Lean In or opt out? Career pathways of academic women

Pamela Eddy, College of William and Mary
Kelly Ward, Washington State University

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/pamelaeddy/6/
Abstract
Sheryl Sandberg’s book *Lean In* has prompted a range of conversations on campus—among women students who are becoming exposed to notions of discrimination, women faculty who are raising issues of equity in work roles and promotion, and women administrators who are trying to reconcile Sandberg’s advice to lean in with the fact that few women lead college campuses. The premise of *Lean In* is that greater will power and fortitude can enable women to surmount barriers that have prevented them from ascending to top-level positions. In this article, we examine how Sandberg’s call for women’s increased agency intersects with organizational and structural frameworks in college and university settings and with work norms that favor work at all costs. The analysis suggests that even when leaning in, both men and women will fail to reach their full potential without attention to workplace structures and norms.

*Keywords*: gender, faculty work, leadership

*Lean In or Opt Out: Career Pathways of Academic Women*
By Pamela L. Eddy and Kelly Ward

*Pamela Eddy is a professor in educational policy, planning, and leadership at the College of William and Mary. Her research focuses on leadership, faculty development, and gender in education. Eddy is the co-author of Creating Strategic Partnerships: A Guide for Educational Institutions and Their Partners (2014) and author of Community College Leadership: A Multidimensional Model for Leading Change (2010). Kelly Ward is a professor of higher education and chair of the Department of Educational Leadership, Sport Studies, and Counseling/Educational Psychology at Washington State University. Her research focuses on faculty career development, work-family integration for faculty, and community engagement. Most recently, she is co-author of the book, Academic Motherhood: How Faculty Manage Work and Family (2012).*
A casual observer of academic environments might come to the conclusion that women’s problems in higher education have been solved. After all, colleges enroll more women than men, on an overall basis there is gender parity in entry-level faculty hires, and the number of women in senior administrative positions continues to increase.

Indeed, Sheryl Sandberg’s recent and widely quoted book *Lean In* (2013) has very publicly raised the idea that all that stands between women and professional success is gumption: If women try harder, seize opportunities, and don’t back away from challenges, professional advancement can be theirs.

A closer look at the work lives and circumstances of university women suggests a more mixed assessment, however. While the numbers of women in positions of power and authority on American campuses have risen in the last 50 years, they are still well below the levels of their male counterparts. Women are under-represented (in both actual and relative terms) as university presidents, upper-level administrators, and senior tenured faculty.

In addition, a disproportionate number of the women who have achieved positions of authority and respect are located in traditionally marginalized disciplines and institutional types. While women have made progress in all realms of higher education, that progress is more on the margins than in the most prestigious institutions and traditional disciplines.

To be sure, some women have, as Sandberg puts it, “leaned back” from opportunities and challenges, but many have “leaned in.” And the latter have found that while this is a necessary condition for professional advancement, it is not a sufficient one. Sometimes what’s holding a woman back from success (however defined) is not how hard she is working but the environment in which she works. Practices, procedures, policies, and prejudices can make women’s moves into leadership positions difficult.

The women who are being urged to lean in deserve a work environment that enables and encourages success. Institutions need the talent of all their employees to address current environmental complexities and address societal concerns, but when structural barriers impede or limit women’s contributions, colleges are less apt to reach their organizational potential.

The intent of this article is to examine the experiences of women in higher education and how college and university structures and norms shape academic women’s ability and desire to pursue or opt out of career advancement and the pursuit of leadership.
Leaning In


Citing data and calling upon her own experience, Sandberg (whose day job is COO of Facebook) argues that in many cases, professional women hold themselves back in their careers by leaning back from opportunities because of concerns about how their professional positions might affect their future life choices.

In one of her examples, Sandberg writes about a woman who expressed concern about how an offered promotion might affect her ability to raise a family. After a few minutes of discussion, Sandberg discovered that the woman not only was not pregnant or planning a pregnancy—she did not even have a partner. It is not necessarily the challenge of the work that prevents people from pursuing career opportunities; it is the anticipation that there will be challenges, albeit an assumption borne out by the reality of many women’s lives.

