

Barriers Facing Aspiring Women Senior Leaders in Higher Education:
A Survey of Organizational Perspectives

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Abstract

Women in higher education remain underrepresented in senior leadership roles despite considerable efforts to close the representation gap. This paper summarizes four common analogies used to explain the phenomenon - concrete barriers, the glass ceiling, sticky floors, and the labyrinth. Next, three organizational perspectives (bureaucratic, political, and institutional) are compared and contrasted against feminist theory to illustrate the critical approach higher education must undertake to correct this representation gap. Next, suggestions are offered to expand the limited scope currently defining this significant issue. Finally, considerations for institutions of higher education and professional associations of higher education are made to inspire institutional, structural, and systemic change.

Introduction

“In the 2016 ACPS [American College President Study] survey, women made up 30.1 percent of the population of presidents, up about four percentage points since the 2011 survey (26.4 percent). The percentage of women presidents completing the survey has roughly tripled since the initial survey in 1986—9.5 percent to 30.1 percent, and, if the proportion of women presidents continues increasing at the same annual growth rate (3.9 percent), gender parity in the presidency will occur by 2030” (American Council on Education, 2018, p. 1). While it is encouraging that more women are securing the most senior leadership role within institutions of higher education (despite doing so at a glacial pace), it is also concerning that such institutions, supposed institutional models for students, lack appropriate representation of women in any number of senior leadership roles (presidential cabinets, leadership teams, senior administrations, etc.).

While there may already be overt consensus regarding the value in having a stronger representation of women in such senior leadership roles, scholars of higher education must give due attention and consideration to better understanding the trends in women’s representation in higher education senior leadership. A natural question critical scholars may propose is when will be enough? I argue, unfortunately, the answer to this concern is complicated. Not only must scholars consider the numerical representation of women in these roles, but they must also examine the experiences of these women senior leaders. Some may believe that numerical representation should be the metric used to gauge “success” in closing the representation gap. This metric would certainly be a tangible evaluation to monitor progress; however, it is also a limited way to understand the phenomenon. As some explanations later presented will postulate, perhaps more women are not better represented

because there are covert systems at play creating an environment inhospitable to women to serve in such capacities. Therefore, this paper will consider both metrics in presenting possible explanations to this significant issue in higher education.

More specifically, I contend that considering the espoused values of higher education, academia must address this representation gap through systemic and cultural change. While higher education is a product of larger societal values, the profession has the capacity to address this gendered role disparity; academia must expend the energy and resources to close the gap. I begin this paper by exploring possible explanations of this manifestation considering various theoretical perspectives and empirical studies. I then suggests directions for future research to enhance our understanding of this troubling representation gap. I conclude with implications for both institutions of higher education and professional associations dedicated to correcting this critical issue.

Relevant Barriers to Women's Advancement in Higher Education

The literature concerning the barriers women face in ascendance into leadership roles within and beyond higher education is vast. Many scholars have put forth theories or have identified potential reasons (barriers) for this gendered attainment gap (Ballenger, 2010; Dahlvig & Longman, 2010; Dominici, Fried, & Zeger, 2009; Eagly & Carli, 2003; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Hannum, Muhly, Shockley-Zalabak, & White, 2015; Hill, Miller, Benson, & Handley, 2016; Geary, 2006; Johnson, 2017; Kantler, 1977; Killeen, López-Zafra & Eagly, 2006; Maher & Tetreault, 2011; Samble, 2008; Yoder, 2001). The following are presented to further illustrate and define the scope of the underrepresentation of women as senior leaders within higher education.

Concrete Wall

“Clearly, the most effective way to prevent people from advancing is to block their path with overt, absolute barriers. For most of human history, barriers to women’s leadership consisted of explicit rules and clear-cut norms” (Eagly, Eagly, & Carli, 2007, p. 2). It may be difficult to remember a time when women in the United States were not allowed to walk the halls of academia. But until Oberlin College admitted the first woman into higher education in 1837, the idea of concrete walls were not even acknowledged (Graham, 1978). It was simply higher education’s reality that academia was intended for (white) men only. Admission into institutions of higher education was only the first of many structural boundaries women would face over the next two centuries.

