

**Excellence in College Teaching and Beyond: Morrill Professors as Relational Leaders**

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**Abstract.** Administrators are viewed as the leaders in higher education. However, accepting exceptional educators as relational leaders is vital as changes in higher education demand institutions provide value and quality to their stakeholders. Exceptional educators at our land-grant Midwestern university are nominated and awarded the title of Morrill Professors in recognition of the Morrill Act. In this qualitative study using a narrative inquiry approach, we interviewed twelve Morrill Professors to find common teaching practices among these outstanding educators. Upon review of the transcripts, we realized that although they all practiced student-success teaching strategies, the emphasis on developing relationships with their students was paramount. Applying the framework of relational leadership to the interview transcripts, we identify ways in which the Morrill Professors exemplified the five elements of the model. The Morrill Professors interviewed were purposeful and empowering while engaging students in learning. They were inclusive and ethical in their approach to fulfilling the teaching component of the land-grant mission. Finally, they were process-oriented, encouraging iterative learning that builds on the needs of the discipline. The results of this study can be used to emphasize building excellence in teaching through the relational leadership model rather than focusing solely on specific teaching strategies. University leadership can further elevate successful teachers as leaders within their institutions.

**Keywords:** teaching, land grant universities, relational leadership, student-centered teaching

At many higher education institutions, faculty have varied and sometimes competing responsibilities, including publishing academic research, receiving external grant funding, and contributing to institutional and disciplinary service. Conducting disciplinary scholarship may be the primary criterion for evaluation in annual review, promotion and tenure decisions, and for merit-based financial rewards (Lane, 2012). Indeed, "The reward for committing seriously to education [and] education leadership is perceived to be very much less than that gained through a commitment to and success in research" (Beckman, 2017, p. 156).

Championing instructors as leaders is vital to demonstrating value and quality to students and stakeholders. An emphasis on providing recognition for teaching excellence is necessary as faculty salaries remain stagnant, tuitions rise, and public perception of higher education ebb and wane (Brink, 2022; Dugas et al., 2020; Fairweather & Beach, 2002; Mitchell et al., 2018). Increasingly, effective teaching by effective educators is a bottom-line financial necessity for many institutions. Despite the lack of perfect teaching conditions for faculty instructors (Stover et al., 2018), exceptional educators exist on college campuses. Undeniably, every institution includes a cadre of exceptional and award-winning professors who transform students' lives. At our institution, exemplary teaching is recognized through department, college, and university awards and fellowships. Since 2013, at the highest level of academic rank in teaching is the Morrill Professorship. Similar in rank to Distinguished Professor for long-standing excellence in research or the rank of University Professor recognizing change agents, the Morrill Professorship celebrates and acknowledges long-standing contributions to teaching excellence.

The initial objective of our investigation was to identify the best teaching practices common to all the exceptional Morrill Professors. However, through analysis of the interview transcripts, it became apparent that the commonality was their role as *leaders* within the classroom and in the lives of their students. Identifying aspects of this intentional focus as *leaders of learning* quickly became the primary purpose of this analysis. Our research is significant because it validates those who spend time perfecting their skills as educators. This research also demonstrates to peers, administrators, and other stakeholders the importance of identifying, rewarding, and elevating effective educators.

## **Leadership in Higher Education**

Within many higher education institutions, “leaders” are often defined by their positional affiliations or title (e.g., dean, provost, president), whereas others without such a title may be overlooked as leaders. Dugan (2011, p. 36) stated, “As a body of literature, leadership theory is complex, socially constructed, and consistently evolving.” However, the definition or conceptualization of leadership is often author-dependent (Rosari, 2019). A contrasting model of leadership focuses on relationships rather than title or positionality. For example, according to Rost (1993), postindustrial leadership is viewed as relationship-centric and focuses on the influences and interactions between leaders and followers at all stages. Contemporary leadership takes this further, suggesting that postindustrial paradigms with constructivist views recognize all involved in the leadership process, often giving voice to marginalized populations (Dugan & Komives, 2011). Relational Leadership (Komives et al., 2013) exemplifies these aspects of contemporary leadership models as it includes purpose, empowerment, inclusivity, ethics, and process as essential elements in developing relationships. Recognizing multiple players in leadership relationships, Rosari (2019) added, “Leadership is an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purposes” (p. 25), which closely aligns with the student-professor dynamic.

