SMITH COLLEGE

Wurtele Center for Collaborative Leadership

Annual Report 2025–26





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Letter From Our Director



We live in a time when the need for collaborative leadership is more important than ever.

In her Substack newsletter, Group Life, author and professional conflict mediator Priya Parker pushes back against the widespread cultural focus on self-help in favor of "group help" and suggests there is a need for all of us to get better at connecting and working with other people. "To avoid the loneliness, fragmentation, and hyperindividualism all around us," she writes, "we need to become more literate about the health of the groups we belong to." The development of collaborative skills is not only a precondition for the practice of inclusive leadership, it's also a requirement for maintaining a robust democracy.

Over the past year, the Wurtele Center has been developing and sharing a model of leadership that is highly relational and humanly interconnected. As part of this work, our team conducted a new strategic planning process for the center on the heels of Smith's *Compass 2035*, engaging students, faculty, and staff in a collaborative effort to help us better define our model and envision our center's next chapter.

One outcome of that process was the adoption of a new word in our center's name, as we officially shifted to the Wurtele Center for Collaborative Leadership. While "leadership" by itself can mean many things to many people, the addition of "collaborative" signals our commitment to a style of leadership that is inclusive, facilitative, and human-centered. We also adopted a new motto, "The future is a group project," to inspire Smithies to work together to envision and build desired futures cooperatively. We want to dispel the overwhelm that can come with traditional models of leadership that emphasize accomplishing enormous achievements alone.

Smith's centers are all slightly different, but what we have in common is a commitment to empowering students to take the scholarship and meaning-making they are doing in their academic lives and find ways to apply and activate that knowledge in their lives outside of the classroom. We're proud of all of the ways we've supported Smith students in creating these connections across and between both curricular and co-curricular spaces over the past year.

We're so grateful to our founding donor, Margaret Von Blon Wurtele '67, for all of her generous support, and to the many partners—students, faculty, staff, alums, community members—who have collaborated with us this year. We couldn't do it without you!

Warmly,

Erin Park Cohn '00
Director

About the Wurtele Center for Collaborative Leadership

Who We Are and What We Do:

The Wurtele Center for Collaborative Leadership helps students integrate their experiences inside and outside the classroom.

Definition Of Collaborative Leadership:

Collaborative leadership is taking the initiative to work intentionally and inclusively with a diverse group of people to achieve a common purpose.

We believe that collaborative leadership is important for every Smith student to learn, because the ability to galvanize a group of people to work toward a shared goal will serve them well, no matter what paths they take through Smith and beyond.



Our mission is to foster expansive understandings of what it means to lead, in particular by cultivating collaborative leadership to facilitate positive change.

We pursue our mission by:

- Offering co-curricular programming that ranges from short-term workshops, events, and competitions to long-term cohort programs and paid internships and fellowships.
- Building students' collaborative leadership skills through credited academic courses taught by Wurtele Center staff.
- Collaborating with other centers and departments to support and train students who hold leadership positions on campus.
- Supporting the work of faculty who build students' collaborative leadership skills through applied projects in classes and research.
- Supporting our staff and faculty colleagues in integrating collaborative approaches in their work.
- Researching and publishing on the topic of collaborative leadership.



The Wurtele Center's New Home: Kathleen McCartney Hall

In the fall of 2025, the Wurtele Center took up residence in its new home in Kathleen McCartney Hall—the most recent addition to Smith's campus.

Designed as a centrally located space on campus where students can explore purpose and find agency as they navigate their path through Smith and beyond, McCartney Hall co-houses the Wurtele Center and the Lazarus Center for Career Development. The building features bright, open, welcoming spaces, including a roof terrace overlooking Paradise Pond.

In the past year, the Wurtele Classroom has become the beating heart of our center's work as we've hosted academic classes, co-curricular workshops, and a wide range of collaborative meetings and gatherings in the space. Specifically designed for maximal collaborative flexibility, the classroom features moveable furniture that includes standing white boards and tables with dry-erase tabletops that have become a favorite tool for students working together to study or move a group project forward. Surrounded by windows that make the vibrant work of the center visible to passersby on Chapin Drive, the Wurtele Classroom beckons students into our space, demystifying the work of leadership development as joyful and connected rather than intimidating or isolating. The space also holds resources that foster collaborative engagement, including games, card decks, and arts and crafts supplies.