Other concrete barriers women would need to face concerned admission to certain professional schools, admission into the most prestigious institutions, acceptance into faculty and administration, and ascendance to institutional governance and leadership. It is imperative to note, however, that these initial breakthroughs only apply to white women; women of color consistently lag behind their white peers (Evans, 2007). To be sure, there are important milestones to celebrate as women have pervaded institutions of higher education - first as students and then as faculty and administrators. Yet there are still many achievements evading women and in particular women of color.

How does one conquer a concrete wall? By nature it is almost impossible to penetrate. Two approaches are common - overcoming or tearing down. Women in higher education have certainly been beneficiaries of both approaches. While some women pioneers are able to scale great walls and lift up other women that follow, other structural walls are taken down to grant women the same access as men. Two significant examples of concrete barrier removal involve Title VII and Title IX. First, Title VII prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex, race,

national origin, and religion in employment (Dyer, 2004). This legislation impacts women's ability to serve academia as employees - as faculty and staff. Second, while the interpretation of Title IX has changed over time (as do many social constructs), the impact of this legislation is designed to remove barriers for students in education on the basis of sex (Reynolds, 2018). Over time, the law has been able to do this to varying degrees of success and continues to evolve. Another controversial attempt in removing barriers concerns affirmative action (Rai & Critzer, 2000). Again, affirmative action was designed to promote equality in the workplace. However, resentment for this intervention remains. Both of these examples, though, are structural attempts to remove overt, absolute barriers.

The Glass Ceiling

Whether through structural change or sheer determination by pioneers, women began to occupy some professional roles within higher education. By the 1970's exclusion of women in professional fields shifted, where women were no longer completely and totally excluded from all positions. Rather, they were only excluded from positions of authority (Eagly et al., 2007). This significant but underwhelming change gave rise to a new analogy to articulate this shift - the glass ceiling. Eagly et al. note:

The term quickly caught on, capturing the less obvious manner in which women were excluded from high level leadership roles. Nevertheless, the glass ceiling still implied an absolute barrier. [...] At the same time, the image of a 'glass' obstruction suggested that women were being misled about their opportunities because the impediment was not easy for them to see from a distance. (2007, p. 4)

Even today, the glass ceiling is a useful illustration to demonstrate the realities for women working within higher education. Heather Johnson (2017) analyzed data from the U.S.

Department of Education's "Digest of Education Statistics 2015" to learn:

Despite the number of female graduates available for leadership positions, women do not hold associate professor or full professor positions at the same rate as their male peers. The data show that women are not ascending to leadership roles, given that they hold a greater share of the entry-level, service, and teaching-only positions than their male counterparts. This is true for all women when looking across degree-granting postsecondary institutions; the trend is exacerbated for women of color." (p. 4)

While women have attained status as employees of higher education, for whatever reason they remain bound to lower-level positions. Again, just as some women are able to scale concrete walls, some women have been able to break through the glass ceiling. But if higher education is to role model inclusive leadership practices for its students, it must continue to examine why the glass ceiling remains in tact for so many women.

Sticky Floors

Thus far, two simple analogies have been presented to attempt to illustrate the barriers women face in higher education. Carli and Eagly (2016) offer a third explanation in contrast to the glass ceiling:

In contrast to the glass ceiling, which implies that women rise to relatively high levels, the sticky floor suggests that most women are unable to rise at all. Moreover, unlike the glass ceiling, which implies an impenetrable barrier, the sticky floor implies a weaker obstacle to women's advancement and a greater possibility that some women might be able to pull themselves up from the floor to reach higher positions. (p. 517)

Sticky floors, as the authors suggest, prevent women from attempting to cascade a concrete wall or strive to break through the glass ceiling early in their careers.

How can one recognize and explain the sticky floor? Authors Reichman and Sterling (2004) posit that, “Compensation disparity is clearly the foundation of gender disparity. When compensation disparity and promotion disparity are combined, they result in problems of retention. The disparities that occur in these [...] components result in ‘sticky floors’ on which women get stuck [...]” (p. 30). This combination of inequality in the workforce hinders women’s advancement in the workforce. Other manifestations of the sticky floor involve policies, practices, and other even overt obstacles or discriminatory practices keep particularly women early in their careers grounded, evading them the opportunity to even see the glass ceiling. Harlan and White Berheide (1994), who coined the analogy explain, “The barriers that prevent women and minorities from moving off the "sticky floor" often arise because the jobs in which these groups are concentrated either lead nowhere or have very short lines of progression” (p. 42). In sum, sticky floors speculate that women cannot advance in higher education or in any field because they are systematically “stuck” to the bottom.

