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# ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP IN THE CONTEXT OF NEOLIBERALISM The Practice of Social Work Directors

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### Résumé de l'article

Motivées par des principes néolibéraux, les nouvelles exigences managériales d'austérité et de responsabilisation redéfinissent les pratiques des directeurs des écoles canadiennes de service social. La présente recherche visait à clarifier la façon dont les directeurs et directrices d'école de service social axée sur la justice sociale exercent leur rôle dans le contexte du nouveau modèle de gestion. L'article s'intéresse particulièrement aux répercussions de ce rôle sur eux. Les données sont tirées de cinq entrevues et d'un groupe de discussion réunissant cinq directeurs d'une école de service social au Canada. Quatre thèmes sont ressortis des données : la lutte pour les ressources menée par les directeurs; le rôle d'agents de gestion des ressources assumé par les directeurs; le rôle de « tampon » joué par les directeurs pour protéger le corps professoral du stress occasionné par les compressions de ressources; et l'établissement de relations comme moyen de résistance. Forcés d'agir comme gestionnaires des ressources, les directeurs déploient des efforts qui passent grandement inaperçus et qui ne sont parfois pas reconnus par les professeurs. Nos résultats seront utiles aux écoles professionnelles qui négocient leur avenir dans le système universitaire, surtout à une époque où les facultés de service social peinent à convaincre quelqu'un d'accepter un rôle de direction. Dans l'ensemble, l'étude aide à clarifier la nature des pratiques de direction dans les écoles de service social, ce qui contribue à mieux comprendre la situation actuelle, les exigences du poste de direction et la façon d'appuyer la personne qui l'occupe.

# ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP IN THE CONTEXT OF NEOLIBERALISM

## The Practice of Social Work Directors

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**Abstract:** Driven by neoliberal principles, new managerialist demands for austerity and accountability are reshaping the practices of directors of Canadian schools of social work. In this paper, we discuss research that aimed to clarify how directors of social-justice-oriented social work schools engage in academic leadership in the context of new managerialism. We were especially interested to know how this engagement affects them. Our data come from five interviews and one focus group with five directors of schools of social work in Canada. Four themes emerged from the data: directors' fight for resources; directors as agents for resource management; directors as 'buffers' to shield their faculty from stresses associated with resource cuts; and resistance through relationship-building. Pushed to act as resource managers, directors' efforts are largely unknown and sometimes unappreciated by faculty members. Our findings will be useful to professional schools negotiating their future in the university system, especially at a time when social work faculties struggle to motivate individuals to take on leadership roles. Overall, the findings of this study help clarify the nature of leadership practices in schools of social work, contributing to a better understanding of the current situation, the requirements of leadership, and how to support leadership.

**Keywords:** Academic leadership, managerial practices, neoliberalism, schools of social work

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**Abstrégé :** Motivées par des principes néolibéraux, les nouvelles exigences managériales d'austérité et de responsabilisation redéfinissent les pratiques des directeurs des écoles canadiennes de service social. La présente recherche visait à clarifier la façon dont les directeurs et directrices d'école de service social axée sur la justice sociale exercent leur rôle dans le contexte du nouveau modèle de gestion. L'article s'intéresse particulièrement aux répercussions de ce rôle sur eux. Les données sont tirées de cinq entrevues et d'un groupe de discussion réunissant cinq directeurs d'une école de service social au Canada. Quatre thèmes sont ressortis des données : la lutte pour les ressources menée par les directeurs; le rôle d'agents de gestion des ressources assumé par les directeurs; le rôle de « tampon » joué par les directeurs pour protéger le corps professoral du stress occasionné par les compressions de ressources; et l'établissement de relations comme moyen de résistance. Forcés d'agir comme gestionnaires des ressources, les directeurs déploient des efforts qui passent grandement inaperçus et qui ne sont parfois pas reconnus par les professeurs. Nos résultats seront utiles aux écoles professionnelles qui négocient leur avenir dans le système universitaire, surtout à une époque où les facultés de service social peinent à convaincre quelqu'un d'accepter un rôle de direction. Dans l'ensemble, l'étude aide à clarifier la nature des pratiques de direction dans les écoles de service social, ce qui contribue à mieux comprendre la situation actuelle, les exigences du poste de direction et la façon d'appuyer la personne qui l'occupe.