According to Miami University writing center developers, leaders who support faculty as change agents might begin by reframing leadership, challenging the personal and positional views in favor of process-oriented leadership (Martin & Wardle, 2022). Solbrekke and Surgrue (2020) suggest helping faculty reconceive leadership by asking them to explore the idea that “leading implies teaching, and teaching implies leading” (p. 72). Helping faculty think of leadership as teaching and teaching as leadership is a promising avenue for helping them embrace their role as change-agents. This shift is important for individuals who desire to lead deep change at the institutions they serve, as effecting such transformation requires an ongoing learning process (Martin & Wardle, 2022).

### **Study Context: About the Morrill Professorship**

Our institution recognizes exemplary teaching through the Morrill Professorship, first awarded in 2013. The Morrill Professor rank was carefully designed with input from the university teaching and learning center and the Faculty Senate to be of equal status with our institution's two additional top

faculty honors, the University Professor for recognition as a change agent and the Distinguished Professor for recognition of research excellence. In a highly competitive nomination and selection process, each of these three titles includes a permanent increase in salary and title change underscoring the significance of the status. As of 2023, 36 faculty representing each of the six academic colleges have received the Morrill Professorship designation.

The Morrill Professor status was purposefully named in recognition of our institutional identity as a land grant university, named after the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862, sponsored by Vermont Senator Justin Morrill, and signed by President Abraham Lincoln. With this Congressional action, tracts of public land were bestowed upon each state to develop colleges to foster broad access to education within each state, especially through teaching practical subjects (Association of Public & Land-Grant Universities, n.d.). Our land-grant institution continues to value the tripartite mission of teaching, research, and extension/service.

### **Conceptual Framing**

In this study, we seek to understand Morrill Professors via the relational leadership model defined by Komives et al. (2013). Relational leadership is a philosophy of leadership that centers “relationships [as] the focal point of the leadership process” (p. 95). The five elements of relational leadership, which we describe below, include being purposeful, inclusive, ethical, and empowering. Unlike many other leadership models, relational leadership is process-oriented instead of positional (Early, 2020). The five pillars’ descriptions include:

**Relational leadership is purposeful** because it relies on dedication to a goal and finding common ground among the participants who work toward that goal.

**Relational leadership is inclusive** because it seeks and respects the multitude of personal and cultural differences that comprise the group (e.g., social identities, norms and customs, and historical perspectives) and builds on those strengths.

**Relational leadership is empowering** because it fosters individual agency and ownership within an environment that promotes full involvement. Good leadership removes barriers that otherwise thwart empowerment.

**Relational leadership is ethical** because it is driven by values and standards commonly perceived as good or moral by the community.

**Relational leadership is process-oriented** because it is intentional about how a group becomes and sustains being a group.

### **Methods**

Our objective was to learn directly from participants about their teaching practices and principles. Thus, this qualitative study was designed with a narrative inquiry approach (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). We employed semi-structured interviews to collect data (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The site of this study was a large, research-intensive, land-grant university in the Midwest with over 30,000 undergraduate and graduate students and over 1,600 FTE faculty.

At the time of data collection in late 2020, 19 faculty were designated Morrill Professors. We elected to limit our participants to those who earned recognition between 2013 and 2019, which reduced the number of potential participants to 14. Participants were recruited via direct email and consented to be interviewed and recorded. Two individuals did not respond to interview requests; as such, our final number of participants included 12 Morrill Professors. To preserve the anonymity of our participants and reduce deductive identification, we share only pseudonyms and no disciplinary-specific identifiers or college affiliations. However, to give readers additional context, the participants' pseudonym and specialized niche of teaching is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*List of Participants and Teaching Niche*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Teaching Niche</b>
Carter	Project-based learning
Chad	Mentoring undergraduate research
Clint	Laboratory mentorship and inclusion
Debbie	Discussion-based teaching
Emily	Collaborative teaching and learning
Eugene	Scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL)
Frank	Clinical laboratory

Gloria	Cooperative learning
Helen	SoTL and inclusion
LuAnn	Study abroad
Todd	Case-based teaching
Walter	Online teaching

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Data for this project come from the transcripts of interviews with 12 participants, which were conducted via the online video meeting platform Zoom and lasted approximately one hour. Each interview was transcribed and reviewed by the participants for accuracy to promote trustworthiness (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The study was considered exempt by our Institutional Review Board (# 12-521), and standard ethical procedures were followed for data safety.

