Prevailing Attitudes about the Role of Women in Distance Learning Administration

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Abstract

The increasing scarcity of women within higher academic ranks is troublesome, especially as associate and full-professors with tenure are generally those tapped for leadership positions. This study surveyed female administrators in distance education in an effort to thematically analyze their perceptions of distance learning in higher education. Themes that garnered more input from the women included the following: assumptions of gender disparity, the optimistic viewpoint that in the future more women will succeed as administrators in distance education, and the belief that the role of administrators was to provide value and goals in distance education but that change in this arena was too slow and obstructions to the quality of distance learning needed to be eliminated. In addition, it appears that Caucasian (non - Hispanic) women are more prone to suggest that gender disparity is a problem and women who hold a higher level of administration spoke less often about problems with gender disparity and appeared to have a more positive attitude.

Introduction

Since the 1970s, there has been an upward trend of women enrolling in both undergraduate and graduate programs in the United States. This increase in enrollment along with the appointment of several female university presidents circa 2007 resulted in a slew of articles with titles such as "Women Increasingly Likely to Be Leaders in U.S. Higher Education." In one such article, the director of research at the American Association of University Women (AAUW) was quoted as saying, "More women than ever attend universities, and slating women for leadership positions in higher education is a natural outgrowth of this pattern" ("Women Increasingly Likely," 2007, p. 1). However, since that time, some researchers have noted that female educational leadership may not have been a true trend at all, while others have argued that any forward motion has been stalled (The White House Project, 2009; Madsen, 2012).

Women represent 57% of all college students and earn more than half of all Ph.D. degrees granted to American citizens today. Currently, females account for approximately 50% of assistant professors; however, females only account for 38% of associate professors and 24% of full professors (Madsen, 2012; Bilen-Green, Froelich & Sukalski, 2011). Additionally females represent only about 45% of tenure-track faculty and a meager 31% of tenured faculty (Bilen-

Green, Froelich & Sukalski, 2011). Participation of women academicians is lowest in doctoral-granting institutions, where women make up 34% of full-time faculty, 26% of tenured faculty, and 19% of full professors. Gender disparity is especially evident in higher education science and engineering departments, where only 19% of full professors are women (NSF Science and Engineering Indicators 2008). More women than men are in part-time or non-tenure track positions across a majority of departments and institutions. The increasing scarcity of women within higher academic ranks is very troublesome especially as associate and full-professors with tenure are generally those tapped for leadership positions (Bilen-Green, Froelich & Sukalski, 2011; Murray, Tremaine, & Fountaine, 2012; Perrakis & Martinez, 2012).

According to The White House Project (2009) report, although the number of females in academic administrative positions increases when examined across several decades, the increases have since stalled and have remained stagnant for the past ten years. Some researchers have expressed concern that any noted progress is due mainly to the increased number of women applicants rather than to any diminishing gender bias. Such concerns are bolstered by continuing disparities in salary and rank, along with declining working conditions as more female academicians are being hired into part-time and non-tenure track positions (Bilen-Green, Froelich & Sukalski, 2011). Women in higher education have actually suffered from an increase in the salary gap since 1972 and earn only 82% of what their male counterparts earn (The White House Report, 2009).

Very few women advance to academic leadership positions such as dean, provost, president or chancellor. One study examining doctoral degree-granting institutions revealed that of 200 institutions only 27 (13.5%) were headed by women presidents, while 47 (23.5%) had female provosts, and only about 28% had female deans (Bilen-Green, Froelich, and Jacobson, 2011). Traditionally female fields, such as education and nursing, did demonstrate a greater prevalence of female deans. One oft cited reason for the gender disparity in academic administration is the lower female tenure and promotion rate (Perrakis & Martinez, 2012).

The importance of female leadership within higher education was also touched on within The White House Report (2009), wherein the authors argued that female academicians, due to their unique experiences, offer significantly differing perspectives from their male counterparts that have profound effects on institutions as well as knowledge and research. Furthermore, successful female faculty and administrators are also able to serve as mentors and role models for future generations of women.