**Mots-clés :** Direction d'un département universitaire, pratiques managériales, néolibéralisme, écoles de travail social

*TO DATE, THERE HAS BEEN LITTLE* documentation on the practices that social actors in educational settings employ to comply with, and/or resist, the influence of neoliberalism. In this paper, we discuss how directors of social-justice-oriented social work schools engage in academic leadership in the context of new managerialism, and how this engagement affects them. Using data from research we conducted in five schools of social work in Canada, we outline some of the specific ways that neoliberal governance affects leadership in universities, as well as the strategies and practices directors use to support their social work programs. This knowledge is useful to professional schools negotiating their future in the university, especially at a time when social work faculties struggle to motivate individuals to take on leadership roles. Overall, the findings clarify the nature of leadership practices in schools of social work, contributing to a better understanding of the current situation, the requirements of leadership, and how leadership can be supported.

## Literature Review

Neoliberalism emerged in the 1980s as an ideological response to inflation. Its proponents advocated for deregulation of the economy, liberalization of trade and industry, and privatization of state-owned enterprise. Influenced by this ideology and sometimes forced into alignment with agreements such as the Washington Consensus, countries around the world introduced massive tax cuts for high income earners and businesses, reduced social services and welfare programs, and used interest rates by independent banks to keep inflation in check; they also downsized government, decreased unionization and increased labour flexibility, and removed controls on global finance (Steger & Roy, 2010). One of the key features of neoliberalism is that rather than encourage citizens to work toward the ideal of social good, neoliberal citizens are encouraged to see themselves as self-interested actors who are responsible to be economically accountable, efficient, and transparent (Giroux, 2004). These ideological shifts were intensified through the fast pace of technological change and globalization. While neoliberalism is a political and economic ideology transforming states and the global economy, it is intended to work on the individual body to reconstitute how we see ourselves in relation to each other, our communities, and the state. There are few spaces in Canada that have not been reshaped by neoliberal ideology; its far-reaching effects have been well documented in the fields of health, education, immigration, citizenship, and social welfare (Baines & McBride, 2014; Basu, 2005).

Within this social political context, universities have also been significantly transformed – shaped by decreases in state funding, increased pressure to bring in research dollars, shifting enrolments, and rising tuition rates (Clark, Moran, Skolnik, & Trick, 2009). The operationalization of neoliberal logic within state-funded organizations such as universities is termed “new managerialism,” and has become the dominant management form within such institutions (Davies, 2005; Deem, Hillyard, & Reed, 2007; Farrel & Morris, 2003). The effects on Canadian universities in particular have required faculty members to negotiate ever-increasing corporate culture regulatory regimes while reframing education in terms more closely aligned with vocational training (Brownlee, 2015; Côté & Allahar, 2011). Faculty members and departments are often overwhelmed by the never-ending pressure to increase the number of students admitted into their programs – students who are desperate for their own economic security (Clark et al., 2009). Studies have revealed a growing gap between what students and faculty members expect from universities, which creates increased stress and tension in social work departments that are trying to simultaneously adapt to a changing university culture and a quickly shifting labour market (Worsley et al., 2009).

Neoliberal governance is sustained on a double truth: it is based on the principle of unbound, free-market relations, while at the same time it calls for increasing regulation of labour within the public sphere. The neoliberal trend is not a withdrawal of government involvement from state institutions, such as the university, but is rather a series of new forms of governance aligned with market-driven rationales to measure and assess workers' activity. Despite neoliberalism's anti-statist claims, based on the need to have unfettered freedom in the marketplace, it is a form of governance vying for control of public institutions (Gray, Dean, Agllias, Howard, & Schubert, 2015). As a key strategy for operationalizing neoliberalism, new managerialism focuses on accountability and metrics such as employee performance measures and outputs (Gray et al., 2015; McDonald, 2006).

