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Women's Leadership in Higher Education: Status, Barriers, and Motivators

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Advancing more women into institutional leadership roles in higher education matters. Although numerous studies have documented the value of involving diverse perspectives in decision-making processes (Donovan & Caplan, 2019; Gero & Garrity, 2018; Williams, 2013; Woolley & Malone, 2011), many individuals and organizations—ranging from the corporate sector and the political realm to postsecondary education—have voiced commitments to increasing the representation of women in higher ranks, yet they have been stymied in achieving measurable results. A variety of examples in the research-based literature reflect the glacial pace of progress for women into leadership roles across a variety of fields. Examining the field of higher education, noted leadership scholars Kellerman and Rhode (2017) have debunked the myth that the oft-touted *pipeline theory*, which argues that "over time, a larger number of women on lower rungs of organizational hierarchies will yield a larger number of women on higher ones" (p. 11). Yet these authors note that even after more than 30 years in which this theory has held currency, "the number of women in positions of leadership and management has remained dauntingly and depressingly low" (p. 11).

Despite the cautionary note sounded by Kellerman and Rhode (2017), lack of progress toward higher levels of representation by women in leadership continues to be attributed to a faulty or leaky pipeline. For example, from the corporate perspective, a *Harvard Business Review* cover story authored by Ibarra, Ely, and Kolb (2013) examined the biases that often derail women's leadership aspirations and advancement. Despite corporate efforts to prioritize gender diversity through establishing aspirational goals, these scholars summarize that such efforts have largely failed: "They [CEOs] and their companies spend time, money, and good intentions on efforts *to build a more robust pipeline* of upwardly mobile women, and then not much happens" (p. 62, emphasis added). Similarly, a recent report titled "Women in the Workplace," released by McKinsey & Company (2018), drew upon data from 462 companies employing almost 20 million people to document an alarming demographic pattern:

> Since 2015, the first year of this study, corporate America has made almost no progress in improving women's representation. Women are underrepresented at every level, and women of color are the most underrepresented group of all. [. . .] Women are dramatically outnumbered in senior leadership. Only about 1 in 5 C-suite leaders is a woman, and only 1 in 25 is a woman of color." (p. 5)

The report challenges corporations to take more decisive action to close the gender gaps in hiring and promotions, "*especially early in the pipeline* when women are most overlooked" (p. 3, emphasis added).

The scope of the problem is clear: Across nearly every sector of US society, a pattern of women's underrepresentation in leadership roles is evident (Gangone & Lennon, 2014). This pattern has been fully documented in the field of higher education (American Council on Education, 2017; Gray, Crandall, & Taylor, 2019; Johnson, 2016; Longman & Madsen, 2014), despite the fact that since 2006 the majority of degrees at every level—associate degrees through doctorates—have been earned by women (Johnson, 2016). Thus, for more than a decade, the population of well-educated candidates for leadership roles has not been dominated by men.

These patterns of underrepresentation by women in leadership are particularly troubling given that numerous studies from across various sectors have documented a compelling case for the importance of advancing more women into leadership, as was summarized in a report produced by Madsen (2015). Five benefits to institutions and organizations when women are actively involved on boards and leadership teams include improved financial performance, strengthened organizational climate, increased corporate social responsibility and reputation, leveraging talent, and enhanced innovation and collective intelligence.

For reasons that are both substantive and symbolic, therefore, higher education should be at the forefront of advocacy for greater women's representation in organizational leadership. This case for advocacy in this area is not new; in fact, a decade ago a major national study titled "The White House Project" examined various sectors with the long-term goal of having a woman enter the US presidency (Wilson, 2009) and made a persuasive argument for proactively increasing the visibility of women in higher education leadership:

