

THE
White Paper
S E R I E S

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EXECUTIVE DEVELOPMENT FOR
WOMEN OF THE THIRD WAVE:
WHY GENDER MATTERS

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Why Gender Matters

The leaking pipeline of women from the corporate world and their relative absence from higher levels of executive leadership has been a subject of concern for decades. In spite of Judy Rosener's widely publicized argument in *America's Competitive Secret: Women Managers* that women represent an untapped talent pool, women are still seriously under represented in the executive ranks.ⁱ More disturbing still are the profound differences between male and female executives' interpretations of the problem. Catalyst's recent *Cracking the Glass Ceiling* report indicates that fewer than one-fourth of women executives believe that opportunities for women to advance to senior leadership positions in their companies have increased in the past five years, while almost three-fourths of CEOs believe that opportunities for women have improved greatly or somewhat.ⁱⁱ *Fortune* magazine's annual list of the 50 most powerful women in American business concludes with the "grim news" that "there are only six women CEOs of Fortune 500 companies. . . . And there are fewer women in the pipeline than anyone would have thought 30 years ago".ⁱⁱⁱ Retention of women leaders has become an increasingly salient issue, but the glass ceiling remains, pushing many talented women to seek more promising opportunities, often through entrepreneurship rather than the corporate world.

Numbers abound to document this trend, from organizations such as Catalyst and other non profit organizations, the Business Women's Network,

numerous state and federal offices, and popular publications ranging from *Working Woman* to *Fortune* magazine. Meanwhile, American business faces an unprecedented war for talent with 99% of companies in McKinsey's War for Talent 2000 Study reporting that they will need a stronger pool of managerial talent within the next three years and 80% reporting that they do not have enough leadership talent to pursue business opportunities.^{iv} These authors predict a continuation of the leadership shortage for the next two decades, even in the present economy.

Explanations document such concrete problems as the incompatibility of corporate values with women's values, problems in work/life balance, continued stereotyping of women in ways that limit the possibility of advancement, exclusion from informal networks of communication, and a generally inhospitable corporate culture. These problems have been around since substantial numbers of women began to move away from traditional

women's jobs in the early 1970s. Less understood, but equally important, are the expectations and blind spots with which the present generation of 20- and 30-something women frame their experience of work. These are the women of what has been called the third wave. I argue here that their inability to understand their career path as a gendered one, and to act accordingly, contributes as much to women's glacial progress in corporate life as do the conditions of the corporate world itself. Executive development for women needs to account for this generational mind-set. In an ironic

Only 12.5% of corporate officers in America's largest 500 companies are women — although in 1999 women made up nearly 50% of the total workforce.

reversal, American business needs to assume greater advocacy for women as women than the women of the third wave are prepared to do for themselves.

What Is the Third Wave?

The term third wave is used in a variety of ways:

1. To refer to the generation of 1980s and 90s women in order to distinguish them from the second wave of feminists (1960s - 1970s) and the first wave, the women of the suffrage movement, roughly 1890s - 1920s
2. To refer to the multiplicity and ambiguity of current feminist positions, from radical to capitalist, and including anti feminist positions
3. To refer to the wholesale rejection of any organized women's movement out of a sense that feminism is about defining women as victims, while success is all about individual effort

For my purpose, I associate the term with the spirit expressed in a 1996 *New Yorker* cartoon. A little girl is telling her mom, "some kids at school called you a feminist, Mom, but I punched them out." In a *New York Times* review article, Wendy Kaminer associates third wave feminism with a heavy emphasis on individualism in ways that obscure, if not reject, more systemic manifestations of gender barriers. "It's easy," Kaminer observes, "to understand the appeal of pure individualism to young women professionals imbued with confidence, an ethic of self-reliance and the headstart of a good education. But it's hard to imagine a women's movement without at least a little 'gender consciousness' and some commitment to collective action."^{vi}

As a college professor, I watched the third wave swell throughout the 80s and 90s as my students struggled blindly with the gender politics of the classroom, the campus, and the culture, all the while rejecting gender as a framework for understanding their lives. Whenever the subject of women came up, the women in my classes became not just resistant; they got downright hostile. Whether they encountered the writing of women in literature classes, the history of women in history classes, or the nature of women's writing in writing classes, my female students let me know in not so subtle ways that this stuff didn't interest them and didn't apply to them. The battle for women's rights ended in the 60s, they thought, and the women won. So let's get on with it.