The Labyrinth

The final, more optimistic, and most recent explanation used to illustrate the barriers women face in career advancement cite the labyrinth, an elaborate and confusing maze where multiple paths lead to a culminating location. Carli and Eagly (2016) who first applied the term to describe a new era of explanation in the perpetual struggle for women’s career advancement in 2007 note, “Some paths to leadership are more direct than others, and some

paths lead nowhere or are dead ends. Finding a successful route to the center is thus not guaranteed and requires persistence and effort” (p. 517). The authors note this illustrative representation best represents the current state of career advancement for women because the workforce has evolved to some extent.

Recently, the barriers and obstacles (some) women face have become more surmountable. Carli and Eagly (2016) go on to note that in contrast to the glass ceiling or sticky floors, the labyrinth does not point toward a specific problem point in a woman’s career. Instead, they propose, “[...] the labyrinth implies that women face challenges throughout their careers, from the moment they began to chart a course to leadership until they reach their goal” (p. 517-8). To be clear, the labyrinth is still an unnecessary obstacle for women compared to the lesser obstacles men may face. Carli and Eagly (2016) brazenly acknowledge the “[...] path that men take is construed as a road (perhaps with some hills and potholes along the way) [...]” (p. 518). Such difficulties are inherently less time consuming, expensive, and involved as those women face. And yet, some women are able to successfully navigate such hindrances (Carli & Eagly, 2016; Eagly, Eagly, & Carli, 2007). Some women are able to maneuver their way through an obstacle course of sorts, designed by men, to advance to the highest levels of leadership over the course of their careers.

Theoretical Explanations Concerning Such Barriers

An evolution almost two hundred years in the making has produced various interpretations of the barriers women face in career advancement. Following a review of the barriers facing women specifically in higher education, it is natural to examine potential explanations of this phenomenon utilizing organizational theory. Organizational theory is an appropriate perspective for analysis of this issue as the academy, itself, is a profession

spanning 4,583 institutions (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Organizational theory, in and of itself, is vast in its scope. Broadly, Bess, and Dee (2008) suggest organizational theory “comprises a body of knowledge about how and why organizations function” (p. 467). More specifically, Gonzales, Kanhai, and Hall, (2018) elaborate:

[...] while some organizational theories focus on structural arrangements and processes, others focus on human interactions and understandings, perhaps stressing the role of leaders or the role of relationships among various subgroups. Still other organizational theories might center on symbolic means, including texts, images, and artifacts, and while some organizational theories focus exclusively on the internal workings of organizations, others direct one’s attention to external conditions. (p. 512)

In order to critically analyze the barriers women in higher education face as senior leaders, the bureaucratic or scientific management, political, and institutional perspectives are considered. But first, in spirit of this paper’s central claim that women must be better represented in senior leadership roles in higher education, the critical, feminist perspective is offered as a point of reference in order to analyses other organizational perspectives.

Critical Perspective

While no one theoretical perspective fully and totally explains any of the above cited barriers, each can and should be critiqued by feminist theory. A product of post-structuralism, feminism, as a critical theory, seeks to “distance us from and make us skeptical about beliefs concerning truth, knowledge, power, the self, and language that are often taken for granted within and serve as legitimation for contemporary Western culture” (Flax, 1987, p. 624). Bensimon and Marshall (2003) further underscore the theory’s applicability to organizational evaluation in their summary of the theory’s theoretical foundations in higher education:

1. Gender is a fundamental category, and [...] analysis that proceeds from a feminist critical perspective is alert to the gendering that goes on both in gender-explicit and gender-neutral practices which may advantage men and disadvantage women, even if not intendedly. 2. Feminist critical policy analysis is gender-conscious, not gender-blind. To do away with power asymmetries and domination that structure relationships between men and women in the academy requires gender-based appraisals of academic structures, practices, and policies. 3. The goal of feminist critical policy is to transform institutions and not simply to "add" women. (p. 338-9)

Following each of the three offered explanations, a brief critical, feminist critique is offered to illustrate dynamic organizational perspectives.