> When we look at where women stand in the leadership ranks of academia, so much more is at stake than the mere numbers of women who have reached the top. The presence—or absence—of female academic leaders can have far-reaching influences not only on the institutions themselves, but beyond that, on the scope of research and knowledge that affects us all. Studies have shown that when prominent female academics are involved in research, for example, it can affect the nature of both the questions that are asked and the findings. Women in senior faculty positions and top-level leadership positions in academia provide male students, faculty and staff an important opportunity to work with talented women—an experience that will prove increasingly valuable as the overall gender balance in the workforce changes. In addition, these women serve as powerful role models and mentors to younger women starting out on the path to leadership themselves. Thus, these leaders can serve to bring out the best in women of not only this generation but several generations to come. (Wilson, 2009, p. 16)

We therefore acknowledge and support the urgency of preparing and advancing more women into higher education leadership on the one hand. Yet it is important to underscore that although women have been increasingly visible at the "lower" levels of the academic pecking order (e.g., in lower faculty ranks, in support positions to top-level administrators), in terms of campus leadership roles, "significant change, major change, continues to remain elusive" (Kellerman & Rhode, 2017, p. 12).

Having acknowledged the persistent lack of women in leadership all sectors, this article offers a brief overview of the status of women and leadership in higher education, with a primary focus on the United States. A summary of the barriers women often face within postsecondary institutions is then provided. Recognizing that the pipeline theory has historically applied male-normed assumptions about leadership (e.g., the motivators for individuals to aspire to leadership and the attractiveness of various kinds of rewards) to address the underrepresentation of women, the article then examines research related to the motivators for women to step into leadership. In summary, rather than continuing to place stock largely in the pipeline theory, we advocate for proactively recognizing that women have rarely been supported to engage the process of *leader identity development*—defined by Ibarra, Ely, and Kolb (2013) as the process of seeing oneself and being seen by others as a leader. Additionally, given that women typically find the male-normed rewards of power, status, money, and competitive advantage to be hierarchical and self-oriented (Helgesen & Johnson, 2010; Turner, 2012), it is important to understand the dimensions of being in leadership that can motivate women to embrace the opportunities afforded by such roles.

Status of Women and Leadership in US Higher Education

In the United States, progress toward the goal of advancing more women into postsecondary leadership has been frustratingly slow (American Council on Education, 2017; Gray, Crandall, & Taylor, 2019; Johnson, 2016; Kellerman & Rhode, 2017). Yet, having an accurate picture of the status quo is helpful in advocating for progress through various means. In this section, we briefly review the demographic trends related to the composition of senior-level leadership of US higher education in general—and presidents in particular—as well as the representation of women on governing bodies (e.g., boards of trustees, regents, commissioners), which hold responsibility for selecting the next generation of presidents and attending to institutional health and financial viability.

A 2013 report issued by the American Council of Education (ACE) titled *On the Pathway to the Presidency* documented that women then comprised 43% of senior administrators in all types of US higher education institutions (Kim, 2013). A 2017 report released by the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources found that women held approximately 50% of all administrative positions in higher education across the United States, with actual representation varying depending on the type of both positions and institutions (Bichsel & McChesney, 2017). For example, a 2009 publication of the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) noted that women represented "52 percent of senior leaders at community colleges, but only 34 percent in doctorate-granting institutions" (Hall, 2010). The observation that women tend to hold lower-level positions and to attain leadership roles in less prestigious institutions has been supported by Nidiffer (2010), who noted that leadership positions held by women tend to be in less "prestigious" areas (e.g., student affairs vs. academic affairs). The demographics justify consistent calls for increased preparation and hiring of women throughout all levels of higher education management and leadership.

Governing bodies that oversee higher education on a statewide basis include boards of regents, commissioners, and education boards; at the level of an individual college or university, a board of trustees or regents is typically responsible for ensuring the integrity of the institutional mission, hiring or firing the president, and monitoring financial viability (Hendrickson, Lane, Harris, & Dorman, 2013). Again, in these key arenas for leadership, women are significantly underrepresented, as evident in data collected from each state's governing board website (Madsen,

Goryunova, & Hew-Len, 2017). Overall as of 2017, women comprised only one-third (33.5%) of members of states' governing bodies, a 4.2% national increase from 2014. In 2017, Nebraska (66.7%), Washington (66.7%), Michigan (63.6%), New York (58.8%), and Rhode Island (58.8%) topped the list on women's representation. The states with the lowest percentage of women on the state's governing board were Missouri (11.1%), Oklahoma (11.1%), Louisiana (12.5%), and Georgia (15.8%).

