

## Women in Higher Education Revisited: Intergenerational Conversations

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*Today's women in higher education administration are the beneficiaries of previous generations of courageous and committed women who challenged societal rules and expectations governing women in the academy. This research study revisits the cross-generational conversations initiated by Astin and Leland (1991) by exploring female administrators' current perceptions regarding their status in higher education at a public, four-year research university. Women employed as administrators spanning three generations with diverse backgrounds and familial statuses were interviewed. The qualitative data was transcribed and analyzed. Five themes emerged to characterize the current perceptions of the status of the women administrators on campus. Recommendations are offered to support and empower future generations within the academy.*

Although women students may be the majority within higher education today, female faculty and administrators have not yet achieved equity in numbers, positions, salaries, or status (Chamberlain, 1991; Chliwniak, 1997; Fogg, 2003; Nidiffer, 2001; Shavlik & Touchton, 1984; Tinsley, Secor, & Kaplan, 1984; Touchton & Davis, 1991). The percentage of female faculty reached an all-time high of 36% in 1880, yet has remained beneath that level, ranging from 22% to 28% throughout the 1900s (Cooper, 2002).

With regard to women in administration, Twombly and Rosser (2002) report, "In 1997, women held 69,432 (46%) of the 151,363 total executive, administrative, and managerial positions..." (p. 461). These women can be found mostly in the areas of student affairs and library services, which are often perceived as marginal to the mission of the institutions and thus compensated at lower rates (Chamberlain, 1991; Touchton & Davis, 1991). According to the National Center for Educational Statistics in 2001, women of color made up 15.5% of the previously mentioned 46% of women holding executive, administrative, and managerial positions held by women (Twombly & Rosser, 2002). Currently, women make up 20% of the presidents of higher education institutions. However only 2% are presidents of major research universities, while the others lead "the less prestigious community colleges, independent colleges, women's colleges, and comprehensive colleges" (Eddy, 2002, p. 500).

In terms of average salaries, Fogg (2003) reports that a 9.6% gap exists between male and female assistant professors at doctoral institutions, stating that women are "still a dime short... earning 91 cents for every dollar their male counterparts make" (¶ 1). Similar pay inequity exists among the administrative ranks. For example, the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) Student Affairs Salary Survey conducted in 2002 reports that women Senior Student Affairs Officers (SSAO) earn approximately 93 cents for every dollar their male SSAO colleagues earn (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2002).

Numerous articles, books, and chapters document other significant issues women in higher education administration face on a regular basis. The *chilly climate* and *glass ceilings* created by sexual harassment and discrimination are tremendous challenges impacting the personal and professional lives of women in higher education (Andruskiw & Howes, 1980; Blackhurst, 2000a; Chamberlain, 1991; Chliwniak, 1997; Johnsrud & Heck, 1994; King, 1997; Sandler & Hall, 1986; Twombly & Rosser, 2002; Williams, 2003).

Higher education administrators who identify as women of color and/or lesbians frequently experience the intersection of discrimination based on their gender as well as their race and/or sexual orientation. This makes it difficult to identify which type of discrimination is operating at any given time (Bassett, 1990; Hersi, 1993).

A number of other issues have been identified, such as dealing with the conflict between the biological clock and the tenure clock (Hensel, 1990; Sagaria, 1988); the challenge of balancing childcare and household responsibilities (Hersi, 1993; Sulliman, 2003; Twombly, 2003); and the lack of mobility and flexibility due to family considerations (Fogg, 2003; Hileman, 1990; Moore, 1984; Williams, 2003). These

major personal decisions impact the professional careers of women. Astin and Leland's (1991) cross-generational study outlines multiple stories of women sacrificing both their personal and professional happiness to meet the demands at work and at home.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This research project was undertaken to explore the perceptions of the status of women administrators across three generations of women with varying familial and parenting statuses. The cross-generational conversations among women in higher education administration revisit those conversations initiated by Astin and Leland in 1991.

### **Methodology**

Purposeful sampling selected ten women administrators at a public, four-year research university. The sample criteria solicited women from three generations, senior administrators, mid-level administrators, and entry-level administrators, representing diverse backgrounds and familial statuses. A copy of the interview questions was emailed prior to the interview to provide time for participants to reflect on their perceptions of the status of women administrators in higher education. To ensure anonymity, each participant selected a pseudonym. The interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and analyzed through comparative analysis for emergent themes.