Bureaucratic or Scientific Management Perspective

The first of three organizational perspectives utilized in this analysis concern bureaucracy. Gonzales et al., (2018) offer briefly regarding the perspective's origin stemming from the Industrial Revolution in the nineteenth century:

[...] Max Weber (1948) observed that Western organizations seemed to be developing in ways that maintained the controls and structures [...] through the use of implicit rules and intricate systems of organizing people. Weber dubbed this new organizational form the "modern organization" or "bureaucracy." (p. 518)

Within the bureaucratic, sometimes referred to as "scientific management," perspective, it is postulated that the central purpose of any organization is to meet the organization's clear goals. The best way to achieve such goals involves efficiency and effectiveness with particular attention to the organization's formalized structures, processes, choices. In order to facilitate this intention, the perspective calls for organizations to value expertise when selecting

organizational leadership, as opposed to consideration of personal identities (class, sex, religion, ability, race, ethnicity, etc.). Such universalism explicitly ignores gender.

In consideration of the abovementioned premises, the bureaucratic perspective is an appropriate one to evaluate the barriers of women's career advancement in higher education. Two specific justifications support this application. First, the perspective concerns structures and policies, which directly relate to the barriers explicitly described with the concrete wall and to a lesser extent the three other barriers, the glass ceiling, sticky floors, and labyrinth. Second, the perspective calls on the notion of expertise. Unfortunately, despite its popularity in organizational studies, the bureaucratic perspective fails to adequately explain the phenomenon of underrepresentation of women in leadership within higher education.

Rosabeth Moss Kanter (1977) first presented the pipeline theory. Heather L. Johnson (2017) summarizes of the pipeline theory, a clear product of concrete walls, the glass ceiling, and sticky floors:

The pipeline myth is the persistent idea that there are too few women qualified (e.g., degree holding) for leadership positions. However, the data indicate that there are more than enough qualified women to fill available leadership positions. In fact, the pipeline is preparing women at a greater rate than it does men. For example, female students have earned half or more of all baccalaureate degrees for the past three decades and of all doctoral degrees for almost a decade. (p. 2)

More specifically, according to the U.S. Department of Education (2015), women have out earned men in associate degree (since 1978), bachelor degree (1982), master degree (1987), and doctoral degree (2006) attainment (Table 318.10). If expertise is a value according to the bureaucratic perspective, women have earned the formal accreditation required to serve in

leadership roles. And yet the data indicates women remain underrepresented in higher education leadership.

Critical response. Again, feminist theory is an appropriate perspective to compare to the bureaucratic because it explicitly values gender. Such diametrically opposed values from the two perspectives are so distant that Joan Acker (1990) noted, “Concepts developed to answer managerial questions, such as how to achieve organizational efficiency, were irrelevant to [second wave] feminist questions, such as why women are always concentrated at the bottom of organizational structures” (p. 141). However, this paper does seek an answer as to why women are concentrated at the bottom of organizations in higher education. Thus, feminist theory is considered. Gonzales et al. (2018) offer the following comparative illustration:

[...] whereas most organizational theories treat organizations as neutral sites, or strive to neutralize the human element of organizations, theories within the critical paradigm see the necessity in recognizing the human element, and particularly how humans are positioned differently in society. Additionally, whereas organizational theories can and do consider the views and experiences of people, most organizational theories do not conceptualize those views and experiences of people as indicators of the human condition, but merely as entry points for producing better organizational results. (p. 517)

Feminist theory challenges the notion that universalism is best and instead emphasizes that organizations must accept the reality that men and women have unique experiences. While the bureaucratic perspective fails to recognize gender as a characteristic to consider when selecting leadership, feminist theory does. While the bureaucratic perspective fails to address

the pipeline problem (as women are more credentialed than men), feminist theory highlights the critical role gender plays in explaining the underrepresentation of women in senior leadership roles within higher education.

Political Perspective

The second of three organizational perspectives considered in this analysis concerns power and its distribution within organizations. While there are many definitions of power and politics, this paper agrees with Pfeffer (1991) that “[...] power is, first of all, a structural phenomenon, created by the division of labor and departmentation that characterize the specific organization [...]” (p. 4). Note, this hierarchical assumption serves the bureaucracy well.

Within higher education as a profession, “power” manifests in the structural distribution and allocation of positions, ranks, resources, prestige, influence, information, and alliances among many actors. Interests, conflict, competition, networks, negotiation, compromise, and authority facilitate power distributions. Pfeffer (1991) also notes, “The distribution of power within a social setting can [...] become legitimated over time, so that those within the setting expect and value a certain pattern of influence” (p. 4). This demonstrates how power can intentionally or unintentionally create systems of influence that can be reinforced over time. Though regardless of intentionally, the impact of such systems is observable.

