

Editorial Introduction – Volume I

Leading for Liberation: Critical Leadership, Belonging, and Institutional Transformation

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Volume I is anchored in a simple but urgent premise: boundary-breaking work in higher education and allied institutions requires more than representation, good intentions, or isolated initiatives. It demands a justice-oriented leadership praxis: a way of leading that is literate about power, accountable to community, and capable of translating critical awareness into sustained institutional transformation. In the wake of ongoing backlash to equity work, persistent racialized inequities in workplace culture, and widening pressures on public institutions, the field needs models that are simultaneously theoretical, practical, and ethically grounded. The chapters in this volume answer that call by centering the experiences, strategies, and innovations of Black leaders, scholars, and practitioners who refuse to accept the “limits” of inclusion as the horizon of possibility.

Across conceptual and empirical contributions, the authors illuminate how leadership is enacted in the everyday, through mentoring ecosystems, affinity spaces, governance decisions, and ethical action under risk. They show that inclusion without power-analysis can reproduce the very structures it purports to reform; that belonging is not an individual feeling but an institutional condition; and that the burdens of equity work are too often carried by those most harmed by inequity. Collectively, the chapters advance a shared argument aligned with the American Association of Blacks in Higher Education (AABHE): cultivating inclusive leadership requires dismantling structural barriers, redistributing resources and voice, and building cultures where Black excellence is not exceptionalized but expected, supported, and protected.

A Unifying Thread: Leadership as Literate, Relational, and Accountable

The organizing theme of Volume I, critical leadership for institutional transformation, invites readers to move beyond leadership as position or personality. Instead, the volume conceptualizes leadership as a developmental capacity that combines (a) critical literacy about self, systems, and power; (b) relational practice rooted in dignity, care, and truth-telling; and (c) accountability mechanisms that convert commitments into outcomes. In this framing, leaders are not simply tasked with managing people or protecting institutional reputation; they are responsible for shaping conditions under which marginalized communities can thrive, advance, and influence the future direction of the institution.

The volume also underscores that “boundary-breaking” is not metaphorical. Boundaries are enacted through policies, evaluation systems, hidden curricula, informal networks, and cultural norms that regulate who belongs, whose knowledge counts, and which forms of leadership are legitimized. When institutions congratulate themselves for diversity while leaving these boundaries intact, they place minoritized professionals and students in the impossible position of

navigating hostile systems without structural support. The scholarship in Volume I responds with models that refuse performative inclusion and instead offer pathways for durable change.

Chapter Pathways: From Frameworks to Institutional Levers

The volume opens with a conceptual anchor that frames boundary-breaking as a literacy challenge and leadership development imperative. In “From Critical Awareness to Transformative Action in Higher Education: The Critical Literacies Advancement Model (CLAM) and the Work of Inclusive Leadership,” Robinson offers a praxis-oriented framework that operationalizes critical consciousness into literacies leaders must cultivate to read, navigate, and reshape systems of power. Rather than treating inclusive leadership as a set of interpersonal behaviors detached from structures, the chapter positions inclusion as an accountable practice that requires institutional literacy, relational literacy, and the capacity to translate critique into coordinated action.

Building on this foundation, Campbell, Robinson, and Sigira extend the conversation into doctoral education and leadership pipelines. “Mentorship Matters: Transformative, Equity-Centered Pathways to Leadership for Doctoral Women of Color” argues that mentorship is not a peripheral support mechanism but a strategic intervention that can either reproduce gatekeeping or cultivate liberatory pathways. The authors reposition mentorship as an ecosystem—one that requires cultural responsiveness, collective care, and institutional responsibility. In doing so, the chapter offers a leadership development approach that centers doctoral women of color as future architects of academic life, rather than as beneficiaries of “support” that leaves structures untouched.

Watts-Bailey’s case study, “Cultivating Connections That Make an Impact: CHIME – An Affinity Group Model for Supporting Professionals of Color in Higher Education,” demonstrates what happens when belonging is designed, resourced, and protected rather than left to chance. Guided by Critical Race Theory and sense-of-belonging scholarship, the chapter documents how an affinity group can function as sanctuary, leadership incubator, and vehicle for institutional change. Importantly, the chapter names tensions that proceedings readers will recognize: the risk of co-optation, the danger of burnout, and the need for material investment so that equity labor is not extracted without recognition or compensation. CHIME emerges as a replicable model precisely because it links community care to structural leverage.

The volume then turns to ethical action and organizational accountability through the lens of whistleblowing. In “Perceptions of Whistleblowing: A Pilot Phenomenological Study,” Funches and Robinson examine how employees who have not acted as whistleblowers understand disclosure, risk, and protection. By centering perceptions—fear of retaliation, stigma, power dynamics, and trust in processes—the chapter highlights the institutional conditions that silence ethical reporting. For leaders committed to justice, the implication is direct: accountability

systems cannot rely on individual courage alone; they must be reinforced through transparent processes, education, and protections that recognize how power shapes the cost of speaking.

Finally, Glass's work on governance extends the volume's leadership lens into decision-making structures that shape access and equity. "Breaking Barriers in School Board Governance: Pursuing Equity and Access through Critical Race Theory" foregrounds governance as a key site where policy choices translate into lived experiences for communities. By using CRT to illuminate how race and power operate in governance contexts, the chapter invites readers to consider who is empowered to set agendas, whose interests are normalized, and how equity is defined and measured. This contribution is essential: it reminds us that institutional transformation requires changes not only in programs but in governance architectures that authorize—or constrain—justice.

Implications for Leaders, Institutions, and the Field

Taken together, Volume I offers three field-level implications for AABHE readers and higher education leaders. First, inclusive leadership must be redefined as a literacy-based praxis, one that equips leaders to interpret and transform the structures that produce inequity. Second, belonging must be treated as infrastructure: it is cultivated through intentional design, resource commitments, and accountability systems, not through the goodwill of marginalized communities forced to build support in the cracks of hostile environments. Third, ethical cultures require institutional protections that make accountability possible without demanding martyrdom from those least protected by power.

This volume speaks directly to practitioners, chief diversity and inclusion officers, student affairs leaders, department chairs, deans, faculty mentors, and governance actors, seeking strategies that are principled, realistic, and scalable. It also speaks to scholars: it illustrates how critical frameworks can be operationalized into models and interventions that generate actionable insight. Most importantly, it speaks to the communities at the heart of AABHE's mission by insisting that Black excellence should not be sustained through exhaustion. Justice-oriented leadership is not merely about surviving institutions; it is about transforming them so that Black leaders, scholars, students, and staff can thrive with dignity and power.

A Call Forward

As readers move through these chapters, we invite them to ask questions that mirror the volume's commitments: What literacies does leadership in your context require, and how are those literacies taught, mentored, and assessed? Where does belonging live in your institution's budget, policies, and evaluation systems? What protections exist for ethical disclosure, and who bears the risk when accountability is pursued? Who sets governance agendas, and what would it take to redistribute decision-making power toward communities most impacted by inequity?

The answers will vary across contexts, but the volume's message is consistent: boundary-breaking leadership is possible when institutions move beyond rhetoric to resource-backed, power-aware practice. Volume I offers frameworks, evidence, and models to support that work—advancing AABHE's broader project of cultivating inclusive leadership not as a slogan, but as a transformative responsibility.