### **The Voices**

#### *Senior Women Administrators*

Previously termed the *Inheritors* by Astin and Leland (1991), this generation has taken on the role of the *Instigators* for future generations. The Instigators provide leadership, role modeling, and mentoring as they pave the way through "the patriarchal structure of existing institutions" (Astin & Leland, 1991, p. 33).

Diane, Karen, and Anne are currently employed in senior level administrative positions. They range in age from the late 40s to mid 50s, and they have been employed as either faculty and/or administrators for over 20 years. All three hold doctoral degrees and have been in their current administrative positions for less than three years.

Diane is a Caucasian senior administrator within academic affairs. She is married and has one grown child. She holds tenure in a traditionally male-dominated college and academic program. Diane has served in a number of administrative roles at two different universities and currently serves as Dean. Having acquired her doctoral degree later in her career, Diane did not originally anticipate advancing to her current administrative role. Diane conducted research regarding the role of women in her field, as a result promoting the advancement of women within the profession.

Karen is also a Caucasian senior administrator within academic affairs. She is married, has no children, has a large extended family, and holds tenure in a traditionally female dominated college and academic program. Prior to assuming her current role, Karen served in a number of administrative roles including Department Chair and Assistant Dean of her college. She has experienced a more traditional path through faculty, department, and college administrator roles. Karen praised the support and foundation she received from her experience at a women's college and identifies this as a key to her success and development as an effective administrator. The fit between her interests, skills, and the requirements of the role brought about Karen's aspirations toward her current position.

Anne is a woman of color serving as a senior administrator within student affairs. She is married and has four children. While she does not have tenure, she teaches each semester through a special faculty appointment. Anne has served in a number of administrative roles at three different institutions before becoming a senior level administrator. She earned her graduate degrees while married with small children,

learning early in her career how to multi-task and set priorities. Anne did not initially aspire to higher-level administrative roles; she was happy and comfortable in her mid-level role. In addition, she had family considerations that required time and created a certain level of inflexibility. Currently, Anne is comfortable in this role and is uncertain about moving to a higher administrative level.

Each of the women expressed a sense of self-assurance in their current role yet indicated that they experienced feelings of uncertainty about their abilities prior to accepting the position. They wondered if their male counterparts had similar feelings prior to assuming these highly demanding roles.

All three women expressed an internalized expectation that they needed better preparation for the day-to-day responsibilities and interactions than their male counterparts. As minorities in the field, they felt the burden of shouldering the expectations associated with representing these broader groups of women.

### *Mid-Level Women Administrators*

The women of this generation can be called the *Inheritors*, the beneficiaries of the previous generations of women who have fought for women to achieve status and power in the administrative ranks (Astin & Leland, 1991).

Carla, Regina, Skeeter, and Amanda hold mid-level administrative positions and range in age from 39 to 43 years. Working in the profession for less than 20 years, these women serve as directors and assistant directors in student affairs and in another administrative area on campus. Most of these women have served in a number of different administrative roles at other universities prior to assuming their current positions. Three women hold master's degrees, and one holds a doctorate.

Carla is Caucasian, single, and has no children. She currently serves as a director in a department previously dominated by men. Carla is aware that her professional choices have greatly impacted her personal life. She fills her personal life with friends, family, and hobbies, hoping to someday share her life with a partner. Carla reports feeling comfortable with her level of responsibility and does not wish to further her advancement. Serving in her current role for less than a year, Carla acknowledges her role as an advocate for women students and staff in the department.

Regina is a woman of color in a committed lesbian relationship, and she is contemplating having a child in the near future. She currently serves as an assistant director in a department that has traditionally employed women at the assistant and associate director levels. Family considerations impact Regina's career aspirations as she worries about balancing her work and home life. Regina works long hours, believing that she must always be on top of her work for fear of being negatively judged on the basis of her gender, ethnicity, and/or sexual orientation. Regina has a strong network of women friends and colleagues on campus who are at the assistant or associate director level. She trusts and depends upon these women to help her cope with the day-to-day stress of the work environment.

Skeeter is a Caucasian, married woman who has no children. She earns the primary income in her household and holds an administrative position at the university. Prior to assuming her current position, Skeeter was employed in the private sector. Watching female and male administrators working collaboratively on campus, Skeeter believes it is important to disregard the dynamics of gender in the workplace. According to Skeeter, this only happens if the administrators respect one another as equals and do not blame difficulties on gender.