According to a research report authored by Johnson (2016), which was published by the American Council on Education and the Center for Policy Research and Strategy (ACE/CPRS), female participation on US university and college boards of trustees increased for public institutions from 28.4% in 2010 to 31.5% in 2015; the percentages for private institutions improved slightly from 30.2% in 2010 to 31.7% during the same period.

That same ACE/CPRS report (Johnson, 2016) documented that women had held presidencies at approximately 27% of colleges and universities across the United States as of 2011, with variation between public institutions (29.1% had women in presidential leadership) and private institutions (24.1% had women presidents). Subsequently, the *American College President Study 2017* (ACPS) reported that the number of institutions led by women presidents had risen to 30% (American Council on Education, 2017). In reporting these statistics, Gray, Crandall, and Taylor (2019) emphasized the underrepresentation of women in these key roles; in particular, they issued a call for higher education to address the preparation of women of color as future leaders:

> In 2016, 25 percent of all presidents self-identified as White women, while women of color accounted for only 5 percent of U.S. college and university leaders. This inequity demands we take an intersectional approach to understanding the pathways, supports, and barriers to the presidency for women of color. Such an approach will take careful planning and intentionally designed policies and practices to succeed. (para 2)

Moving from the demographic composition of institutional presidents to chief academic officers, presidents' cabinets, and deans, it is challenging to locate current data. The 2016 ACE/CPRS study (Johnson, 2016) reported that 43.6% of chief academic officers (CAOs) were women (an increase from 39.1% in 2013). The closest US percentages for the gender distribution on presidential cabinets is the 42% of senior institutional officers reported above, providing a fairly accurate snapshot of women in cabinet-level positions. Academic deans are also among key leadership positions within institutions of higher education. In that regard, a CUPA-HR 2017 report identified that the percentage of female deans in the nation had increased from approximately 33% in 2001 to slightly over 40% in 2016.

Nidiffer's (2010) review of the history of women as leaders in academia, which was authored almost a decade ago, makes an important point that likely remains salient for the present day. She observed that although progress has been made in some areas, women continue to lag behind male colleagues in moving into institutional leadership roles. According to Nidiffer, the challenges start at the faculty level, given that "women faculty members at the assistant professor level equal men in several disciplines, but women represent many fewer full professors" (p. 555). Yet it is faculty members at higher ranks who typically have access to key committees that shape the future direction of the institution (e.g., rank and tenure, presidential search committees).

Barriers That Women Face

Regarding the gendered realities of higher education, it is important to consider the barriers and challenges that women confront in considering and/or advancing into leadership roles. Much has been written about the strengths and skills that women often bring to leadership (Helgesen & Johnson, 2010; Kezar, 2014; Turner, 2012); despite these assets, it is clear that the structures, expectations, and rewards characteristic of male-normed organizations often discourage the leadership aspirations of women (Ely & Rhode, 2010; Helgesen & Johnson, 2010). The McKinsey & Company report (2018) titled "Women in the Workplace" used the term "everyday discrimination" (p. 3) for aspects of organizational culture that prevent women from feeling safe and supported at work. Similarly, Ibarra, Ely, and Kolb (2013) described the pervasive damaging effects of *second-generation gender bias*, which "erects powerful but subtle and often invisible barriers for women that arise from cultural assumptions and organizational structures, practices, and patterns of interaction that inadvertently benefit men while putting women at a disadvantage" (p. 64).