#### *Neoliberal Governance of the University Employee*

Davies, Gottsche, and Bansell (2006) noted that incremental changes in new-managerial-governing practices have led to a constitution of the subject wherein the focus is alteration of the self, rather than the institution. Change is largely redirected from the collective to the individual actor (Clegg, 2008). In the neoliberal institution, the preferred subjectivity is for employees to become entrepreneurial, competitive, and self-governing individuals, characterized as self-sufficient, self-directing, and enterprising (Clarke, 2010; Clegg, 2008; Morrish, 2014). The principal legitimate goal for those employees is continuous improvement (Ball, 2000; Morrish, 2014).

The means for evaluating this continuous improvement is based largely upon the quantity of publications and the amount of research funding that individuals, and by extension departments, can produce (Davies et al., 2006). Good leadership becomes defined mostly by the exercise of operationalizing neoliberal ideology through increased surveillance, accountability, productivity, efficiency, and transparency. Leaders engage in a set of practices that are meant to increase certainty, but within the logic of neoliberal precarity and individualized competition; Brown (2015) argued that university actors become human capital or economized beings, incited to outperform their competitors. The result is increased isolation and insecurity (Ball, 2000; Gill, 2009). Managerial practices are primarily concerned with surveillance and auditing to reduce costs and increase efficiency and productivity. Administrators use outcomes and performance indicators to heighten accountability through measurable, quantifiable data. In the new-managerial regime, efficiency, effectiveness, and flexibility are considered to be paramount (Farrel & Morris, 2003). The emotional consequences of these shifts are well documented by authors such as Mountz et al., who cited "depression, exhaustion, shame, loss, discontentment" (2015, p. 10), and Gill, who cited

“exhaustion, stress, overload, insomnia, anxiety, shame, aggression, hurt, guilt and feelings of out-of-placeness, fraudulence and fear of exposure within the contemporary academy” (2009, p. 4) as the emotional response to the neoliberal university. O’Gorman (2015) dubbed the new university a ‘breeding ground for worry.’

Still, the discourse of neoliberalism and the new managerial regime is so pervasive that any attempts to critique it from outside its range of terminology and logic forestall resistance to it (Davies & Bendix Petersen, 2005; Morrish, 2014). Instead, Morrish (2014) suggested that we attempt to understand the governing strategies of managerialist, neoliberal institutions by revealing and understanding the practices of social actors within the institutions. Working within the neoliberalism system does not mean actors must be blindly complicit with its practices: it is possible to simultaneously work for and against the institutional manifestations of neoliberalism. Human service personnel are already inventing new ways of practice that can minimize the harshest effects of neoliberal governance, including making decisions to spend more time with clients, to treat them more humanely, and to include critiques of the system in their work with the people to whom they provide services (Gray et al., 2015).

### *Social-Justice-Oriented Educational Leadership in the Context of Neoliberalism*

Ayers (2014) imagined university governance as a process whereby actors interpret the nature of the university based on observations of university culture, current situational contexts, individual perceptions, and historical patterns. He showed how the discourse of budgets within the university mystifies power relations and legitimizes managerialist practices, but argued that it also reveals a complex *mélange* of social relations. He posited that a type of bricolage exists within the communication, which both anticipates resistance to managerialist practices and expresses a university culture based on principles that include collegiality, professional autonomy, and deliberative decision-making.

According to Anderson (2008), academics refuse to be subjugated by managerialism, and in fact develop micro-level resistances in their practices. He argued that their ability to assess, analyze, and criticize are skills that can benefit resistance to managerialist practices, and that their effective strategies for resistance include a wide variety of tactics such as avoidance, refusal, discursive resistance, engagement in hidden transcripts, outright protest, and qualified compliance. When avoidance is not possible, academics often appear to comply with neoliberal demands, although in minimal, strategic, and pragmatic ways that suggest less than full support. While this does not release academics from neoliberal managerialist demands, it reveals degrees of resistance in terms of the micro-politics of power associated with managerialism. Similarly, Gray

et al. (2015) noted that social service and educational workers engage in acts of resistance when they can, locating and taking advantage of fissures in governance rules in concert with their clients, creating new alliances, and representing the interests of service users despite attempts to limit advocacy. The more adverse effects of neoliberalism are met with small acts of refusal and resistance on a daily basis (Carey & Foster, 2011; Gray et al., 2015). Mountz et al. (2015) drew on feminist theory to argue for a form of 'slow scholarship' to counter the productivity demands of the neoliberal university. They argued for collective action based on a feminist ethos of care and the adoption of specific tactics that range from turning off email, creating a 'good enough' stance on productivity, and writing and thinking in a deliberate, collaborative manner.

