

Women and the College Presidency: Transforming Hope to Action in Smashing the Glass Ceiling

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The position of college or university president is a unique one, even in academia. Traditionally, and until very recently, the role of college president was typically filled by white, married males in their fifties who followed a traditional path to the top; assistant professor, associate professor, professor, department chair, dean, vice-president, and, finally, president (Slaughter, 1986). This tradition in academia, and the preponderance of white males in the professorate until recently, along with innumerable other factors not covered here, have denied women the opportunity to ascend to the college presidency. Women have not always followed traditional paths to the college presidency, yet the majority has come from an academic affairs background. Most have cited mentor relationships as crucial (Buddemeier, 1998). Women were almost totally excluded from leading institutions of higher education until after WWII. Presently, fewer than 20 percent of college and university presidents are women despite the fact that 40 percent of all faculty members in the U.S. are female (Lively, 2000). The number of women today who hold such positions, and the real opportunities for other women to attain the presidency, suggests that a "glass ceiling" is still very real and imposing in preventing qualified women from becoming college presidents.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the perceptions of current female presidents regarding the unseen but still evident barriers they faced in becoming president, barriers that still exist for women in trying to attain positions of leadership in academia. Those barriers might include an institution's history and traditions, patriarchal attitudes towards female leaders, negative attitudes towards female leaders with families, and a lack of leadership role models for women. The

paper focuses upon a review of recent literature, data collected from a purposeful sample of female college and university presidents, and recommendations for breaking through the "glass ceiling."

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Up until the post-Civil War era, presidents of colleges and universities in the United States were almost exclusively members of a male clergy who had been appointed to the position of what were small, denominational colleges. The president usually taught some courses and ate with the faculty and students in the dining hall. Students were, with a few notable exceptions, almost exclusively male until the twentieth century (Rudolph, 1990). This naturally precluded women from becoming faculty and, obviously, presidents of colleges. Julia Sears, an educator from Massachusetts, was named president of Mankato Normal School in 1872, and Martha Carey Thomas a little later is credited with being the first female college president at Bryn Mawr (Ihle, 1991). However, these are two pioneers in a process that did not see more than fifty women hold presidencies until the 1960's (Rudolph, 1990).

Many of the women who are now presidents had male role models. One study (Curry, 1995) specifically examined the father's influence on women who had become president. Forty-three female presidents were interviewed, and Curry found that the most influential people in their lives were their fathers. The study also revealed that their fathers (and mothers) were generally better educated than the average couple. However, there is evidence that identification with a male (father) figure or male mentor may well be

changing as more women can now identify with female presidents and other female leaders as academic role models (Curry, 1995; Ross & Green, 2000).

Until recently, most of what was written about college presidents and women describe the role of the president's spouse. As late as the 1980's, publications by organizations such as the Association of Governing Boards described how spouses of college presidents should act in public. During conferences for college presidents, organizers arranged shopping tours for spouses who were assumed to be female (Clodius & Magrath, 1984). This legacy continues. These prevailing expectations about what the spouse of a university president should do are sexist by action and implication. Recently, some female spouses of presidents have been paid salaries to serve as assistants to their husbands, acknowledging the work they do for the college. This trend may deny some women the opportunity to become president as their male spouses usually have careers and are unable or uninterested in assisting their presidential spouse (Basinger, 2000).

Investigations by Touchton and Ingram (1995) indicate that female presidents are equally divided between private and public colleges and universities and that 60 percent lead four-year institutions while 40 percent lead two-year institutions. Interestingly there is more diversity among female presidents than male presidents as 16 percent for women versus 8 percent men are of color. Almost three-quarters of all female college presidents lead schools of less than 3,000 students, and less than ten percent lead schools with more than 10,000 students (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2000).

There are also unique differences in the manner female presidents are selected and their qualifications. Most female presidents have had significant experience in mid-level administrative positions, and over one-half of all female presidents have been invited (as opposed to applied) to their position as president (Merrell & Donoghue, 1982). Fewer male presidents hold terminal degrees (Women in Higher Education, May 1998), which may indicate a lower expectation of qualifications when male applicants are considered for the presi-

dency. In another study, more than half of these women have been involved in other searches for presidents before accepting a presidency. Most of them were external candidates for their present positions. In competitive searches where the female candidate has not been asked to apply for the position, there is a trend toward fewer female finalists and hence, fewer presidents being women (Touchton, Shavlik, & Davis, 1991).