In order to understand how women approach work, it is necessary to look at gender roles, professional work norms, and institutional structures. Joan Williams’ 2000 concept of the ideal worker and the socialization of women to gendered roles helps explain unequal playing field of work for women and men. Williams’ ideal worker gives preference to work and has someone at home doing the day-to-day tasks involved with running a household.

In this environment, it is not surprising that women lag in academic career progression and continue to leak out of the leadership pipeline. While the issues that influence women’s career development are complex, one is certainly the integration (or lack thereof) of work and family.

Previous research on work/life roles in higher education (see for example Lester & Sallee, 2009; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012) points to some of the critical tensions that can inhibit women from pursuing career advancement and leadership positions. Choices such as opting out of full-time positions to care for children or choosing not to go up for promotion to full professor in the interest of maintaining greater balance between work and home can have long-term consequences for academic career advancement.
While these choices are generally described as an individual woman’s choice, they are to some degree forced by policies on tenure and promotion, as well as a lack of structural supports for working families, including child care and other family-friendly policies and practices. To be sure, not all women working in higher education have or want to have children. But even those women (and men) who don’t may want to integrate life at work and beyond work.

Sandberg assumes that professional women have unimpeded individual agency—the capacity to make free choices (Billot, 2002). She believes that women who say “yes” to a promotion that moves them to a new town, “yes” to staying at work to finish a research article, and “yes” to grant funders for expanded work are exercising that agency and eventually will advance to leadership positions.

So is it merely a matter of women trying harder and making choices that privilege work, or is there a problem inherent in the underlying structures and assumptions of academic work?

**Women in Higher Education**

Women have represented the majority of undergraduate students for the past three decades (NCES, 2012). But they are over-represented in the feminized, low-paying, and low-prestige disciplines of education and nursing and under-represented in engineering and the sciences (NCES, 2012).

At the beginning of the faculty career, things look promising: Women represent half of new faculty members. Of course experiences vary significantly by discipline. In many science and engineering fields, for example, women lag significantly behind their male colleagues at all ranks, even entry level.

But generally, this pipeline begins to leak at the associate-professor level: The number of women associate professors dips to an average of 42 percent, and by the time they become full professors, women comprise only 29 percent of those at the top of the faculty pipeline (NCES, 2012). Obtaining the rank of full professor affords opportunities for leadership in faculty governance, extends an individual’s national influence in the disciplines; and is a traditional prerequisite for beginning the climb up the leadership ladder (American Council on Education, 2012).

A similar pattern holds true on the administrative career ladder. A crucial step on that ladder is the position of chief academic officer (CAO). Male CAOs are more likely to indicate
they are interested in seeking a presidency (33 percent) than women (25 percent). But both men and women current CAOs who indicate they do not want or are not sure about seeking a presidency say it is because the work is unappealing (men, 65 percent; women, 68 percent; ACE, 2009).

Half of the CAOs at community colleges are women, and approximately one-third of four-year colleges boast a woman in this position (ACE, 2009). This generates optimism about increasing the number of women in presidencies. However, women fill only one in four college presidencies (ACE, 2012).

Currently, 53 percent of sitting presidents are 61 or older (ACE, 2012) and 80 percent of CAOs are over 50 (ACE, 2009). Similar trends exist in the faculty ranks, with the graying of the professoriate. So this is an ideal time for women to advance in higher education leadership.

What makes women fail to advance in their careers? We explore this and other questions in examining the intersection of women, leadership, and agency.

**Organizational Structures**

The power of individual choices is limited by organizational structures and the formal and informal rules governing behavior and self-image. Rosebeth Kanter (1993) concluded long ago that bureaucratic structures give individuals power through activities and alliances, often to the exclusion of women. And the sense of self that women have in academic settings emerges from gendered expectations of women and men at work.