While an extensive body of critical literature has focused on neoliberalism in higher education, we still know little about how academic leaders are negotiating this neoliberal terrain, and how leadership roles and responsibilities might be changing within specific neoliberal university contexts. The complexity of neoliberalism and the multiple forms it takes in various contexts is precisely what makes it difficult to disrupt or see beyond. Practices of negotiating neoliberalism are not universal, but are situated and shaped by particular actors and organizational cultures and histories. In this paper, we explore the nature of academic leadership in the neoliberal university, with a particular focus on the role of directors within progressive schools of social work in Canada. We investigate how directors see their roles and responsibilities and how they enact them for the betterment of their schools within the current context. Specifically, we explore questions such as: What are their key struggles? What strategies do they use to negotiate neoliberal trends? What is it like to be an academic leader within this context? Apart from one article published by Rogers (2010) on leadership in social work, few studies or discussions have investigated these issues. Given the leadership crisis in many schools in Canada, this research gap is significant and is one we hope this article begins to fill.

## **Method**

The data for this paper were collected as part of a larger study that was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and received ethics clearance from two Ontario universities. The objectives of the larger study were fourfold: (1) to clarify how new managerialism influences administrative and pedagogical practices in Canadian schools of social work; (2) to investigate how social work educators who adhere to critical pedagogy negotiate and/or resist new managerialism; (3) to understand how new managerialism shapes various encounters within the university, including between administrators and faculty members, educators and students, and among faculty members;



and (4) to develop practice and policy recommendations to support pedagogical and administrative activities that respond effectively to and/or resist new managerialism. The data collection process involved interviewing faculty members and students at five schools of social work across Canada, which were selected to reflect regional diversity and because they identified as progressive schools of social work. The schools only had to consider themselves as progressive; the research team did not have any particular definition of what 'progressive' meant for this study, because we were mostly interested in how schools were able to negotiate their self-identities within the neoliberal university. The data were drawn from individual interviews, focus groups, and document analysis.

For this paper, we analyzed data from the five individual interviews with directors, as well as data from a focus group discussion with five directors. The directors involved in the focus group were the same as those interviewed, with the exception of one who sent the school's associate director as the representative for the focus group.

We began our analysis with a line-by-line analysis of these six transcripts, looking specifically for content about the activities and feelings of participating directors. Across the data, we observed one overarching theme related to how directors were enacting leadership in a managerialist context, which upon further analysis we were able to break down into the four themes presented in this paper: directors as fighting for school resources; directors as agents of resource management; directors as buffers; and resistance through relationship-building. Within these themes, we identified examples of their efforts to advance the work of their schools, their acts of resistance, and how they negotiated new managerialist demands within their particular university context. On a third reading of the data, we developed a coding framework by grouping similar categories into the themes outlined above.

## Results

### *Directors 'Fight' for School Resources*

Directors told us, that in the context of neoliberalism, they spend a great deal of their energy 'fighting' for the resources they need from the university in order to operate their school, including struggles just to maintain the status quo. As one director described the context of financial austerity: "There is this culture of cuts that just operates constantly" (Site 2). Another director also characterized this struggle as ongoing:

I'm constantly fighting for the needs of the school...I feel like I'm in guerrilla warfare. I have, for the last two years, tried to figure out how to present the information to protect the school and to make a case for why we have the staff that we have, why we have the faculty that we have (Site 3).