In the last twenty years there have been dramatic increases in who occupies the college presidency position. In 1975, only five percent of all presidents of colleges and universities in the United States were women (Touchton, Shavlik, & Davis, 1991). By 1998, this number had risen to just under 20 percent (The Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac, 2000). Because public higher education institutions saw the number of female presidents jump dramatically in the 1980's, several scholars (Touchton & Ingram, 1995) predicted that the 1990's would be the decade when hiring a female president would cease to be news. Sadly, that is still not the case at most colleges and universities.

Current Barriers Facing Female Leaders in Academe

The role of college president combines the talents of the academic, the CEO, the professional fund-raiser, and the government lobbyist. One of the key barriers to women academics becoming president is the perception of what a leader should be or look like. There are lingering stereotypes that men are leaders and women are followers (Collins, Chrisler, & Quina, 1998). One study (Fobbs, 1988) suggested that women administrators are often assigned to do "women's work" and are rarely given leadership roles in traditionally male disciplines such as engineering, business, or technology. Another study (Jablonski, 1996) identified the perceptions of female presidents, their leadership styles, and the perceptions their faculty had about their leadership. The female presidents felt they were open and collaborative, yet the faculty saw them as hierarchical and task-orientated. This disparity in perceptions could be due to several factors e.g. the nature of the job, disgruntled faculty (Birnbaum, 1992). Since the majority of

the faculty at these colleges was male, they may not have responded well to a female president's leadership, which has been described as more collegial and frequently by consensus.

It is a commonly held belief in academia that to achieve any recognition women have to be overwhelmingly better than their male peers. Many women appear to have outstanding qualifications for the position of college or university president, but the number who are given the opportunity is disproportionate to their numbers in academia (Lively, 2000). Women have made advances, but it is still evident that the senior academic positions, particularly the presidency, are predominantly male. Many women must wonder if much has changed in academia in the past twenty years (King, 1997).

The personal profiles of female presidents are somewhat different than for a man. Typical female presidents are, like their male counterparts, in their fifties, white, and hold a Ph.D. However, female presidents are more likely to have never been married, be divorced, and have no children. If they are married, they have spouses who usually hold terminal degrees and are academics. This differs significantly from typical male presidents, who are married with at least two children and have spouses who do not hold terminal degrees and who spent significant time at home (Bowen, 1988; Ross & Green, 2000). This would suggest that, in the process of becoming a president a female must forego any hope of a traditional family life with a spouse and children. Yet, males appear to have a more traditional family lifestyle that is either a requirement or a product of their position.

There is an argument, and indeed some of the research points out, that if women learn the game and act like male leaders, they will succeed. Some women do manage to become president by playing the game. However, many of those who have succeeded in this way speak of their isolation and struggle to be accepted (King, 1997) and that loneliness was often a cost of success. The argument that implies that women have the same leadership styles as men has been proven false (Leland & Astin, 1999). In fact, women are often cited as being more informal, better team leaders, good at drawing the strengths out of individuals, and often

encourage staff into trying new ideas (King, 1997).

The question of whether a woman can or should serve as a college president is still an issue as historically the rationale was that it was not a "woman's job" (Tisinger, Sturnick, & Milley, 1991). There remain states that have yet to appoint a woman to head a large public college or university. Because of this, the majority of women are in their first presidency. Over half had been in their jobs less than five years and almost all have had less than ten years experience. This is key when noting that networking is cited as one of the most valuable resources for presidents (Touchton, Shavlik, & Davis, 1991). It is also important when noting the trend that boards of trustees are moving toward hiring presidents with past experience which may further limit the opportunities for women (Basinger, 2000).

The perceptions, the reality, and the numbers suggest there is still a very real "glass ceiling" impeding qualified women from becoming president. Women who wish to become college presidents still have to overcome traditions, stereotyping, and subtle barriers that eliminate them from decision-making and positions of authority. Women are still judged informally and subjectively on the basis of their "suitability" for a position. Search committees continue to question a woman's commitment to the presidency (especially if a candidate has young children), ability to "fit in", and the relevance of a woman's experiences to the position. Age can also become a factor because women almost always come to positions of leadership in academia later than men. Women often have to overcome a lack of support or even active discouragement in seeking leadership positions in academia (Brown, 1997) and, unfortunately, a significant number of female presidents thought their leadership would be adversely affected if they were labeled as women's advocates (Touchton & Ingram, 1995). It might appear that now, in the twenty-first century, with equal opportunity legislation and Title IX, women merely have to apply for presidential openings to "break through" the glass ceiling. Their upbringing, their socialization, and the attitudes they face impede their progress and discourage many to leave academia when ambitions to seek positions of leadership are crushed.

