

## **Kirk A. Domer Leadership Essay:** Collaborative Leadership

My leadership philosophy follows the same approach I use in my scholarship: collaboration. As a theatrical scene designer, I consistently work with a creative team to interpret what is on the page and translate it for the stage. The collaborative spirit that I infuse in all my work also observes and respects each individual's accomplishments in creating a cohesive whole. My goal as a designer, professor, program/department administrator, and now as an associate dean is to grow as part of a team through a continuous renovation of our creative practices, regular conversations surrounding curricular and professional opportunities afforded our students, and attention to the development of faculty and staff for whom I care so deeply.

I have held many administrative positions in the College of Arts & Letters (CAL), including four years as Associate Chairperson of the Department of Theatre (THR), two years as Interim/Co-Director of the Arts & Cultural Management-Museum Studies program, ten years as Chairperson/Acting Chairperson of THR, and most recently as the CAL Acting Associate Dean for Academic Personnel and Administration (July-Dec. 2022). Serving in various levels of leadership, I simultaneously managed and championed organizational units that amplified the unit's vision and mission. While at MSU, I have collaborated with many campus organizations, from serving as a board member for the Gay and Lesbian Faculty Staff Association (now MSU Employee Pride and Inclusion Coalition) to coordinating many creating inclusive excellence initiatives through the Office for Institutional Diversity and Inclusion and serving on the CAL Inclusive Practices Committee. I appreciate the fundamental need to recognize and learn from the voices of all populations, and to strengthen these voices, I first listen and then encourage participation.

My time as THR Chairperson was defined by two words: innovation and renovation. Implicit in these words was a willingness to risk, reexamine, and recreate. And that is exactly what I have done as a designer, educator, and administrator. I risked and succeeded in facility (re)design, imaginative curriculum development, and integrative academic, professional, and community-based service. My leadership in these areas was impacted by literal renovation. During my two terms as chairperson, I oversaw and spearheaded renovations (> \$25,000,000) that provided the means for the artistic activity of my colleagues and students to flourish. My commitment to these two principles of innovation and renovation in my research, creative activity, teaching, and service was central to my post-tenure leadership: I sought renovations that stimulated innovation and innovations that compelled us to reconsider our artistic, pedagogical, and citizenship practices. My leadership style remains one of constant reinvention to collectively seek the highest level of artistic and educational experience for faculty, staff, and students.

My MSU career has been vast and varied. I joined the faculty as Visiting Assistant Professor ('02), then as a Fixed-term Assistant Professor ('04); and finally, as a tenure-system Assistant Professor of Scene Design ('06). In 2006 I also assumed the role of Associate Chairperson for Dr. George F. Peters (a highly accomplished Professor of German). I was tasked with leading the production side of the discipline as Dr. Peters did not have a background in Theatre. From Dr. Peters, I learned patience and compassion that were central to his academic leadership style. At the rank of Assistant Professor, Dr. Peters' tremendous mentorship enabled me to confidently assume the helm of both the academic and production sides of THR as Acting Chairperson, while he administered the Academic Year in Freiburg program. In 2011, as a newly minted Associate Professor, I assumed the THR Chairperson role, bolstered by Dr. Peters' lessons to continue developing an understanding of the individual goals and the benefits of collective vision-making. My dedication to helping faculty members reach their goals has manifested itself through continuous tenure-system mentorship and participation in the CAL Taskforce on Non-Tenure Stream Career Pathways and CAL Mentoring Program, where I have worked in teams to amplify the voices of often neglected but essential educators at MSU.

I attribute my leadership philosophy to several formative experiences. I first learned respect for how all roles contribute to an operation while earning my BA in Theatre at Ashland University^ (AU), where I served as president of the honorary theatre society and started a student group that worked to beautify AU's performance spaces. While serving as the Artistic Coordinator at the Ohio Light Opera, I annually hired a team of designers and technicians to help young artists build their resumes by offering professional development opportunities outside of their daily duties. Since 2008, I have collaborated with the Michigan Education Theatre Association^^ (META) to help grow their organization by providing infrastructural support for their annual Thespian Festival when at MSU and launching their inaugural summer Leadership Conference where the top theatre students from across Michigan partnered with MSU faculty members to learn valuable team-building skills to bring back to their respective performing arts troupes. Through each of these foundational experiences, I inspired innovation through groupthink and celebrated the growth of the individual and the organization.

^In 2022, I received the AU Alumni Association's Special Achievement Award for proven leadership abilities, excellence in my field, and faithful service to AU and the community.

^^In 2021, I received the META Standing Ovation Award for creating positive and lasting change by leading with optimism and light and giving unconditionally to enact change.

As an administrator, I embody a ground-up leadership style. I am known to equally celebrate a project that came in on budget, a production that valued inclusive practices, and support staff members who enhanced the Spartan experience. Alongside many talented students, staff, faculty, guests, and friends/donors, I regularly coordinate special events to highlight the amazing work of my colleagues who inspire neurodiverse youth through performance, create initiatives to benefit underrepresented populations, or build long-lasting partnerships with the community, to name a few. My approach to developing a team flourishes because it is based on mutual respect for all members and all jobs. In 2017, in addition to starting the first unit-level DEI Student Advisory Board in CAL to uphold the values of equity and inclusion in the department, I received the MSU Outstanding Supervisor Award for celebrating success, rewarding a job well done, and creating an environment that honors every person.