We followed Saldaña's (2021) two-cycle analytic method to analyze the data. To code and analyze the data corpus, each author read the transcripts and made notes with keywords. In the second cycle of coding (axial coding), the authors met several times to comment and reflect on the concepts revealed from the data, allowing us to triangulate our understanding of the interview data with interrater reliability (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). We also used this coding cycle to explicitly connect data with the relational leadership framework (Komives et al., 2013). Field notes with rich descriptions were taken, reviewed, and consulted along with transcripts during researcher meetings to confirm the dependability of emergent themes or ideas. Saturation occurred when no new ideas were presented following interview analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Finally, key interview findings were shared with the interviewed Morrill Professors to ensure confirmation with our results.

### **Findings**

Findings from the Morrill Professors' interviews are organized according to the relational leadership framework's five key pillars (Komives et al., 2013). We do so to illustrate the direct link between Morrill Professors' teaching philosophies and key concepts of relational leadership. Table 2 summarizes the five tenets of the relational leadership framework with subsequent themes that emerged from our analysis, along with the participants' names most associated with those themes.

**Table 2**

*Summary of Conceptual Pillars, Themes, and Associated Participants*

<b>Conceptual Pillar &amp; Themes</b>	<b>Associated Participants</b>
<b>Relational Leadership is Purposeful</b>	
Student success via relationships	Todd, Chad, Eugene
Valuing the student experience	LuAnn, Helen
<b>Relational Leadership is Inclusive</b>	
Care and safety	Frank, Chad
Confronting inequities of the past	Gloria, Walter
<b>Relational Leadership is Empowering</b>	
Mentorship	Walter, Clint, Gloria
Agency	Carter, Debbie
<b>Relational Leadership is Ethical</b>	
Land grant mission	Frank, Gloria, Carter
Morality of teaching	Todd, Frank
<b>Relational Leadership is Process-Oriented</b>	
Cooperative, collaborative learning	Todd, Carter
Iterative teaching and development	Helen, Emily

**Relational Leadership is Purposeful**

Being purposeful is often identified with building a shared vision. Purpose animates individual and group behaviors and actions regardless of a relational leader's tactics (Komives et al., 2013). Shared purpose can motivate a group, driving action towards achieving common goals.

According to the Morrill Professors interviewed, the purpose of teaching was singularly identified as student success. Interestingly, while thinking like an expert in the discipline and achieving student learning outcomes were often mentioned, five Morrill Professors discussed the importance of relationships as the key to successful teaching. Todd discussed the importance of building relationships through regional trips with students. He stated,

It was so much fun to listen to those students talk about the program as if I'm a fly on the wall. I'm driving the van, and I'm listening to them talk about, "Oh, did you do this assignment? What about the paper and such and such class? What did you think about this particular exercise? And, what do you think..." When they started talking about faculty personalities, and other student personalities I felt like I had this very personal window into the program. I was now seeing the dynamics, the real human dynamics of this thing. Have you been able to interact with students to a point where they see who you are, and you learn who they are?

To build rapport with his students, Chad tells his students on the first day of every semester,

I choose to be here. I think you're important. I think the university's here for two primary missions. You're fundamentally related to one of them, and I choose to do this." Your affect and the way you treat students, the way you treat them when they succeed, the way you treat them when they fail. The way you respond to the brilliant question, the way you respond to the idiotic question. The way you respond to the student who's a grade grabber. All those things, and it's work, I swear it's the discipline of teaching, is keeping a beginner's mind. Seeing the infinite in them, recognizing that you were an idiot too.