Although much about work has changed in the past generation, hierarchical and bureaucratic structures in higher education remain. The organizational structure of higher education builds on the division of work along gender lines and the reinforcement of existing power structures that reify gendered roles.

A masculine ethic exists in management, with clerical work feminized. Joan Acker (2006) noted that gender inequalities are apparent when one notices “the relative scarcity of white women and people of color in most top-level positions and the existence of large job categories filled almost entirely with low-wage women workers with little power and autonomy” (p. 111). This description sounds a lot like most college campuses.

**Cases**
To illustrate the tensions between self and organization, we provide a sample of vignettes drawn from the literature, our own previous research, and a composite of national data points. These portraits are not intended to represent all women’s experiences but to problematize the view, promoted by Sandberg, that by trying harder and staying at the table, women will achieve leadership positions at a rate equal to that of men. The cases below illustrate that women’s progress in higher education is not simply a matter of leaning in or opting out—the terrain is much more complex than that.

**Case #1: Women’s Roles**

In her recent book, *Professing to Learn: Creating Tenured Lives and Careers in the American Research University* (2009), Anna Neumann investigated the roles of tenured faculty in American research institutions, focusing especially on women in the sciences and how they work in groups. Neumann found that women scientists typically took on more of the human, political, and social aspects of working in research groups, whereas their male counterparts engaged more in research leading to publications—the coin of the realm for promotion to full professor. But Neumann had trouble determining whether each gender chose to do so or if those roles were assigned (consciously or unconsciously) to them by others.

As Tierney and Bensimon (1996) found, the “smile” work in academia often falls to women faculty once they have achieved tenure (p. 83). Yet relational and service-oriented work, while necessary for student success and support as well as contributing to functional units, can limit women’s advancement. Consequently, fewer women are positioned for consideration for faculty or administrative leadership positions on campus.

Institutions can be shortsighted and not value on-the-ground work with students, despite the fact that it is the relational work and engagement that promotes student retention. The new watchword in higher education is student success—now tied in some states to performance-based funding. The relational work that is good for students and that tends to be done by women will help institutions meet their outcome targets. But when research is what is rewarded, women often come up short.

Sandberg might argue that these women are pulling themselves out of the game with their focus on relationships and service because they have not kept “their foot on the gas” (p. 103)—which in this case means staying engaged in cutting-edge research and publication and
promoting their work (as Robin Wilson recently reported, women researchers don’t cite their own work as much as their male counterparts do). On the other hand, institutions typically fail to reward women for the gendered work of service.

Coupled with heavy service demands can be the realities of academic motherhood. Academic women with children continually make trade-offs regarding time devoted to career advancement and to family obligations (Mason, Wolfinger, & Goulden, 2013). Even when women do not have children, they are often assigned “mom” work (Tierney & Bensimon, 1996) on campus, which can leave them stalled in their careers.

**Case #2: Stuck in the Middle**

Women who have made the move to administration often get stuck in mid-level positions and do not advance to senior leadership. Kim VanDerLinden (2003) found that women in community colleges were disproportionately represented in the middle-level ranks, despite participating in professional-development activities as much as men. Women are preparing for advancement, but other factors prevent their promotion.

Middle-level leadership positions can actually slow advancement if too much time and attention is paid to management versus leadership and teaching versus administration. Mid-level managers may keep the trains running on time, but they do not get to choose the destination of the train.

One dean interviewed for an ongoing research project (Garza, Mithcell, & Eddy, 2015) about leadership development noted that she was not given leadership opportunities and that this hurt her chances for advancement. Even though she was publicly cast as a leader on campus, her functional work aligned more squarely with the work of a manager.

Another stumbling block for women is that often, those seeking upper-level positions need to relocate. As Pamela Eddy (2009) has reported, women frequently structure their careers to accommodate children and the careers of their husbands (see also VanDerLinden, 2003), making relocation difficult.