These women of the third wave are convinced they live in a meritocracy, that they alone are the makers of their destiny. They voice what Delese Wear describes among the female medical students she teaches as "the hubris and hearty individualism of those who have 'arrived' and who mistakenly believe they have done so solely on their own merit. If they can do it, anyone can."^{vii} Rounding out this psychology, Jackie Brookner, another college professor surprised by her students' resistance to gender, observes, "Many students, especially the younger ones, seem not to be aware that there is a problem, partly because they do have women teachers and mothers who work; the urgency of twenty years ago has been dissipated. Partly, too, they have not yet experienced much overt sexism, and much of what they do experience they have already been socialized not to notice."^{viii} To women of the third wave, there are no barriers, only an open highway to success.

The Gendered Workplace

Meanwhile, I looked at how my women colleagues were faring. The disconnect was jarring. The students and I were living in two different worlds even though we worked in the same buildings. Here are three vignettes from a single organization that occurred in the last three years:

Karla: Karla is a brilliant scholar, administrator, and teacher who became heavily involved leading a radical and pace-setting reform of the college's writing program. She was a tenured professor who, with more than half a dozen years at that institution, had earned the respect of her colleagues, and most recently won the college's coveted distinguished service award. When the position of Composition Director came open, she was the only candidate for the job. Rather than simply appointing her, the college administration made her go through the entire search process, writing lengthy letters of application and philosophy statements and undergoing extensive interviews. At the same time, the position of Budget Director came open. A young man who had been hired only a year earlier as the college's institutional research specialist was simply appointed—no search, no interviews, just an announcement. He had no significant experience in budget management.

Denise: Denise had been the head of public relations for over a decade and was widely respected in the community and on campus for her journalistic integrity, her tremendous commitment to her job, and her highly successful promotion of the college throughout the region. As a result of her

previous work as a journalist, she had both entrée to and respect from the local and statewide media. A new president was appointed who made it clear that his notions of public relations had more to do with spin than truth-telling. Within a year, Denise had been demoted and a man with no experience in public relations and no credentials in even a remotely related field was given the job. His chief qualification: the consummate “team player.”

Karen: The third vignette is my own. I had been the dean of arts and sciences for nine years. I was the highest-ranking female academic officer at the college, the first woman ever to hold that job. I was the head of two-thirds of the college faculty and was enjoying great success in rejuvenating the curriculum and re-energizing a large core of the faculty by providing intellectual leadership. I was active and visible in national higher education circles, consulted regularly at other colleges and universities throughout the country, and continued to publish my own scholarly work, all of which helped to call attention to a little-known college. Just two weeks after a new president arrived, I was asked to resign. No reasons were given except a vague comment that I was not a team player. My male colleagues were apparently prequalified for whatever the game was, so they passed the team player litmus test. My two female administrative colleagues simply accepted the traditional female role of silent compliance. When word of the president's decision leaked out, the faculty went ballistic. Despite a faculty vote of no-confidence, a barrage of letters to the editor

in the local paper, and a parade of campus and community leaders who tried to persuade the new president to reconsider his decision, he remained unmoved. I refused to resign rather than to make it easy for the president to evade responsibility for his decision. So I was fired.

Cases like these serve to remind us that the terrain is still not level for women. No matter how meritorious the women in these cases, their careers were affected not by their performance but by their gender. Nor are cases like these unique to academia. They replay the issues that surfaced in previous landmark cases of gender bias from other professions. The Ann Hopkins case is a common touchstone. Hopkins was denied partnership in Price Waterhouse because she was deemed too aggressive for a woman and not feminine enough. She was told to style her hair, apply makeup, and wear more jewelry. She was told she needed to be more nurturing of support staff, easier to get along with. The courts found that men with similar or lesser qualifications were admitted to partnership and that Hopkins had indeed been the victim of gender discrimination. In 1990, the U.S. Supreme Court found in her favor.^{ix}