Considering these key concepts, the political framework as an organizational perspective may be able to explain the barriers women face in career advancement within higher education. To first illustrate this connection, the following excerpt from Dr. Roslyn

Clark Artis, President of Benedict College in Columbia, SC, articulates one way power manifests in hiring processes:

The reality is, [positioning and opportunity] is based on relationships. Boards of trustee members who are making presidential [hiring] selections, principals in search firms who are facilitating those searches, if they like you, you get opportunity. If they know you, you get opportunity. If someone called someone who knew someone, you get an opportunity. [...] Women have not been in the rooms to make those relationships. Women have not been exposed to opportunities to gain the attention of, whether it's search consultants or potential board of trustee members, to distinguish themselves in ways that would've allowed them to rise to the top of the search [...].

(ACE, 2018, p. 4)

The hiring process, itself, is an important example of power distribution in higher education. There are limited senior leadership opportunities in an organizational structure. Once a senior leader hire is made, that senior leader then becomes another decision-maker who will be allocated certain power to distribute. This is just one descriptive example highlighting the impact of politics within the hiring process.

A second illustration of the distribution of power again concerns the debunked pipeline theory. According to the 2017 ACPS, seventy-seven percent of responding women compared to only sixty-one percent of men noted their doctoral disciplines from education or higher education, the social sciences, or humanities/fine arts (Gagliardi, Espinosa, Turk, & Taylor, 2017). The fields of education, the social sciences, and humanities or fine arts are typically associated with women, while STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), law, and medical academic disciplines are associated with men. The latter,

though, are considered more prestigious. Thus, despite out earning men in the number of doctoral degrees attained, women are more likely to hold less prestigious terminal degrees. This data suggests that prestige, a valuable and limited commodity among higher education professionals (Bastedo & Bowman, 2011), may influence the career advancement of women into the highest level of leadership within higher education.

Critical response. While the political perspective demonstrates how power distributions contribute to the barriers facing women in career advancement in higher education, because gender-consciousness underpins feminist theory, it is a stronger framework to analyze this critical issue. Acker (1990) demonstrates the saliency of feminist theory as a mechanism to analyze organizations when she noted, “[...] to say that an organization [...] is gendered means that advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity, are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine” (p. 146). This definition advances the political framework by weaving gender into the perspective when examining the many manifestations of power distributions in organizations.

Acker (1990) also proposes that gendering in organizations occurs through the “construction of divisions” which are “well documented” and “obvious to casual observers” (p. 146). Concerning the barriers women in higher education face, Acker (1990) cites:

Although there are great variations in the patterns and extent of gender division, men are almost always in the highest positions of organizational power. Managers' decisions often initiate gender divisions (Cohn 1985), and organizational practices maintain them--although they also take on new forms with changes in technology and the labor process. (p. 146)

While the political perspective generally recognizes power dynamics exist within organizations, feminist theory explicitly furthers the premise that power is distributed along the lines of gender, where men and the patriarchy maintain such power, the currency of the political framework.

Institutional Perspective

The final of three comparative organizational perspectives considered to explain the barriers women aspiring for senior leadership roles in higher education face concerns the institution. Institutional perspectives take a holistic approach when attempting to understand an organization. Consider Paul Bush's (1987) definition of "institution" as a foundation of this hypothesis:

"Society" may be thought of as a set of institutional systems. [...] And an "institution" may be defined as a set of socially prescribed patterns of correlated behavior. In each of the above sentences, the term "set" refers to functionally interrelated elements. [...] When employing this definition of an institution, institutionalists lay stress on the term "socially prescribed." While it is entirely possible for human behavior to exhibit random characteristics, institutionalists argue that all behavior within a community is ultimately subject to social prescriptions or proscription. (p. 1076-7)

This approach proposes both society at-large and the organizations within such a society, create patterns, molds, and models of various types. Such prescriptions influence every facet of the organization: decision-making styles, structures, legitimization, norms, values, behavior, practices, goals, policies, etc. For when a norm or practice is "prescribed," a routine of sorts emerges. This process of formalization, whether intentional or not, forms cultures.

