Leadership Training Develops University Presidents

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Although developing leadership is often acknowledged as an important topic in higher education today, the percentage of women found in high leadership positions still remains quite low.

Since the 1970s significant efforts have been made to increase women’s participation in higher education administration, with some progress, according to Glazer-Raymo (1999). Today more women are interested in leadership. Yet the leadership gap continues and opportunities for in-depth development are still not widely available for many women.

Little has been published about how high-level women leaders actually developed the leadership knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary to successfully lead. In addition, according to Olsson and Pringle (2004), “much of the women in management literature has focused on the ‘glass half empty’—the perceptions and experiences of women who may be constructed as victims of organizational structure and culture that privilege masculine characteristics.” They explained that the literature is missing “studies of women who have succeeded and may feel comfortable participating in such a culture.”

The purpose of this article is to do just that. It reports the results of a research project studying successful women leaders who feel comfortable in an often male-dominated culture. It was designed to hear the voices of women leaders in higher education and highlight their perspectives and developmental experiences.

The study

This qualitative research study used phenomenological methodology to discover how women university presidents learned to become effective leaders. It explored leadership development throughout the lifetimes of women who have successfully navigated the educational system to roles of leadership. We gathered data on influential activities, individuals, events, opportunities and experiences as described by the successful women. This article focuses on the presidents’ perceptions of past leadership training and development opportunities and experiences.

In early 2005, we used email to invite 25 women presidents—mostly at public and private research universities—to participate in the study. We collected names from many sources including news reports, the Chronicle of Higher Education and online searches. Of the 12 who accepted, 10 were able to participate in interviews between March and June 2005.

Eight of the ten served as presidents or chancellors of strong, well-known research institutions or university systems, while two were presidents of teaching-focused comprehensive institutions with strong scholarship expectations. Nine were in public and one in a private school.

Eight were Caucasian and two were African American women. Four were in their 50s and six in their 60s.

We sought to examine the specific workshops, seminars and other training programs that the women college presidents felt helped in their leadership development. The goal was to create a framework for future leadership programs, especially for girls and young women, to build on the strengths that have proven successful in developing leadership skills and opportunities for current, successful female leaders.

Findings

The 10 presidents mentioned these programs:

• American Council on Education Fellowship
• American Council on Education National Identification Project for Women (ACE/NIP)
• American Council on Education Network
• American Council on Education seminars/ workshops
• Association of State Colleges and Universities (ASCU)
• Bryn Mawr Women in Leadership Institute
• Delta Kappa Gamma Fellow
• Doctoral course in Educational Administration and Leadership
• European Higher Educational Roundtables
• Harvard Institute for Education Management
• Higher Education Resource Services (HERS)
• Other leadership seminars and workshops
• Professional organizations and memberships
• Related research and publishing (as faculty)
• Conferences/meetings on same position issues
• Women-only training and groups

Nine of the ten women presidents specifically mentioned the American Council on Education (ACE) programs as influential in their leadership training and preparation. They listed several benefits of participation: increased confidence, new positions of authority, personal and professional growth and development, and broadened contextual understanding of management in higher education.

Three presidents who participated in the ACE Fellowship program spoke highly and fondly of their experiences, growth and personal and professional development. One said, “They put me with 30 to 40 really smart people from higher education and brought in great people to teach us. We went everywhere—to national meetings and various campuses. They got us pumped up and ready to be presidents.”

Another discussed a very real, immediate benefit of the ACE program: “I went to all of the things [ACE] did and had access to everything that was happening at that level. When I came back to my own campus, the chancellor immediately asked me to be his assistant.” One summarized: “ACE is the best and broadest of anything you could do. Everyone there has something to teach and learn.”

Four presidents mentioned the ACE/NIP or ACE Network, established in the late 1970s to identify women in
higher education and help prepare them for promotions, as a valuable forum for women to get together and “find their voices.” From these experiences women “gain confidence that they can do it, and they learn they are smart, competent, and can move into new positions.”

