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# Women Presidents in Higher Education: How They Experience Their Calling<sup>1</sup>



The academic presidency in the United States has generally carried with it prestige and distinction (Bornstein, 2003). Rhodes (1998) called the academic presidency one of the most influential, most important, and most powerful of positions in United States society. In 2011, 2,312 four-year institutions, 697 public and 1,615 private comprised the collegiate arena (Hennessy, 2013). Each has a president to lead the institution in implementing and executing the organization's mission.

According to Ruben (2003), "Extraordinary challenges face higher education nationally, and leaders with exceptional capabilities are needed to help institutions meet these challenges" (p. 288). King and Gomez (2008) noted that, with the graying of the academy, over half of college presidents are aged 61 or older. The American Council of Education (ACE) Report on Presidents predicts a "significant turnover in presidential leadership due to

retirements in the near term," which will present "an opportunity to further diversify the presidency" (*The American College President Study*, 2012, p. 49). Given this imminent turnover, identifying and preparing future leaders for higher education is critical. As we predict that more women will consider the role of the presidency in the next ten years, understanding the concept of calling may be critical in order to entice the best talent possible to lead our students, faculty, and staff. This article investigates the journeys of female college presidents and the role of calling in leading these women to the office of president.

## Past Studies: Calling and Females

By some estimates the present concept of calling emerged in 1522 when Martin Luther, declared that everyone (not just religious leaders) has a calling from God (Kolden, 2008). Calling, often used interchangeably with the concept of vocation, from the Latin word *vocare*, or "to call" involves living a life of meaning and purpose (ELCA, 2013). In addition, the Lutheran definition suggests that one's calling seeks to equip people to serve their neighbor and the community in wholesome and effective ways (Christenson, 2004).

Hunter, Dik, and Banning (2010) suggested that definitions of calling vary considerably—from limiting calling to the work environment to defining the concept

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broadly to considering it more a lifestyle. Buechner described calling as any place where one's "deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet" (1992 p. 186). According to Johnson (2012), vocation or purpose in life has the ability to change based on circumstance. Unexpected experiences may lead to the discovery of a new vocation, and the way in which vocation is fulfilled depends on the individual and the call they perceive.

Gender differences also appear to influence one's sense of calling (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011; Dik & Duffy, 2009; Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007; Longman et al., 2010; Philips, 2009). Researchers have suggested that males tend to view their job as a calling, while females rely more on relationships and caring for others. Longman et al. (2010) offered a theoretical model for women and calling according to which the strength of a calling relies on four factors and lies along two continua. The continua (internal-external and specific-general) refer to sources of validation and the manifestation of calling in a specific or general way. An internal validation could be "a strong sense of self-awareness and self-efficacy" (Longman et al., 2010, p. 269), while an external validation could be in the form of "encouragement from mentors or other important figures" (p. 269). The manifestation of a calling can occur in a specific way, as in a vision, hearing the voice of God, or in answer to prayer, or in a general way, as in a pull towards a career.

The participants of that study also identified four factors connected to calling: theological influences, family realities, cultural expectations, and life circumstances. These four factors "represent potential for movement or development inherent in a woman's sense of calling...that could propel women further into pursuing their giftedness and talents, which may result in greater clarity about their calling, or could act as limitations to an exploration of calling." (Longman et al., 2010, p. 270) This article expands the concept to female presidents in colleges and universities to determine the role of calling in the pinnacle role of higher education leadership.

## Present Study: Women Presidents and Calling

The number of women at every level of academia has been rising for decades. Within the United States, a recent

Department of Education (2010) report identified that, in 2007-2008, women earned 57.3 percent of bachelor's degrees, 60.6 percent of master's degrees, and 51 percent of doctoral degrees. Yet, the percentage of college and university leadership positions held by women remains low (Moore Brown, 2005). According to the American College President (2012), 26 percent of the presidents of doctorate-granting institutions are now women, as compared with 14 percent in 2006.