Another touchstone case, with a less happy ending for the complainant, was that of Nancy Ezold, an attorney for a law firm in Philadelphia. In her discussion of the case, Joan Williams concedes that Ezold “was not a superstar, though evidence suggests that many of the men who made partner at her firm had the kind of positive but mixed performance evaluations she had.”^x Senior colleagues counseled her that she would have difficulty being elected to partner, in part because she was a woman. Her willingness to

stick up for the (predominantly women) paralegals in the firm over issues of salary and workload, coupled with her pointing out that she was being held to a different standard than her male colleagues were not well received, and she was denied partnership. Like Ann Hopkins, she was criticized for not getting along well with staff, “very demanding, prima-donnaish, not a team player.”^{xi}

The final blow during the appeals process was the firm’s contention that she lacked sufficient analytical ability. The appeals court found no discrimination. Williams’ analysis of the case is significant: “Arguably, Ezold would have faced none of the difficulties named had she been a man; together, they added up to a force field that pulled her out of contention by undermining her reputation, particularly among lawyers who had not worked with her.”^{xii} The personnel documents from the Hopkins case reveal the same pattern of escalating performance requirements once reviewers seized on the shreds of criticism in the file, and an ever-enlarging concentration on the negatives as the nomination moved further away from her office.^{xiii}

To return this narrative to the present, one of my favorite recent examples is the appointment of Shirley Caldwell Tilghman to the presidency of Princeton University. Thomas Wright, secretary to the search committee, commented to the *Chronicle of Higher Education* that “there was some real concern that our admiration and affection, based on our associations with her, would overwhelm our good judgment. Because of that she was held to a higher standard than the rest of the candidates.”^{xiv} Frankly, I’d prefer to be loved a little less and treated equally a little more.

The point of all these stories, however, is not to parade a series of villains and victims, but to show once again that gender barriers are deeply woven into the cultural systems of work. That a search committee thinks it's OK to justify holding a female candidate to higher standards than her male competitors while simultaneously patronizing her with expressions of affection would be unheard of in the case of a male candidate.

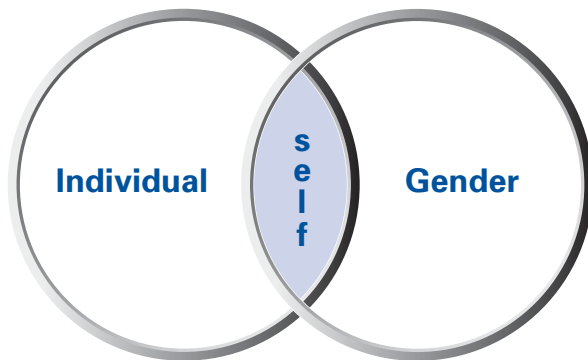
Individualism and the Ideology of Merit: Career Blinders for Women of the Third Wave

What is the connection between these cases and those students I taught over the last two decades? About the time my students were trying to convince me that gender barriers were passé, Ann Hopkins began her struggle. Nancy Ezold was duking it out in Philadelphia during the early 90s. The three vignettes from my professional world took place in 1999. Ms Tilghman was appointed to her new post last summer. In my new career developing and leading professional development programs for women executives, I am once again working with that generation of women from the 80s and 90s who thought feminism had nothing to say to them. Feminism, in fact, has become the f-word. To the extent that third wave women can envision gender imbalances, their individualistic worldview makes it impossible for them to see beyond a morality play of victims and villains. Such a morality play is neither appealing nor empowering; nor is it an accurate perception of the starting point for women's leadership development. What makes their situations different from the cases I've discussed, but all the more frightening, is this: The cases I've cited involved women established in their careers and interested in

advancing further. The women I work with are still early enough in their careers that they have not crashed into the glass ceiling that continues to block so many of their more senior women colleagues. The threshold is relatively even at the front door of a career. However, coming into a career without an understanding of the potential roadblocks for women and what they can do to avoid them leaves women unprepared to manage their careers strategically at the time when they most need such insight—before their careers take off with the increasing risks of derailment, before they decide that the corporate world is not for them, and before they decide they can't do anything about either one.

Equally important, coming into an executive career as a woman without an inkling that one dimension of executive work is as a change agent to many aspects of the business culture, including how gender is handled, is potentially crippling to women's potential contributions. Most third wave women still bristle at the notion that gender has something to do with the paths their lives are taking. They affirm the observation that Glazer and Slater made in their history of the entrance of women into the professions at the turn of the century: "Women banked so heavily on merit — on the belief that if only they were good enough, trained enough, committed enough, their achievement of superior performance would be rewarded — because it seemed so incontestable. Merit and achievement were, presumably, a matter of personal control and volition, and therefore protected from political manipulation by others."^{xv} A century later, women of the third wave still support the ideology of individual effort, even though all evidence suggests that larger, more systemic, less visible obstacles continue to block the career aspirations of all but a handful.