Amanda is a woman of color who is married with two young children. She is the director of a unit that works collaboratively with other offices primarily led by women administrators. Amanda struggles with balancing her roles as an administrator, spouse, and mother. She worries about her children growing up without her and about not giving enough to her students. Amanda sees herself as a role model for male and female students, demonstrating that it is possible to be an administrator, wife, and mother. Amanda has aspirations for upper-level administrative positions, such as Dean of Students or Vice President for Student Affairs.

These women are cautiously optimistic, having experienced sexual harassment and discrimination during their tenure as higher education administrators. They appreciate the female role models that have come before them but recognize the scarcity and silence among women in significant administrative positions on campus.

#### *Entry-Level Women Administrators*

These women represent the *Idealists*, a name given to this generation by the authors of this article. The Idealists have just begun their careers as administrators in higher education and have not experienced the role gender plays in the workplace. Their level of employment, which looks mainly within the Division of Student Affairs, rather than the larger university administration, limits their perspective.

Susan, Robin, and Natalie represent the youngest generation of women administrators on campus and range in age from 25 to 37 years. Two of the women are enrolled in graduate school, seeking a master's in student affairs administration, and one has already earned a master's degree and works full time. They have been in the field less than nine years, working in one or two different areas within higher education.

Susan is Caucasian, married, and the mother of one young child. She is an assistant director, supervising student employees and advising numerous student groups. Susan is pleased with her career choice but struggles with the time demands at work and home. Married to a very supportive husband, Susan strives to have an equal relationship at home. Unfortunately, she is often forced to respond to stereotypical expectations from her spouse's workplace. Susan frequently thinks about staying home full-time if she were to have another child, but the financial and long-term career implications cause her to dismiss this idea. She frequently feels guilty, never feeling as if she is giving her best.

Robin is a woman of color who is single and has no children. She is in a coordinator position, working directly with students. Robin is working full-time and taking a full schedule of courses in order to complete her master's degree. She moved out of her mother's home for the first time this past summer and is enjoying her newfound freedom and responsibility. Robin is optimistic about her career in student affairs but maintains a realistic approach regarding her own aspirations, never wanting to take a position that is too far removed from students.

Natalie is a Caucasian single mother of a young child. She is a nontraditional student, having worked full-time for a number of years prior to returning to school for her bachelor's degree. She is currently working on her second master's degree. Natalie focuses all of her energies on being a mother, a student, and a graduate assistant. She is an advocate for nontraditional students and other underrepresented populations.

These young professionals see a large number of women in assistant and associate director roles and are hopeful that they will reach these levels. They look to women in director roles for guidance, mentoring, and encouragement. All three women are concerned about the daily demands and stress of their chosen professions, remaining flexible for future career changes.

### **Emergent Themes**

#### *Perceptions of the Current Climate for Women on the College Campus*

Among the Instigators and Inheritors there are some common perceptions about the status of being a women administrator. While there are increasing numbers of women in senior level positions, women in each of the generations feel they are not readily supported in their roles by faculty, colleagues, and other administrators in the same way that male colleagues are supported.

Women at all levels face many stereotypes about their competencies and management styles that are not placed upon their male colleagues. Skeeter mentions that she has never seen a man offer to take notes during a meeting; therefore, she has stopped volunteering for that responsibility as well.

The women feel that they are less likely to be trusted in making difficult decisions. Nearly all of the women comment about incidents in which their ideas or comments are ignored or devalued and then later taken more seriously when a male colleague shares the ideas. Karen explains, "I don't deserve to be discounted and no one else does as well, and at some point in my career it would have played on my self-concept. Now it just makes me angry. How dare you!"

Other issues identified are the inequity of salaries when compared to male colleagues and the underrepresentation of women administrators in high status positions. The Instigators point to this as the major reason for the continued gap in administrative salaries, believing that universities are reluctant to deal with the issue due to the costs associated with fixing the inequities.

Many of the women feel positive about having increasing numbers of women in mid-level administrative roles. Diane expresses concern, however, that there are not many women in department chair roles and that few women faculty aspire to administrative roles. All of the Instigators and Inheritors express disappointment in efforts to identify and support women seeking training for administrative roles, especially in academic administration. This appears to have disappeared as a university priority. Regina expressed, "The men are okay to let one or two women in at that higher status, but that's enough. So it's almost like a men's club. But if you look at all the assistant directors across campus, they're all women."