Eugene spoke of purpose (i.e., student success) in a way that conjured up legacy notions. That is, the kind of impact he might leave on the students he mentors. He shared,

I'm not going to be here terribly long in the geological sense of things or even in the historical scale of things. We have a fairly limited timestamp in which we have the opportunity to interact with our fellow humans and walk the soils of this planet. And to me, what that implies, is that we need to be thinking about who's going to be here when we're gone. I can aspire to helping students really find a direction that they value and that they can envision a future through.

For two of the Morrill Professors, the purpose of student success means to value the student experience and their humanity. LuAnn indicated that it is vital to be intentional when considering students' learning needs when she succinctly stated,



Valuing each of the students...if you think about them first, everything that you should do, every decision that you should make should be to benefit them. What do they need? How do they need to be successful?

Similarly, Helen talked about her purpose by recognizing, "what my students bring to the class and how I can connect to their lives and their interest(s) and try to make it relevant for the future." For Helen, her motivation is derived from connecting with the motivations of her students. In these quotes, the Morrill Professors distilled the importance of education as not just facts and figures fitting within a discipline-specific curriculum but as an opportunity to develop students into future responsible, value-driven, global citizens and not just employees.

### **Relational Leadership is Inclusive**

Inclusive leadership acknowledges the reciprocal, dynamic interaction of the individual and the whole. Komives and colleagues (2013) indicate that the language used can be inclusive, such as when a leader routinely uses "we" statements versus "I" statements. For the Morrill Professors, inclusion meant establishing a sense of care and safety in their teaching without assuming everyone starts at the same point.

Creating a safe learning environment through connectedness and inclusion was an often-repeated sentiment from the Morrill Professors. Frank remarked that,

inclusive teaching has always been there, we just find new terms for these things, but it's making people feel comfortable in your classroom, letting them know you care about them, and then taking their concerns to heart.

Establishing a culture of care was also a goal for Chad, who pointed out that relationships are the key to teaching. He stated,

I actually am a non-believer in pedagogy, I'm a big believer in relationships. I think successful teachers succeed in a very wide range of practice. They have a lot of different styles. But the common thread is they understand that teaching is *relational*. That doesn't mean you've got to be their best buddy, the student's best buddy, but they find a way of making sure that students know that you care, and they spend time prepping, so whatever mode they're using is delivered well.

In addition to treating students inclusively, several of the Morrill Professors recognized that they were trained in settings that were not as equitable as those they wished to create in their classrooms and lab settings. These trailblazers were graduate students or assistant professors before others of similar gender, race, or background were common in their discipline or geographic location. They understood what it is like to be different from others and developed an enhanced compassion toward recognizing when students need a nudge towards being more inclusive. Gloria's comments reflected a personal understanding of the power of not assuming her students know how to navigate notions of belonging. She stated,

You got to remember that I'm a woman in [male-dominated discipline], and I have this fine line between being a woman and being a scientist...I read an article a long time ago that said students often expect their female professors to bake cookies for them but never their male professors....Having some confidence [is important] but also realizing some of these students are coming from places [where] they never met a scientist, they may never have met a female scientist. They just don't know how to act. I have the attitude that no one told the students the rules, so I should be helpful and tell them in a polite way. At the University, we do not use social titles [like] "Mrs.," but rather professional titles, "Ms., Dr., Dean." The students may not know this, so I am taking the high road.

Gloria's comments reflect the importance of compassionately meeting students' understanding of the norms of the academy where they are rather than, say, punishing them for what they might not have learned. Doing so emphasizes and enriches the influence of the relationship – in this case, through an inclusionary lens.

Walter recognized the importance and his impact on gender equity in his male-dominated discipline. He stated,

While I was program leader, we got to the point where we had gender equity on our faculty. It is especially important to have female [students] and I use [the numbers of women students in our program] to convince some of my industry skeptics in terms of that.

Throughout each interview, the Morrill Professors centered on the value of students not just as burgeoning academics, but as whole humans with many needs to flourish. Each of these quotes demonstrates not only that teaching

and learning is a social experience (i.e., it is relational), but that they are also modeling inclusive behaviors – in some cases doing so in a way that corrects past inequities and forging a path for a future diverse academy.

### **Relational Leadership is Empowering**

An empowering environment leverages varying types of power to foster trust and inclusivity while mitigating fear and humiliation. An empowering learning environment also assumes success and promotes failure as an opportunity for deeper learning (Komives et al., 2013).