As an administrator, it is important that I remain active as a scholar, artist, educator, and advocate/activist.

SCHOLAR/ARTIST: My theatrical designer and educator work has a common thread – combining technique with artistry. I maintain a creative tension by connecting theory with practice. My expertise as a scene designer launched five renovation projects at MSU, where I served as the design consultant. 1) Renovation of a 5,000 sq. ft. scene shop, 2) Design and Construction of a new 10,000 sq. ft. scene shop, 3) Renovation of the Fairchild Theatre and many adjacent spaces in the MSU Auditorium, 4) Renovation of a 4,500 sq. ft. dance studio, and 5) Design and Construction for the Summer Circle Courtyard. Through my ability to express the disciplinary needs and safety concerns associated with these projects, our Friends of Theatre at MSU raised \$1,150,000 to create a permanent home for Summer Circle Theatre, where I annually serve as a company member.

EDUCATOR: My courses provide a solid educational foundation that offers students the tools to create independently and collaboratively. My teaching focus at MSU has been spent realizing that goal through a myriad of curriculum and policy changes. As a freelance designer at professional venues, my work has expanded my curricular reach. I have created a progressive experiential learning lab where I regularly engage MSU students as collaborative assistants. I offer aspects of the production design to challenge their skills while supervising and guiding their work. This professional mentorship model of teaching undergraduate and graduate design students is driven by an ever-changing profession and by assessing individual students' needs.

I have also championed the development of innovative educational opportunities. In addition to co-designed the inaugural CAL Study Away in NYC, I served as the inaugural Creative Director for the CAL Creativity Exploratory, combining the diverse strengths of faculty and students to create unique digital projects, and co-created the Certification in College Teaching for Performing Arts. I also helped develop four meaningful collaborative partnerships for THR: 1) Williamston Theatre, a professional Theatre partner; 2) Happendance, a professional Dance partner; 3) OpenSpot Theatre, a theatre program for neurodiverse children; and 4) the imáGen program with Wharton Center connecting Broadway professionals with MSU students. These co-curricular innovations emphasize practical experiences that build professional networks for students and faculty.

ADVOCATE/ACTIVIST: I firmly believe that recognizing others' hard work and dedication to MSU is paramount to growing a vibrant community. I mentored/nominated MFA students who received the following recognitions: (1) Midwest Association of Graduate Schools: Excellence in Teaching Award, (3) United States Institute for Theatre Technology (USITT) Regional Design Awards, (4) Varg-Sullivan Graduate Awards, (6) Academic Achievement Graduate Assistantships, (16) Degree Completion Fellowships, and (52) Summer Support Fellowships. I mentored/nominated undergraduates who received the following recognitions: (2) USITT Midwest Founders Award, (5) UURAF: First Prize Winners, (3) Louis B. Sudler Prize Awards, (1) CAL Alumni Award for Undergraduate Excellence, (1) CAL Community Partner Award, and (11) CAL Alumni Association Student Group Grants. I nominated faculty and staff members who received the following recognitions: (2) Michigan Association of State Universities Professors of the Year, (1) Oscar Brockett Outstanding Teacher Award from American Theatre of Higher Education, (1) William J. Beal Outstanding Faculty Award, (1) MSU President's Distinguished Teaching Award, (2) MSU Alumni Club of Mid-Michigan Quality in Undergraduate Teaching Awards, (2) MSU Teacher-Scholar Awards, (1) MSU Distinguished Academic Staff Award, (1) MSU Award for Outstanding Service to Education Abroad, (3) MSU Excellence in Diversity Awards, (2) MSU Service-Learning and Civic Engagement Awards, (1) MSU Community Engagement Scholarship Award, (1) MSU Distinguished Partnership Award, (5) CAL Faculty Innovation and Leadership Awards, (1) CAL Community Partner Award, (1) CAL Jo-Ann Vanden Bergh Staff Award, (1) CAL Exceptional Service Staff Award, (1) CAL Diversity Equity Justice & Inclusion Award, and (2) Arts Council of Greater Lansing Arts Educator Applause Awards. These awards showcase my understanding and appreciation for colleagues and how collaborative leadership cultivates excellence at all levels. I have also received similar awards for my administrative acumen, including the CAL Faculty Leadership Award ('10), CAL Alumni Award for Innovation and Leadership in Teaching and Learning ('11), MSU Excellence in Diversity Award (Team Award, '15), and the CAL Paul Varg Award ('19).

Throughout this essay, I have highlighted the themes of collaboration, ground-up leadership, innovation, renovation, and compassion. I will bring the same energy and enthusiasm to the College of Arts & Letters Dean's Office, where I serve in my current role as Acting Associate Dean for Academic Personnel and Administration.