When specifically asked about their perception of the status of women administrators on campus, many of the Inheritors and Idealists believe that it is fairly balanced between men and women; however, some identify a systemic preference towards men. Both Amanda and Skeeter identify a stronger network among men for promotion and opportunities. They feel that the opportunities are available for women, but they "are so busy climbing the ladder, they don't help each other," states Amanda.

### *Struggling for Balance*

One of the most pressing issues for all generations of the women administrators interviewed is the constant struggle to find balance in their lives. All of them love their work, yet it requires so much of their time. The common refrain throughout the interviews is that women are determined to "make it work."

The women talk about their responsibilities for managing their home life, and how their male counterparts rarely experience this added stress. The women with partners report sharing domestic activities such as cooking, cleaning, and caring for children. However, despite a greater sense of equity at work, the home front is still not viewed as truly egalitarian. The juggling of responsibilities wears on these women. Diana believes that women experience much more stress than their male counterparts because the women have to "suck it up and sacrifice." She longs for personal time to take care of herself emotionally, physically, and spiritually, commenting on the lack of time for personal reflection.

When asked about how effectively Amanda and her women colleagues balance family and work responsibilities, she shares:

I struggle. I struggle a lot. There are many days I don't want to be here. I want to be with my kids, I want to be the one to teach them. And then, I'm here until six, seven, eight o'clock at night and either they're asleep or we don't have quality time when I do get home. I'm just not good at this. Well, I think I do good with it, I just don't feel good about it. How do I be the parent that I really want to be and how do I be a good administrator, too?

Two of the senior women also talked about recent experiences in dealing with aging parents and the extra time and emotional strain this adds to an already very demanding executive life. Diane describes her emotional turmoil:

Like parenting, women feel more stress about it. It is something that never leaves our minds. Men can compartmentalize things. Women have to deal with it emotionally, and it does not go away. It is always on your mind when you are dealing with other things.

### *Career Decisions*

None of the Instigators planned to be at their current administrative level, and none of them aspire to a higher level within the administrative hierarchy. All of the women perceive that the more senior level positions are not worth the personal costs. They view these roles as being fairly absorbing of time and energy, leaving nothing for other interests and commitments. Regina comments, "I look at the VP position and I ask myself, do I really want to be there, as a woman? Do I really want all that grief?" Given their other commitments, all the women feel they do not want to make this type of total commitment to only one aspect of their lives.

### *Mentoring and Role Models*

The Instigators identify both women and men as mentors as well as their supervisors who assisted them in reaching their current administrative levels. They indicate that the qualities and characteristics of these people are the important factors, not their gender. All three Instigators highlight the ability to listen, to be supportive, to challenge, and to provide opportunities for personal and professional growth as the keys to success.

This view is different from the Inheritors and Idealists who specifically look to female role models and mentors. Susan appreciates the women role models she has had, but she comments that the majority have been single, lesbian, and without children. For the first time, she has a female supervisor who is also a mother, sharing that they have cried together and relate on both a personal and professional level. Surrounded by strong women role models and mentors, Amanda stresses the importance of finding white men to serve as mentors to get in the door and gain access to opportunities for promotion and development.

All of the women in this study believe they have a major responsibility to be role models and to help advance the careers of younger women and men. The Instigators express concern that the university has lost interest in identifying young women faculty and administrators to be prepared for more senior administrative roles. They also mention their experience with the classical *Queen Bee Woman* who does reach out to aspiring women. They are committed to not taking on this role. They talk about their desire to influence young men and encourage them to understand and appreciate their domestic and career roles. The women with children speak of their additional responsibilities of role modeling, parenting, and caring for the family. They are always mindful of the eyes watching and judging when they bring their children to the office or campus events.

### *Networks*

Given the demands on their very busy lives and their desire to make time for their families and partners, many of the women express regrets that they do not have more time for friends. The Inheritors and Idealists request that informal and formal networks be established as a support system to share vulnerabilities and help one another through difficult times. Diana desires a place "to bare [her] soul without negatively impacting [her] status or job advancement."

## **Discussion**

Each of the three generations of women provides a unique perspective regarding the status of women administrators. As expected, their perspectives are based both on their range of experiences and their positions within the university.