Little has been written about women presidents and their calling. Madsen's (2008) research on women presidents does not mention calling. A few women presidents, former presidents, and authors refer to it (Bornstein, 2003; Wolverton, Bower, & Hyle, 2009), but none directly explains the role of calling for women presidents in higher education.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework of the present study draws from transformative learning theory, which explains that individuals cannot develop leadership unless they are receptive to learning, the basis of effective development. Kolb (1984) defined learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (p. 38) and emphasized that learning takes place through reflection on one's experiences. Merriam and Caffarella (1995) suggested that "transformational learning theory is about change—dramatic, fundamental change in the way we see ourselves and the world in which we live" (p. 318).

Both Meizrow (2000) and Merriam and Caffarella (1998) explained that this theory focuses on three core components: *mental construction of experience* (engaging with each life experience to make meaning contains an opportunity for a change in perspective and behavior); *critical reflection* (effective learning follows effective reflection, not the experience itself; individuals must not only think about their experiences, but also examine the underlying beliefs and assumptions that influence how they make sense of their experiences); and *development and action* (to transform, individuals need to try out their new knowledge, skills, or roles and then build new competence and self-confidence).

Effective leaders experience all three components of transformative learning while discerning a potential calling. Among them, critical reflection stands out as a crucial part of the journey to becoming a college president.

## Methodology

Our study employed a qualitative methodology with a descriptive approach. We used in-depth interviews of 15 women presidents in higher education. Collected data included an extensive description of the journey to the presidency (Creswell, 2007).

Women comprise 26 percent of all current college presidents. Having identified 70 female presidents, we sent each a letter inviting each to participate in the study. Consistent with Gustavus Adolphus's Institutional Review Board approval, the e-mail contained a description of the study, its purpose, the benefits and risks, a guarantee of anonymity (unless participants decided to share their identity publicly), and their willingness to have the interviews audiotaped. Sixteen responded initially. Fifteen followed through with a phone interview.

The ages of the responding presidents ranged from 50 to 76. Of the 15 women interviewed, 13 self-identified as Caucasian, one as black, and one as Hispanic. These women have spent an average of 8.7 years as president. Nine held the office of academic vice-president or provost prior to becoming a president. Six were presidents of public institutions, five were presidents of religiously-affiliated institutions, and two were presidents of private all-female colleges that were not religiously affiliated.

Each interview began with the question, "How did you first get interested in being a president?" and then, "Did someone mentor or sponsor you to the role?" After defining calling, using the definitions of Luther and Beuchner, the question was asked, "Were you called to the role of college president?" Other questions included, "What advice would you give to women who may hear a calling toward a presidency but are still unsure about moving forward?" and "What should interested female presidential candidates be doing now to get prepared?"

## Results

Based on the nature of the questions asked and the presidents' responses, three descriptive categories emerged: Identifying the Call, Interpreting the Call, and Pursuing the Call, as shown in Figure 1.

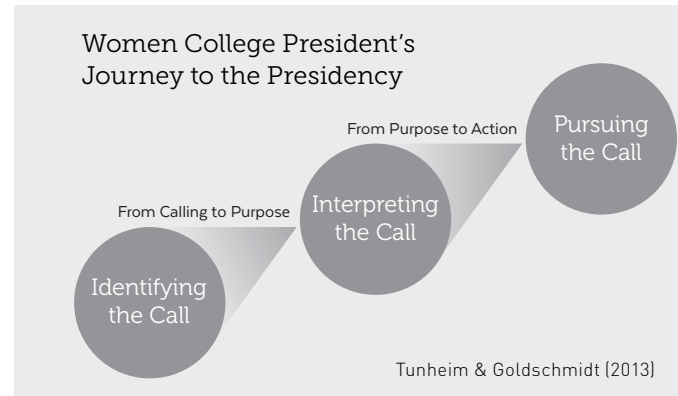


Figure 1

### Identifying the Call

Twelve of the 15 presidents claimed to have a calling to their role. Three described a spiritual calling, with one replying, "The Lord opened this door for me. I could not have done this without [God]." Nine said that they felt a calling in terms of a felt match between their gifts and skills and the needs of the institution, which fits with Beuchner's definition. One explained:

I am not an evangelical Christian by any means, and so I didn't have a calling like a burning bush or anything like that. But I certainly felt as though my strengths and what I loved to do, I felt called in that way.

