

Drexel University

Research Brief no. 6

Leadership without Boundaries:
Exploring Career Pathways of Women* in Higher Education Administration

By

Katrina Struloeff
Drexel University
December, 2020

Supervising Professor:
Dr. Alonzo Flowers

Editors:

Dr. Penny L. Hammrich
Professor and Dean

Dr. Rajashi Ghosh

Associate Professor and Department Chair for Policy, Organization, and Leadership

Dr. Kathy Geller
Associate Clinical Professor

Christine Galib
EdD Student

Copy Editor:

Anthony Hopkins
Director of Marketing and Communications

Leadership without Boundaries:
Exploring Career Pathways of Women* in Higher Education Administration

Karina Struloeff
Drexel University

Abstract

With the passing of Title IX of the Education Amendments Act of 1972, federal law prohibited discrimination against women in higher education. There remains significant barriers that impact the progression of women in higher education administration leaving an inequality in the representation of women in these roles (Clark & Johnson, 2017; Klenke, 2018). This study explores the pathways of women in higher education administration through semi-structured interviews using an intersectional feminist lens. Allowing participants to critically reflect, three categories of observations emerge: destiny and fit, complexities of social practices, and advocates/allies.

Aim

The purpose of this study is to qualitatively explore how women leaders in higher education critically reflect on aspects of their career trajectory.

Issue

With a pipeline of experienced and educated women in the United States, there is something stopping them from reaching top leadership in higher education (Clark & Johnson, 2017; Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016). Klenke (2018) notes that “relatively small numbers of women...progress up the academic career ladder or become institutional leaders” (p. 403). Many causes have been identified when examining the lack of women in leadership roles including “socialization practices,” “societal opportunities,” lack of role models, and demands of family life (Klenke, 2018, p. 403). Through this study and the following research questions, the pathways and personal navigation of barriers specifically of three women in higher education administration will be explored and shared. To understand what career barriers exist for women and how they are navigated, researchers must create spaces for hearing the voices of successful women in higher education administration. This study provides a space for women in higher education administration to critically reflect on their career pathways and inform women, as well as their advocates/allies, on the systematic and societal barriers plaguing these pathways.

RQ1: What are the pathways (including but not limited to experience, decision-making process, and motivations) for women in higher education administration roles?

RQ2: What are the primary self-identified barriers of women in higher education administration?

RQ3: How do women navigate through self-identified barriers successfully?

Study Design & Methodology

An intersectional feminist lens (Carastathis, 2014) was used to investigate how women in higher education administration reflect upon their journey. The intersecting categories highlighted through the lens of intersectionality represent a “dynamic interaction between individual and institutional factors” (Hancock, 2007, p. 64). This study of higher education administration was a qualitative phenomenological study designed to assemble the experiences of successful women. Using convenience sampling, three women in higher education roles were selected to participate through a series of two 30-minute semi-structured interviews. During the interviews, participants were encouraged to critically reflect on their personal experiences and process in becoming successful women in higher education including motivations, barriers, navigation of barriers, and their pathways compared to others through a protocol of open-ended questions.

Initial Findings

The women in this study have achieved high roles within academia while navigating personalized, social, and institutional barriers. Their critical reflection on their labyrinths are valuable for informing research on the lived experience of women in higher education and offering knowledge for future women leaders. In these interviews, three themes have been identified to understand their experiences. Those themes (1) *destiny and fit*, (2) *complexities of social practice*, and (3) *advocates/allies* will be discussed below.

Destiny and Fit. Each of the three women in this study noted that they did not aspire to hold a position in higher education administration, nor did they have a consciously mapped pathway. All highlighted that there was uncertainty about their career plans. Although shared pathway was followed to attain their roles, each of the participants noted that in higher education administration they feel a sense of fit. Fey phrased it succinctly when asked about her motivation to work in higher education, “I don't know, it's just where I felt like I belonged” (FeyInt1).