With this framework in mind, consider, again, the history of women in higher education. Frances Maher and Mary Kay Thompson Tetreault (2011) summarize the history of women entering higher education into five institutional phases. In the beginning, higher education existed to exclusively serve white men. This trend persisted through World War II, where one of the most significant invitations to academia invited only males (GI Bill). The second phase, “Affirmative action: ending policies of discrimination and becoming ‘just like them,’ was the first interruption to institutional norms in hiring practices. The authors note:

Responding to federal legislation, universities developed affirmative action policies, as a result of which data on sex and race became available as objects of institutional analysis. As a few more exceptional newcomers arrived, white women and people of colour were enabled for the first time to see themselves as a “class.” (p. 284)

The third phase, “Challenges to university norms and cultures,” witnessed the continuous but exhausting work of people of color and women pioneers to challenge the institutionalization of higher education. During this phase, as Carolyn Lougee observed during an interview with the authors, ““It was threatening to people ... to see women and minorities telling you that you had to do things differently after you have just let them on to your faculty a decade earlier with great trepidation”” (interview with Carolyn Lougee, chair History Department, Stanford University, 30 January 2004). During the fourth and fifth phase, “Linking diversity and excellence as institutional mission,” and “Shifting the focus from excellence and diversity to privilege and diversity” respectively, it is accepted that institutional practices and cultures, rather than individual newcomers, must adapt and change. However, the authors warn that while faculties are significantly more integrated by race and gender today, societal impacts (recession, budget cuts, movement away from tenure, etc.) threaten those most recently hired -

people of color and women. This brief but sufficient summary of the integration of women into higher education highlights the premises of the institutional perspective well.

Many connections between the institutional perspective and the barriers women face in higher education exist. Geary (2009) proposes that the institution of higher education, historically, has refused to address the structures of embedded male hegemony as problematic for the advancement and attraction of women into leadership. Instead, higher education institutions approach the system problem with simplistic solutions, two of which have been coined “add women and stir” and “fix the women” (Ely, Ibarra Insead, & Kolb, 2011, p. 475). Geary (2009) elaborates:

By having more women in academe, it was assumed that they would begin to fill the “pipeline” to leadership positions. This focused on making women fit into leadership roles within the institutional culture in its existing masculine form. As this approach did not result in more women advancing into leadership, a second approach, “fix the women,” focused on socializing women to be successful in the world of masculinized higher education. This tactic acknowledged that women and men’s style of leadership was different and urged women to balance their feminine identity while adopting a masculine identity in order to “fit” within the male culture of higher education (Ely, Ibarra Insead, & Kolb, 2011). Clearly, neither approach benefited women’s advancement as they continue to be underrepresented in academic leadership positions, or leave administrative positions due to conflicts between their feminine identity and expectations for fulfilling management roles (Jo, 2008). (p. 2-3)

Such clear connections between the institutional perspective and women’s lack of career advancement in higher education are plentiful.

Critical critique. While the institutional perspective is a strong and applicable one to explain the underrepresentation of women in senior roles of leadership in higher education, the framework can be further strengthened when coupled with feminist theory. As Maher and Thompson Tetreault (2011) acknowledge, “The dynamics of gender, race, sexuality and class are embedded into the everyday processes regulated by the university, constructing regimes of ‘ruling relations’ that not only construct individual identities and social relations but also scholarly paradigms and hierarchies throughout the academic disciplines” (p. 282). Maher and Thompson Tetreault’s critical application to institutional theory illustrates the malleability of organizations. Specifically, their theory of institutional phases highlight the process by which institutions are able to interrupt systems of inequity and marginalization. Thus, coupled with the central premise of feminist theory, the institutional framework is a strong perspective to examine the barriers women in higher education face in career advancement to senior leadership.

Directions for Future Research

While the literature on women, the workplace, and higher education as a profession is vast, clear intersections of these interests are not available. Of the literature that does exist, research heavily favors the study of women presidents in higher education. The college presidency, some may argue, is an appropriate variable to study, first, as it is a visible, pinnacle of career advancement within higher education and second, because it is an easy measurement. However, leadership extends beyond the presidency within loosely coupled institutions of higher education. Therefore, it would be a significant contribution to the field of higher education organizational studies if future researchers were to expand the scope of study. I would offer a larger, more encompassing definition of “senior leadership” roles to

include those ranking from the dean level(s), vice president level(s), and president. (This would include assistant and associate deans, vice presidents, etc.) Such an expanded definition acknowledges the coveted currency of leadership - power, influence, and authority - is distributed throughout the loosely coupled institution of higher education. Then, scholars would need to apply this expanded definition to the many valuable nuances already being studied within the field.