This battle for resources appears to involve convincing administration about the special nature of social work schools:

We've [continually] worked very hard...at educating deans about what the program is, why it is different [from other departments], why we look resource intensive [compared to some other departments], that there's a rationale for it [the way we do things in a school of social work] (Site 1).

The competition for resources is tied to a system of approvals and monitoring that has become more complex. Small tasks that only a few years earlier were quite easy to accomplish, now have to be 'fought for': "Things take longer to happen because lots more systems of monitoring are being put in place, and they're often monitored by people who don't understand the situation, so there's a lot more arguing to get something through" (Site 2). In social-justice-oriented social work schools in particular, the directors said they are constantly fighting to situate their schools within the current university priorities, and to see the school's perspective reflected and understood within the wider university:

The things that are valued now [within the university] aren't things that fit with how we do things as a social work school. Like, in terms of money...the obvious example is class sizes. We are teaching people to be social workers. You can't teach them that in class sizes of 500 where you don't get to know them. And when you're teaching anti-oppression content, you need lots of time to process and discuss and debate. You can't do that with 500 students. So I feel like there's this constant...like, they don't understand who we are and what we are trying to do here, and there is very little opportunity to insert that perspective (Site 5).

### *Directors Constructed as Agents Responsible for Resource Management*

Directors told us that having to uphold this constant, unwavering, 'fighting' stance takes a significant toll on them personally: "It's a constant struggle, an absolutely constant struggle" (Site 2). The impact on directors is especially difficult because their efforts are often unnoticed by their colleagues: "It takes all this effort to hold this tent up, and a lot of it is not visible. In fact, most of it is not visible.... Disasters averted leave no trace...I feel as if a lot of the time I'm fending off a disaster that, you know, becomes invisible and un-recordable" (Site 1).

Perhaps even more frustrating to these directors is that it often seems to them that the resource decisions made are not necessarily related to their efforts, yet the university administration has a way of making it appear that its decisions are based on how well directors argue their cases. Directors are unsure this is true. They find it exhausting to constantly have to argue for why they should maintain the resources they currently have, and to make the case as to why these are crucial to the

effective operations of their schools, especially when the decisions do not necessarily correspond to the facts. One director, for example, described a time when their school was “on the chopping block” (Site 4) and they were working hard to get the school “off the radar” (Site 4) of those administrators who were looking for justifications of where they could cut the budget. As part of their decision-making about which programs to cut, the administration had forced the school to go through an external review. Despite the positive results, the cuts were still imposed and the director was forced to eliminate support-staff positions. Faculty members were upset by this and the director felt blamed by them, although “there was nothing [else] I could do [about the budget cut].... I’m just powerless” (Site 4).

Other directors echoed similar sentiments in their individual interviews and focus groups, and presented their own examples of how they are constantly asked to justify every resource allocation to their school. For example, when someone retires and a replacement is necessary, a case has to be made for that replacement. And if it is not approved, it is assumed that the director “must have not made the case well enough” (Site 5):

We just had a faculty [member] resign and I actually had to make a case why we should have that person replaced. And not only did I have to make a case, but...I got a message that I had to make that case [just before] a long weekend and it was due on the following Tuesday at noon. And making that case involved setting out our program’s overall goals, its objectives [and] how this new person is going to fill that. And I didn’t have time to consult with the faculty members. It was Thursday before a long weekend. It’s constant. And if you don’t do this properly, we are going to lose that position and it’s going to be [perceived as] my fault... as opposed to the University making its own decisions. It feels to me that there is a way that the University is creating [the impression that]... somehow it’s the director’s fault if you don’t get something that you need, even though it’s not that, right? So I’m just feeling a lot of pressure from that (Site 5).

The directors we interviewed said they are weary from having to constantly battle to maintain resources – and when their program resources are cut, they are considered inadequate wardens. This construction of the director’s efforts as the main determinant for funding is further enhanced by the fact that faculty members within the school have limited knowledge of what is going on in the upper levels of administration. Faculty members are generally unaware of threats to their program and their director’s efforts to even maintain the status quo. In part, this is because they are not privy to the same information as directors, but also because directors tend to ‘shield’ their faculty members from the burden of this knowledge, as described in the next section.