Available survey information discussing the role of women in the economy may help explain the gender disparity in higher education. Surveys have found that, women lose interest in higher professional levels more quickly than men primarily due to a perceived lack of opportunity rather than a lack of ambition (Madsen, 2012). Additionally, women more so than men strive for a healthy and well-maintained balance between work and their personal lives, especially as they have children, which can result in less interest in and time for the corporate ladder. The "second shift" of traditional feminine domestic life, the "coincidence of the biological clock and the tenure clock" and the "invisible job" of greater academic service roles may all play a role in the current academic gender disparity (Bilen-Green, Froelich & Sukalski, 2011). Furthermore, the flexibility of academic work can often make it very adversarial to women with domestic responsibilities. Both teaching and research are complex, time-intensive, and require vast cognitive skills. Academic work requires a lot of work outside the standard eight-hour day. The

blurry or non-existent boundaries between an academician's personal life and their work life can add additional work-family conflicts, especially as female academicians with children tend to experience greater role stress (Maranto & Griffin, 2010; Perrakis & Martinez, 2012).

The current structure and cultures within academic institutions also contribute to the academic leadership gender disparity. Highly gendered organizations and institutions, such as institutions of higher education, often have policies, interpersonal networks, and embedded attitudes which favor the advancement of men through the devaluation, marginalization and exclusion of women (Bilen-Green, Froelich & Sukalski, 2011; Maranto & Griffin, 2010).

Women, who are generally socialized to be supportive rather than dominant, are systematically disadvantaged within male-centered climates including academic institutions (Bilen-Green, Froelich & Sukalski, 2011). Previous studies have examined the perceptions of numerous female faculty members, administrators, and graduate students. These studies described a range of behaviors which discouraged female academicians including being assigned to more time consuming but less powerful committees, stereotyping, being assigned to support rather than leadership roles, male discomfort which creates and broadens social isolation and inequities in available resources (Bilen-Green, Froelich & Sukalski, 2011). These negative climates result in decreased retention of female faculty members and lower job satisfaction (Maranto & Griffin, 2010).

Relational demography theory posits that individuals who are different from their colleagues are negatively impacted by how they experience their work environment (Maranto & Griffin, 2010). The isolation and increasing scrutiny experienced by the few women who are in top leadership positions are expositive of this theory. The solo status experiences by lone female administrators can increase stereotyping and isolation (Bilen-Green, Froelich & Sukalski, 2011). Feelings of tokenism amongst female administrators is also common and depletes respect while exacerbating pressures.

Additionally, other issues may exist within the methods used for assessing hiring, tenure and promotion to the administrative ranks. In the United States, applicants for educational leadership positions are evaluated using an analytical system which measures applicants on a range of relevant factors; however, the tenure system is also used. Tenure decisions tend to rely on "cut and dried" rules which incorporate specifics such as a required type and number of publications. Promotion decisions, however, tend to rely on more subjective criteria (Murray, Tremaine, & Fountaine, 2012). In their "Critical Analysis of Leadership Needed in Higher Education," (2010) authors Wang and Berger noted that some university presidents, provosts, and vice presidents are hired based on cronyism and nepotism while others are simply not qualified. These practices are due to systemic problems such as a lack of commitment to shared governance, the driving away of good faculty while retaining unqualified faculty due to a preference for certain groups of people while alienating other, equally acceptable, groups, and decisions based on false data or outright lies (Wang &Berger, 2010).

The equitability and strengths of female leaders can be seen within the body of leadership literature. Female leaders tend to exceed males on overall transformational leadership, which seeks to inspire employees to go beyond their assigned role, foster creativity and problem solving, mentor, establish vision, and lay plans for reaching that vision. Women also, exceed men on the contingent reward aspect of transactional leadership, which is based on a system of

rewards and consequences for successes and failures, especially where mentoring behavior that is supportive of other people is concerned. Men, in contrast, exceed women in management by exception (active and passive) and laissez-faire leadership, wherein no responsibility for managing is taken by the leader. Meta-analytical evidence has suggested that those styles preferred by women, compared with men, are more effective leadership styles (Vinkenburg, van Engen, Eagly, & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2011). However, traditionally, when men and women describe the ideal administrator, terms typically associated with the cultural view of males were used such as self-confident, independent, assertive, dominant and rational (Kark, Waismel-Manor, & Shamir, 2012). Traditionally feminine traits are typically considered antithetical to success in management roles. Such ideas and beliefs put women at a disadvantage for promotion to administrative positions. However, the evolving culture within higher education has necessitated administrators to engage in collaboration, be cooperative, demonstrate openness, interpersonal sensitivity and empathy, and invest efforts in the development of their employees; qualities that are traditionally associated with the feminine gender (Kark, Waismel-Manor, & Shamir, 2012).