Sandberg (2013) would argue that it is just this behavior that must be avoided—women should not take themselves out of consideration because of the impact of a move on their families any more than men do. In making such choices, they may not be gaining the type of leadership experiences needed for upper-level positions.
Case #3: Double Standards

Women who arrive in the corner office are not immune from power dynamics. Consider the case of Teresa Sullivan, president of the University of Virginia (UVA), who resigned after pressure from the chair and vice chair of her governing board, only to be reinstated later. Selected as the first woman president of UVA in 2010, Sullivan resigned abruptly in June, 2012, due to differences with the leadership of the Board of Visitors (Hebel, Stripling, & Wilson, 2012).

Pointedly, another woman—Helen Dragas, the board chair—orchestrated Sullivan’s removal. Dragas held a view of how a president should act and look that reflected traditional male norms about leadership—for example, she commented on what she considered Sullivan’s lack of strategy and occasionally informal wardrobe selection (Rice, 2012). The Sullivan example demonstrates that women as well as men can have traditional expectations regarding leadership behavior. Dragas also managed the firing without public consultation with the board—a top-down approach that was the opposite of Sullivan’s leadership style.

As the saga unfolded in the national press, Sullivan explained that her consensus-building, incremental approach to change was at odds with the board leadership’s desire for faster responses to financial and other pressures. This scenario put in sharp relief the contrast between collaborative leadership and authoritative leadership approaches. The board leadership was keen for UVA to be seen as innovative and transformational and did not consider collegial approaches fast enough to respond to current challenges.

There is often a double standard of expectations in place for women presidents. On the one hand, they should be decisive, authoritative, and clearly in charge. On the other hand, women leaders should be communal and collaborative—but when using such approaches, they can be viewed as indecisive.

Sullivan did not fit the mold of a traditional president in her approach to leadership and was harshly judged and ultimately fired as a result. Interestingly, it was primarily the campus-level and national outcry regarding the authoritative and secretive decision-making process that contributed to her reinstatement. It seems that an approval of collaborative approaches to leadership may be increasing in some places.
Another example of double standards is the recent case at Winthrop University in South Carolina, where the board fired the president, Jamie Comstock Williamson, after one year on the job. The tipping point for the firing centered around spousal hiring, which is a contentious issue for many college presidents. Yet in the background, issues of gender loomed.

Prior to her inauguration as president, Comstock Williamson sent out a notice to the campus community that she was changing her last name from Comstock to Comstock Williamson to acknowledge her husband’s support of her career. The name change signaled that the president was attempting to conform to historic norms for women.

Yet her name change did not counterbalance the effect that her “direct manner” created: Her attorney stated that the president had been told that her manner “was not suitable to her now Southern setting” (Douglas, 2014). Here, gender is at play in the expectation that she act the part of a Southern woman and in her being chastised for using more male (as well as Northern) norms of behavior.

These cases featuring female university presidents highlight how women leaders are judged both when they do not embody the historic conception of strong, bold, inspirational leadership that is often ascribed to men or when they do not meet the expectations associated with women. Women can find themselves in a double bind when they are held to such conflicting expectations—the need to be a tough, decisive leader and at the same time to act like a lady.

In short, merely showing up and trying harder is not enough for women faculty and leaders in academic settings. Given the history of colleges and universities as male enclaves, women often advance their careers by mimicking male behavior while being subtly pressured to enact gender norms.

**Action Steps**

Here we offer some suggestions for college and universities as they consider both institutional structures and individual choices as the means to create more a more diverse senior academic and administrative cadre.

**Broadened Leadership Development and Selection**
Leadership-development programs need to be aggressive in tapping potential leaders. One place that this has done this in is Maryland’s community college system, which boasts that women fill 56 percent of its presidencies—well above the national norm of 33 percent (http://mdacc.org/).