How Gender & Individual Background Construct the Self



- ▶ Upbringing
- ▶ Educational Background
- ▶ Socioeconomic Background
- ▶ Religious Training
- ▶ Adulthood
- ▶ Sex Role Stereotypes
- ▶ Gender Norms in School
- ▶ Gender Images in Popular Culture
- ▶ Visible, Normalized Power Structures in Organizations
- ▶ Invisible, Normalized Power Structures in Organizations

As a result, women of the third wave look for professional development that can provide tips and techniques to help them succeed as individuals: self-confidence building, improving their communication skills, networking, receiving mentoring, becoming more assertive, getting better at negotiating, and so on. It's not that professional women don't need this sort of professional training, because they do. But too often such training for women is couched in terms of remediating deficiencies, while for men some of the same issues are about value-added. Kaminer is useful here: "An excessively individualist feminism obliterates the political. . . . Conceiving of continuing discrimination as a private problem, feminism would be less a political movement than an exercise in personal development."^{xvi}

The problem for third wave women is not that they don't perceive a disconnect between their own needs and values and those of the corporate environment. They do. A running survey that I conduct of early executive women in a global professional services firm affirms that the top sources of career satisfaction are achieving work/life balance and working with supportive colleagues, while more male-oriented sources of satisfaction, such as compensation, visibility, and public recognition rank at the bottom of a list of 22 items. Few move to partnership.

The problem is that the ideology of merit has its dark side: the ideology of failure. If you believe that your successes derive from your individual accomplishments, then your failures must derive from your faults. So when women of the third wave stumble and fall in their careers, they blame themselves: somehow they are not good enough, not smart enough, not networked enough, not assertive enough, not confident enough, not persistent enough, not quick enough, not competitive enough — the list goes on and on. Of course this explanation isn't true at all. Men tend to externalize their faults (e.g., the boss was a jerk), but women internalize them. Ironically, the ideology of individual merit can be as hurtful as it is helpful for women because when you falter you see yourself as a failure.

Viewing themselves and their careers this way is like going through life with only one eye open. Women need to develop their eye for the ways gender is embedded in the systems of their work life to balance their eye for individual talent. As the cases above demonstrate, the systems in which we work are heavily gendered. They are riddled with the historical artifacts of male power and privilege that still reflect the origins of work

today in the all-male enclaves of the military and the church. The difficulty is that these gender hurdles are subtle and hard to detect. Third wave women are right that instances of overt discrimination have largely disappeared through

Examples of Systemic Gender Barriers

- When key decisions are made in the informal culture of work — from which women often feel excluded — and merely ratified in the formal culture
- When gender stereotypes govern plum job assignments, limit opportunities for mentoring or training, or ghettoize women in particular industries or job types
- When women are responsible for the "housework" of an organization's operations while men are the decision-makers in key P & L positions
- When an organization convinces itself that a handful of token women represents the achievement of equal opportunity
- When organizational norms for advancement, such as unbounded time at work, are not perceived as disadvantageous to women
- When gender inequities are routinely rationalized as "business decisions" such as client, customer, or industry preference to deal with a man rather than a woman
- When an organization resists acknowledging the existence of systemic gender differences, thereby precluding any need to address them, in favor of an *a priori* assumption that everyone is treated equally

decades of accumulated legislation. But you don't need to run into a sign on the door that says "women need not apply" to experience a career obstacle unique to women. Debra Meyerson and Joyce Fletcher, in "A Modest Manifesto for Shattering the Glass Ceiling," observe that "today discrimination against women lingers in a plethora of work practices and cultural norms that only appear unbiased. They are common and mundane — and woven into the fabric of an organization's status quo — which is why most people don't notice them, let alone question them. But they create a subtle pattern of systemic disadvantage, which blocks all but a few women from career advancement."^{xvii} The eye that sees gender as systemic is the eye that needs to be opened.

