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Shared Leadership Experiences of Women Community College Presidents

Suzanne Campbell, Kathryn Mueller and Jane M. Souza

According to the American Council on Education study *The American College President: 2007 Edition* only 23% of college presidencies were held by women as late as 2006. While the number of female executive officers has doubled since 1986, progress in achieving the presidency has been undeniably slow for women. To better understand a woman's road to the presidency, a collective case study was conducted to explore the career paths of six community college women presidents. Data collected revealed commonalities in their experiences. The results of the study provided key information for women seeking presidential positions in community colleges.

Introduction

An ever-increasing number of professional women are seeking and obtaining administrative positions in higher education. However, it is unclear what central factors contribute to these women achieving and sustaining their leadership roles. This collective case study sought to identify a common set of experiences shared by women presidents in community colleges.

The study of leadership has been in existence for decades. However, most of the previous studies focused on male-dominated leadership skills, traits, and characteristics. There is an identified lack of leadership studies that focus on women as the population sample. Additionally, the majority of these studies within the field of education have looked at four-year institutions and the K-12 education systems. A deficiency in research exists with regard to female higher education administrators, and with community colleges. The results of this study contribute to the data available that focuses on community colleges and the women presidents who demonstrate success in that arena.

The skills, characteristics, and credentials required for women to obtain a higher education administrative position are suggested by this study. The obstacles or barriers that relate to being female and experienced by these women are presented. The role of professional development opportunities and networks are explored. Through the identification of central factors

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and common experiences of women presidents in community colleges, this study sought to provide a useful guide for aspiring female presidents.

Literature Review

There is a limited amount of research available on the experiences of women administrators in higher education. The lack of research is reflected in the low percentages of women in college and university leadership positions: one-fifth are presidents (Barwick, 2002), and specifically only 28% of presidents at community colleges are women (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2006). With a large number of presidents expected to retire in the next few years, and fewer people “applying for presidencies now than before,” never has there “been a greater opportunity” for those “who are truly ready to become president, regardless of gender or race” (Barwick, 2002, p. 8).

Jones and Credille (2003) stated, “men continue their domination of the academy in terms of policies, evaluations, interactions, practices, and management” and “women have infrequently held important positions in higher education administration with the exception of women’s colleges” (p. 5). Typical positions for women in education “were dean or director of: women, library services, home economics, or nursing” (Jones & Credille, 2003, p. 5).

Alison Richard, former Yale University provost, provided encouragement: “the number of women becoming potential candidates for these positions is growing. That means the leadership in higher education will become increasingly diversified and more closely reflect the composition of our student pools” (Lively, 2000, p. A33). Yet leadership preparation needs to be strategic as Beverly Simone, president of Madison Area Technical College said, “Leaders aren’t born; they are developed” (Carter, Terwilliger, Alfred, Hartleb, & Simone, 2002, p. 22). The literature explored in this study included the following: pathways to leadership development, barriers, strategies, skills and mentoring.

Pathways to the presidency vary, with some presidents rising from the faculty ranks and others from student affairs. In 2006 it was documented

that 54% of community college presidents had an academic affairs background, while only 8.4% had a background in student services (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2006, p. B16). Experience, increased job responsibilities, development of new skills, motivation for advancement, encouragement from others, and involvement in professional organizations were all influential in a leader's advancement (Barwick, 2002; Jones & Credille, 2003). Women chief academic officers interviewed by Cjeda (2008) shared that encouragement from peers and superiors contributed to their advancement into senior administrative positions.

Barriers to advancement can be perceived or real, conscious and unconscious. Various researchers have identified the barriers as: male-dominated networks, campus politics, family commitments or tensions, balancing family and career, finding good fits for two-career couples, bias in the search process, a dearth of female colleagues, gender bias, isolation, exclusion, under-representation in senior leadership, lack of opportunity for projects and risks, and lack of training (Aisenberg & Harrington, 1988; Archer, 2003; Blackhurst, 2000; Jones & Credille, 2003; Lively, 2000).

Previous research concluded that "women still need to do it better" and had "no room for mistakes" (Brooks & Brooks, 1997, p. 175), and that "women get fewer chances to make mistakes than men, especially during the early months of the job" (Lively, 2000, p. A33).

