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Presidents of Independent Colleges Vary Career Paths

By Dr. Terri Moore Brown, Assistant Professor in Social and Behavioral Sciences, Fayetteville State University NC

Can we increase the number of women college presidents by studying the career paths of current presidents?

For research leading to an EdD in higher ed administration from North Carolina State University in 2000, I examined the career paths and experiences of female presidents of selected four-year independent colleges. Of the 129 female college presidents of ACE schools I polled, which excluded professional schools and those affiliated with the Catholic church, 91 responded to my questionnaire.

Traditional vs. non-traditional career path

Few of the female presidents reported following a traditional career path to the presidency: faculty, department or division head and then chief academic officer. Half had not entered higher ed as a faculty member, half had not been department or division head and two thirds had not been chief academic officer just before their first presidency.

Early in their careers, the women didn't plan to seek the college presidency, either not recognizing their abilities or not knowing how to hone their leadership skills. As more females become college presidents, women can see themselves in the role and plan their careers accordingly.

What they had in common

- **Credentials:** More than half the female presidents of independent colleges had a PhD, and more than a third had an EdD, confirming the doctorate as a valuable credential for females aspiring to the presidency.

- **Mentoring:** Most respondents reported having more than one mentor in career development. They had more male than female mentors; most said their primary mentors had initiated the relationships, not the reverse, which indicates more men are perceiving women as capable leaders in higher ed.

Most of those who had mentors had also been mentors, especially to women.

- **Professional development programs:** National professional programs contribute to the women's career advancement. Most had attended at least one of the five programs listed on the survey, which they felt enhanced their professional skills and provided networking opportunities. Especially beneficial were the HERS Management Institutes and the Harvard Educational Management program.

- **All-female colleges:** Nearly half the respondents had attended all-female colleges, which produce a significantly higher ratio of female leaders.

Personal and institutional barriers

Women still face personal and institutional hindrances. Of personal barriers they reported, geographical constraints and maternal responsibilities were the most common, requiring women to get creative in integrating their

personal lives, careers and social lives. To attract more females to the presidency, college leaders can be proactive in offering solutions, such as hiring their partners or at least helping them find jobs, and providing info on area K-12 schools.

They also listed two top institutional hindrances: politics and exclusion from the old boys' network. But compared with a study a decade ago, fewer women felt excluded from the old boys' network.

Fewer reported personal and institutional hindrances than in previous studies, suggesting higher ed is doing more to support women leaders. Still, one president in her 40s said trustees told her she was too young to be a president.

Recommendations

Changes in attitudes and practices are boosting the chances of women becoming college presidents. The women had experienced fewer personal hindrances, so perhaps independent colleges are providing more support in helping aspiring female presidents handle barriers. Since most of these presidents followed non-traditional career paths, independent schools seem to be more open to considering a variety of administrative and academic experiences. Those aspiring to the job shouldn't feel all is lost if they aren't already in the academic pipeline.

Serving in leadership roles enhances a woman's qualifications for the presidency and provides her with visibility. Accept leadership responsibilities inside and outside one's area (such as development, business affairs, academic affairs), chair campus-wide committees and create new administrative duties within a current job.

Outside the college, consider serving on accrediting bodies; present at academic conferences; publish; and participate on boards of professional, national, and civic organizations and in professional programs.

Get into mentoring, a key to career advancement.

Because less than 10% of the responding presidents of these four-year independent colleges were ethnic minority women, educational leaders need to do more to prepare them for a college presidency and to recruit those already prepared. To be effective, mentoring programs should recognize the differing needs of ethnic minority women and create culturally sensitive programs.

Schools have more work to do to increase the number of women in the college presidency, and women need to take more control and aim higher in planning their academic careers. ■

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Independent schools seem to be more open to considering a variety of administrative and academic experiences.