Five Morrill Professors talked about empowerment in the ways they bring students along on the learning journey, not simply exercising a form of control. The comments from these educators reflect two key ideas of empowerment: mentorship and agency. First, comments from participants exposed a certain “passing along” of empowerment to their students that their mentors once gave them. Second, participants’ remarks encouraged students to have agency in their learning. Walter, for example, reported successful mentorship during his formative academic development and continues to experience empowerment from peers and even students. He quipped that he was not “quite so warm and fuzzy,” but nonetheless was adamant when saying,

The fact that I cared enough...I treated my undergraduate TAs with a lot of respect and gave them lots of authority. I think the students get the idea that there is this environment or a system or whatever that I’ve created that’s thoughtful.

Clint and Gloria indicated the tremendous influence of mentors, especially noting that mentors were a community of people, not solely a singular individual. Gloria commented,

During my undergraduate studies, the professors were good at teaching. They had research but it didn't get in the way of teaching like the stereotype of a research professor. I grew up professionally in a system where teaching was really valued. I felt like my professors were valued in their department.

Clint shared,

I just look so fondly back on my experiences doing undergraduate research because of the mentorship that I had. Not only from the professor but from the other grad students and post-doc in the lab. It

was very fulfilling. It was very encouraging, very supportive, and it was just such a great experience. And so, I think that's why it's so important to be a good instructor, being a good mentor to all of these undergrads. And that's why I do what I do is really, as I look back on it; it's based on my experiences and the mentorship that I had as an undergraduate and then the same professor for my graduate studies.

The gratitude displayed in Clint's remarks suggests there may also be a connection between empowerment and purpose, which in this case, resembles the idea of empowerment as giving back in ways that empowered him previously. A second empowerment-related concept we found when talking with the Morrill Professors involved providing agency to students in their learning. For instance, Carter reminds students that taking responsibility or ownership of their learning is vital. He described his approach as,

making them feel like they're in charge, showing them where they've got to get to and maybe hinting at a few ways to do it, but reminding them that ultimately, this is your project. I'm not actually swinging the bat; you're the one swinging the bat. I think there's a lot more focus today on giving students ownership, letting them feel like they're empowered to make the decisions, and again, being more of a coach and less of a critic.

Carter's approach to empowerment was through coaching; Debbie approached it from being authentically encouraging. She said,

I try to be personable but not take things personally. Especially in face-to-face teaching, if someone says something that has even the glimmer of originality, I'll really play that up, "I never thought of it exactly that way. Tell me more about why you think that." And they're so happy. And I'm not being ironic. I hope I'm not being condescending. I'm not going to say it if it isn't true if they hadn't actually come up with something. But I'll make the most of it. And it gives people a boost.

The "boost" that Debbie provides to students fosters a sense of agency in learning for students and empowers them to keep building on their success.

### **Relational Leadership is Ethical**

Many leaders are guided by codes of ethics or standards that serve as guideposts to determine what actions or decisions are "right." Leading by

example is an important element of ethical leadership, whereby a person demonstrates alignment between actions and values. Professors, for example, have standards and values of their discipline and codes of conduct within their institutions that exemplify those principles with their students.

Valuing research, teaching, and extension responsibilities as part of the ethical contract of the land-grant mission came up repeatedly with Morrill Professors. Frank stressed the importance of access to education in the land-grant ethic, "I would argue that we're a land grant institution, and... one of (our) jobs (is) to provide education to the masses...affordable education to people of all sorts." While Frank spoke to access, Gloria expanded the idea to also include the centrality of teaching, specifically within the land-grant mission. She said, "We market (ourselves) correctly as a university. Yes, we're a research one, but we are focused on extension, and we're focused on teaching." Gloria affirms that research has its place at our university, but the values of the land-grant tradition necessitate a unique focus on teaching that should not be overshadowed by research. In agreement, Carter echoed,

To me, the kind of ethic of it has always been whatever you do inside the four walls on campus ought to make some difference outside. In other words, it is not just pure research. We always have to keep in mind the fact that we're paid by the state, we're supported by the state, and the idea that our mission is really to turn that around and give back has always really appealed to me.