Business Leadership for the Third Wave: Taking a Hard Look at Gendered Systems

So what happens when executive development helps third wave women don a new pair of glasses and look at the world through the lens of the gender system? Three things change: First, women can begin to understand the traditional emphases on networking and mentoring in a different way. Instead of being concerned with how networks can help you, you begin to understand that your own career advancement is intimately tied to the successes of other women. Networking and mentoring help keep women's careers moving and therefore keep more women advancing toward positions of increased responsibility and power. They are reciprocal processes for women because the more women in the pipeline, the more women increase their individual chances of success. This is a very different perspective from tokenism and ghettoization of women, on the one hand

(“We’ve got our female VP and she’s head of Human Resources”), and the zero sum competition between women that stems from tokenism, on the other. It pushes us all toward a frame of mind that just might allow the news, sports, and weather on the evening news to be broadcast by three women and not be seen as odd, or Hollywood movies that might actually take women seriously, or senior management groups that are dominated by women as often as they are dominated by men, or legislative bodies in which there is truly equal representation — the list goes on.

Second, women begin to recognize that however much they wish their careers were just about them, they are always, also, about them as women, and therefore about the women who work above them, beside them, and in the pipeline behind them. A “woman doctor” is a very different entity than a “doctor.” A “woman driver” is highly suspect. A “woman engineer” or a “woman general” or a “woman CEO” is still an interesting anomaly. When she succeeds, the success often goes unnoticed. When she fails, it’s not just about her, it’s about any woman’s fitness for that position.

This added responsibility may be irksome and is certainly illogical, but it’s inevitable. It’s the reason why research on women and work tells us over and over again that women must work harder than men, that women’s performance is scrutinized more closely than men’s, that men are advanced based on potential, women on performance. Like it or not, those with the least power carry the heaviest burden for challenging and changing the systems that keep them in their place. But truly effective executive development takes the courageous step of opening up the

business culture itself to gender analysis rather than obscuring gender in the rush to develop (and adapt) the woman to fit the culture.

Third, in order to change the system, executive development needs to enable women to see how it really works. One of the supreme accomplishments of second wave feminism has been to help us see how the invisible norms that govern our work life take maleness as the unconscious standard, femaleness as the exception. Women need to be invited to become suspicious of such commonplace metaphors that determine how places at the table are doled out or denied. Take the innocuous and commonplace “team player” metaphor. It’s so embedded in the business world that we don’t even recognize it as a metaphor.

On the surface, being a team player is all about getting along, supporting the common cause, and winning against the competition. But sports teams aren’t very democratic structures. Rules aren’t negotiated by the players; they are just made. Unlike sports teams that have referees and codified rules for behavior, team captains in business wield enormous power. Some captains use that power fairly and effectively by building consensus, sharing responsibility, and choosing influence over command. Others do not, though they may mouth the words. Though business leaders talk more about the feminization of leadership, with the associated values of collaboration, consensus, and care, they continue to couch their work in the same old masculine metaphor of the team. Ironically, male team captains are going back to school to learn a more feminine leadership style. Meanwhile, women, who presumably possess these attitudes already, are leaving the

“corporate team” in record numbers to start their own businesses, where feminine values and feminine talents can be exercised and recognized more explicitly.

The team player metaphor often masks a kind of McCarthyism, where branding someone as “not a team player” can be as destructive to careers today as being branded a “communist” was in the 1950s. Just the whisper, “She’s not a team player,” and all sorts of accusations are leveled: She’s not like us; she’s difficult; she’s just in it for herself; she’s not one of us. To avoid the slur, to be a good team player, what you often get is the worst of groupthink: compliance, risk-aversion, and sucking up. Politics as usual. But then again, if we’re a team, then it’s only a game that we’re playing. Isn’t that what teams do — play games? One of the most consistent differences between men’s and women’s attitudes toward work is that while for men, it’s not personal, it’s business; for women, it’s not business, it’s personal. Women work too hard, make too many tough choices, and juggle too much to see their work life as a game. What would business be like if executives of either gender saw themselves as working in co-ops rather than teams?

