Gender and Career Paths

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Laura Leatherwood and Mitch Williams

Although women lead several major universities, including Harvard, the number of women leading the more than 1100 community colleges is not a record in which women—or the community college—can take pride. The current study examines factors affecting the advancement of women to the presidency in the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS). The study identifies the unique challenges women face as they advance through the NCCCS, and it goes a step further by examining differences in the perceptions of men and women with regard to personal and institutional barriers to career advancement including the community college presidency.

During the past several decades, women have moved into leadership positions in almost every aspect of society, but progress in some areas of higher education has been sporadic. Women make up the majority of students enrolled in colleges and universities, yet the higher education sector has not been a strong area for women in leadership positions. Although women lead several major universities, including Harvard, the number of women leading the more than 1100 community colleges is not a record in which women—or the community college—can take pride.

The topic of women entering leadership positions in higher education has been extensively studied and discussed (Amey & Vanderlinden, 2002; Gillett-Karam, 2001; Tedrow, 1999; Vanhook-Morrissey, 2003). Although the literature reveals women are less likely than men to participate in upper levels of administration (Warner & DeFluer, 1993), community colleges have reported advancement in the number of women in senior-level positions (Faulconer, 1995; Warner & DeFluer, 1993). Despite a number of studies on the pathway to community college leadership (Amey, Vanderlinden, & Brown 2002; Vaughan, 1990; Vaughan, Mellander, & Blois, 1994), there is little existing research that explores what may be at work in shaping the career paths of women at community colleges (Tedrow, 1999).

Although community colleges have a high percentage of women in faculty positions (Townsend, 1995), these institutions have traditionally been distinguished by their male-dominated structures (Tedrow, 1999). The number of women in community college presidencies, for example, is not proportional to the percentage of female students or faculty members at community colleges (Petterson, 2003). At the time of this study, of the fifty-eight community colleges in North Carolina, only ten had female
presidents. In North Carolina, however, almost 60% of community college students are female. The lack of exposure to female role models in leadership positions at the community college may influence the career development of young women; since women are under-represented in leadership positions, the full impact of their perspectives, contributions, and role modeling has yet to be felt. Community college presidents not only serve as the chief executive officer of the institution, but they also serve as role models for staff, faculty, students, and the general community.

Vaughan, Mellander, and Blois (1994) conducted a nationwide career and lifestyle survey of the community college presidents. This research gave a snapshot of the career paths of administrators to the community college presidency, more than 800 presidents responded to the survey. Fourteen percent of the community college presidents were female. Of the respondents, 70% of the presidents in the survey were in their first presidency, almost 20% in their second and 7% in their third. Ninety percent of the presidents had attained the position of presidency by age 50. Sixteen percent of the sample had received an associate’s degree from a community college and 85% had earned a doctoral degree. For those having earned a doctoral degree, nearly 80% had received their highest degree in the field of education. The most common position just prior to the presidency was that of the chief academic officer.

The current study examines factors affecting the advancement of women to the presidency in the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS). The study identifies the unique challenges women face as they advance through the NCCCS, and it goes a step further by examining differences in the perceptions of men and women with regard to personal and institutional barriers to career advancement including the community college presidency.

Methodology

While this study primarily used a qualitative methodology, quantitative data were obtained through a brief a survey instrument designed by the re-
searchers and distributed to all fifty-eight community college presidents in North Carolina. The survey utilized a Likert scale format and was distributed at a quarterly meeting of the community college presidents’ association. Presidents who did not attend the meeting received the survey instrument through the mail. A return rate of 67% was realized. Based on the information collected in the survey, comprehensive and in-depth interviews were conducted with two male and two female community college presidents. The interview content was based on the responses to the survey. Interviewees were asked about their pathway to the presidency and the personal and institutional barriers they faced along the pathway. The interviews provided rich narrative information and in-depth insight and understanding of the different perceptions of male and female presidents and the keys to success for these presidents. Data on the pathway to the community college presidency are presented in the categories of factors affecting the pathway to the presidency of the community college presidency: (1) general background experiences, (2) educational and professional background, and (3) personal and institutional barriers.

Findings

This study investigated the advancement of women to the presidency in the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS). Challenges both men and women face as they advance toward presidential positions were identified, and analysis was conducted to determine which factors on the pathways to the presidency were affected by gender differences. As indicated in Table 1, factors with gender differences were: the number of years as president, age at first presidency, the position prior to the presidency, lack of family support, willingness to relocate to obtain a presidency, general gender inequities, and cultural attitudes.