The McCartney Hall Mural Project

From its original conception, McCartney Hall was designed to make students feel welcomed and seen as they embark on career and leadership development. In service of that goal, the Wurtele Center spearheaded the production of a temporary mural to be installed in the main stairwell of the building that would be developed with input from the Smith community. A committee of Smith students and staff members selected Boston-based artist Julia Emiliani to design the mural based on the theme of the future of work and leadership at Smith. Working with two student interns, Eloise van Meter ’26 and Ruby Goldstein ’27, Julia conducted research through student interviews and scouring the archives, ultimately developing a complex mosaic of scenes that depict collaborative leadership and diverse career pursuits mixed with a healthy dose of Smith “Easter eggs” that will be familiar to students and alums visiting the space. Digitally illustrated and printed on wallpaper, the mural will remain on the wall for another four years, at which time we will launch a search for our next artist to create a new vision of leadership and careers at Smith.

Special thanks to Margaret Von Blon Wurtele ’67 for her generous lead gift supporting McCartney Hall and to the many alums and friends whose gifts to the capital project and related programming helped bring this building and its mission to life.

“We wanted to showcase leadership in a way that felt like bringing together a community and celebrating a bunch of different kinds of work.”

Ruby Goldstein ’27



Supporting the Co-Curriculum

Students develop as leaders in a variety of co-curricular spaces at Smith. As a hub for collaborative leadership development, the Wurtele Center's role is to coordinate and support those efforts, as well as offer a range of opportunities for students to find a collaborative community, hone their skills, and share their voices with others.



Student Leadership Conference

In August 2025, the Wurtele Center organized Smith's third annual Student Leadership Conference, where over 300 students sharpened their leadership skills and reflected on their upcoming roles. It was attended by students in house leadership positions, such as house presidents and heads of new students, and by those in academic and peer educator roles, such as student academic advisers and community health organizers. The daylong conference included welcoming remarks from President Sarah Willie-LeBreton, a keynote address from Tanya O. Williams, and breakout training sessions on diverse topics designed and facilitated by Smith staff members.



Wurtele Wednesdays and Coffee Chats

This year, the Wurtele Center experimented with two new weekly offerings: Wurtele Wednesdays and Coffee Chats. Facilitated by our creative team of student interns, Wurtele Wednesdays brought students together for various collaborative activities designed to welcome them into our space and build community in low-stakes and fun ways. The series successfully familiarized nearly 400 students with the center over the course of the year. Weekly Coffee Chats served as a more intimate opportunity to connect with Wurtele staff members. We provided coffee and led open discussions to address any leadership questions that were surfacing for students at the time. Both programs filled their intended goal: to break down the barrier some students might feel about connecting with the Wurtele Center.



Amplify Program

A Wurtele Center signature program, Amplify is a set of events, workshops, and a competition that build Smith students' public voices as a powerful form of leadership. During the Amplify Competition, which is held in early February, students can compete for cash prizes in the categories of Public Speaking (short TED-style talks), Public Writing (op-eds), and an annual Wild Card category that features a new creative or journalistic medium each year. This year's Wild Card category focused on field guides—practical and often portable resources designed to help people identify, understand, and navigate unfamiliar environments or subjects.

Each year, we feature a big Amplify event in the fall to inspire students to participate. This year's event featured Alie Ward, host of the *Ologies* podcast, in which she tackles a different "ology" in each episode and interviews an expert on the topic. Alie joined us for a public talk and conversation on "The Magic of Curiosity," co-moderated by Erin Park Cohn '00 and Clover Drake '28, that drew an audience of 116 students, faculty, staff, and community members. Following the talk, Alie gathered with a packed classroom of students for a workshop on making field guides, where she reminisced about her favorite nature field guides from childhood and helped students brainstorm topics for their own guide.

The Amplify Competition culminates in the annual Amplify Day celebration, where the Smith community gathers to hear inspiring student talks. This year's topics included the environmental dangers of flushable wipes, the experience of immigrating to the United States, and gender discrimination in medical care, among others. The event included trivia facilitated by Smith trivia club members Olivia Bodden '28 and Gillian Frost '26 as well as a banquet table full of fun snacks. Amplify Day ends with the final announcement of prize winners in the Amplify Awards Ceremony.



"The warmth around the table was palpable. I thought the idea of someone else saying your toast was very nice, as it made the whole room feel connected with the honoree, regardless of whether they knew each other or not."

