I’ve had many opportunities to speak with our students over the last year—both formally and informally. They’ve been among the highlights of my first year as chancellor of WSU Vancouver.

These occasions have also occurred at important milestones in my first year. At the end of my first week as chancellor, I spoke to many of you in this room primarily to introduce myself, but also hopefully to make clear that student voices would be and are an important consideration in my administration. As I was preparing my remarks for today, I decided that first time I spoke along with today make nice bookends to my first year. I am very honored to have this opportunity.

My assignment for today is to reflect on the quote by Lao Tzu: “When the best leader’s work is done the people say “we did it ourselves.” Lao Tzu was probably born in China in the sixth century before the Christian era, and he was the philosophical founder of Taoism. Over the centuries he became a figure of mythic proportions and his writings were often cited in movements against authoritarianism. His philosophy of leadership is best described by what we would say today is “servant leadership.”

I’m tempted to analyze Lao Tzu a little more closely. He doesn’t say, for example, “When the best leader’s work is done, the people did it themselves.” It only suggests that they “say” they did it. They believe it. It allows for a manipulation that I’m not entirely comfortable with, though I don’t believe that’s what he had in mind. Another translation of that quote says, “A leader is best when people barely know he exists, when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say: we did it ourselves.” His point is, I believe, that the best leaders sublimate their desire for personal glory for the good of collective success. I would add that the best leaders facilitate the emergence of more leaders. In the end, that’s what makes them less visible.

It’s actually the earlier part of that same quote that resonates most strongly with me: Lao Tzu also said, “To lead people, walk beside them.” Nelson Mandela said something similar. He said, “It is better to lead from behind and to put others in front, especially when you celebrate victory when nice things occur. You take the front line when there is danger. Then people will appreciate your leadership.” You get the idea. The best leaders are those who are with those they lead. They engage those they lead, and they are engaged with those they lead. This I strongly believe.

There are many leaders on this campus, and I am honored to be one of them and among them. The list includes just about everyone in the room this afternoon. We
all have our leadership responsibilities, each of them vitally important to the health and success of our institution or our community or our families.

Shortly before the last presidential election, I was speaking with Jay Inslee, who subsequently became governor. He was asking about my first few months and my career path. At one point I told him, “I was hired for the only position I’m qualified for on the campus.” That may sound a little glib, but it’s also true and mostly humbling. What impresses me so much about WSU Vancouver is that pretty much everyone in a leadership position on this campus has skills and leadership qualities that qualify them for a position. I like to think of us as a community of leaders.

I haven’t used the word “followers” once, yet. And I won’t use it again after this paragraph. Some would say that followers legitimate leaders. They make it possible for leaders to lead. I would argue that the emergence of more leaders makes it possible for the best leaders to lead.

Like many of you, I have been following Valerie Harper’s announcement that she has an incurable form of brain cancer. Her very public act of disclosure has led more people to see their doctors or to confront their own illnesses. She is not developing a following; she is creating more leaders who are raising awareness.

Let’s look at this topic from a different angle. A colleague of mine was giving a talk to other college presidents on leadership. George Pruitt has been president of Thomas Edison State College since 1982. In his presentation he said, “There are certain things only a president can do. You should limit yourself to those things.” I have come back to this quote many times during my first year.

I have seen leaders over-reach. In their quests to lead their organizations, they don’t create room for others to lead. Not only does this hobble the success of their organizations, it breaks down trust among leaders. Leaders who facilitate the leadership of others build communities in which everyone steps up.

All of this adds up to one compelling point: Leadership is not an individual pursuit. It’s a team sport. And where we position ourselves on those teams and who we bring to those teams says everything about our view of leadership and how we value those who’ve chosen us to lead.

Doris Kearns Goodwin wrote the book on which Steven Spielberg’s film “Lincoln” is based. The name of her book is not “Lincoln,” however. It’s “Team of Rivals.” Goodwin argues that Lincoln had the most successful presidency in American history because he built his cabinet around a group of leaders—even some who opposed him in the race for president—with a wide range of beliefs, and he trusted them to lead and to engage with each other. There were moments where Lincoln knew another leader would be far more effective in achieving the goals of his administration. That’s one of the key things portrayed in the film.

It’s no secret that President Obama is a student of Lincoln. And he took those lessons to heart. He built his cabinet with his Democratic rivals and Republicans. And regardless of one’s position on gun regulation, it’s clear that Obama
understands that his personal leadership will not result in the change he desires. And so, he has put other leaders forward, giving them the spotlight. For the first time in history last Saturday, the president did not deliver the Weekly Presidential Address.

Leadership is a very dynamic process. Nelson Mandela is absolutely right that the best leaders know when to walk behind, when to walk side-by-side, and when to walk in front of those they lead. There isn’t one correct answer, and different moments call for different relationships.

When I spoke at the Expand Leadership Conference in November, I talked about the importance of leaders in building community. Five months later, I would say that building community is the key aspect of leadership. It is how our leaders build trust; it’s how we move from discussion to action; and it’s how more leaders emerge.

Some of you will be graduating in three weeks and will emerge as community leaders if you aren’t already. Some of you will be back next year as student leaders, building your organizations and helping to empower new leaders on our campus. All of us will continue to work together to advance the goals of our campus and our community. We are stewards as much as we are leaders.

I have been tremendously blessed in my first year. So many campus leaders—students, faculty and staff—have stepped forward to help take WSU Vancouver to greater heights. And it’s great to be a part of this celebration honoring our student leaders.

Back to Lao Tsu for a moment. He said, “When the best leader’s work is done the people say, “we did it ourselves.” The best leaders build communities. They help to build opportunities for everyone to be a leader. And in the end, when the people say, “we did it ourselves,” it is precisely because we did do it ourselves as a community of leaders.

Thank you.