Two of the participants spoke to a sense of responsibility and personal character built on their ethics, which exemplifies the broad, mutual purposes of leadership. This code of ethics is a vital part of "being" for these Morrill Professors. For example, Todd shared that teaching comes with moral obligations while also noting the morality of teaching well. According to him,

Good teachers view teaching as a moral obligation...that's M-O-R-A-L...the right thing to do. It's not just a placeholder, or something else, or a load. You have a teaching load, but teaching is an opportunity to create connections and meaning. Teaching is an opportunity to personify or be an example of your field...I was trained when I went through the doctoral program (that) you balance teaching and research because if you view teaching as an onus, you're in the wrong business.

Todd's comments of balance are important for institutions of higher education, who must uphold the reciprocal relationship of service to stakeholders with innovation or prestige. In other words, teaching, research, and extension should be at parity. Frank took this idea one step further, indicating,

I would argue that the teaching function of the university is important **to lead** the research portion of the university. All these people who came in here and did research were taught somewhere by somebody in some manner, maybe classroom, postdocs, fellowships, laboratory trainings, or whatever. So it's the foundation for building on to train researchers.

While being relational leaders, the Morrill Professors were guided by ethics – notions of what is “right” – to respect students as humans (as observed throughout our findings), value their learning in the classroom, as well as uphold their responsibilities in fulfilling the university's land grant mission.

#### **Relational Leadership is Process-Oriented**

According to Komives et al. (2013), "Attending to the process means being thoughtful and conscious of how the group is going about its business" (p. 133). Being process-conscious requires that all group members be reflective, collaborative, inclusive, cooperative, and aware of community dynamics. The Morrill Professors' attention to the process is evident in how they discussed their teaching.

Many participants used cooperative or collaborative learning in their classrooms as student interaction was viewed as a powerful tool. Todd, for example, shared the joy that comes from creating an engaging classroom environment for students,

In this big classroom where everybody can see each other, I'll be pointing and say, "Okay, well, Harvey over here said this, what do you think about that? Okay, Ethel, you said that, and Harvey, you get a rebuttal." They're talking with each other, and the minute I lose control, I know that's worked. And then, when I have to wrestle control back from the class, I know I've got the conversation going. And so, creating that is exhilarating.

Morrill Professors worked hard to challenge students to reflect, make meaning of assignments, and solve difficult problems as part of their process

orientation. They frequently gave feedback and welcomed feedback from students and peers. Again, Carter parallels this idea to coaching,

We're not trying to teach so much as we are trying to coach. It's less to me about teaching skills per se and more about just coaching skills, being able to work one on one with students, and being able to empathize with where they are, how much they don't know, and to understand what they've got to do to get there.

Carter emphasized that, like coaching, teaching requires close, trusting relationships with students, give-and-take, reflection, and adjustment. He summarized, "I think it's the experience and the knowledge and the patience and the failing and the learning from it and redoing it...I think it has to be an ongoing process." To be an effective coach, then, mandates an awareness of what has successful outcomes as part of the process. Carter is continually testing tools or tactics with an understanding of how they might be impactful while teaching.

Similarly, Helen suggested that her teaching practice requires good teaching strategies and considering how students experience these strategies. For her, this work involves

Informing my teaching with the best practices or approaches, technology, understanding not just the cognitive aspects of what I'm teaching, but also looking at the affective components, what my students bring to the class, and how I can connect to their lives and their interest and try to make it relevant for their future focusing more on science literacy than the specific, so the big picture.

For many of the Morrill Professors, becoming excellent instructors was also a process, and achieving the rank and title were humbling, yet empowering. Emily indicated little to no background in education and educational theory when she first began in the classroom. Through her professional development and personal growth, she became a part of a campus-wide teaching leadership group, and mentored others across the university in understanding that students must take responsibility for their own learning, even if they push back. She indicated,

The knowing and having the confidence to persist longer than students resist has always been a bit of a struggle. And then once I had this professorship stamp, I was like, 'Nope, I'm right. I'm the expert. And I know what I'm doing here friends.' When you give them the

responsibility for the learning and when you give them the responsibility for interacting with their peers to do that constructive knowledge-building process, they will push back and they will push back pretty hard...I am more comfortable with myself, I think having a distinction like this somehow affects how I interact with students. I could really focus on the teaching and learning as opposed to, "Who am I to be in here teaching about [this topic]."