–Twenty Toasts Honoree

Leaders for Equity-Centered and Action-Based Design (LEAD)

This year, the LEAD Program reached maturity with a fall cohort of 16 Scholars and 10 Corps members and a spring cohort of 11 Scholars and 10 Corps members. Co-sponsored with the Office for Equity and Inclusion, LEAD trains and employs students as peer facilitators who help their fellow students navigate through challenging conversations. At Cromwell Day, LEAD Scholars facilitated several sessions, all of which were filled to maximum capacity. The Wurtele Center's Co-Curricular Leadership Development Manager, Annie DelBusto Cohen, and Inclusion Education Trainer/Facilitator Tobias Davis '03 also collaborated with LEAD students to write a series of reflective essays on the program that were published this spring as a special issue of *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*.

"LEAD is a transformative program that teaches its participants as much about the world around them as it does about themselves. Through learning how to navigate unknown dynamics in a group, I have been given the tools to handle the unexpected."

- Rhys Vulpe '23, former LEAD Corps member

Twenty Toasts

Student leadership on campus takes many forms and often doesn't get recognized. This spring, the Wurtele Center launched Twenty Toasts–a new ritual to celebrate and reward the efforts of student leaders. At this festive dinner event, Smith community members read short toasts aloud in honor of 20 students–who are nominated by the community–highlighting their impact at Smith and beyond. Honorees also received a $200 award in support of their future leadership. We are looking forward to turning this successful event into a cherished annual tradition.

Supporting the Curriculum

Facilitating positive change in the world requires us to work with others to generate knowledge and wield it as a force for good. The Wurtele Center develops students' collaborative leadership capacities as a part of their curricular experience at Smith, both in the courses taught by our center's staff and as partners with faculty across the curriculum who actively integrate collaborative pedagogies into their courses.

Fostering Collaboration Across the Curriculum

Fueled by the idea that coursework can provide rich opportunities for students to gain important collaborative leadership skills and experiences, the Wurtele Center's Assistant Director, Megan Lyster, has greatly expanded her support of Smith's faculty as they integrate group learning into their pedagogical approach. This year, she offered direct in-class support to 21 faculty members who were teaching courses in a wide range of academic disciplines, and shared teaching resources or consulted with seven more. Of the 21 in-class support engagements, half included multiple workshop sessions, allowing for deeper engagement with both faculty and students.



Student Pedagogical Partnerships

This year also marked our sixth year of co-hosting the Student Pedagogical Partnership Program with the Sherrerd Center for Teaching and Learning. Together we supported seven student-faculty partnerships as they examined a pressing pedagogical question in the faculty partner's spring course.

A Sampling of Courses Supported by the Wurtele Center This Year:

- American Studies 256: Economies of Care—Resilience Strategies in America, From Braiding Seeds to Mutual Aid (And Beyond)
- Anthropology 200: Research Methods in Anthropology
- East Asian Languages 266 Taiwan: On Page, on Stage, and on Screen
- First-Year Seminar 125 Money: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly
- Geology 302: Field Studies of the Desert Southwest
- Psychology 305 Seminar: Human Flourishing and the Climate Crisis
- Statistics and Data Sciences 239: Data Science Goes to the Movies

Wurtele-Sponsored Courses

IDP 132: Introduction to Collaborative Innovation

Co-taught by Wurtele Center Assistant Director Megan Lyster and Design Thinking Initiative Assistant Director Alix Gerber, this 2-credit course introduces students to collaborative leadership and human-centered design, critically considering these practices and their impact in the world. This year, we experimented with a more project-based approach, partnering with The Botanic Garden of Smith College to consider the question, "How might the gardens communicate needs and ways of belonging across stakeholders—including Smith College students, staff, faculty, Northampton community members, and other visitors?" Students practiced a number of techniques for collaboratively defining and refining the challenge and testing possible interventions to enhance communication and engagement between the Smith community and the garden.

IDP 133: Critical Perspectives on Collaborative Leadership

Taught by Wurtele Center Director Erin Cohn, this 4-credit course offers students a deep dive into critical engagement with theories of leadership, challenges them to broaden their own understandings of the term, and provides a theoretical grounding in the science and art of collaborative work, which students then apply through an intensive group project. This year's project partnered groups of IDP 133 students with alum volunteers Selena Trotter '08 and Christine Monska '11 to collaboratively design and facilitate a public webinar in late April as part of the Office of Alumnae Relations' Alum Career Program. Titled "Leading Through Moral Ambition," the webinar focused on concepts in Rutger Bregman's book by the same name, and fostered deep conversation across generations of Smithies about how and if leadership should be dedicated toward doing good in the world.