General Background Experiences

Thirty nine of the 58 community college presidents in North Carolina completed the survey, including seven of the ten female presidents and 32 of the 48 male presidents. The number of years in the current presidency varied from three months to 29 years. All of the female respondents had been in their current presidency for fewer than 12 years, and almost half of the male presidents had been in their current position for more than 12 years. Male presidents have been serving as community college president much longer than women indicating that, historically, opportunities for women have not been as prevalent as opportunities for men.

Thirty eight percent of all respondents were presidents when they were appointed to their current position. For six of the seven female presidents, however, this was their first presidency. With regard to the total number of years as a president, one female president in the study had a total of 12 years as a community college president. The other female respondents had eight
or fewer years as a president. In contrast, eighteen of the 32 male respondents had served as president for more than 12 years.

The majority of the female presidents participating in the study attained their first presidency between the ages of 48 and 59. A majority of the male presidents attained their first presidency prior to age 47. In comparing these findings to the Vaughan, Mellander, and Blois (1994) model, the results are similar and indicate that women continue to be appointed to the presidency at a later age than men. Later appointments to the presidency could be attributed to the fact that fewer women have been on the traditional pathway to the presidency, and women tend to occupy positions at the community

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| Table 1                                                                 |
| Summary of Findings on Factors Affecting the Pathway to the Community College Presidency. |
college that are not a direct pathway to the presidency (e.g., positions in student development and counseling).

One of the female presidents interviewed for this study wished she had not taken so much time off between undergraduate and graduate school. She was, however, a first generation college graduate and economic factors impacted the decisions she made as she progressed on her career pathway. She began her career as an alcohol and drug rehabilitation counselor. She then worked for an attorney as a secretary before accepting her first position at the community college as an Administrative Assistant to the President and eventually serving as the Executive Assistant to the President.

Only one female president in this study had served in more than one presidency. More than half of the male presidents held a presidency prior to their current presidency. There were significant differences between men and women in this category. In the Vaughan, Mellander, and Blois (1994) model, more women had held two and three presidencies which may indicate that North Carolina Community Colleges are more likely to appoint new presidents with no previous presidential experience. This could be evidence the presidential pathway is beginning to attract more women as more vacancies are created due to retirements.

**Educational and Professional Background**

In the study, there were no significant differences between the men and women regarding the position held immediately prior to attaining the presidency. As noted in the Vaughan, Mellander, and Blois (1994) model, the most commonly held position prior to the presidency was chief academic officer, and the results in the current study indicate this remains true in North Carolina regardless of gender. The pathway to the community college presidency in North Carolina remains through the academic ranks.

In the second position prior to the presidency, however, gender was a factor. The findings of the current study indicate the second previous position became much more varied; the second position prior to the presidency was more likely to include jobs in finance, student development, and advancement. These are positions which have traditionally been held by women on a career pathway to the presidency.

Although gender was not a factor affecting the educational background of people on the pathway to the presidency, it is interesting to note that 95% percent of all the respondents in the current study had earned a doctoral degree. The Vaughan, Mellander, and Blois (1994) model found 85% of the presidents surveyed had earned a doctoral degree. Additionally, the current study found a higher percentage of women than men held a doctoral degree. Attaining a doctoral degree will help level the playing field as more and more women aspire to be community college presidents.

One of the female presidents interviewed for this study commented, “Comple-
ing my doctorate in community college leadership was probably the single most important thing I did to prepare myself.” The other female president added, “The most important thing you can do is the educational preparation. Don’t think it will be handed to you: Prepare!

**Personal and Institutional Barriers to the Presidency**

The current study also investigated presidents’ perceptions of obstacles to attaining the college presidency. Respondents to the survey instrument were asked to select the degree to which personal and institutional barriers affected their ability to attain a presidency. The scale ranged from one to five, with one indicating the factor was not a barrier and five indicating the factor was a significant barrier. Responses were collapsed into three categories: not a barrier, somewhat a barrier, and a significant barrier.

