Chapter 16
Women in Higher Education Administration Leadership and the Role of Institutional Support

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ABSTRACT

Studies show women are underrepresented in higher education leadership. Nonetheless, women leaders achieve success when they receive strong institutional support. Mentors and coaches, both men and women, have the most impact on women's success, while other institutional aids include financial assistance, leadership support, and open institutional culture. Women who advance in their careers tend to remain at their institution. At the same time, lack of institutional support, family and work conflicts, and limited career advancement opportunities continue to pose barriers as women seek positions in the upper echelons of academic administration. Thus, there is a need for strong, consistent institutional support to improve and accelerate women's progress. Institutions that implement change in an inclusive, adaptable, and flexible manner can build a supportive infrastructure that benefits everyone. Women who prepare academically and professionally and contribute to the scholarly literature will help shape the future of higher education.

INTRODUCTION

The acceptance and support of women higher education leaders in the United States through institutional culture and policies constitutes a key indicator of their success. Women have progressively gained access to higher education leadership positions since the 1970s (Easterly, 2008), and current studies identify a trend that support for women higher education leaders is growing internationally as economic and governmental norms are being challenged (Longman, 2018). Even though higher education institutional cultures, policies, and practices have not always served women leaders as well as male counterparts (Eddy, 2008; Jackson & O'Callaghan, 2009; Shollen, Bland, Finstad & Taylor, 2009; Bingham & Nix,

2010), some institutional policies, such as parental and family leave, have become more accommodating for women (Mayer & Tikka, 2008).

While women have made significant gains in earning degrees in higher education, that achievement has not fully translated into equivalent representation in leadership positions. In 2017, the United States Department of Education reported women accounted for 56 percent of undergraduate enrollments, and women earned more than 50 percent of the master's and doctoral degrees issued in the United States (American Council on Education, 2017). Despite these positive statistics, the percentage of women obtaining presidency positions remains relatively low at 30 percent (ACE, 2017). The phrase "the higher the few" has been used to describe the disconnect between educational attainment and employment for women in senior level higher education positions (ACE, 2017).

This chapter examines the ways in which strong, systematic institutional support can address this disconnection, as well as pinpoints lingering barriers that impede women's ability to advance through the ranks of higher education administration. The topic is explored foremostly through a case study conducted with women who hold positions of dean or higher from 12 institutions as well as aspiring leaders in the field, corroborated by research. The chapter also provides recommendations for both individuals and institutions to create and improve pathways going forward. The objective is to encourage higher education institutions to implement change in an inclusive, adaptable, and flexible manner to build a supportive infrastructure that benefits not just women leaders, but everyone who aspires to serve at the highest levels.

BACKGROUND

Until recently, the research literature focused on the barriers and challenges women continued to face in higher education leadership administration. In some cases, the aggregate of disadvantages encountered by women in such positions resulted in the adoption of a pluralistic leadership style, blending professional and personal characteristics (Wheat & Hill, 2016). A more current trend in the literature has been to examine the positive professional experiences of women who have attained senior leadership positions (Hannum, Muhly, Schockley-Zalabak & White, 2015), including how supportive institutional policies and practices have enabled systematic movement up the administrative ladder. According to the Association for the Study of Higher Education (2017), policy and curricular reform and research has enhanced women's access to senior level positions.

In addition, opportunities for mentoring have provided some women with a positive environment to succeed (Searby, Ballenger & Tripses, 2015). Some institutions have invested in formal professional development programs and mentoring opportunities to help prepare women for leadership positions. For example, administrators at Ohio State University created the Women's Place and the President and Provosts Leadership Institute (Hornsby, Morrow-Jones & Ballam, 2011).

Recognizing there has been some overall progress, the literature also confirms the need for an expanded role for institutional support as a way to improve access for women to higher education leadership positions (Shepherd, 2012; Tolar, 2012). As part of institutional succession planning, upcoming women leaders need to be cultivated and mentored for a successful transition (Hannum et al, 2015). In a study based on the experiences of 71 high-achieving female Truman Scholars who had at least 10 years of work experience (Tolar, 2012), participants were asked to comment on institutional support, inputs, or advantages affecting leadership. Many cited mentoring as an important component in leadership

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