"[IDP 133] is hands down one of my favorites and one of the best courses I took in my Smith career ... The practical applications are boundless and adaptable to teams around the world, regardless of field. I know I'll continue to use, develop, and build upon the foundations you helped create."

- Maggie Landis '24



Supporting Our Colleagues at Smith

While the work of the Wurtele Center focuses primarily on the growth and development of Smith undergraduates, the Wurtele Center believes that if we want to build a culture of collaborative leadership in our students, we also need to cultivate that culture in ourselves and among our colleagues at Smith. The principles, skills, and frameworks that shape our work with students, therefore, also guide us as a professional team, and we facilitate collaborative leadership-oriented programming and direct support for staff and faculty.

The Art of Leading Teams (ALT) Lunch Series

Open to all interested staff and faculty, this interactive monthly lunch series draws colleagues together for conversation and collective learning on topics related to collaborative leadership. Each session is co-facilitated by a Wurtele staff member and a colleague from another office or department at the college, and includes information sharing, collaborative engagement, and tools and resources that participants can immediately apply in their work. This year, 132 staff and faculty members attended at least one session of the ALT series.

> "Thank you for fostering this culture of collaboration. Much appreciated (and so needed in the world we all live in!)"
>
> *-2025-26 ALT Participant*

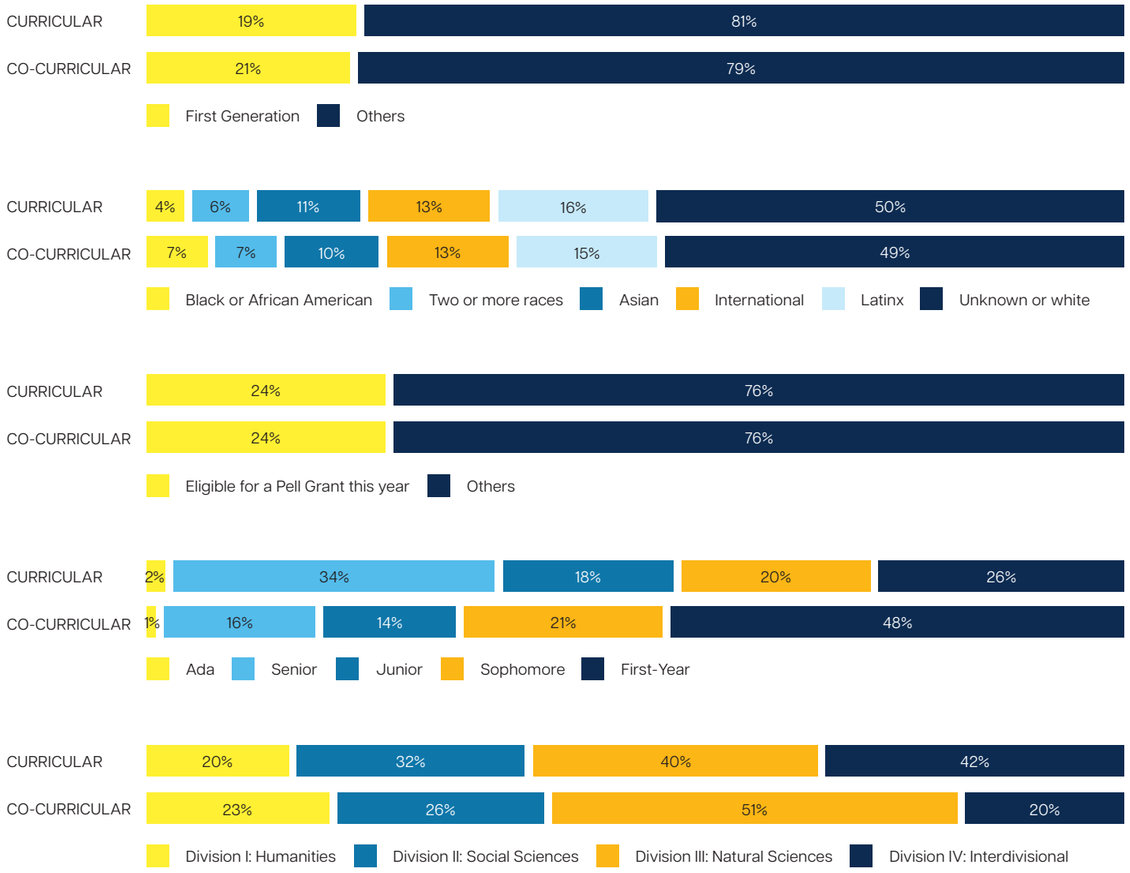
2025–26 Art of Leading Teams Topics:

- Leading Change in an Institution (with Chief of Public Safety Jimi Nealy)
- Making Mutualisms: Lessons in Collaboration From the Natural World (with Senior Laboratory Instructor in Biological Science Marney Pratt)
- Cultivating Rest for Sustainable Leadership and Collaboration (with the Chair of the Psychology Department and Professor of Psychology, Benita Jackson)
- Generating Courage for Difficult Conversations (with Human Rights Leadership Specialist Carrie Cuthbert)
- Getting Unstuck With Tiny Experiments (with the Prototyping Studio Manager for the Design Thinking Initiative, Forrest Hudes)
- Facilitation 101 (with Inclusion Education Trainer/Facilitator for the Office for Equity and Inclusion, Tobias Davis '03, and student members of the LEAD Corps)
- Building and Tending Reciprocal Relationships (with professional facilitator Ariel Brooks)



The Wurtele Center by the Numbers

Demographics of Participation



1,586
unique student participants engaged



75%
increase in student participants from last year





41
Amplify Competition submissions



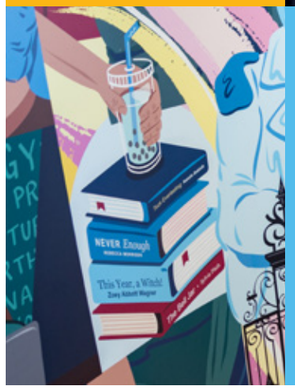
21
unique classes supported (about 25% increase from last year)

132
staff and faculty members attended at least one Art of Leading Teams



375
students attended a Wurtele Wednesday





62
books authored by Smith alums featured in the McCartney Hall mural



186
students dropped by the Opening Party at McCartney Hall

Planning the Wurtele Center's Next Chapter

This past fall, as we relocated to McCartney Hall and participated in Smith's institutional strategic planning efforts, the Wurtele Center launched a parallel strategic planning process to explore our center's future.

Our process began with reflecting on successes and gaps in implementing our 2020 strategic plan, as well as gathering together a range of assessments our team has completed in recent years to evaluate our work, including both quantitative and qualitative data. Using insights from those data, we drafted new foundational language for the Wurtele Center, including a new mission statement and motto; a definition of the term collaborative leadership; and a set of core principles, skills, and frameworks that clarify and codify the ideas and commitments that drive our leadership development work. Over the course of the fall 2025 semester, we shared drafts of this language with multiple student, staff, and faculty focus groups. These conversations resulted in new insights that helped us revise the language to create a final draft.

Concurrently with these efforts, the Wurtele Center participated in the college's efforts of strategic planning for the institution, as our director, Erin Cohn, served as a member of the working group on careers and leadership and helped to facilitate feedback sessions that were a part of that process. Throughout the Wurtele Center's planning efforts, we've kept an eye toward how leadership development has been folded into the college's future plans, with hopes that our efforts in the coming years will contribute meaningfully to the strategic development of Smith as a whole.

Strategic Direction #1: Enhancing Faculty Partnerships and Support

Over the next five years, the Wurtele Center will expand its focus on fostering collaborative leadership development in the classroom by enhancing its partnership with and direct support for faculty and contributing meaningfully to the college's efforts to improve wayfinding for students on their journeys through Smith.

Possible Initiatives:

- Evolve how we partner with and support faculty in academic courses to better integrate and/or enhance collaborative learning and problem-solving methodologies.
- Develop and share tools and resources—perhaps in the form of a handbook or website—for developing collaborative skills in the academic classroom.
- Partner with faculty and the Lazarus Center to develop programs and materials that help students translate their academic experiences into career and leadership skill-building.

Strategic Direction #2: Evolving Our Co-Curricular Programming

Over the next five years, the Wurtele Center will both broaden and focus its approach to co-curricular programming. We'll broaden it by inviting students into our space through more regular, casual touchpoints, and we'll focus it by developing and offering new intensive opportunities for students to learn and practice our model of collaborative leadership.