Although approximately one-third of the female presidents perceived the lack of family support to be a barrier, the male presidents did not indicate it was a barrier to the presidency. Almost all of the men and women presidents were willing to relocate to attain the presidency, and the majority actually did relocate to attain their first presidency. There were not a lot of differences in mobility from women to men. At the same time, more women than men perceived mobility to be a barrier to attaining the presidency. In the past it was not usual to relocate a family to advance a man’s career. As more opportunities for women become available family mobility will become more prevalent and will be perceived as less of a barrier.

Two comments from those interviewed for this study reflect these findings. A male president commented that he had “not really experienced any barriers or obstacles to the presidency.” When pressed on this question, he said one of his concerns was that because he had to move several times, his wife’s career had suffered: “That was tough for me. She had to find a new job every time we moved, but I had wonderful family support.” These comments are in contrast to a female president’s observations that, “It was tough to progress to higher levels of management. I can remember feeling very discouraged because I did not precisely fit the mold that was considered to be “the one” to become a president. When I hit the “glass ceiling” at an organization, my strategy was to get a higher level position elsewhere. In each position, I made sure that I performed to the best of my ability and that I exposed myself to leadership experiences that prepared me to serve as a college president.”

Historically, it has been the woman’s responsibility to raise a family and manage a household; these are roles which consume time and energy. For women to attain the community college presidency, they often need support from others as they progress on the pathway. Families may, at times, be unwilling or unable to give the household manager the assistance and sup-
port needed to pursue her career. More than ever before, family financial security often requires two incomes. This may help women get the family support needed to pursue leadership positions.

Although there were no significant differences in the responses of men and women regarding access to role models and mentor relationships, the findings are of interest. More women than men perceived the access to role models and mentors as a barrier to the presidency. As more and more women serve in leadership roles on campuses, female role models will become easier to find. After reaching the presidency, women are more than willing to provide guidance and mentorship because they understand how long the pathway to the presidency can be for other women who aspire to leadership. Professional associations have established mentoring programs across the country and they can be accessed by anyone.

A male president suggested females who aspire to the presidency are more in need of role models or mentors. “My first suggestion to women who want to be college presidents is to find a mentor, someone to take you under his/her wing and give you counsel and support. Even a bad mentor can be beneficial to you in defining what you don’t want to do. In selecting a mentor be observant; see weaknesses and strengths. Find someone you are comfortable with and understand.”

The current study found that more females than males perceive general gender inequities and cultural attitudes to be barriers to the community college presidency. Cultural attitudes can be described as the perception that women should be in supportive roles and not leadership roles at the community college. These societal attitudes can be overcome as institutional leadership changes. Similarly, gender inequities will decrease as community colleges put diversity programs in place to increase leadership opportunities for women and people from non-dominant cultures.

None of the male presidents perceived gender inequities or cultural attitudes to be obstacles to attaining the presidency. Seventy one percent of the females perceived gender inequities to be an obstacle to them attaining the presidency. There is clearly a difference in the perception of males and females with regard to gender inequities. These gender barriers will decrease as community colleges put diversity programs in place to increase leadership opportunities for women and minorities and as more women become leaders at community colleges.

**Discussion of the Results**

Progress for women seeking the presidency in community colleges has been slow. It was not that long ago that North Carolina, the third largest community college system in the country, had only three female presidents in its 58-member system. It has taken a number of years for North Carolina community colleges to increase to ten female presidents. In early 2005 the North Carolina System had 11 female presidents, but that number decreased to 10 later that year.
Since local boards of trustees are the hiring entities for the community college president, perhaps the composition of the boards will have to change before progress can be made in hiring female presidents. One of the presidents interviewed for this study mentioned that North Carolina is a very conservative state and is being governed locally and at the state level by men who are politically and socially conservative. As these leaders retire and age-out of public service, a younger and more open generation may begin to govern state and local governments; significant changes in community college presidencies may then occur. Changing generational value systems only happens with time. Two comments from the interviews describe these changes:

Unfortunately the “good ole boy” network still exists to some extent, but the environment is a little better than it was. As new trustees are appointed, things will change quickly. Boards of Trustees are going through a transition. As more women are appointed to our boards, this transition will create more opportunities for women.

I did encounter barriers related to my gender. For example, I was discouraged by men in my own institution. One man told me ‘why are you doing that you’ll never be a president.’