One particular suggestion for future research concerns the role of institutional prestige. It would be of interest to consider the role that institutional prestige plays in the hiring and retention of women as senior leaders. Perhaps institutions with a surplus of prestige feel secure enough to move beyond the traditional, and ultimately gendered, hires (an example of institutional change). An alternative hypothesis might contend the most prestigious institutions of higher education retain their prestige with continued “prestigious leadership,” which historically has been gendered (perhaps because of gendered academic disciplines). Perhaps other scholars will find this subject matter inspiring enough to advance the collective knowledge of gender and leadership within the organizational frameworks of higher education.

Implications for Institutions of Higher Education

The value of considering multiple organizational perspectives to analyze this significant issue in higher education affords constituents the opportunity to utilize a variety of remedies. While explicit literature characterizing this issue within an organizational framework is sparse, there is a tremendous amount of literature responding to the reality of the situation. Many scholars have developed or proposed specific solutions to address the underrepresentation of women in senior leadership roles in higher education (Bashaw &

Nidiffer, 2002; Brown, 2000; Geary, 2009; Gerdes, 2003; Howard & Gagliardi, 2018; Hoyt, 2005; Laden, 1996; O'Brien & Janssen, 2005; Reichman & Sterling, 2004; Rosynsky, 2003; Selzer, Howton, & Wallace, 2017; Touchton, Shavlik, & Davis, 1991; University of Denver, 2013; Walton & McDade, 2001; Warner & DeFleur, 1993). Geary (2009) summarizes well these many efforts:

In an attempt to assist women desiring advancement, scholars have conducted research to determine ways to assist women in overcoming barriers. The preponderance of research can be categorized into three main categories: 1. bolstering mentoring experiences; 2. sparking institutional cultural change; and 3. women-only leadership development programs (Eliasson, Berggren, & Bondestam, 2000; O'Brien & Janssen, 2005; Vinnicombe & Singh, 2003). Each of these areas provide women with potential resources to utilize in their attempts to remove barriers, confront patriarchy, and build their own leadership skills for advancement. (p. 4)

Brief, tangible examples of the three categorized solutions follow for institutions of higher education to consider implementing.

First, the concept of mentorship is suggested. Tiao (2006) proposes that mentors provide mentees invaluable advice on, “[...] how to fit in the system, how to develop linkages with others, and how to acquire needed resources [...]” (p. 30). Such relationships afford women the opportunity to learn to navigate the barriers within the system. Whether considering barriers as the glass ceiling, sticky floors, or labyrinth, mentors are those individuals invested in seeing women advance to senior leadership roles and provide them with knowledge to assist in their advancement. Geary (2009) unfortunately notes, however, women often struggle to obtain mentors in the first place. She elaborates that a lack of

mentorship for women, “[...] impedes their insider perspective into institutional cultural norms, behavioral expectations, and promotion processes that are often unwritten” (p. 28). Therefore, institutions of higher education must make intentional efforts to facilitate such mentoring networks. However, not all women will have the privilege of securing a mentor; two other solutions remain as options to combat this significant problem.

The second proposed solution concerns the organization of higher education itself. In sparking institutional cultural change, institutions of higher education must examine the policies, practices, structures, and cultures serving as invisible barriers to women’s career advancement. The University of Denver’s Colorado Women’s College suggests the following institutional recommendations:

- Review hiring and promotion policies to ensure they are fair and equitable and do not disproportionately encumber women. For example, if the majority of non-tenure track positions do not have equal standing in promotion, and women predominantly occupy these positions, then the university must critically evaluate its hiring process;
- Diversify search committees for presidential, senior leadership, and faculty positions. Often diversification on the committee helps ensure a search will be expanded to the broadest range of qualified candidates;
- Insist that pools of candidates for faculty and senior leadership positions be diverse.

Women cannot get hired if they are not in the pool of candidates. (p. 16)

Institutions of higher education must invest the time, energy, and resources into the recognition of invisible bias in hiring processes; this is simply the first of many steps for institutions in the pursuit of gender equity. Once women are placed in senior leadership roles,

the next measure or milestone of equity concerns the lived experiences of women senior leaders.