The Courage to Facilitate Change

In developing the executive talent of women of the third wave, corporations need to take the lead in framing the agenda around gender and gender systems. Helping women articulate their experience, helping them develop the skills and attitudes necessary for successful executive performance, and opening up the culture itself to systemic gender analysis all need to be balanced if business is to realize the potential of a more

diverse executive talent pool. The good news is that as I re-encounter these women on the executive track, many are more ready to hear what they rejected before. Now, rather than rejecting the woman-as-victim image they mistakenly perceived 15 years ago, they are empowered by the alternative that the women-as-collective image holds out. The isolation of individual merit begins to look less appealing than the mutual support of giving and receiving help from other women. Seeing systems as both gendered and changeable, where they once saw only the individual mandate of adapt or leave, holds out more hope and seems more feasible to a 30-year-old than to an 18-year-old. Slowly, corporations are discovering that gender matters as a bottom-line issue. But it will take a more informed, receptive, and insightful generation of corporate women to show exactly how and why gender matters, and what to do about it. One of the unmet challenges of executive development for third wave women is to help them develop those insights.

Notes

ⁱ Judy Rosener, *America's Competitive Secret: Women Managers*, Oxford University Press, 1995.

ⁱⁱ Catalyst, *Cracking the Glass Ceiling: Catalyst's Research on Women in Corporate Management*, 1995 - 2000.

ⁱⁱⁱ Patricia Sellers, "Patient But Not Passive," *Fortune*, October 15, 2001, p.193.

^{iv} Ed Michaels, Helen Handfield-Jones, Beth Axelrod, *The War for Talent*, Harvard Business School Press, 2001, p. 4.

^v For further discussion of the concept of third wave feminism, see the following: Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake, eds., *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism*, University of Minnesota Press, 1997, especially the essay by Carolyn Sorisio, "A Tale of Two Feminisms: Power and Victimization in Contemporary Feminist Debate," pp.134-149; Jennifer Drake, "Third Wave Feminisms: Review Essay," *Feminist Studies* 23 (Spring 1997), pp. 97 - 108; and Rebecca Walker, ed., *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism*, Anchor Books, 1995.

^{vi} Wendy Kaminer, "Feminism's Third Wave: What Do Young Women Want?" *New York Times Book Review*, 3, pp. 22 - 23.

^{vii} Delese Wear, *Privilege in the Medical Academy: A Feminist Examines Gender, Race, and Power*, Teachers College Press, 1997, p. 47.

^{viii} Jackie Brookner, "Feminism and Students of the 80's and 90's: The Lady and the Raging Bitch; or, How Feminism Got a Bad Name," *Art Journal*, 50, Summer 1991, p.12.

^{ix} Price Waterhouse v. Hopkins, 490 U.S. 228 (1990).

^x Joan Williams, *Unbending Gender: Why Family and Work Conflict and What to Do About It*, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 248.

^{xi} Ezold v. Wolf, Block, Schoor & Solis-Cohen, 938 F.2d 509, cert denied, 510 U.S. 826 (1993).

^{xii} Williams, p.249.

^{xiii} Mary C. Gentile, *Managerial Excellence Through Diversity*, Chicago, Irwin Press, 1996, pp.199-221.

^{xiv} "Princeton Names Its First Female President," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 18, 2001, p. A 32.

^{xv} Perina Glazer and Miriam Slater, *Unequal Colleagues: The Entrance of Women into the Professions, 1890 - 1940*, Rutgers University Press, 1987, p. 22.

^{xvi} Kaminer, p. 23.

^{xvii} Debra E. Meyerson and Joyce K. Fletcher, "A Modest Manifesto for Shattering the Glass Ceiling," *Harvard Business Review*, 78, January-February 2000, p. 128.



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About the Author

Karen Spear brings a background in higher education to consulting and training engagements. She recently served as a faculty member on Lore's *Inspirational Leadership* program. She headed

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Karen was dean of arts and sciences for nine years at Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colorado, where she took a particular interest in curriculum and faculty development. She is the author of two books on collaboration in the teaching of writing that are widely used by secondary and higher education faculty. She has also published a wide variety of work on liberal education, cognitive development, writing development, and collaboration. She is co-author of a forthcoming book on business coaching that includes an emphasis on the special challenges of coaching women and minorities.

Her teaching career includes developing and teaching more than 30 courses in literature, writing, teacher training, cognitive development, psychology, and interdisciplinary studies.

Her Ph.D. is in literature and psychology from American University, awarded in 1976. She has served as a teacher, researcher, and administrator at the University of Utah, Utah State University, University of South Florida, and Colorado State University.

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\$10.95
ISBN 01-577740-076-3

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