Cjeda (2008) discovered, however, that while the women chief academic officers he interviewed "had heard of barriers" in higher education, none of them had encountered gender barriers. Instead, Cjeda's subjects "felt that the community college environment supported or facilitated the movement of women in the administrative hierarchy" (p. 176). One subject, however, stated that the lack of a doctorate was a barrier.

Strategies for empowering and enabling women to fill senior leadership positions at colleges and universities include: "kick-starting the process" (McNutt, 2005, p. A10); not waiting for it to happen, being tough, and competing for the opportunity (Williams, 2005); networking (Ellis, 2003; Jones & Credille, 2003); and "cultivating a public self" (Becker, 2002, p. B15).

One strategic model includes seven pieces: have mentors or advocates; increase one's visibility; "develop an effective network"; learn to communicate effectively; balance work and home; take smart risks; and "understand the politics of an organization." Connected to these seven strategies are the four Ps: "performance, perseverance, practice, and patience" (Brooks & Brooks, 1997, p.7).

Some additional strategies for advancement include: professional development (e.g. attending workshops and conferences), staying current in professional literature, gaining "an understanding of the larger picture" through serving on campus committees, "obtaining program approval at the institutional or state level, familiarity with both securing and expending funding, and representing the institution to external constituencies

such as external advisory groups or business and industry” (Cjeda, 2008 p. 177).

Cook (2008) identified methods for breaking barriers to the presidency: “in your current job, build each skill you’ll need for the position above you”; “inventory your skill set and plan how to fill the gaps”; manage budgets; learn how institutions of higher education interact with industry, businesses and non-profits; become comfortable with fund raising; “get experience through committees, nonprofit boards and strategic planning”; “document and publicize your skills and successes”; and keep your sense of humor.

Barwick (2002), Brooks and Brooks (1997), Ellis (2003), Lively (2000), and Ottenritter (2006) identified similar critical leadership skills including the ability to:

- communicate effectively
- listen actively
- respond tactfully and responsibly
- act with diplomacy
- delegate appropriately
- understand finances and budgets
- grow fiscal resources
- problem solve through collaboration
- build bridges, networks, and partnerships
- juggle multiple tasks
- balance home and work
- develop a supportive network at home
- foster a supportive environment at work
- use technology to advantage
- take smart risks
- keep a sense of humor
- avoid taking things personally
- listen objectively to feedback and criticism
- project confidence
- make challenging decisions
- hold and promote high standards
- demonstrate respect and integrity
- participate actively in the profession

Astin and Leland (1991) identified the following valuable leadership qualities and experiences: high energy level; welcome challenges, risk taking and problem solving; ability to accept and overcome personal setbacks and obstacles; intellectual competence; sound academic background; personal confidence and awareness; and support from friends, family, mentors and leadership models.

Mentors play an important role in leadership training and advancement. “Mentors give us permission to aspire and to act” and they “inspire us to try and realize our greatest potential” (Astin & Leland, 1991, p. 47). Individu-

als with mentors usually advance more rapidly due to access to information networks (Brooks & Brooks, 1997) and a reduction in role ambiguity and conflict as well as learning the unwritten “rules” (Blackhurst, 2000). Mentors also serve as role models, to both the up-and-coming woman leader as well as to the men in similar or parallel leadership positions (Lively, 2000).

Methodology

Since the purpose of this study was to explore the career paths that led these women community college presidents to their current positions and to identify the commonalities in their experiences, the case study research design was selected. The use of the case study design allows the researcher to secure knowledge about phenomenon, an organization, selected groups, or an individual. The case study research design also allows the researcher to “retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events” (Yin, 2003, p. 2).

According to Merriam (1998), being a good communicator is an essential characteristic of a qualitative researcher. Establishing rapport with the participants, demonstrating empathy, asking good questions, and listening intently are elements of good communication. In this case study, formal questions and probes were used for the interviews.

The interviews with six women community college presidents were conducted between March 2007 and May 2007. With permission from the participants, the interviews were conducted face to face and audio recorded. The interview questions allowed the researchers to identify central factors that contributed to these women gaining positions as community college presidents.

The analysis strategies for case studies, as suggested by Creswell (1998), were utilized for the interview data. The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and organized by participant. These transcriptions, along with interviewer notes, were imported into NVivo software for coding purposes. Use of the software allowed the researchers to document the frequency of particular responses thereby assisting in the development of categories and patterns.