Regardless of gender, all effective leaders must be able to use strategies for establishing the change(s) needed to bring the desired vision into fruition while communicating the necessary changes to others who can create networks of people who understand the vision and are committed to its achievement in addition to keeping everyone moving in the desired direction (Wang & Berger, 2010). Furthermore, all effective leaders must also exhibit specific traits as marks of having the necessary emotional intelligence, including, self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, and empathy.

It has been suggested that non-traditional academic settings such as those offered by community colleges and distance education may provide more supportive environments for female academicians (Perrakis & Martinez, 2012). One qualitative study noted that many female academicians purposely chose to work at a community college as they believed, based on past experiences that such a position would be highly compatible with family life (Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Twombly, 2007).

As the strategic importance of distance education comes to the forefront, it has presented women with a new, increasingly prestigious realm for advancement. The term distance learning is used to describe every type of instruction delivered to students who are not physically present on campus or in a brick-and-mortar classroom. Distance learning has taken advantage of technologies ranging from satellite television, video conferencing, cable, audiotapes, computer systems, fax, correspondence courses, home study, and independent study (Floyd, 2003). Over the past decade due to dramatic increases in the availability of technology and cost decreases the use of distance learning has increased and is now offered at most institutions (Gopalarkrishnan, 2012).

Distance learning advancements have taken place primarily in the form of online education and instruction, which requires instructors and administrators to utilize technology and computers in ways that may be foreign and intimidating to some (Floyd, 2003). As such, leaders in the relatively new realm of online learning must have a listening edge and be understanding; attributes traditionally associated with females (Floyd, 2003; Kark, Waismel-Manor, & Shamir, 2012).

As distance education continues to expand and offer new opportunities to female educators and aspiring academic administrators, it is important to examine the role of women in distance education including their success and the obstacles that have been presented.

Methodology

Subjects were selected in two ways:

1. Subjects were invited from a statewide distance learning organization website. An invitation was posted on the "Members Only" webpage asking for participation in the study and providing a link to the survey. The researchers also included an invitation to share the link with other colleagues in distance learning.

2. Subjects were also invited through colleague interactions. The researchers sent out the invitation via e-mail requesting participation in the study and asking colleagues in the field to pass the invitation to other colleagues. These are colleagues the researchers have collaborated with during the last 10 years while working in the field of distance learning. They are not personal friends but are professional colleagues and the invitation clarified that participation was both voluntary and anonymous.

This study surveyed female administrators in distance education in an effort to thematically analyze their perceptions of distance learning in higher education.

The study was guided by the following research question:

RQ1: What are the prevailing attitudes about the role of women in administration in distance learning among female administrators?

The survey that was sent out included the following questions:

- Based on your experiences, what do you foresee as the role of women in administration of distance education programs in the future?
- Do you have any other comments you would like to share pertaining to your role as a female administrator in distance education?
- In your experience, what hurdles have you met on your road to success in an administrative position in distance learning?
- Of the hurdles mentioned, which one was the hardest to overcome and why?
- What challenges have you faced as a female administrator in distance education?

Sample and Population

Initially, 48 individuals responded, 47 agreed to participate, 22 actually participated in responding to the survey. One participant was male and was removed from the line-up. There were a total of 21 participants. Race/ethnicity was mainly Caucasian with 16 participants falling into that category, two participants were Hispanic, two were African American and one participant marked other. The participants included one Dean, one Associate Dean, two faculty, three Coordinators, eight Directors, three Instructional Designers, two Managers, and one Online Specialist. The length of time spent in these positions ranged from one to 18 years with the median and the mode both equal to four years. The participants supervised between zero and 42 employees with a median of three employees. The participants were pretty evenly split with

seven employed at universities, seven at community colleges, five at K - 12, one at a technical school, and one at a non-profit business. Of the 21 institutions, 10 were Traditional (majority of students are Caucasian), five were Hispanic Serving, four were Minority Serving, and two were non educational institutions. The median salary was $69,000.