Finally, the third solution proposed to combat the underrepresentation of women in higher education involves investment in women's leadership development programs. A number of professional associations and individual institutions have supported leadership development programs designed to support women in their professional development. Women-specific leadership programs are generally designed to bolster identity development in women, reframe leadership paradigms, and foster support networks among women (Ely, Ibarra Insead, & Kolb, 2011; Hoyt, 2005). On behalf of the American Council on Education and the TIAA Institute, Howard & Gagliardi (2018) suggest all leaders within higher education invest in women in earlier stages of their leadership development and provide them with formal leadership training opportunities. While such programs require financial resources of the institution, the literature suggests such investments are valuable to institutions of higher education.

Critical response. Of the three primary recommendations for institutions of higher education to correct this significant issue as categorized by Geary (2009), only one (sparking institutional cultural change) places onus on institutions, themselves, to challenge and remove barriers in career advancement for women, which is in and of itself is a structural and institutional problem. This means two thirds of the many solutions offered require women, who are already systematically disadvantaged, must endure additional work and expense of time, energy, and resources in order to advance into senior leadership roles within higher education. The two remaining recommendations for women involve 1) obtaining the skills and knowledge necessary to navigate the problematic environment through mentorship and 2)

investment in their own personal development. While both of these methods may be effective ways to combat the institutional problem, they are also both examples of additional, unfair burdens placed on women and people of color to in order to succeed. These solutions reinforce the “fix the woman” approach, as opposed to removing the actual barriers.

Considerations for Professional Associations

It is encouraging to see professional associations affiliated with higher education serve as advocates for this significant issue. The American Council of Education (ACE), National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), Women in Higher Education (WIHE), Higher Education Resource Services (HERS), The Postsecondary National Policy Institute, College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (CUPA-HR), and The TIAA Institute are just a few examples of associations and organizations contributing to efforts to correct women’s underrepresentation in higher education. Publications like “Moving the Needle: Advancing Women in Higher Education Leadership,” “Pipelines, Pathways, and Institutional Leadership,” “Voices from the Field: Women of Color Presidents in Higher Education,” each published by ACE, utilize data (both quantitative and qualitative) to amplify the realities of women working in higher education. Subcommittees or working groups such as NASPA’s Center for Women or ACE’s Women’s Network are both specific organizations providing leadership development programming, as cited in the literature as an effective effort to combat the barriers women face, to women. Such efforts must continue.

However, I would also suggest that each of these organizations evaluate the scope of their contributions. Just as future scholarship needs to be more inclusive in the definition of “senior leadership,” so too should the many associations and organizations working to advance the careers of women in higher education. Literature, programs, resources, and

networks must be reflective of and available to as many women interested in assuming senior leadership roles.

Conclusion

The statistics indicating an underrepresentation of women working in higher education are concerning. Despite the fact that women outearn men in associate, bachelor, master, and doctoral degrees, women are still underrepresented. Despite affirmative action policies and practices, women are still underrepresented. This paper attempts to call attention to this inexcusable reality and acknowledge the limitations of the issue's definition thus far. This paper also considers competing organizational perspectives in an attempt to understand how this issue remains almost two hundred years since women first entered academia. Institutions must commit to intentional efforts to address this critical issue. In fact, considering the impending workforce void that will need to be filled following waves of Baby Boomer retirement, now is the perfect opportunity for higher education to ensure institutional barriers are eradicated for women (Hannum, Muhly, Shockley-Zalabak, & White, 2015).

It is this author's hope that future scholars, institutions, and professional associations will recognize both a more broad and encompassing definition and critical consideration of traditional organizational frameworks to inspire systemic action to combat the barriers women face in their pursuit of senior leadership within institutions of higher education. Any and all strategies to propel women into such leadership roles are welcome. However, from a critical perspective, it is the responsibility of the organization to tear down concrete walls, dismantle glass ceilings, clean up sticky floors, and ensure that, if there must be a labyrinth to senior leadership, both men and women are navigating such a labyrinth together. Institutions of higher education could not simply "add women and stir." They also can no longer simply "fix

the woman.” Instead, it is time for organizations, themselves, endure institutional, structural, and systemic change.

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