These findings reported how Morrill Professors embody relational leadership through their purposeful, inclusive, empowering, ethical, and process-oriented relationship with students and their careers.

### **Discussion**

While the initial purpose of this study was to identify common teaching practices among exceptional educators, the commonality we found was a student-centric approach to learning in the classroom. Each of these exceptional educators found their way to "excellent teacher" status uniquely. For example, one made significant use of case studies in his teaching, another championed the proliferation of the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL), and yet another developed a robust undergraduate research lab. Regardless of their niche, they all centered on student learning by fostering professional relationships with their students. Although research suggests that student-centeredness may be more popular in some disciplines than others (Murphy et al., 2021), our study showcases that student-centeredness can be present across disciplines.

Findings from this study provide examples that illustrate how Morrill Professors are relational leaders (Komives et al., 2013). By placing Morrill Professors' words within the relational leadership framework, we demonstrate that faculty work goes beyond the traditionally-thought-of research, teaching, and service. Instead, for Morrill Professors, teaching is a way to showcase relational leadership that promotes espoused institutional values and expectations, such as student success and inclusive learning. Since relational leadership is process-oriented instead of positional, the profession of teaching serves as an excellent example of relational leadership in action (Early, 2020). Readers will observe in our findings that the participants in this study tied teaching to a moral obligation to teach the people of the state, specifically because it is an integral part of our land-grant mission. While many are driven to succeed in their chosen discipline, they also nurture a similar drive and passion for student success regardless



of knowledge, background, or experience. They freely reflected on their experiences, successes, and failures to develop teaching philosophies, practices, and strategies that inspire and empower student success.

The present research has implications for faculty developers in teaching and learning centers. While we often imbue our new instructor training with the “nuts and bolts” of teaching and science of educational theory, it is essential that we also hold conversations regarding the art of teaching, specifically building relationships with students. Based on the importance of mentors in each of the Morrill Professors’ stories, it is essential that academic departments are thoughtful in creating opportunities for enriching experiences that are inclusive of student classification and faculty title and rank. Universities would be wise to consider how they might elevate teaching success to the highest level of honor to promote, honor, and encourage good teaching.

### **Conclusion**

We have demonstrated how a collection of higher education faculty, noted for excellence in teaching ability, are relational leaders (Komives et al., 2013) within their classroom and craft. While the potential for university-wide impact exists, determining the impact of exceptional educators (like Morrill Professors) at the university level would require assessing and interviewing others (i.e., non-Morrill Professors, administrators, students) across disciplines as well. We also recognize that teaching is iterative and cyclical. Our “snapshot” study of Morrill Professors does not take this reality into account, especially given the ways instruction in higher education has evolved due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Teaching can be diminished in many instances of the university faculty portfolio, overshadowed by the allure of research and grant prestige. Acclaimed scholar bell hooks (1994) noted in *Teaching to Transgress* that “teaching is seen as a duller, less valuable aspect of the academic profession” (p. 12). Although there are demotivators and biases against spending time and energy devoted to teaching enhancement, there are extrinsic motivators to encourage effective instructors. Extrinsic motivators to encourage effective instructors. Extrinsic motivators, teaching awards and grants can be noted on a curriculum vitae and used as evidence of good teaching when seeking promotion and tenure. Intrinsic motivators such as asserting that “teaching is a moral undertaking” (Richlin et al., 2018, p.1) may motivate some faculty to sustain vitality in their work by taking risks in their careers (e.g., experimenting with teaching strategies) or

investing more time and effort in teaching. We contend that promoting excellent teaching can transform universities both by enriching the learning and student experience as well as providing extrinsic motivation and recognition of those who espouse teaching as an act of leadership. In an era that seems to repeatedly minimize the value of teaching within the academy, our findings on faculty as relational leaders indicate the opposite approach is needed to ensure successful students and institutions.

### **Conflicts of Interest**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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