*Directors as Buffers*

Directors told us they consciously act as a 'buffer' to 'protect' faculty members and staff:

I think I'm buffering them from the demands of the administration.... I feel sometimes as Director you act as a mediator with those forces and you should buffer the faculty from them...so the faculty can do their work...creating the space where it is positive for faculty (Site 3).

Another director expressed this perception in a similar way:

It's kind of like me trying to hold off the worst things that come from [upper administration] and to protect the school.... I see myself as the buffer between whatever is coming down from management and the school, if you like, to try to keep it afloat in that broader context (Site 2).

Directors believe that by shielding faculty members from budget pressures, they help protect morale and allow the faculty members to focus on their work and feel more positive about their work environment:

I feel that if faculty [members] are excited and engaged, all kinds of good stuff is going to happen. One of my dilemmas is, how do I bring them enough information so they get a sense of what's going on, but not panic them to a point where they just say, "Well, forget it. Who cares?" I want them to be engaged because if they are not engaged I can't do my job and the school doesn't run. I feel that I'm in this constant sort of balancing act, which I find really difficult. If I shared most of the stuff that I hear with the faculty, the morale would just be gone. When you share things, people just panic (Site 5).

The interconnected roles of fighting for school resources as an agent responsible for resource management, acting as a buffer for faculty members and staff, as well as relationship building (as discussed in the next section), are all demanding and serve as sources of stress and tension for directors. The directors we interviewed were clear that enacting the role of director in the current neoliberal context, especially in a social-justice-oriented school, takes a toll on them personally. One director said, "It feels very isolated" (Site 4). Another said, "...I don't really feel threatened by what comes from management, although it constantly annoys me, absolutely constantly annoys me" (Site 2). A third director, picking up on the earlier theme of 'invisible work,' noted that successfully enacting the role of 'buffer' requires a degree of invisibility, and therefore colleagues are unaware and do not recognize or appreciate the effort involved: "When you are maintaining something, it's invisible, so people can't see your work, right?... When you're doing a good job, for the most part, as an administrator, people don't see you doing anything because everything's just working well" (Site 5).

*Resistance Through Relationship-Building*

The role of director is situated at a juncture of conflicting needs and pressures – an intersection of differing politics within the university. Occupying this position between administration and faculty members can be extremely draining:

It's constantly stressful...this job does place you at the intersection of a lot of different politics. And so it is managing all those politics that I find stressful.... The issue is how to manage all of that so people can get on and do their work and feel reasonably safe and not be too stressed. I haven't got an answer to that. I just get stressed. I find it totally stressful and I think that is the difficult part of the job.... I think, to be honest, these are not desirable jobs because of that, because of the stress. You know, the management, the leadership side, [is] great. Strategy side, great. But actually putting it into practice in this kind of environment, I think it's almost impossible (Site 2).

Within this difficult context, one key strategy for success used by directors is to build strong relationships with upper-level administrators, in particular with their deans. These directors have found that building a strong trusting relationship with their dean can be one of the most helpful strategies in terms of winning support and resources for their schools. One director claimed that the character of these social relations with senior administrators held more sway in decision-making than logic did:

...a lot of this [success in protecting the school] depends on...the hard work of the director...to educate, befriend, support, negotiate, mediate, with the deans...the provost.... In so many situations, the protection of the program...depends on your personal relationships that get developed [with administrators] as opposed to the principles upon which those decisions should be made (Site 1).

Another director stressed the value of taking a diplomatic approach toward negotiation and co-operation, at least up to a point:

I don't actually believe it helps the school for us just to disengage.... I don't think it helps us be able to continue what we want to do.... I think the director has to participate.... I think [the dean] respects that I work in good faith, that I 'get it', I know what you're asking us to do, and I'm going to try to do my best to do it, but where I'm done, I'm going to say I can't do that.... I think that's the relationship piece...trust that I'm not just saying "no" because that's always going to be my stance, but that when I say "no", it is really...the end of the line (Site 5).