Results

First, the participants were asked their perceptions of the role of women in administration of distance education programs in the future based on their experiences. There were 10 out of a total of 28 comments. or 36%. that pursued the theme of equality. Overall, the comments can be reflected by the following comments: "I don't see a gender specific role, I believe that women will be as influential as men in this area." "If I think about the number of distance education administrators I know, I would say that at least half are women, so I do not think there are a disproportionate number of men to women in these jobs." Another participant noted that women had equal opportunity but that they had to work at it. "Women will have an equal opportunity to become leaders in distance education programs. They will need to build the right relationships and excel in their work, and they will be given the opportunities to lead. Women need to tap their inner creativity to take distance learning programs to the next level." Another respondent agreed but added that there appeared to be a shortage of qualified personnel. "Unfortunately, I'd have to take the "woman" part out of this question as I think that it doesn't matter if you are a man or a woman. Positions are tough to fill with QUALIFIED and EXPERIENCED personnel. In the future, there will be more administrators needed and the role will most likely expand to the use of distance technologies--beyond online learning." These respondents saw no difference based on either gender or on any other role in administration.

A total of eight comments, or 29%, assumed that more women will succeed as administrators in distance education. "More educators are diving into online course development so this would have to contribute to a significant increase in women's roles in the area of distance learning." Another participant was more female oriented suggesting that women would dominate this field: "There are many female administrators in this field already. I feel that women will continue to play a dominant role in distance learning as this field grows. [There are] only bright futures for women in this career path." However, five comments, or 18%, held the opinion that gender disparity was still a concern in distance learning: "Women who wish to move up in any environment still must hold their own, work harder, and be better prepared, and not forsake her femininity. It's still a good ol' boys club out there."

Three of the comments, or 11%, held the perspective that the role of administrators was to provide value and goals in distance education: "The role of women is to promote change and equitable opportunities for all students." One participant went further than the focus on students, stating "[women] get the hard things accomplished that need to be done for the benefit of our students, communities, and countries." With one comment, 4%, a respondent acknowledged the importance of combining technology and education. One respondent also commented on the importance of advancement for women in this area: "[The role of women in administration of distance education programs in the future is] very good, as long as women play smart, review situations for possibility for advancement, [and] be willing to walk away to greener pastures when needed."

On being asked further perceptions pertaining to their role as a female administrator in distance

education, the majority of the comments, 12 out of 27, or 44%, indicated they had no further comments as a woman. However, the perception of the survey was positive as four of the comments, or 15%, indicated there was a need for the survey: "This is a critically important topic." and "I am glad someone is looking at the female role." Another six, or 22%, of the comments continued with the gender disparity theme: "I look forward to the day when the question of hiring and continued parity in the workplace does not involve gender but only involves human competence and capability." Skill development as a theme was mentioned thrice for 11% but it should be noted that it was also entwined with gender disparity and was seen as a way to conquer that problem. "I see them [female administrators] being so competent that it dispels and knocks down male stereotypes of "female" administrators. Frankly I see too many women who currently are in positions of distance learning/higher ed leadership positions who are not qualified to be there from a competency standpoint and thus are viewed as "weak" - which just continues to reinforce the weak female administrator stereotype." Thus approximately one-third of the comments dealt with gender disparity in some context. Two other areas were mentioned once each; opportunity for women, "increasing popularity will change the role of females in our institution and region" and a need for women to assume leadership, "I encourage women to continue building the road for other women by getting involved in leadership-building activities and accepting increased levels of responsibility and power. While society seems to assume this for males, females are not inherently trained with this mindset."

On being asked about the hurdles they met on their road to success in an administrative position in distance learning, there were a total of 27 comments from the respondents. The theme that was most often discussed was gender discrimination with seven comments, or 26%. A couple of respondents suggested that this was still a male oriented field: "Distance education is still often thought of as just another technology field by administration and technology is typically a male dominated area. Therefore, a lack of understanding of the educational knowledge involved, plus a perception that woman may not know as much about technology as men, may be responsible for and hurdles." Another participant discussed "gender bias in supervisory and peer relationships and in 3rd party vendor relationships. I have encountered bias in the form of "you're a female, so you don't know as much as I know"; "you're not as good a leader because you're female and 'soft'; 'you couldn't possibly understand this (e.g. business development, construction, data, etc. -things stereotyped as male skills) because you're female and females don't have those skill sets'; I have been left out of critical meetings and 'inner circles' of males on a professional and a social basis; I have not been invited to join male peers or higher ups at times in informal networking events such as golf tournaments, attending sports events, etc. This means that I have developed an incredible skill set of working around these hurdles in order to maintain and promote myself professionally."