According to the Vaughan, Mellander, and Blois (1994) model, the pathway to the presidency is through the academic ranks. According to the current study, that pathway has not changed. Men and women presidents followed the same career path as found in the 1994 model. The most immediate position to becoming president was Chief Academic Officer. As the respondents in this study entered into lower levels of administration in the community college there were a myriad of disciplines represented. As they ascended to higher levels of administration, however, the focus narrowed to academic leadership. All of the presidents interviewed for the study stated they felt there is no one clear path to the presidency. The path is determined by the needs of the institution at the time of the position vacancy. Each of the leaders came through different paths: one came through workforce development, one from continuing education, one came from a position in advancement and fundraising, and the last one came through the public school system. This may indicate that, for some, the pathway is changing and will continue to change as the needs of the colleges change and the hiring priorities of boards of trustees change.

It was expected there would be a significant difference in the immediate position held prior to the presidency. More colleges are hiring presidents that are not Chief Academic Officers. Rural community colleges, for example, face unique challenges related to economic development (Pennington & Williams, 2004). In communities that have lost substantial manufacturing industry, those colleges may be seeking a president who has a strong economic development background. Colleges that have experienced reductions in public funding may be inclined to hire a president whose focus is on
advancement and who have had success in securing outside funding. The economic and political events will affect the work of community colleges and the career path of presidents in the future.

Only 17% of the North Carolina community college presidents were female at the time of this study. All but one female president was in her first presidency, and only one female president had been in her presidency for as long as 12 years. As more women attain top positions of leadership and are successful, they will be paving the way for future opportunities for women. Other institutions seeking the same success will replicate the leadership decisions that were made which would include the hiring of a female president.

If a leadership crisis is indeed on the horizon (Evelyn, 2001; Shults, 2001), then the opportunities for women to move through the ranks of leadership to the presidency will be prevalent. If the number of vacancies is extremely high, the sheer number of people needed to fill those vacancies will create a supply and demand situation. The demand for presidents will be high, and the supply will come from women who are now occupying the student bodies at two and four year institutions.

**Personal and Institutional Barriers**

Lack of family support was perceived by the female presidents to be somewhat of a barrier to attaining the presidency. Women are traditionally the household managers and spend a significant amount of time raising children. Families at times may not be willing to provide supportive roles to the household managers and caregivers of the family to free them up to pursue greater roles in their professional careers. As the national economy continues to change, families will increasingly need two incomes to survive and prosper. Extra income has become a necessity, not a luxury for many families. The earning power of both wage earners will need to be greater therefore career and educational pursuits will be required.

One president interviewed for this study was a single parent who needed to able to provide for her daughter; the only way to do that was to continue to seek promotion to higher levels within the community college. In many ways, it was her life situation which led her to the presidency.

In order to attain the presidency, candidates often must be willing to move. In this study both the male and female presidents felt mobility was a barrier; for those wishing to be a community college president, mobility increases your chances of reaching that goal. It is clear that not being mobile would be a barrier to attaining the presidency of a community college for most candidates, but women have historically tended to depend on extended family to help manage the children and provide family support. Moving away from this support structure creates an additional burden for women and an additional barrier to being mobile. People are much more mobile in today’s society and the idea of getting a job and staying in that job
for 30 years until retirement is no longer the norm. Institutions teach students to continue to seek positions that advance them to a higher level position and to never settle for mediocre positions making it acceptable to move from one job to another.

Finally, gender inequities are perceived by women to be a significant barrier. Since boards of trustees are charged with hiring a president, until a larger proportion of board members are female, gender inequities will continue to be a barrier. The female presidents interviewed for this study encountered gender inequities in their rise to the presidency.

**Implications for Practitioners**

A significant finding of this study was that all the women community college presidents surveyed had their doctoral degree. In addition, this factor was one of the top four qualities for men and for women attaining the community college presidency. The importance of completing a doctoral degree for women who aspire to be presidents cannot be overstated. Non-traditional and distance education doctoral programs will be increasingly important as women balance multiple roles between family and career development. Women in leadership positions will help to eliminate gender barriers which may exist at institutions.

Another finding was that varied community college experience was the most important quality described in advancing to the presidency. Therefore, women should seek out varied opportunities and projects at their institutions which give them experiences beyond the scope of their everyday job. If possible, this experience should include academic administration. This will enlighten current leadership to women’s aspirations to broaden their knowledge base and become better leaders for the benefit of their institutions while also instilling in them the confidence of the faculty and staff of the college.