METHODOLOGY

A survey and letter that asked them to participate in a study of their perceptions about a glass ceiling in higher education for women was sent to twelve pre-selected female presidents in the upper Midwest in spring 2001. Participants were asked to provide some demographic information such as age, highest degree attained, details regarding their career experience, family life, the type of institution they presently lead, and answer seven open-ended questions regarding their perceptions of barriers faced by female presidents. Participants were chosen from two doctoral, three masters, three baccalaureate universities, and four community colleges.

Seven presidents responded to the survey. A cross sectional design was used to collect the participants' attitudes, beliefs, and opinions about barriers and challenges they faced as female presidents (Creswell, 2002). Their responses were organized and transcribed. Analysis using a coding process of text data and key code words revealed several themes. A narrative description of those themes from the text of responses is reported (Creswell, 2002). Due to the small, purposeful sampling, identifying the response rate and response bias was not conducted. Analysis consisted of conducting a descriptive analysis of all items and grouping similar responses to discern patterns and variation by identifying text data and key words (Creswell, 2002).

RESULTS

The participating presidents were representative of female presidents across the U.S. in many respects. Their median age was 56 while their mean age was 58 which is consistent with the majority of female presidents being in their fifties or older (Mercer, 1998). All participants were Caucasian and held academic terminal degrees. The percentage of participants holding terminal degrees was higher than the most recent results from 1995 indicating that 65 percent of female presidents hold such degrees. In terms of experience, the majority of female presidents surveyed had 18 years or more experience as a faculty member. This,

combined with the late entry into academia for many women due to raising families (Merrell & Donoghue, 1982) explains the late entry into presidential careers. The presidents surveyed that rose through the ranks did so in a traditional way that mirrored the most recent research on female presidents. With the exception of a single participant all had previously either served as vice-presidents or dean. The single exception who had no experience in academia prior to becoming president had 33 years in the private sector; some of that time she served as CEO of her own company. This individual's experience is not the norm for female presidents, but it is indicative of a trend for more presidents who come to the presidency from leadership positions in business (Mercer, 1998).

The personal lives of the survey participants mirrored the national trends. Over half were either divorced or single, which is consistent with recent national data indicating female presidents are not married (Women in Higher Education, 1998). Three of the seven surveyed were the primary caregiver to their children; however, one of the seven presidents identified adult children in her response. All of the female presidents with families indicated that their family obligations had impacted their careers.

When the presidents were asked about their mentoring relationships prior to and while serving as president, responses were inconsistent. One president of a comprehensive university noted the time she spent as an undergraduate in a woman's college provided her with wonderful experiences. As she advanced in her career, she noted both male and female mentors as important in her career. Another president of a two-year college identified past presidents in the region who were primarily men and were excellent guides when she started out as a new president. All of those surveyed identified mentors, although three presidents suggested the relationships were more casual and informal than a true mentoring relationship.

Only one president identified their spouse as being helpful. She noted that her husband provided primarily emotional support as a "sounding board and cheerleader." Another president stated that a personal assistant is needed to enable female presidents to keep up with male presidents who have

“wonderful, supportive (female) spouses.” It is unusual to find a female president whose spouse had a significant role in advancing their career or supporting them as president. It is even more unusual to find a husband who will perform social duties as a spouse of a president entertaining and attending numerous functions. The reason for this is that male spouses of female presidents were found to have their own careers separate from their wives while female spouses of presidents continue to play a significant role in their husband’s careers (Basinger, 2000). This puts female candidates for presidencies at a distinct disadvantage states Janet L. Holmgren, president of Mills College in Oakland, California.

If we build in the notion that the partner is part of the package, it disadvantages women in the job market for presidencies,” says “Presidents should be hired on their own strengths and given the support they need without having to put expectations on spouses (Basinger, 2000, p.37).

Presidents who have had or presently have children had different viewpoints on how their children have impacted their careers. One president of a four-year comprehensive university pointed out that her children have had a “major impact [they] slowed down [my] career track [and] willingness and ability to move when they were at a younger age.” Yet, another two year college president note that her children were “always supportive and able to accept my schedule and are proud of me. They have helped with foundation parties, gone to retreats with me, encouraged me.” These two comments indicate the variety of perceptions on how children impact female careers.

When asked about their leadership style and their perception of how they led people, six of the seven surveyed identified such qualities as strength, fairness, visionary, and inclusive when decision-making. When asked how they felt others perceived their leadership, they again mentioned the same qualities, but they included “hard working” and “too busy.” One president simply noted she does what “the circumstances demand at the

time.” Some of the presidents talked about the importance of being able to delegate and trust others to do good work; this went hand in hand with hiring good people.