Another popular theme was the slow pace of change and/or the lack of value in this arena with five comments, or 25%: "Institutions [are not] keeping up with the pace of change. The slowness makes me very antsy." This slow pace may be partially due to the "aversion to online learning strategies from older administrative members. I am constantly met with defensive responses as there is little buy into our technological needs from this particular population of non-technology users." Dealing with obstructions to the quality of distance learning earned three comments, or 11%. On the one hand, the administrators appeared to be a road block: "My biggest hurdle (and peeve) is instructors who allow their online courses to become electronic correspondence courses instead of dynamic ones with ample interaction." But administrators also were deemed to offer obstructions: "The biggest hurdle is administration and adherence to numbers of students

serviced/quantity rather than quality desired by faculty."

Two other themes, at 7% each, included the need to prove oneself and problems with supervisors. In addition, there were several individual comments about the administrative position in distance learning and the hurdles that were faced: conflicts working with people, long hours, not being recognized, problems with the organizational structure, lack of pay incentives, a need for networking, insufficient funding, lack of technology, and the steep learning curve for those who had no prior training in this field.

There were a total of 21 responses to the question on the hardest hurdle to overcome. The majority of the responses with nine, or 43%, of the responses dealt with a bias of some kind, gender discrimination, cultural, or generational. Gender bias was described as follows: "In addition, there are always a few men who resist female leaders. I strive to win them over to my way of thinking rather than issue an ultimatum; however, I have done that when it was necessary." A cultural bias example: was noted, "Then a little over a year ago, my most difficult hurdle was when I supervised an employee who was from Mexico on a work visa. The challenge came when he would not listen to any female authority nor obey acceptable use guidelines. It seemed to be more cultural in nature since he commented on all failures of individuals he worked with especially females." Three areas, misconceptions of distance learning such as "the lack of understanding that distance education is more than just videotaping what happened in the face-to-face classroom", supervisor issues including "establishing trust with your superiors is hardest to overcome because it takes time and multiple successes before you are given independence and funding", and change issues; each garnered two responses, or 10%. There were several individualistic outlooks to this question, including generational differences, cultural differences, time expectations, lack of opportunity for advancement, won't hire doctorate in educational technology, communication, overcome being first gen college student, lack of administrative technology skills, technology, examples of support, language (ethnic accent), and quality of courses.

More specifically, respondents were asked to look at the challenges they faced as female administrators in distance education: "Do you have any other comments you would like to share pertaining to your role as a female administrator in distance education?" A total of 26 participants responded. Of these, twelve, or 46%, stated 'No' or 'nothing' or 'N/A' and of the 14 that wrote comments, nine, or 35%, specifically discussed gender issues, onem or 4%, mentioned the problem of balancing work and family and four, or 15% did not address gender discrimination specifically. Looking at those respondents who addressed the question directly, the nine who discussed some type of gender disparity were all Caucasian (non-Hispanic). Of those that stated 'no,' six were Caucasian (non-Hispanic), two were African American, one was Asian, two were Hispanic, and one was other. The average age for the comment group was 51 and for the no comment group was 44.5. The average number of years of experience was 5.4 for the comment group and 5.0 for the 'no' group. According to the job titles given, there were 44% at the level of director and 55% at the level of Coordinator or above in the comment group and 50% at the level of director and above (including two deans) and 75% at the level of Coordinator or above in the no comment group.

It appears that the comment group was a culturally intact group of Caucasian (non-Hispanic) women and appeared to hold a lower level in administrative duties. They also appeared to be slightly older. There did not appear to be any differences in years of experience.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Themes that garnered more input from the women included the following: assumptions of gender disparity, the optimistic viewpoint that in the future more women will succeed as administrators in distance education, the belief that the role of administrators was to provide value and goals in distance education but that change in this arena was too slow and obstructions to the quality of distance learning needed to be eliminated.

Based on the findings more research has to be completed on the reasons for the cultural diversity in the area of gender disparity as it appears that Caucasian (non - Hispanic) women are more prone to suggest that gender disparity is a problem. More research also needs to be completed on the basis that women who hold a higher level of administration spoke less often about problems with gender disparity and appeared to have a more positive attitude.

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