This sense of belonging ties directly to two other patterns that emerged in the interviews. First that the participants are mission-driven individuals, dedicating their careers to their values. This is demonstrated in this excerpt from Mary's interview, “I'm very motivated by that same idea that the purpose of higher education should be to provide solutions for the public good... exactly the job that I have” (MaryInt1). The second pattern seen in all of the interviews was job satisfaction. All three women discussed their satisfaction in their role and accomplishments in higher education administration.

Complexities of Social Practices. While all three women feel that sense of destiny and fit in their roles, they have also had their career trajectories shaped by complexities of social practices. These complexities vary in influence for each woman but were individually addressed throughout the interviews. Each of these complexities is created by societal practices and norms that have shifted the pathways for these women. Fey addresses how her choices have been formed around *care for others* as she reflects, “I have been all about taking care of other people, my children, my students, organizations that I support...” (FeyInt1). Care for others ties directly to the second social practice, *familial and partnership responsibilities*.

Research has demonstrated that family and partners positively impact a man's career, but often does not have the same positive impact on a women's career (Clark & Johnson, 2017). Another

closely tied but distinct social practice is the concept of *second shift* for women. Mary hinted that child-rearing is an additional burden for her and thus an organization that allows for that prioritization is appealing. The time and energy put into care for others, familial and partnership responsibilities, and second shift prioritizes others and obligations over self. These complexities of societal practices care for others, familial and partnership responsibilities, second shift, and self-care separation greatly impacted the career pathways of these women. Their decisions and commitments formed their trajectory.

Advocates/Allies. Upon critical reflection, each of the three women referenced the importance to date of advocates/allies for helping them achieve success. Specifically, Mary and Fey verbalized their appreciation of family members/partners supporting them. The support and efforts that have helped these women succeed have not only come from family and partners but also men in the field. By providing networking opportunities and hiring women, men have been essential advocates for these women. The importance of advocates/allies is not strictly gendered. All participants highlighted the impact that other women had on their pathway. Quin put it simply, “I think women are willing to be generous to each other” (QuinInt1). Specifically, they emphasized the idea of sending the elevator back down for other women through mentorship, encouragement, and purposeful resource allocation.

Significance and Implications

The findings of this study provide additional insight for women in higher education administration and those aspiring to these roles to know the similarities that exist within their shared experiences. In addition, the study outlines the realities of these women’s experiences for others who are not in these roles to attempt to inform and call on their advocacy/allyship for women in higher education. The researcher acknowledges the roles of leadership in higher education do not exist in a vacuum, but rather in the context layers of systemic power of the institution. This effort must extend for the full intersectionality of women including but not limited to race, sexuality, and ability. These embedded barriers are strong in the academy and must be addressed to support women leaders.

References

- Diehl, A. B., & Dzubinski, L. M. (2016). Making the invisible visible: A cross-sector analysis of gender-based leadership barriers. *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, 27(2), 181-206.
- Carastathis, A. (2014). The concept of intersectionality in feminist theory. *Philosophy Compass*, 9(5), 304-314.
- Clark, K. L., & Johnson, A. T. (2017). Surrendering to gender in education? complacency and the woman leader. *Journal of Women in Educational Leadership*, 215, 1–27.
- Klenke, K. (Ed.). (2017). *Women in leadership: Contextual dynamics and boundaries*. Emerald Group Publishing.
- Hancock, A. M. (2007). When multiplication doesn't equal quick addition: Examining intersectionality as a research paradigm. *Perspectives on politics*, 5(1), 63-79.

Author Bio

Katrina Struloeff is an experienced k-12 urban educator with a background in non-profit operations, educational development, and communications. Prior to joining Drexel, Katrina spent 7 years in the New Orleans public charter school landscape as a middle school and high school

administrator. She has facilitated national training for organizations that serve youth and families in vulnerable positions; taught arts, STEM, and entrepreneurship to youth; engaged with community activism and social enterprise incubation; and lead partnerships with numerous national and regional organizations for information-sharing and innovative evidence-based programming. She earned a Master's degree from Carnegie Mellon University Heinz College in public policy, with a focus on nonprofit and arts management. Her research interests focus on leadership and education policy including equity gaps and representation for women and minoritized populations, policy design, and principles and practices of effective leaders in education.