Initial codes were suggested through close readings of the transcription data. The resulting codes were then sorted by categorical aggregation, a process in which “the researcher seeks a collection of instances from the data, hoping that issue-relevant meanings will emerge” (Creswell, 1998, p. 154). Following the categorization process, generalizations were made based on the patterns that emerged. Frequent use of direct quotations was used to support the resulting generalizations.

Although qualitative research does not lend itself to reliability and generalizability as does quantitative research, validity can be confirmed. For the interpretation of the data to be seen as valid, it is the charge of the researcher to employ strategies to demonstrate the validity of the study. Creswell (2003) and Merriam (1998) identified various strategies to check

for accuracy of findings. For this case study research, data validation was based on two verification procedures: member checks and rich-thick descriptions. Member checks are defined as “taking data, analyses, interpretations, and conclusions back to the participants so that they can judge the accuracy and credibility of the account” (Creswell, 1998, p. 203). Through the use of rich, thick descriptions “the researcher enables the readers to transfer information to other settings and to determine whether the findings can be transferred” (Creswell, 1998, p. 203).

The six women community college presidents were located across the United States. Two of the participants were presidents in rural community colleges while the other four were presidents in urban community colleges. The community college presidents ranged in age from 54 to 65 years of age. There was no pattern of academic degrees. Various administrative positions had been held prior to the presidency. All of the women had earned doctorates. The participants possessed an average of eight years experience as faculty and twenty-four years experience in administration. Three of the women were divorced while one was single and two were married. Four of the participants were mothers.

The central research question was, “What do women leaders identify as central factors contributing to achieving and sustaining their leadership roles in higher education administration.” To ascertain the information, three additional questions were identified.

1. Are there any specific professional development opportunities or networks in which these women participated to achieve their current position?
2. What obstacles or barriers to success do these women higher education administrators attribute to being female?
3. What skills, characteristics, and credentials do they feel are necessary to be successful in higher education administration?

Findings

Seven questions were asked of the six community college women presidents in the study. Findings from the data analysis were organized by questions. Direct quotations from the participants were provided to support the findings of common themes.

Please describe your career path.

No common pattern was discerned in the path to the presidency with respect to prior positions held. The six participants came from various areas within the academy including faculty, finance, student services, and community development. Titles included dean of instruction, dean of the library, vice president of administration and finance, and dean of student affairs. Three women described themselves as having taken traditional paths to the presidency while two cited non-traditional avenues. The remaining president stated:

Traditional in a way which I came through the community college rank and file as in various positions. Non-traditional in the kind of positions I held from the very beginning to where I am today . . . my first job was a counselor in a very non-traditional program working with refugees.

The greatest commonality in the paths of these women is that they all came from within the academy. The similarities did not emerge until the women began speaking of what motivated them to follow the path to the presidency.

What motivating factors contributed to your decision to seek this leadership position?

Analysis of the responses to the question of motivating factors yielded common themes. The women described themselves as people who wanted to make a difference and to have a large sphere of influence. They used the following expressions to describe themselves:

I like to be in control. (President 1)

I just like to see things get done. (President 5)

The bottom line is that I got convinced that I could have a broader impact. (President 6)

The scope of influence starts to be . . . you can make a difference not just one-on-one but in a larger and larger group. (President 4)

I just thought I was going to be able to make decisions that would benefit not just me, but the entire division. (President 5)

I'm far more a description of a 'type A' personality than I like to admit. (President 2)

The themes of control and sphere of influence were repeated from president to president. It also became clear that these women were motivated by the *challenge* of the leadership position. President 1, for example, specifically spoke of looking for the next challenge, "You gotta have something new to do or it just gets boring." President 2 stated, "I had always preached that people should grow and develop and seek new challenges." She went on to say that she had to practice what she preached. President 5 used these words to describe a driving force for her, "I found it isn't that I found the job easy it's that I found the job interesting and challenging."

Overall, the analysis of the data for this question regarding motivation revealed common personality traits of enjoying control, being challenged, and having a broad sphere of influence.

What skills do you possess that best serve you in your administrative position?