Rather than attempting to synthesize the literature related to the barriers women often encounter, we turn to an excellent summary authored by Diehl and Dzubinski (2017), who identified 27 gender-based leadership barriers that exist in higher education settings. The framework proposed by Diehl and Dzubinski is one of the most comprehensive to date and is particularly apropos to this article, given that much of the emerging qualitative data for the model comes from postsecondary contexts. The authors organized the 27 barriers according to the "level of society in which they generally operate most strongly" (p. 273): *macro (societal)*, *meso (organizational)*, and *micro (individual)*.

Macro or *societal barriers* are cultural dimensions that make it challenging for women to be taken seriously and to contribute as leaders. The six barriers that Diehl and Dzubinski (2017) highlight in this area are the following: control of women's voices (restrictions in how they contribute); cultural constraints on women's own choices (constraints by society and social norms); gender stereotypes (generalizations held by society); gender unconsciousness (lack of understanding of how gender plays out in organizations); leadership perceptions (leadership is associated with men); and scrutiny (intense examination of women in leadership).

Diehl and Dzubinski (2017) also identified 16 gender-based *meso* or *organizational barriers*, each of which relates to ways that women's leadership contributions and effectiveness are often discounted within organizations. The barriers at this level include devaluing of communal practice (a more caring and nurturing style is discounted); discrimination (unjust treatment); exclusion from informal networks (limited access); glass cliff realities (being placed in high-risk roles); lack of mentoring, sponsorship, and support (three separate barriers, each of which is relationship-based); male gatekeeping (control of access); male organizational culture (male normed); organizational ambivalence (lack of confidence in women); the queen bee effect (women not supporting women); salary inequality (gender wage gap); tokenism (not being viewed as competent and earning a spot); two-person career structure (the partner is expected to do unpaid work), unequal standards (women must perform at a higher level); and workplace harassment ("sabotage, verbal abuse, bullying, intimidation, sexual harassment, and other behaviors intended to provoke, frighten, intimidate, or bring discomfort," p. 280).

Finally, Diehl and Dzubinski's (2017) third "level of society in which [certain barriers] generally operate most strongly" (p. 273) is *micro* or *individual barriers*. In their initial extensive interviews with women leaders in higher education, the authors identified five gender-based

leadership barriers that operate at this level. Although these barriers typically lie within the woman herself, the authors contend that "the roots lie in cultural and organizational expectations for women's behavior" (p. 280). These include communication style constraints (women must monitor what and how messages are communicated), conscious unconsciousness (choosing to not notice), personalizing (take responsibility for organizational problems), psychological glass ceiling (behave according to society's expectations), and work-life conflict.

Overall, most of the documented challenges for women in higher education settings fall within these 27 gender-based leadership barriers. Understanding the multi-leveled barriers is critical in determining the best strategies to develop women as leaders, while also addressing the processes, structures, and cultures that negatively impact women's aspirations, ambitions, and other motivators for women to consider or step into leadership roles.

Motivators for Women to Lead

In addition to the array of internalized and external barriers that deter women's leadership aspirations and advancement, as described above and by other scholars (e.g., Ely & Rhode, 2010; Helgesen & Johnson, 2010; McKinsey & Company, 2018), factors related to fallacies in the pipeline theory also come into play. Although we do not disagree that bolstering the presence of women from entry-level positions toward the "middle" of the pipeline affords them opportunities to learn skills and establish a credible track record of accomplishments that may lead to subsequent advancement, the data clearly indicate that fewer women than men aspire to the senior-most positions in the first place (Keohane, 2014; McKinsey & Company, 2018). Additionally, the motivations for women to seek leadership roles tend not to be self-promoting (e.g., salary, power, status), but rather are often related to the relational aspects they anticipate being part of leadership (Devnew, Austin, LeBer, & Shapiro, 2017; Helgesen & Johnson, 2010). Additionally, women are more likely to move into leadership out of a desire to make a difference regarding priorities that are important to them; in other words, as Keohane (2014) described, serving in positions that are "*high-impact* rather than *high-profile*" (p. 47).