While the directors believe this strategy can be quite effective, they are often criticized by faculty members when they choose to use

relationship-building, rather than outright protest, as a strategy in certain instances:

It's a big university but...a lot is done between networks.... And you've got to have a good reputation and credible reputation within the right networks to get it done. And I think this is also a tension for me because I think normally, in social justice political terms, it's more about confronting head-on what an issue is and having a big fight about it and then having a power struggle over it. I'm not feeling that that's necessarily the first and best way to work, but I think that clearly you've got to get to some point like that if there's not agreement (Site 2).

For directors in social-justice-oriented schools relationship-building, and the associated scepticism, present one of the major challenges of academic leadership within the new managerialist context. Faculty members in progressive schools seem to believe that more recognizable social-justice-oriented advocacy strategies should always be employed. As one director put it, "When you get an established social-justice school, I think there are, you know.... People do assume that there are particular ways of practicing social justice and that if we are not doing that, then it is not social justice" (Site 2). When faculty members observe the director engaging in relationship-building activities such as mediating, negotiating, compromising, and consensus-building with deans, they are often sceptical of the director's actions:

There's something about a social-justice orientation that's about fighting. Like, it's always about positioning you against, you know, "the man" or whoever, right? Like, that's the way to behave as a good social justice activist.... [It's hard] when you're with a group of faculty members who expects the appropriate strategy to always be to adamantly oppose, and say, "no," and fight the dean.... Sometimes it's more helpful to kind of go in with a different strategy (Site 5).

The directors we interviewed expressed frustration with this tension, and felt faculty members did not necessarily understand that within the new managerialist academy, different political strategies are worth trying and in some cases may be more effective than conflict and protest, even though the latter strategies may have been more effective in the past:

I think that the problem with the way we've constructed social-justice social work is we haven't left room for negotiation. And maybe negotiation is even the wrong word but, you know, I've always said social work is contextual. So it means that you have to work with whatever your environment is. We don't exist outside our environment. So if you're in a university that says that, how do you engage with that? ...Just because you negotiate doesn't mean you're being conservative. And actually, you

may be changing power imbalances by negotiating as well. So I don't know how we got stuck in this really narrow understanding of social justice (Site 2).

Scepticism about negotiation efforts and strategies among faculty members suggests they may fear that capitulation is inevitable—that there is no longer any clear 'front line' of resistance.

## Discussion

These research findings reveal some of the ways in which neoliberal forces and new managerial practices unfold within the university and the direct effects these have on individuals in leadership roles in schools of social work. One key finding is that while resources for schools of social work are being challenged and withdrawn, directors are expected to be stewards or managers of those resources. As program leaders, they are expected to advocate for and make a case for continued or new resources. Resource allocation decisions, although often made by senior administrators, are often attributed to the director's effectiveness in justifying the school's requirements. Thus, the neoliberal governance of the university constructs directors as autonomous actors who are vying with other department directors for limited resources. This combination of expectations places the responsibility for the success of the school squarely on the performance of the director.

Our data revealed that directors of schools of social work follow practices that are often characterized as forms of resistance to neoliberal governance. They take on the role of advocate and fight for resources. This role is co-constructed by the expectations within the broader university, as one but it is also, albeit reluctantly, at times taken up by directors as a central function of their job. Directors also act as intermediaries between the faculty members within their schools and the broader university. This role as buffer usually involves invisible work and leads to a sense of isolation, but directors also see their role as emissary to the broader university as one where they can build relationships in order to be able to negotiate on behalf of the school. Serving in the role of buffer can be particularly tense. On the one hand, it does seem important to ensure faculty members have the mental and emotional space to teach and research – and to be continually confronted with the hostile nature of the neoliberal university poses a threat to such work. On the other hand, the cost of this buffering may involve increased separation and a lack of understanding between directors and faculty members, which makes bridging and succession planning difficult. As the research team reflected on this particular role of buffer, we wondered whether schools might want to consider ways to share the burden among more, if not all, faculty members in a unit. However, this kind of shift would come with

risks; in other words, it might make faculty members even more reluctant to take on leadership roles. Therefore, it will be important to explore various strategies for sharing the burden by including more leaders, and assess which ones may be more empowering than others.

