Chapter 1
"To Be, or Not to Be, That Is the Question":
Decisions of Women in Leadership in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Deciding to pursue administrative roles in higher education presents a significant challenge for women, particularly motherscholars. While some make this decision swiftly, others navigate a complex web of personal values, family responsibilities, ambitions, and the sacrifices such roles often demand. This chapter explores how women engage with the workforce and approach leadership decisions, framed through the authors' personal perspectives. It examines the hesitation many women experience, the pivotal moments that lead to action, and the pursuit of authentic leadership as a means of initiating cultural change from within. The chapter concludes by offering strategies for reaching a sense of peace in leadership roles and presents recommendations for reducing institutional barriers through policy reform and shifts in organizational culture.

INTRODUCTION

"To be or not to be, that is the question" (Shakespeare, 1603, Act III, Scene I). The opening line of Act III in William Shakespeare's Hamlet, though contemplating life or death, resonates with women weighing the complexities of leadership. A profound philosophical question in the 16th century - still a profound question today for women in higher education. Hamlet's timeless question, a dilemma of pros and cons -- whether it was better to endure hardships in life or escape them -- mirrors choices women face, especially those considering a leadership role in higher education, a field historically shaped by male-dominated structures. This choice - filled with challenges and trade-offs - defines one author's own journey which was much like the Beatles' 1968 song *The Long and Winding Road* (Lennon & McCartney, 1970), fraught with uncertainty, setbacks, and difficult decisions of compromise. Lennon and McCartney's lyrics capture the persistent pull for this author toward leadership, no matter how often she tried to step away or decline.

The purpose of this chapter is two-fold. First, to outline in a casual, but very real way how women fit in the workforce and how the authors have personally looked at this topic from within their own heart, mind, and life. We will include research surrounding our lived experience, as well as 10 years of research regarding motherscholars. This will include reasons life gets out of balance and possible motives women may have for delaying work, leadership, or both. Secondly, we offer the reader a relaxed way to see life from the perspective of a stay-at-home mother all the way through a working motherscholar turned administrator and a first-generation student as a professor who chose to use her skills and attributes to mentor students in the classroom rather than enter the world of administration. In so doing, each reader may find tactics that will illuminate reasons for their choices as well as possible ways to improve individually. Additionally, we will provide solutions that address the institutional barriers women face, including policy and cultural changes.

To understand why women hesitate pursuing leadership roles, we must first consider the historical roots of women in the workforce. Although gender roles have changed and evolved over the years (News editor, 2008; Zhu & Chang, 2019), women still carry the lion's share of responsibility in the home, despite the increased contributions from men (Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard, 2010; Nagy et al., 2023). Like Hamlet, when opportunities for leadership and administrative roles present themselves, women face a 'moment of choice' that requires navigating complex compromises as they weigh their own ambitions, personal values, and responsibilities against the sacrifices such a role demands. It is a critical decision, maybe even a turning point, for women. For men, climbing the organizational ladder may seem straightforward; for women, it is far more complex weighing personal and professional costs. How much time is involved? What is the personal cost? What sacrifices

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