Accordingly, we argue that attempting to bolster a male-normed pipeline theory as the most effective means of addressing the unsatisfactory status quo may be less effective than understanding and tapping into the motivators for women to embrace the opportunities that accompany being in leadership roles. As part of reframing the necessary steps forward, we also advocate that greater attention be paid to the growing body of literature that distinguishes between the long-touted concept of "leadership development" and what numerous authors refer to as the process of "leader identity development" (e.g., Ibarra, Ely, & Kolb, 2013; Komives & Dugan, 2014). Ibarra, Ely, and Kolb (2013) described this "fragile" process:

> People become leaders by *internalizing a leadership identity* and *developing a sense of purpose.* Internalizing a sense of oneself as a leader is an iterative process. A person asserts leadership by taking purposeful action—such as convening a meeting to revive a dormant project. Others affirm or resist the action, thus encouraging or discouraging subsequent assertions. These interactions inform the person's sense of self as a leader and communicate how others view his or her fitness for the role. (p. 62)

In particular, Ibarra (2015) has popularized this concept in her book titled *Act Like a Leader, Think Like a Leader,* which makes a compelling case for adopting the approach of "outsight" (p. 5) rather than the popular concepts of authenticity and the focusing on the inner life of the leader. According to Ibarra, the process of leader identity development involves proactively seeking stretch assignments, being willing to take risks, and networking strategically to advance the priorities of the organization.

As a supplement to the inevitable (and perhaps appropriate) continued focus on the pipeline theory in seeking to advance more women into leadership, we draw from a decade of previous research (Dahlvig & Longman, 2014; Longman, Dahlvig, Wikkerink, Cunningham, & O'Connor, 2011; Longman, Drennan, Beam, & Marble, 2019; Longman, Lamm Bray, Liddell, Hough, & Dahlvig, 2018) to examine three sources of motivation that have been documented as contributing to women's leadership aspirations and professional advancement: (a) *aligning leadership with purpose and calling;* (b) *recognizing the role of "relational responsibility"* in women's leadership journeys; and (c) *tapping the potential of developmental relationships* to inspire and support emerging leaders.

Aligning Leadership with Purpose and Calling

In identifying strategies for corporate leaders to increase the percentage of women in senior-level roles, one of three primary recommendations offered by Ibarra, Ely, and Kolb (2013) is encouraging high-potential women to "focus on behaving in ways that advance the purposes for which they stand" (p. 66). These scholars advocate supporting women to anchor their leadership considerations in purpose, which "enables women to redirect their attention toward shared goals and to consider who they need to be and what they need to learn in order to achieve those goals" (p. 66). Similarly, Keohane's (2014) research with high-capacity university students found that women often assumed top leadership roles in organizations that aligned with their interests and passions, rather than seeking high-status/high power positions elsewhere on campus.

The refocusing of leadership from the individual to the collective benefits related to some larger purpose of a group or organization is consistent with one of the strategies offered by Kay and Shipman (2014) to build confidence in women: Change the language from "me" to "we." This subtle shift in focus contributes to greater willingness on the part of women to step up to the leadership plate. Additionally, research within the context of faith-based higher education identified that women assumed leadership roles in part as a "stewardship" response to becoming aware of gifts and strengths and/or in response to a sense of being called to a broader platform of service that would advance a cause or broader mission (Longman et al., 2011; Longman & Lamm Bray, 2017).

Recognizing the Role of Relational Responsibility

In researching the reasons that talented women chose to leave leadership roles in the corporate sector, a mixed-methods study by Helgesen and Johnson (2010) identified that women who left often reportedly found their values and priorities to be out of sync with the priorities, rewards, and work environment of the male-normed corporate culture in which they had been embedded. Helgesen and Johnson observed that women typically cared deeply about the "fabric" (p. 77) of the workplace; they also sought "satisfaction day-by-day" (p. 57) through the relationships around them, and they chose to exit when those priorities were unmet. In like manner, numerous studies have documented the communal and empowering characteristics that women often bring to the

