

Women in Leadership Searches

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A study presented Friday at the American Educational Research Association's annual meeting shines some light on the way women are hired for top higher education leadership positions in searches involving third-party executive search firms.

For the study, Harvard Ph.D. student Jeraul C. Mackey obtained access to proprietary data from a search firm that remained anonymous. The data covered almost 500 searches over an eight-year period starting in 2009. Mackey ultimately analyzed a subset of the data covering 250 searches for two- and four-year public and private nonprofit institutions.

He was able to look at how women candidates fared at each stage of the recruitment process for upper-level positions, finding that women fared better as searches progressed. He was also able to examine recruiters' preferences about women candidates, finding that the gender makeup of a recruitment team had no discernible effect on whether a search ultimately resulted in a woman being hired.

Plenty of press attention has been focused on gender gaps that show fewer women holding top higher education leadership positions than men, Mackey said. He wanted to use the data to dig beneath an observation he made that colleges and universities seem to be using search firms and increasingly [hiring women to top positions](#).

"Is it that recruiters are recruiting more women, and that's leading to better outcomes, or may there be some other mechanisms at work?" he said.

Mackey looked at recruitment projects for presidents, provosts and academic deans, with the exception of medical schools and programs. Presidential searches were 28 percent of the sample, provosts were 17 percent and academic deans were 54 percent.

Presidential searches hired women 32 percent of the time, provost searches hired women 40 percent of the time and dean searches hired women 40 percent of the time.

Mackey looked at the composition of applicant pools at six stages of the recruitment process. Those stages started when the recruiter developed an initial candidate list based on referrals, applicants and suggestions. The searches progressed through various rounds of feedback and interviews advancing candidates to the finalist stage before ending with the stage when a candidate was hired.

The probability that a woman was present at any given stage increased with each later round. It was 29.5 percent in the first stage when recruiters developed initial candidate lists, progressed to 28.7 percent in the second stage and increased to 29.5 percent in the third. It then jumped to 31.2 percent in stage four, 33.8 percent in stage five and 37.5 percent in stage six, the hiring stage.

"Women tend to do better as the recruitment process progresses," Mackey said.

The sample had 54 recruiters and 29 managers. Women recruiters completed just over half of recruitment projects. Women managers were awarded about 42 percent of recruitment projects, roughly on par with the 41 percent of managers who were women.

A third of search teams were made up of all women. Overall, 45 percent of searches were led by single-gender teams -- all-women or all-men teams.

All-women teams were in charge of recruitment projects that resulted in a women being hired 41 percent of the time. That's in line with all projects led by all single-gender teams, which led to women being hired 37 percent of the time.

"There doesn't seem to be a relationship between outcomes and recruitment teams," Mackey said. "Increasing representation among women is not a function of having more women recruiters, but it's something that everyone seems to share, in terms of a shared responsibility."

The next step of research beyond the study is to try to understand why women were more successful with each successive recruitment round, according to Mackey. His research did not address that question.

Since Mackey's research only looked at data from one firm, he did not reach any findings on whether search firms brought more women into the executive search process. He also thinks there are further research opportunities to look at whether search firms affect hiring of minority candidates.

"As we think about search firms and the institutions that are hiring search firms, I think this study can help them get a picture of the value-add of their recruitment process," Mackey said.

Executive search firms can bring an outside perspective to the search process that may help with hiring diversity. Jan Greenwood is an executive search consultant who is co-owner and partner at Greenwood/Asher & Associates in Miramar Beach, Fla. Everyone in the firm is responsible for developing diverse candidate pools when they work with college and university search committees, she said.

"At the first meeting, we work with the committee on what their definition of what the candidate's background needs to be -- degree, experience, all of that," Greenwood said. "And then, if it's a situation where they have defined that in such a way that it's a pool that cannot be diverse, we tell them at that time."

Search firms have to be able to work with committees to tell them if there are issues that could exclude diverse candidates from the search process, Greenwood said.

"It takes, I think, that kind of accountability and credibility in working with the search committee to be able to have those results," Greenwood said.