

Increasing Women's Senior-Level Leadership in Student Affairs

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The article "So Few Women Leaders" in the July/August issue of AAUP's magazine *Academe* recently caught my eye. Its focus was women's leadership in the academic ranks, and it included statistics regarding the lack of women in provost, dean, and department chair positions. This situation results from a variety of circumstances, not the least of which are the lower numbers of women in the faculty and the irregular progress of women through the tenure pipeline.

The article spurred my thinking about women's leadership in student affairs. We are often called a "feminized" profession. In 1986, women were 65 percent of masters students and 47 percent of doctoral students. These numbers continued into the 1990s, with women accounting for 66 percent and 55 percent of students in masters and doctoral programs, respectively (Jones & Komives, 2001). In the masters classes I currently teach, women account for more than half of the enrollment. Attendance at student affairs national conferences also points to the high proportion of women among student affairs educators.

Yet, this high population in the educational pipeline is not consistently carried into the senior student affairs leadership ranks.

For example, the College and University Professional Association's 2004 Administrative Compensation Survey indicates that

women held 43 percent of dean of students positions at doctoral granting institutions, 40 percent at baccalaureate institutions, and 61 percent held dean of students positions at two-year institutions (Dale, 2007, p. 17).

The CUPA data support the premise of a glass ceiling: women reach entry-level

through directorships but are less likely to advance to "positions encompassing a broad span of leadership, supervisory, and budgetary responsibility" (p. 17).

With women facing parallel barriers to academic and student affairs upper-level leadership positions, we have much to learn from one another. The focus group findings quoted in "So Few Women Leaders" reflect academic-based insights that can inform student affairs professionals.

The findings include the following:

Women's paths to leadership are often blocked or are slower-moving than are men's.

Women are undoubtedly exerting leadership in higher education institutions. They regularly and actively serve on committees, direct programs, and fill director's positions. But they are less likely to be tapped for positions, such as associate vice presidencies, that lead to executive-level appointments.

Two strategies may increase the visibility of women: 1) speaking to the transferable skills obtained at these women-focused positions and 2) nominating your female colleagues for positions whenever possible.

Leadership positions, as currently defined, are generally less attractive to women than they are to men—and they possibly are becoming increasingly unattractive to men too.

Everyone in higher education knows of the long hours and stress associated with executive-level positions. Understaffing and increased budget pressures only exacerbate this situation.

How can we each change the culture of overwork so that student affairs positions at all levels become more balanced, manageable, and attractive to all applicants? An aspect of this balance is to

change what the authors of "So Few Women Leaders" call the "male, transactional, and hierarchical models of leadership" that are debilitating to everyone.

Women already in leadership roles are not as well-recognized or as appropriately rewarded within their institutions as are men.

The female leaders identified by the article's authors cited lack of respect, lower salaries, and decreased institutional support as several indicators of decreased recognition.

We all can examine the ways we add to this. Do we expect female leaders to "work twice as hard to be considered half as good"? Do we use our campus influence and social capital to support their efforts? How might our sexism, internal or external, work to undermine these leaders?

Women are more often excluded than are men from informal intellectual leadership networks.

In response to questions about whether President Obama's all-male basketball games gave male congressional leaders an edge over women, he replied, "I think this is bunk....I don't think it sends any kind of message or signal whatsoever."

Obama's words reinforce the blind spots present among all of us when access is afforded to one group and denied to another. The goal is not to become "one of the boys" but to challenge unequal access when it occurs.

Women and men in executive leadership positions have a particular obligation to observe and comment on these inequities. Jamie Washington teaches a technique called "tracking." When people track, they notice and name, without

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judgment, sexism, racism, homophobia, or other oppressive actions occurring within a group. The goal is not to target judgmental comments toward one person. Groups often “drift” toward sexist (e.g., only the men speak) or homophobic (e.g., only heterosexual partnerships are acknowledged) behavior by most or all group members. An artfully spoken comment can acknowledge tracking and result in profound changes. Although offering these observations is difficult, ignoring the oppression has more severe consequences.

Student affairs has long created opportunities for women and their leadership. But our long-standing, delayed, and inequitable involvement in the upper leadership ranks begs for a solution. As a profession, we can certainly rise to the challenge.

References

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More on the *Academe* article “So Few Women Leaders” is available at <http://www.aaup.org/AAUP/pubsres/academe/2009/JA/Feat/domi.htm>.

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