All the presidents surveyed stated they had faced gender discrimination at some point in their careers. While a few chose not to elaborate about the frequency or types of discrimination they faced, others provided detailed descriptions of what they had endured. One two-year college president said it was not formal or obvious, but she had been left out of the “boys networking groups” and was not invited to the “cigar smoking back room get-togethers.” Another president of a four-year comprehensive university detailed similar experiences, such as being ignored at alumni gatherings and men’s golfing events held for presidents, and enduring such comments as “I’m amazed that no one complains about a woman making such a high salary.” In addition, athletic boosters opposed her becoming president because they did not expect her to understand intercollegiate athletics. When this president applied for the position, the board of trustees sent letters to her references asking about her wife and referred to the applicant as a “he.” Finally, the board in this particular case indicated to candidate that, despite her experience as a vice-president on campus, she should not apply. A different university president identified athletics as a problem area where assumptions about her ignorance of sports were pervasive. It has taken her five years to dispel the notion of her supposed ignorance, and she is invited to athletic functions. She noted that “Frankly, I am often relieved not to be invited, despite losing the informal networking opportunity.”

Most women presidents, including the ones surveyed for this study, strongly agreed that discrimination and differential treatment exists for female administrators and faculty. When asked if there were still a glass ceiling for women in higher education, the answer was an emphatic “Yes!” All but one of those surveyed strongly felt they had to work harder and be better than their male counterparts in order to earn respect. Nationally, most female presidents felt strongly that all searches should yield a significant number of female candidates (Touchton, Shavlik, & Davis, 1991). One

president who responded to the survey felt that female candidates for presidencies are treated as afterthoughts, tagged on to ensure some form of gender equity among the pool of candidates. She noted that trustees and even some search firms are still controlled by the "old boy network." Another felt some female presidents were perceived as "too mannish, bitchy, and aggressive." She stated she had to be both strong and feminine, implying that some people thought they were incompatible.

The problems with completing the doctorate, gaining tenure, and caring for children were cited as delaying career advancement into leadership positions by one president. On a more positive note, one president said that as people got to know her, they recognized her strengths and thought less about her gender. Yet, sadly, she pointed out that completing the survey had reopened wounds and caused pain for her. She aptly pointed out, "Sexism hurts people, and it hurts organizations."

CONCLUSION

A key point cited in the literature (King, 1997; Touchton, Shavlik, & Davis, 1991) on how to advance more women to positions of leadership in academe, particularly the presidency, is networking among female leaders. Women who have sat alone at a board meeting of an institution have identified the tension and discomfort at being the only woman at the table; when two women are present, the situation improves dramatically. Whatever encouragement women leaders receive from male counterparts, they still need the open discussion and networking that occurs in a group of women leaders where it is a safe place to explore ideas and solutions (Brown, 1997).

Traditions that have not welcomed women into the upper echelons of academia have to change. Search committees and trustees need to recognize that including more women in the pool of candidates for presidencies of colleges and universities can only improve the selection process by increasing the overall quality level of candidate pools. Presidents and senior administrators need to work at encouraging women to seek out positions of leadership in academia. Women in leadership roles need to encourage and support other women pursu-

ing such positions: this includes actively addressing issues of women's equality on campus. Almost every woman president interviewed in this survey strongly agreed that it was very important to show concern for women's issues on campus and eliminate sex bias.

Lastly, women who aspire to the presidency need to understand the barriers, opportunities, and career patterns that have existed for women who have gone before them and learn from those experiences. They need to develop coping strategies to deal with challenges female presidents are likely to encounter. At the same time, it is also important to cultivate a reputation as an independent thinker and to be well informed of issues at all times (Collins, Chrisler, & Quina, 1998).

Identifying the obstacles women face in becoming president and the perceptions they, and others, have about women becoming president of a college or university provides some conclusions about what can possibly be done to remedy the problem. There is no one answer to solve the problem, but there are many things listed above that both men and women can do to improve academic leadership opportunities for women who are preparing for the presidency. The glass ceiling for women in leadership positions and in particular the presidency has been slowly bending during the past 25 to 30 years at colleges and universities across the United States. It is likely that the breaking of this barrier will come as a result of built-up social pressure and increased numbers of female faculty. Numbers that will incrementally increase the number of female presidents rather than one event occurring that triggers a change in the climate and culture of academic leadership. A collaborative, cooperative effort by women in academia must include enlisting others who support the inclusion of women in the inner circle of college and university presidents, networking among women in academia to foster support for those seeking leadership positions, and acknowledgement and recognition of successful female presidents. These are some of the keys to increasing the number of female presidents of colleges and universities.

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