Amy Martin’s (2014) research on this phenomenon found several contributing factors. Certainly, the location of many of the colleges near metropolitan areas meant that the women’s partners could find work more readily. But second, the state board’s determination to open the pipeline for women created a supportive context and environment. Third, once women represented about 40 percent of the total leadership in the sector, a tipping point was reached.

Finally, current and previous community college presidents in the state teach in nearby doctoral programs (Morgan State University and University of Maryland University College). This provides opportunities for job shadowing that creates more diverse and broader hiring pools.

**Saying “Yes” to Opportunities**

At the same time, women’s individual choices do indeed matter. Sandberg argues that women often think they are not ready for new opportunities unless they are fully prepared, whereas men with less experience have fewer qualms about pursuing positions, even when they do not meet all the requirements.

Women need to take advantage of job shadowing and cross-training for leadership positions, which can help eliminate some of the initial trepidation they might have about saying yes to new opportunities. Institutions’ responsibility is to make such developmental activities available to potential women leaders and actively recruit them to participate.

For example, colleges can take advantage of their state’s chapter of the ACE Women’s Network to send aspiring leaders to professional-development activities. These meeting provide networking opportunities, mentoring, and the sharing of best practices and strategies for advancement. Institutions can also provide in-house or regional leadership-development opportunities to mid-level women so that they can be competitive in applying for senior leadership positions, either locally or elsewhere once they are free to relocate.
Changing the Rules of the Game

We argue that it is necessary to rewrite the rules regarding the steps to leadership positions and the type of skills required. Creating a more inclusive leadership corps can help colleges and universities address today’s challenges by taking advantage of different approaches, ideas, and strategies.

Current campus leaders are in the best position to advocate for changes in campus policies—starting with tenure and promotion policies that support work-family integration. Faculty turnover is costly, and the quality of worklife is directly linked to job satisfaction (Rosser, 2004).

Even top research universities such as the University of Michigan recognize that recruiting and retaining talented academics requires supporting them in ways that acknowledge the demands of both work and family. So the provost’s office at Michigan has a dedicated “family-friendly” webpage to support current and prospective faculty that contains resources, university policies, and childcare information (http://www.provost.umich.edu/faculty/family/).

No change will occur if women believe there are no opportunities for them to advance or if they accept as a given that the only way to the corner office is by taking a proscribed series of steps—especially when they do not even think they are on the staircase. There should be multiple ways to advance in academic and administrative careers. By presenting varied models, institutions can help women move down broadened career paths.

Reframing the conversation helps men as well as women, in that many men want to take a more active role in parenting and to lead more balanced lives. On-campus child care and supportive parental policies help both male and female faculty and staff better integrate work and family. Aligning the work that needs to be done on any campus—including “smile” work and “mom” work—with the reward system will ensure that this work gets done and that the people doing it will not be penalized for their efforts.

Stopping the tenure clock, rewarding service that supports student success, and creating a welcoming environment that encourages faculty and staff to stay all contribute to the success of colleges and universities. Women’s adapting themselves to the system by leaning in does not result in any improvement in the institutional climate or in changed policies that make campus work more satisfying to those who do it.
Looking Forward

We think it is necessary to challenge the notion that agency alone can create gender equity in leadership positions. Certainly, individual women can increase their agency and build their own leadership strengths by taking advantage of development opportunities. On the other hand, institutions need to create those opportunities, as well as address structural issues that influence academic job expectations and opportunities and that interact with individual decision-making. In the end, individual action alone is not enough.

The lack of advancement of women in all levels of higher education continues to stymie colleges and universities that want to diversity their faculty and administrative ranks. We conclude that merely focusing on the individual—her agency and her individual choices—without considering the structures in which that agency is exercised limits women’s potential for leadership and institutions’ opportunities to take advantage of the strengths of all its workforce.

Resources


Billot, J. (2002). Women’s leadership through agency. In S. A. Korcheck & M. Reese (Eds.), *Women as school executives: Research and reflections on educational leadership* (pp. 10-15). Austin, TX: Texas Council of Women School Executives.