In recent years, schools of social work have often struggled to find people willing to take on the role of dean or director. Moreover, those who do become leaders are, more often than not, White men, despite the gendered and racialized nature of the social work student body. Rogers (2010) argued that the ways in which leadership in social work have been constituted results in these positions appearing quite lonely and, consequently, women (and we would add racialized persons) may not want to take on leadership roles. Our data shed some light on the reasons for faculty members' reticence to act as formal leaders in schools of social work and the challenges of leadership. Together, our research findings suggest that social work educators might benefit from honing their collective ability to support leaders and developing collective and individual mentorship practices to ensure succession. However, one issue is still unclear and needs further research: What is the vision of leadership we hope new leaders will develop? In other words, given the context and struggle described by participants in this study, are there ways in which we might imagine, clarify, and unpack leadership to more helpfully prepare faculty members for leadership in the academy? Our research findings also suggest that within a profession committed to social justice, it is important to consider how our notions of 'appropriate' forms of resistance and political strategy may hamper leadership in the neoliberal context. As researchers, we have been left asking whether it is possible to develop an idea of social justice that allows our leaders to celebrate their successes and mourn losses with the rest of us, rather than having to worry that they will be seen as betraying our cause.

Feminist and critical race scholars are grappling with similar questions, and some have suggested various frames for trying to rethink how academic leaders can survive in neoliberal institutions. Santamaria (2014) focused on leaders of colour within the field of education, including post-secondary education, and identified several characteristics of critical race leadership. These leaders tend to critically reflect on their own personal educational experience, and based on their social location, they develop a unique set of skills to embrace diversity, including engaging in critical conversations, getting involved in academic discourse, reaching group consensus, honouring all members of their constituencies, leading by example, and building trust with the mainstream.

Reflecting on her experiences as a dean of social work, Rogers (2010) argued for the feminization of leadership, based on the growing realization that good leadership does not require women to fit a male model, but rather can benefit from the inclusion of a full range of gendered skills and abilities. Applying a feminist lens, she explored how



the construction of leadership within the university often results in very few women taking on these roles, even in social work programs where the number of women faculty members is usually quite high.

Theoharis (2007) studied the views and practices of educational leaders who draw upon social-justice theory in order to reduce marginalization within school settings. These leaders spoke of resistance to their work, resulting in a great personal toll on their physical, emotional, and mental health, as well as a constant sense of discouragement. Their strategies to maintain their efforts include authentic and purposeful communication, keeping an 'eye on the prize,' developing a supportive administrative network, working together for change, prioritizing work, engaging in professional learning, and building relationships among 'like-minded' colleagues. These proactive strategies help create the time and emotional space needed to build support and continue to engage in equity-focused social-justice work.

Our findings exposed a tension in leadership within the neoliberal academy between having to fight (justify, negotiate, disagree) and needing to foster relationships (be relational) in order to protect the school. It seems the orientation required for each of these roles is quite different and difficult to integrate into a single person. The stark contrast between these two elements of leadership reveals the need for more nuanced research into how effective leaders integrate these different aspects of the job into their own understandings of leadership. What might be the defining characteristics of progressive academic leaders who have both the ability to 'fight' and also the ability to build relationships? How can we be challenged to rethink what an academic leader, who is a strong advocate for their school, might look like? What does leadership look like when we have leaders with stronger skills in one area over another? Are there ways to structure leadership in schools of social work where one person is not expected to have all of those skills finely tuned?

The ways in which we socialize our students and faculty members, who may have much to offer, may actually leave them unprepared for negotiating the complexity of the neoliberal institution. It seems that while social workers bring an extensive skill set to their leadership roles, the personal cost of academic leadership in the neoliberal university can be extremely high. Although our study focused on directors within schools of social work characterized by a social-justice perspective, we expect this finding is not limited to directors in only these types of schools. This would be a useful issue to explore in future research. By better clarifying the dynamics of social work academic leadership within the current neoliberal context, we can better help prepare school directors for their role, and identify and implement more effective supports for them.

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