Multiple skills were listed as helpful to these women in leadership posi-

tions. Among those mentioned were business skills, the ability to see the big picture, consistency, content knowledge, and entrepreneurial skills. However, people skills, including communication skills, were most cited as being essential. Remarks included the following statements:

I don't want to minimize content knowledge . . . even more valuable skill is that interpersonal realm and that communication realm. . . . Able to build bridges where chasms existed. (President 2)

The most important skill for me is not the technical skill that's related to that particular position or job, but it's the people skills, allowing anybody and everybody to be able to work well in a collective people organization. (President 3)

. . . clearly—communication—to be able to tell your story, and convince people that you are worthy of the campus, and to understand the political place you live in . . . (President 5)

I think you have to be a good communicator, persuasive, persistent . . . (President 6)

I want to be respected. I want to be listened to. I want to feel a sense of importance. I want to be appreciated. So whatever it is I want as a person, everybody is the same. . . . The technical skills that I have, not much of that has contributed to my administrative success. (President 3)

If you are not an effective communicator, the skills are not productive. (President 2)

You have to respect the people around you because nothing gets done without people getting it done. (President 1)

For these women presidents, the soft skills, generally intangible skills, were credited with being more important than the traditional hard skills associated with content knowledge.

What professional development opportunities, associations, and/or networking opportunities assisted you in attaining your leadership position?

All of the six presidents participated in some form of professional development program. Presidents 1, 2, and 3 specifically cited the National Institute for Leadership Development as being instrumental in their career paths. This program, under the direction of Carolyn Desjardins in the 1980s, formerly hosted by Maricopa Community Colleges and now sponsored by the American Association for Women in Community Colleges (AAWCC) as the Leaders Institute, targeted women with leadership potential. President 6 credited another such program for women, the American Council on Education National Identification Program (ACE-NIP), with "opening my horizons about what was possible." Presidents 3, 4, and 6 all spoke of the value of their participation in the American Association of

Community Colleges (AACC). Words used to describe the role of these professional development opportunities included “profound” and “huge.” Only President 5 did not mention a particular program that was beneficial. This woman patched together her own professional development opportunities by attending conferences that she funded herself, considering the expense “my own investment in myself.”

Did mentoring play a significant role in your career path?

Only one of the six presidents did not have a mentor. She described herself as a “pretty self-contained, happy with myself, self actualized person.” The other five presidents all related the pivotal roles mentors played in their leadership journeys. The following quotes demonstrate the impact of their mentors.

I think his unwavering belief in my abilities and skills and this vision for me to be a community college president some day was invaluable. (President 2)

I have gotten a huge dose over the years from all those successful sitting CEOs who’ve been, and being my mentors still today, that made a difference. (President 3)

... a person who changed my life, a mentor, said ‘What are you doing? You need to be back in school.’ (President 4)

It wasn’t mentoring in a formal sense of a mentoring program, but there were individuals that encouraged me at critical junctures in my career to take that next step. (President 5)

I considered him a great mentor. He did things like put me into national conferences doing presentations with him and doing publications with him. (President 6).

Overall, mentors were credited with providing the push for further education, being leadership examples, providing moral support, working in a political environment, and sharing advice on building shared vision.

Did you have any experiences on your career path that you attribute specifically to being a woman?

While only one of the six women presidents specifically recalled having had a “glass ceiling” experience, the others cited occasions of gender-based treatment. The one who truly felt she had a promotion stonewalled said that a male vice president “couldn’t envision a woman as a dean and that was plain and simple” (President 6). She moved to another institution for her next position advancement.

The majority of the interview participants offered examples of how they were treated differently from their male peers. President 3 stated, “I was not included in certain conversations . . . because of my gender.” She further explained, “. . . you know, you gave an idea and you think it’s the most won-

derful idea, but it isn't, until someone else says it." President 1 stated that women "don't get a pass", meaning that women don't have the same opportunity to make mistakes that are allowed to men. President 6 described how a male with whom she had an appointment "chewed me up one side and down the other" when she had to change the appointment. She could not imagine that the man who had preceded her as president would have been treated in the same manner. Along similar lines, President 4 worked with a male superintendent "who would hardly acknowledge my presence in a room because I was a female."

Two of the six women suggested that other women can be problematic for women climbing the career ladder. President 1 said, "It is the women's support that I have had trouble with . . . they're jealous of the fact that a woman has gotten to that point." She went on to say that women actually put up their own barriers to success, "They put imaginary barriers there and they can't go past them." President 4 encountered "females who do not want to be led by another female."

Contrary to the notion of the glass ceiling, one woman president stated that she actually benefited from gender bias. She became a dean because the institution was looking to fill the spot with a woman: "I wasn't afraid to be a token woman at the time; it was an opportunity for me" (President 5).