Three respondents denied the existence of a calling to the role, stating that their position came as the next logical step and that there was no religious aspect at all. Said one,

I would say that I felt like I was ready, that it was something that I really wanted to do, that I had the talent and the skill to do it. But I didn't think that anyone was calling me...

All respondents were asked how they became a president. Several were approached by search firms or by mentors or co-workers who encouraged them to look into the possibility. One described the frustration she felt from experiencing bad presidencies. She had also been discouraged by how the potential of faculty had been untapped in a previous institution, which inspired her to pursue the role. Another spoke of how the idea of this role had gradually grown in her, finally leading her to think that it was something she could do. The first step of transformational learning theory is at work here; engaging with

life experience opened up an opportunity for change in the lives of these women. The next thing they needed was to understand this change and what it meant.

### ***Interpreting the Call***

Women who felt that they had been called explored that calling in a variety of ways. After being approached by search firms or encouraged by mentors, the seed had been planted. The next step consisted of interpreting that encouragement and determining its purpose. The participants offered different advice to women who felt a calling to the role. One who had felt a spiritual calling recommended examining the desires of the heart:

If you're not sure about moving forward [and yet]...you ask God to guide you and you really mean that with all of your heart, [and] if the desire gets stronger and stronger...I'd say, "Lord, I see that you're calling me this way, but if I'm making a mistake, I trust you to then shut doors, close windows if I'm not supposed to be there."

Another suggested looking into attending workshops to explore the possibility. She too had decided to "test to see whether or not this sounded like something I wanted to do...not only to prepare me but to solidify for me that that was something I wanted to do."

One president replied that it "would be wise to talk to quite a few people who are in higher education about the distinctive culture and values of higher education" if the calling came to someone outside of academe. If the calling came to someone inside higher education, she continued, "I would encourage them to use some of the programs that the national organizations have...for people considering a presidency." Additionally, she advises potential candidates to research current female presidents and not to hesitate to contact them for help.

Finally, two presidents stressed the importance of self-evaluation, to "analyze whether it's in your own being to take risks, make tough decisions, take criticism if things go wrong," and to be aware that "it's not just about wearing nice suits and going to great parties." Moreover, it is imperative to "think about what you can get and what you can give...[and to] trust your own instincts."

In essence, understanding the role and the self are imperative in interpreting whether one has a calling

to college or university presidency. The second part of the transformative learning theory ("critical reflection") appears here; these women not only reflect on their feelings, but also closely examine their underlying gifts and purpose in life. Prospective presidential candidates should examine how the role would fit into their lives, discuss the possibilities and implications with the important people in their lives, research the requirements and skills needed for the job, and otherwise think deeply about this opportunity.

"While men are typically under-prepared and over-confident for these roles, women are often over-prepared and under-confident for leadership roles."

### ***Pursuing the Call***

Once one has determined that she feels called to the role and is willing to accept that calling, the next step is to pursue the calling. Women in academic leadership seek out opportunities and ways to fit into the organization in order to advance their careers. Several things contribute to this step. The first is preparation for the role. Academic literature has identified a gap between men and women concerning preparedness and confidence. While men are typically under-prepared and over-confident for these roles, women are often over-prepared and under-confident for leadership roles (Kinicki & Kreitner, 2009). In order to have success in these roles, candidates for the position must have confidence in both their skills and ability. One respondent emphasized the importance of this balance:

If you go into a position [and] you think you know everything, you can almost guarantee it's not going to work, and if you go in without the confidence that can even get you there, it's obviously not going to work.