The Instigators are more focused on systemic issues related to women, indicating that the climate is better for women administrators today, though not all issues have been fully addressed. They speak of being discounted and not being supported in the same way as their male counterparts, but no senior level woman mentions experiencing overt discrimination.

The Inheritors are aware of the low numbers of upper-level women administrators and identify the imbalance of power among male and female administrators at their own level. Each woman was able to provide examples of when her voice was not heard, valued, or allowed at the decision-making table. One participant commented:

There are some people who are willing to look beyond gender and really listen to me. But I also want them to look at me because I am a woman, and I am a woman of African American descent. Look at all of who I am, and understand that this adds to my ability.

There is a common perception among Inheritors that upper-level women administrators fight gender discrimination on a regular basis. Robin questions whether she would ever “want to be in an upper-level administrative position and have to constantly have to fight, day in and day out.”

The Idealists are positive about the significant number of female assistant and/or associate directors and the visible women in upper-level leadership positions within student affairs. They do not refer to women administrators in any other part of the university and are not concerned about this omission. The future appears bright for these women, who believe that there are more opportunities available to them and that their ideas, voices, and creativity are more welcome in the workplace.

The Instigators are committed to the mentoring of both younger women and men, citing the need to shape future generations of higher education administrators. The Instigators also speak of the tremendous personal and professional lessons taught by both male and female mentors and colleagues throughout their careers. Unlike their predecessors, the Inheritors and Idealists yearn for women mentors and role models, discounting the value of learning from male mentors and role models.

Family issues are significant for all generations of women administrators in higher education. The differences rest with the Instigators taking care of aging parents in contrast to the Inheritors and Idealists planning for and raising children. Finding time for family, friends, and self are common issues across generations.

In terms of career aspirations, while some of the Inheritors and Idealists aspire to positions of greater responsibility, all three generations identify the personal costs of aspiring to upper-level administration positions. They remain ambivalent about actively pursuing these types of positions, preferring to enjoy their current roles while being flexible for future job changes.

### **Limitations**

The voices of the participants reflect the perceptions of ten women employed at a public, four-year, research university. As a qualitative study, no attempt at generalizability is being offered. Another limitation involves the researchers’ administrative positions, which may have influenced the willingness to honestly disclose perceptions of the status of women in higher education administration on campus.

### **Recommendations**

#### *Address Issues of Equity*

While there are increasing numbers of women in higher education administration, there are few at senior level positions. Salary inequity, discounted contributions from women, and continuous stereotyping of women’s abilities remain issues. Renewed attention to dispelling these myths and addressing the remaining issues of equity in salary and opportunity need to occur.

#### *Highlight Women Role Models*

With the advent of more women in leadership positions throughout higher education, the opportunity for role modeling increases. It is crucial for the younger generations to see successful women, from all types of backgrounds and lifestyles, leading healthy and happy lives in and outside of the workplace. Being exposed

to the coping strategies of top women administrators can provide a realistic perspective as well as a learning opportunity for younger, less-seasoned administrators.

#### *Promote Informal and Formal Networks and Mentoring Programs*

Creating informal and formal networks could provide a systemic approach to career advancement, access to power and resources, and ultimately job satisfaction for women. Research also demonstrates that mentoring programs for women, by women, play a significant role in providing skills, training, strategy building, and constructive feedback necessary for taking risks and assuming additional responsibilities (Anderson & Ramey, 1990; Blackhurst, 2000; Blackhurst, Brandt, & Kalinowski, 1998b; Chamberlain, 1991; Hersi, 1993). At the same time, it is important to recognize the important role that male mentors and supervisors can play in assisting women pursuing new opportunities. Women can also play a significant role in mentoring men. Institutional support should be directed toward developing and maintaining such mentoring opportunities.

#### *Encourage and Promote Research*

Research must continue to focus on women in higher education administration. It also is important to explore gender roles as they impact career achievement and mobility for all higher education administrators.

### **Conclusion**

Women make up more than half of the students enrolled in higher education today (Guido-DiBrito, 2002). It is therefore imperative for both men and women to be exposed to women administrative role models. As Amanda declares, "We are an obvious force to be reckoned with. You can't ignore all of us."

The challenges women administrators face is more than an equity issue; they represent an effectiveness issue. Colleges and universities need all of their talent, both male and female, to successfully lead higher education institutions into the future. They cannot afford to do anything less.

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