Additionally, leadership skills and abilities were found to be a critical factor in rising to the presidency. Women should seek leadership opportunities internal and external to the institution. They should not only volunteer for leadership roles, but they should lead initiatives for the greater good of their communities and roles that have an impact on society as a whole. Finally, regardless of position, personal characteristics are crucial in leadership roles. Characteristics such as flexibility, work ethic, integrity, and good communication skills are all factors leading to successful career advancement. Women must be committed to seeking out opportunities to strengthen these areas of their work style.

As more women become leaders and move into presidential positions at community colleges, they will eliminate gender stereotypes and the gender barriers that exist today. Previous research and the current study found that persistence and a planned approached to career advancement are invaluable in seeking a leadership position at a community college. As women continue to fill presidential positions they will implement gender-related
policies and procedures which promote diversity, raise collegial awareness, and initiate dialogue on gender issues not only among administrators, staff, and faculty, but also among students and the community. Additionally, female presidents may be more likely to implement diversity training for staff and faculty. These types of activities will help to ensure that opportunities are provided for women and people from non-dominant cultures.

Women will also become more active in legislative relations as they fill community college presidencies across the country. Legislative actions are necessary to enable women to be more proactive in pushing public policy that affects gender issues beyond the campus.

Many community colleges and universities do a great job providing support services to their students: child care, counseling services, career counseling, job placement, resume writing, leadership training, health-related support, and transportation. All these services are provided in an effort to support the development and success of students. However, when it comes to providing these same support services for staff and faculty, institutions often fall short. If we know student success is tied to providing these services, why would anyone deny that employee success could be ensured by institutions providing the same types of services? This is an investment institutions cannot afford not to make. Women in leadership roles can assist institutions in providing financial support and setting up support services and programming for women that allows for the development and success of female staff and faculty.

North Carolina is one of many states to have significantly fewer women than men as college presidents. I believe that women still face a perception barrier among selection committees that makes it more difficult for them to obtain a presidency and that they are more disinclined than their male counterparts to move geographically for higher level positions. However, the record number of community college retirements is opening more opportunities for women and minorities to advance in their careers.

Women who reach leadership positions in the community college need to help create opportunities for women who will seek leadership roles in the future.

Sure some men still feel threatened by the success of women. But determination and perseverance got me where I am today.

**Conclusions**

This study found few areas of career pathway development which differed by gender. On the career pathway, the factors for which gender was a factor included: number of years as president, age at first presidency, second position prior to presidency, lack of family support, mobility, gender inequities and cultural attitudes. If there are so few areas in which gender was found to be a factor, the question for those who are concerned about the future of the
community college remains: why are there so few women serving as community college presidents?

Diversity programs for leadership positions grew significantly in the 1990s, and since that time the environment for women in leadership positions has improved. In recent years, progress may have led to complacency, however, and this may have slowed the hiring of women in community college presidential positions. Diversity programs on community college campuses and at the state level need to be revitalized. Search firms and campus search committees need to become more aware of the critical nature of having diverse leadership on campus at all levels of administration. This recognition of the value of diversity is equally important for the individuals and organizations responsible for appointing members of community college boards of trustees.

Women at all levels of community college administration have a unique opportunity in their organizations and in the community to place people in positions of influence who can bring attention to the need to provide equal opportunity to all regardless of gender. It will only benefit the community college—and our students—to have everyone equally represented at these institutions. If more training for future community college leaders includes, and demonstrates, the value of diversity, future leaders will in turn hire people that value differences in others.

Community colleges need good leaders. With the impending retirement of a large number of presidents and vice presidents, opportunities for women are in abundance. It is hoped that this study will add to the discussion surrounding the preparation of women for leadership positions. State systems, boards of trustees, presidents and others will use the information to understand the pathway to the presidency for women at community colleges.

Remember, there is no one “right” path any more. The path is determined by the need of the institution at the time. Place yourself in high growth situations that initially scare you because they are so challenging. Take calculated risks. Learn from everyone around you. In this manner, prepare yourself for the position you ultimately desire.

Community colleges are the people’s college; they are the reflection of the individual communities they serve. If community colleges and their leaders do not value diversity, how can we expect communities and society as a whole to value diversity? One positive sign: in the time since this study was conducted in 2006, the number of female community college presidents in North Carolina has increased from 10 to 15.

References