workplace, as synthesized by Kezar (2014) in a chapter titled "Woman's Contributions to Higher Education Leadership and the Road Ahead." Given that women often embody a relational style of leadership (Binns, 2008; Eagly & Carli, 2007) that prioritizes responsiveness to the context and people of the workplace, it is not surprising that research by Longman, Lamm Bray, Liddell, Hough, and Dahlvig (2018) found that a sense of "relational responsibility" was often the force that propelled women into leadership. This sense of responsibility sometimes took the form of supporting an individual leader who encouraged the woman to move into a broader leadership role; at other times, advancement came in response to encouragement from those around or positionally "below" the woman involved. In other cases, a sense of responsibility to the people of the organization (i.e., care for the institution; Fritz, 2011) caused women to step into leadership when individually they might not have chosen to do so.

Tapping the Potential of Developmental Relationships

The professional contributions of mentors and role models in the leadership journeys of emerging leaders has long been recognized in the literature; more recently, scholars (see the survey of literature by Murphy, Gibson, and Kram, 2017) have also highlighted the importance of "developmental relationships" in the identity development process. Similar to Ibarra, Ely, and Kolb's (2013) description of how others come to see certain individuals as having leadership capacity, Murphy, Gibson, and Kram (2017) explain that "women (and men) define themselves based on how those around them tell them who they are. Given this reality, the developmental network plays a critical role in shaping how an individual crafts her identity" (p. 364).

Past literature has tended to focus on specific kinds of developmentally supportive relationships (e.g., mentoring, executive coaching, sponsorship), although the goal in all cases is to provide opportunities for learning, support, and personal/professional growth (Murphy & Kram, 2014). More recently, the value of having a network of supportive relationships (both within and beyond one's own organization) has been recognized, moving beyond the individualized approach of mentoring, coaching, or sponsorship alone. This trend is consistent with encouragement offered a decade ago by Gibson (2008), who advised women to cultivate relationships outside their own workplace, emphasizing the importance of having a *constellation* of developmental relationship. Gibson described such relationships as being "potentially more critical for women leaders due to their limited access to informal networks in the organizational context" (p. 652).

In summarizing the literature on mentoring, coaching, and the newer concept of sponsorship (Hewlett, 2013), Longman, Drennan, Beam, and Marble (2019) identified having a network of such developmental relationship as being the "secret sauce" (p. 54) of women's leadership development as well as leader identity development. Similar to the motivation to step into leadership for the purposes of advancing a mission or cause about which an individual is passionate, or in response to a sense of "relational responsibility" to individuals or the institution itself, having various kinds of developmental relationships can empower women step into the unknown terrain of broader leadership. The desire, vision, or courage to assume a larger platform may emerge from a recognition that more junior women need role models or mentors; alternatively, colleagues outside of one's own workplace who are part of a developmental network may express confidence in a woman's abilities even when male-normed voices fail to do so.

Further research will undoubtedly identify additional motivators, potentially related to the organizational environment or generational considerations. Just as Diehl and Dzubinski (2017) offered 27 kinds of barriers that may factor into women's leadership considerations and experiences,

there may be a similar number of motivators, each with various nuances, yet to be identified that can be tapped to open new doors for the next generation of emerging leaders.

Conclusion

Scholars and practitioners across higher education agree that the complexities facing education today are greater today than ever before. Hence, wise, strategic, and courageous leaders are needed in the senior ranks of faculty, staff, and administrators in all of our colleges and universities. Yet, we continue to argue that "many women who could develop into highly talented leaders find their potential dampened by an array of internal and external factors, and those constraints are evident even in the field of higher education" (Longman & Madsen, 2014, p. ix). An impressive body of research has documented the status of women in college and university leadership, and advances in leadership roles, strategies, and best practices have narrowly opened the gates for women to serve as leaders in higher education; however, substantial barriers remain and practices based on conscious and unconscious bias still dominate. Yet, higher education has much to gain by identifying, preparing, and advancing more high-potential women into leadership roles. Achieving this goal must be a priority if we want the best education for our children, grandchildren, neighbors, students, and world.

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