Chapter 14

Women Leaders in Higher Education:
Where's Walda?

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ABSTRACT

An interesting inquiry is whether women leaders are desiring, dismissing, or being disqualified from senior leadership positions in the global K-20 educational academy. Why is there a leadership underrepresentation of those born female? It may be that women leaders have not been socialized in accordance with the male-centric leadership model; they are relatively outsiders who must forge new ways of leading. This chapter's author embarked on a small literature search of history to identify what is not new to us, but possibly forgotten – the experiences and lessons learned from women leaders who met challenges through their bold and effective leadership, as they forged paths for us. There is a feeling of belonging to the past, but not fully understanding it. There is a sense of having acquired a pressing but obscure responsibility, along with a peculiar female ancestry, for us to be the twenty-first century generation in a long line of uncommon women. The insights in this chapter are presented through a simple folktale, asking the question, Where is Walda?

INTRODUCTION

This chapter is not about the history of institutions, rather it is of four women who hungered for education, who fought for education, and during times of conditions beyond their control, contributed to a momentum of change. From the beginning of my research into this topic I sought out four American women whose aspirations for educational equality came against external forces that both hindered and helped women in the sphere of educational leadership. They knew then, as we know now, that women cannot remain static, for both the demands of women themselves and the needs of a dynamic society necessitates educational advancement in the academy 'boardroom.'

Leadership and vision of the women identified in this chapter contributed to an altered awareness of leadership in education. They contributed to the creation of inspirational pathways that restored hope, encouraged positive engagement, and a contribution to a new sense of personal authenticity. Cooperrider and Whitney (2001) suggested that "the more positive question we ask in our work the longer lasting and successful the change effort. The major thing we do that makes the difference is to craft and seed, in better and more catalytic ways, the unconditional positive question" (p. 22).

Thus, reading the advent of the *Where's Waldo* story initiated my curiosity of asking that same question of women leaders in higher education: *Where's Walda*? The *Where's Waldo* story, written in 1987, introduced Waldo as a distinctively dressed man setting off on a 'worldwide hike.' He traveled to every day places and was equipped with items to help him be successful on his travels. He carried a walking stick, kettle, mallet, cup, backpack, sleeping bag, binoculars, camera, snorkel, belt, bag and shovel. As Waldo journeyed from location to location he would lose many of these items, but would always ask for and receive help to locate objects he had lost. Are we equipping women leaders in higher education to successfully travel their path, achieving their leadership aspirations and being equipped with items to help them be successful on their leadership travels? Thus, my question is, *Where is Walda*?

Since I first began studying the whereabouts of women leaders in higher education, somehow there always seemed other questions to ask, other lines of inquiry to follow; all auguring answers more promising that those I thought I had in hand. There is fruitful literature written by many scholars who focus on women and leadership, whether it is research, theory or practice. However, much of the scholarship highlights the adversity, the frustrations and obstacles of female leaders in higher education, as well as the perceptions of their effectiveness as leaders. A great deal of scholarly work on leadership inside the academy, has been male-centric in that it most often has been conducted by men and focused on male leaders. Thus, male behaviors and characteristics in leadership roles have been the standard against which women leaders are assessed (Kruse & Prettyman, 2008; Wolverton, Bower, & Hyle, 2009 as cited in Dunn, Gerlach, & Hyle, 2014). Reflection and curiosity is employed in this chapter to explore the leadership experiences of four women who forged ahead and yet are in our past. The insights gained may not move the underrepresentation of women issue forward, but hopefully we can step along-side our history and be a significant step toward re-addressing the limitations for female academic leaders.

My reading on leadership provides insights into the underrepresentation of women leaders, both inside and outside the academy. Inside higher education, the research suggests that masculine practices and leadership norms function to exclude women. The American Council on Education reported that only about 23% of college and university presidents are women, and of that number less than 14% are members of under-represented groups (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2008). As to the whereabouts of female leaders in the academy: are they lost leaders, are the rules of the game and the leaderist turn in higher education a myth, are the policies and practices inside higher educational institutions wasting talent because women are becoming disenchanted and disengaged with leadership, or is it simply no one has a clear and agreed upon definition of the *L-word* as it relates to females, in a male-centric environment? (Kezar, Carducci, & Contreras-McGavin, 2011; Morley, 2014). There are contested meanings of leadership within the context of higher education and the discursive connotations. Juntrasook identified the discursive effects of these meanings focusing on how they constitute certain ways of thinking, practicing, and 'becoming' for academic leaders (2014). Or a simpler way to look at this is to unmask the *rules of the game* that lurk beneath the surface rationality of academic meritocracy. This then may pose questions about the relentless misrecognition of women's leadership capacities and suggests the need for an expanded lexicon of leadership with which to move the academy into the future (Morley, 2013).

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