What advice would you have for a woman considering a career in higher education administration?

The most cited piece of advice offered was to pursue the leadership position if you have a passion for it:

If the position matches passion and there is a reasonable level of preparation, I would urge pursuing the opportunity (President 2).

Absolutely have a passion about people and students . . . because that passion will drive you to make the right decisions . . . (President 3).

You really need a real passion for it, you really need to decide that I'd rather be here than any place else in the world. (President 4).

Other advice included finding a balance between personal and professional life, sticking with successful people, creating your own network, finding a mentor, and seeking professional development opportunities. That final point was mentioned by multiple participants. They offered the suggestion to look at the gaps in your experience and seek opportunities to fill those gaps. Specific recommendations were made:

(If) you haven't had the experiences or the background in budgeting or working with a board or negotiating contracts or a variety of things . . . to get that skill set you should volunteer for committees. (President 1).

You have to think in terms of the things you are going to be expected to do in that job. . . . I haven't lobbied politicians, but I have worked with local and city offi-

cials and it's about people skills and you have to figure out a way to persuade people that you have the skills. (President 6).

Finally, these women acknowledged the fact that there will be many vacancies in presidencies in the near future and this fact represents exciting prospects for women. As Presidents 2 and 4 stated:

. . . those seeking positions of that nature will likely never feel prepared enough but so what? I think it goes back to being a gender thing of whether we can really do the job. But the answer is yes and you have to learn by gaining experience in the trenches. . . . I would urge pursuing the opportunity.

. . . take a look at the openings that are going to be there, the retirees . . . the field is wide open. So I'd just go for it.

Summary and Recommendations

There was no singular path to the presidency for the six women community college presidents interviewed. While they all came from within academe, their backgrounds varied considerably. Their original fields of interest ranged from financial officer, to dean of the library, to refugee counselor. There did not appear to be a common factor related to positions held that led them into the top office on campus.

Common themes did emerge with respect to the motivating factors driving these women to a presidency. They repeatedly spoke of enjoying the ability to have control and to make an impact on a large scale. They sought challenges and increasingly greater spheres of influence. It became clear to the researchers that these women were motivated more by *who* they were as individuals than *what* role they played within the academy. It was therefore not surprising to learn that they valued the soft skills over the harder skills of technical competency.

These women stated that their abilities within the realm of communication and interpersonal skills served them best in their leadership positions. While giving credit to traits such as content knowledge and entrepreneurialism, they emphasized the need to relate to people and to respect them.

The professional development opportunities cited by these women as most helpful were formal organizations that focused on leadership development. They credited these associations with helping expand their horizons and offering them valuable opportunities to network with others seeking leadership positions. With the exception of one president, whose campus did not encourage or financially support any professional development, these women had significant experiences with leadership programs and highly recommended them to others seeking a presidency.

Five of the six presidents gave significant credit to mentors in their lives. These mentors pushed them to earn their doctorates, encouraged them to apply for higher level positions, taught them how to work in highly political

environments, and offered moral support and general encouragement. Along with taking advantage of professional development opportunities, it was evident that these women considered the support of a trusted mentor as very important to climbing the career ladder.

These women all had very different stories, but most experienced some form of treatment that was predicated on their being women. Whether it was overt discrimination with respect to promotions or lack of value for their opinions in meetings, they felt they were often treated differently. Some of these women described in detail occasions when they felt slighted or disrespected. The memories appeared to be very fresh, though the instances may have occurred some time ago. This led the researchers to conclude that these episodes had lasting impacts on the subjects.

Consistent with the emphasis on soft skills, when these women were asked to provide advice for future leaders, they most often spoke of the need for a driving passion. Having a love of the institution and a passion for students and learning emerged as important features within their recommendations.

Based on the data from these six interviews, the following recommendations are made for women seeking the community college presidency:

1. Realize the path to the presidency is not defined by a particular set of positions held within the institution.
2. Successful presidents love their jobs. Therefore, explore what drives the decision to seek the office.
3. Avoid constructing artificial barriers to the presidency based on previous positions held. Do not look at titles; look at skill sets.
4. Take advantage of formal leadership development programs and other professional development opportunities.
5. Find a trustworthy mentor.
6. Learn how to handle situations where gender bias is present.
7. Keep informed of the number of presidencies that should be opening in the near future. It is important to be prepared, but not necessary to be over-prepared.
8. Go for it.

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