Possible Initiatives:

- Increase our offerings of low-commitment, low-barrier-to-entry programs that invite students into the Wurtele Center and begin to familiarize them with our team and our work.
- Launch the Wurtele Futures Fellowship—a new cohort program for first- and second-year students that will engage them deeply with our collaborative leadership model.*
- Reimagine training for students who occupy leadership positions (in the SGA, in Residence Life, in clubs and organizations, etc.)
- Reimagine collegewide rituals that celebrate leadership and impact.*
- Develop consistent and meaningful training for our community that helps them have difficult conversations and manage conflict.

Strategic Direction #3: Activating Our New Space in Kathleen McCartney Hall

Over the next five years, the Wurtele Center will make generous and creative use of our new space in McCartney Hall to support collaborative work on campus, build students' collaborative leadership skills, and partner with the Lazarus Center to enhance connections across leadership and career development at Smith.

Possible Initiatives:

- Facilitate the creation of a community-engaged mural to be installed in the main stairwell of McCartney Hall, with the intention of helping students feel seen and inspired as they explore their leadership and career paths.*
- Partner with the Lazarus Center to design and pilot one or two strands of co-programming and/or complementary programming that help students draw connections between their leadership development and career exploration.
- Invite students, staff, and faculty to make use of the Wurtele Classroom (McCartney Hall 101) for a range of collaborative purposes that include teaching classes, holding club and organization meetings, hosting events and gatherings, etc.

Strategic Direction #4: Clarifying and Sharing Our Model of Collaborative Leadership

Over the next five years, the Wurtele Center will consolidate and clearly communicate how we define collaborative leadership, and sharpen the ways in which we apply that model in our leadership development work with students and the larger Smith community.

Possible Initiatives:

- Revise the center's name and refresh all of our communications to better share our newly consolidated model of collaborative leadership.*
- Develop new avenues for storytelling to share examples of collaborative leadership in action both on and off campus.
- Consult with colleagues on collaborative process and meeting design and offer assistance facilitating team-building sessions and retreats, as our staff's bandwidth allows.
- Communicate our model of collaborative leadership via publications and conference presentations.

*These initiatives have been completed or are currently underway.

The Wurtele Center Team

The accomplishments highlighted in this annual report would not have been possible without the dedication of the Wurtele Center's creative and highly collaborative team. This includes both our professional staff and our student interns.

Wurtele Center Staff

Erin Park Cohn '00, *Director*

Megan Lyster, *Assistant Director*

Annie DelBusto Cohen,
Co-Curricular Leadership Development Manager

Sarah Hampton, *Senior Operations Coordinator*

Silas McClung, *Co-Curricular Leadership Coordinator (through February 2026)*

Maya González, *Co-Curricular Leadership Coordinator (beginning June 2026)*

2025–26 Student Interns

Newsletter Intern:
Catherine Nichols '28

Social Media Interns:
Amelia Grannis '27 (fall 2025)
Carolina Rangel '29 (spring 2026)

Facilitation and Events Interns:
Guillianna Agüero Ferreira '27 (fall 2025)
Khadija Teffahi '27 (fall 2025)
Paige Abrey '27 (spring 2026)
Nour Alhuda Farha '29 (spring 2026)

McCartney Hall Mural Project Interns:
Ruby Goldstein '27
Eloise Van Meter '26

Special Project Research Intern:
Nuala MacDonald '27

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Back cover art by Colleen Schilly.



Erin Park Cohn



Megan Lyster



Annie DelBusto Cohen



Sarah Hampton



Silas McClung



Maya González


SMITH COLLEGE
Wurtele Center
for Collaborative Leadership
COLLABORATION
SYSTEMS THINKING
FACILITATION
PUBLIC VOICE
FUTURES THINKING
THE FUTURE is a GROUP PROJECT
AND INCLUSIVELY WITH A DIVERSE GROUP OF PEOPLE TO ACHIEVE A COMMON PURPOSE
TAKING THE INITIATIVE TO WORK INTENTIONALLY
LEADERSHIP IS NOT ALWAYS POSITIONAL
EVERY PERSON HAS INHERENT DIGNITY, BRINGS AN IMPORTANT PERSPECTIVE, AND DESERVES RESPECT
ANY CHANGE WE FACILITATE SHOULD ACTIVELY FOSTER REGENERATIVE RELATIONSHIPS
OUR MISSION IS TO FOSTER EXPANSIVE UNDERSTANDINGS OF WHAT IT MEANS TO LEAD, IN PARTICULAR BY CULTIVATING COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP TO FACILITATE POSITIVE CHANGE.