As described in the transformative learning theory, trying out new knowledge, skills, or roles, and building new competence and self-confidence, truly transform individuals and will prepare them for their calling. One current president said that women trying to get into the presidency "should be working in the academic arena

as much as they can, in whatever position they're in, [and] should be getting special training from the AGB (Association of Governing Boards) or other sources that they know about." Delegation is also key. Several presidents spoke about the importance of having the ability to recognize their skills and then supplement their weaknesses by having others to advise them.

One spoke encouragingly about women's natural gifts for the role:

We have a lot, if not all, of the major qualities needed that have been attributed to men—hard work, commitment. We're analytical; we're both right brained and left brained. And here's the thing: women intuitively have the emotional intelligence down...In this diverse world, emotional intelligence, almost innately, should bolster up our confidence.

Focusing on performance makes up the next part of preparing for the role. Nine interviewees had been provosts before their appointment to the presidency, and all of them had served in administration as vice-presidents, deans, or assistant provosts. Several presidents said that interested candidates should volunteer for committees not only to gain experience, but also to show their skills, work ethic, and enthusiasm for the role. Said one president:

Everything in my life has prepared me for this role—my role as a soccer mom and busy mother, as a department chair and as VP of Academic Affairs. Every role was important in giving me skills. My work outside the office was as important as in.

All of these requirements add up to the next part of pursuing the calling: opportunity. These women came to presidency through a variety of pipelines. Some were contacted by search firms; others were nominated, and some were encouraged by mentors who were previous presidents. Women who feel a calling and want to pursue that calling should be on the lookout for opportunities to learn more, to strengthen their skills, and to apply themselves. When the opportunity does come, fit with the institution is paramount, according to the interviewees. One president even interviewed for over ten positions and waited until she found the right fit.

## Implications

Women who sense a calling to presidency need to be encouraged to attend ACE, Higher Education Resource Services (HERS), Bryn Mawr, Council of Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU), and similar types of women-only leadership development programs. The research suggests that this is helpful for women leaders in higher education (Madsen, 2008). The more women who are exposed to the idea of a presidency, the more they can identify, interpret, and pursue the call.

Current male and female college presidents need to continue to increase their mentoring of high potential women leaders, both inside and outside their institutions. Research suggests that mentoring and sponsoring women leaders works (Moore Brown, 2005). With the imbalance of women in higher executive roles, women need to be encouraged to pursue such callings earlier in their careers.

More needs to be written and published about college and university women presidents. Besides Bornstein (2003), Longman et al. (2010), Madsen (2008), and Wolverton et al. (2009), few authors have written on the topic of women in higher education in relation to callings. Many of the journal articles focus on women presidents of community colleges, as that is where the majority of the 26 percent of women college presidents reside. As more women pursue higher degrees and take on higher roles, we can expect a growing percentage of female presidents.<sup>2</sup>

## Conclusion

After discovering the role of calling in the journeys of male college presidents, the question of whether women feel that same calling arose. Seventy percent of men responded that they felt a calling in a previous study. This study concludes that many of the women in this study also felt a calling in their journey to the presidency. This calling manifested itself in a variety of ways with little regard to religious affiliation; it occurred through personal, spiritual, and vocational connections.

## Endnotes

1. An early version of this article was published as: Tunheim, K. A., & Goldschmidt, A. N. (2013). Exploring the role of calling in the professional journeys of college presidents. *Journal of Leadership, Accountability and Ethics*, 10(4), 30-56. It has been revised and is published here with the permission of the publishers. The citation style of the earlier publication is retained.

2. Two central limitations influenced this study. First, the 15 presidents who participated were volunteers. They are a small percent of the total number of women in higher

education presidencies. Therefore, these presidents are not representative of the at least 70 women college presidents in the role today. These presidents may be the only ones interested in or familiar with calling as a construct. Thus, the findings of this study cannot be generalized. Second, we set out specifically to explore calling by offering the two definitions and asking questions about calling. If we had conducted a phenomenological study in which we simply explored the experiences of these presidents in pursuing the presidency, calling may not have surfaced as such an important factor.

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