Another said the workshops “helped them validate their own points of view and hear and understand that there are other points of view that might be equally valuable and helpful.” Women participants “come to really value the group as a way to help them learn and grow. Their understanding and confidence grows. They open up and share well, and it is fun!”

Many presidents found ACE seminars and workshops helpful, both to get new ideas and reinforce old, solid ones. Many found the opportunities for building and extending networks to be very effective and important: “All of these have been helpful and contributed to my leadership development in different ways. In each one you create a new network you can use to find out and learn what you don’t already know.”

Three mentioned being accepted to the Harvard Institute for Management Education program, but only one attended. She said the week-long seminar was, targeted at some of the issues that a president would face like time management, fund raising, dealing with multiple constituencies, and such. It was helpful. It gave me things to think about and to learn more about. I learned where I needed more information. I created a network of other presidents which was helpful. In fact, I remain in touch with some of them to this day.

Three of the women mentioned attending HERS as presenters or participants, speaking highly of its positive influence on future women leaders in higher education.

One spoke of European higher educational roundtables, in which presidents meet and discuss the “leadership of higher educational institutions and those issues that impact universities.” Finding them very enlightening and beneficial, she said, “It’s important to draw from those who are in similar situations but to also understand the differences as well. There are common things all institutions deal with in higher education and it is helpful to listen, discuss, learn and reflect.”

Most of the presidents spoke of the positive influence of meeting with others with similar job titles (e.g., provost, dean) and responsibilities. Whether they met in training sessions, as groups or at conferences, they found the experiences with kindred from elsewhere to be very useful.

One said, “Some of the best learning opportunities are going to sessions with people in your same position from different universities. I love hearing ideas, innovations, and what other people are doing.” Another said, “Conferences or meetings with people doing your same job are critical.” A third explained, “Getting together with people who do your same job at other campuses is helpful. I’ve done that for a long time. We stay in touch informally through email and other events. We give and take advice freely. It is a powerful leadership development tool.”

Most also spoke of the value of belonging to and staying involved with professional organizations. One said that even now, as a president, she brings back “what others are doing and how other people are thinking, whether it conflicts with what we are doing or adds to what we are thinking and doing.”

Two talked about the leadership experience they gained from being in the leadership of such a group, and noted the benefits of networking throughout the years. A president called professional organizations “very important in terms of my development, not only seeing the dynamics but watching the process and staying connected (past, present, future) to the bigger picture within the industry.”

Four presidents had graduated with doctorates in educational administration and leadership. All spoke of the helpfulness of the coursework, projects, research opportunities and application-focused experiences provided.

Those with doctorates in education explained that their related research and publishing were important in their continued development to improve their leadership abilities and skills: “Doing research, presenting at conferences, and publishing in these areas—that taught me more about higher education and leadership.”

Women-only groups?

Eight described their perceptions of women-only training sessions and groups. All felt that these experiences can be positive and insightful. None believed all training and development programs should be women-only, but found occasional women-only sessions were refreshing, informative, motivational, and enriching. One said:

Women are very candid about themselves. Men are much more guarded. I was on the president’s panel at an ACE network regional meeting, and we all talked about our own experiences and we discovered that they were so similar.

Everyone was candid about what they didn’t do well and about where they made mistakes. I don’t think you could get a group of male presidents to ever talk like that. I don’t think you could talk like that in a mixed group either. I wouldn’t.

Another said, “Women’s groups can be very candid and collegial, and there really is a kind of sisterhood.”

They didn’t see these experiences as formal leadership training and development opportunities. Often they spoke of women-only groups within professional organizations, academic conferences and community groups, to name a few. Two presidents made it clear that while they enjoyed discussing challenges and opportunities in an open and positive environment, they didn’t like to attend or belong to women’s groups that focus on women as victims in the “glass-half empty” mentality.

Final thoughts

Knowing the types of training and development experiences that were most helpful for these women provides insight, which is useful to design individual and organizational career development strategies, to help prepare others for influential leadership positions.

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