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Impediments to the Advancement of Women at Community Colleges

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Abstract

This study examined current women leaders' perceptions of the impediments to advancement at the community college. The study was guided by research questions addressing perceptions of (a) personal or internal impediments to advancement; (b) organizational or structural impediments to advancement; and (c) organizational cultural impediments to advancement. Additionally, the current study focuses on the setting and size of the community college and how these factors affect women leaders' perceptions of impediments to leadership advancement. Participants in the study included a nonrandom, purposive sample of senior female leaders at community college leaders at community colleges in the eleven-state region of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS).

One unexpected finding from the current study was the continuing existence of the perception of the "‘good ol’ boys’ network and culture of power" impediment to advancement of women leaders in community colleges. As a result of

the passage of time and the advancement of women in business and political sectors as well as educational institutions, colleges would have expectantly progressed past the original “good ol’ boys” networks. In the second decade of the 21st century, women participating in the current study are still reporting the “‘good ol’ boys’ network and culture of power” as the strongest cultural impediment to advancement within their institutions. Based on the findings of this study, recommendations are made to support emerging female leaders as well as to assist search committees and leaders at community colleges.

Keywords: women leaders, community colleges, impediments to advancement

According to the American Association of Community Colleges, approximately three of four community college presidents surveyed in 2012 indicated they plan to retire by 2022 (American Association of Community Colleges [AACC], 2014). As an increasing number of senior administrators at community colleges plan to retire, women are still disproportionately underrepresented in the roles of presidents, provosts, chief academic officers, chief financial officers, and deans (Amey & VanDerLinden, 2002; Weisman & Vaughan, 2007). In 2011, 56% of community college administrative and managerial staff were women, but only 36% of presidents and CEOs were women (AACC, 2014).

Previous analysis of this underrepresentation has provided initial insight into some of the reasons women have not advanced into these positions. Women leaders have identified personal barriers, organizational structural barriers, and organizational cultural barriers (Cejda, 2008; Eddy & Cox, 2008). If women currently working in community colleges are to successfully advance to senior level administrative positions, additional analysis of women leaders’ perceptions of impediments is needed to offer a clear set of personal and organizational recommendations for the advancement of women leaders into critical leadership positions.

The purpose of the current study was to examine the perceptions of current female community college leaders regarding the barriers to career advancement at community colleges in various geographic locations: rural, suburban, and urban. The investigation of their perceptions of impediments will lead to discussion that might help explain factors in the continued underrepresentation of women in senior level positions.

Background

Many of these studies of women community college leaders focused on the demographics of senior leaders and presidents, including age, gender, ethnicity, and other characteristics (Amey, VanDerLinden, & Brown, 2002; Leatherwood & Williams, 2008; Weisman & Vaughan, 2007). Studies have often focused on the career pathways of these leaders, including job mobility (Cejda, 2008; Eddy & Cox, 2008); internal job advancement within traditional career pathways (Weisman & Vaughan, 2007); external job placement (Weisman & Vaughan, 2007); and professional development (Wolverton, Bower, & Hyle, 2009). Additionally, a group of primarily qualitative studies have followed the “stories” of leaders in an attempt to find out how successful women leaders have overcome gender role stereotyping to advance and thrive within community colleges and other educational settings (Harris, Balenger, Hicks-Townes, Carr, & Alford, 2004). Finally, gender studies of community college leaders have yielded insights into women’s career pathways, including both success stories of job attainment and advancement as well as impediments encountered along the career pathways (Leatherwood & Williams, 2008). The continuation of these impediments, over decades, is a crucial problem for community colleges facing a shortage of qualified leaders as well as lingering issues regarding diversity in leadership (Amey et al., 2002; Eddy & Cox, 2008; Stout-Stewart, 2005). The literature also revealed a number of self-reported impediments which are organizational and personal in nature (Chin, Lott, Rice, & Sanchez-Hucles, 2007; Eddy & Cox, 2008; Lester, 2008; Stout-Stewart, 2005).

The advancement of women into leadership positions and the persistence of the gender gap have been challenges for the community college. More empirical study of community college leadership gender trends and persistent impediments to the advancement of women is suggested. Additionally, the classification settings of community colleges by size and setting provide additional insight into impediments which are specific to these settings (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching [Carnegie Foundation], 2016). Prior to the current study, no empirical studies have included the factor of colleges’ size and settings.

This study examined current women leaders’ perceptions of the impediments to advancement at the community college. The study was guided by research questions addressing perceptions of (a) personal or

internal impediments to advancement; (b) organizational or structural impediments to advancement; and (c) organizational cultural impediments to advancement. Additionally, the current study focuses on the setting and size of the community college and how these factors affect women leaders' perceptions of impediments to leadership advancement.

Methodology

This study employed a cross-sectional online survey instrument which was distributed electronically. It utilized 24 Likert-type items which reflected factors identified in the literature and from previous instruments regarding impediments to advancement. An opening section of the survey instrument included a series of demographic items identifying aspects of the participants' professional position, institution, and personal characteristics. The content validity and reliability of the survey instrument were established through a review by a panel of subject matter experts. The panel of experts for this study included five professionals with knowledge of the community college and expertise in issues related to leadership and the advancement of women to leadership positions. Based on the feedback from the panel members, the format of the instrument was modified and several survey instrument items were revised. The instrument was also pilot tested. The pilot, which involved a small number of female community college leaders from a state not included in the study, indicated a coefficient of consistency of .816.

Participants in the study included a nonrandom, purposive sample of senior female leaders at community college leaders in the eleven-state region of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). Participants were from community colleges in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia. Community colleges in these states include a number of institutions in the three categories of the Carnegie Classification System. The eleven states included 268 community colleges with approximately two to five senior-level women leaders at each identified institution. A cover e-mail was sent to each senior level participant with the online survey instrument link provided directly in the body of the email. A total of 1703 participants were invited to participate; there were 377 participants, a response rate of 22%. Among the respondents, 188 respondents were employed at rural institutions, 99 at suburban institutions, and 90 at urban institutions.

Summary of Findings

The majority of women leaders who participated in the survey were deans and vice presidents; they had held their current leadership positions for one to six years, and their highest educational levels were Master's degrees. The majority of their institutions' classification settings were reported as rural settings followed by suburban and urban settings. The age range of the participants was 34 to 75 years with the highest frequency in category of 55 to 63 years.

Their race and ethnic backgrounds were primarily white, and a large majority were married.

With regard to personal impediments to career advancement, the factor with the highest mean score was "balance professional/personal life," which fell between the slight impediment and moderate impediment. For the responses to organizational/structural impediments, the factor with the highest mean score was "hiring or promotion practices/policies, salary gap," which fell closer to the moderate impediment rating. For the responses to organizational cultural impediments, the highest mean score was "'good ol' boys' network and culture of power," which fell closer to the moderate impediment rating than the means of any other of the 24 items.

The findings related to women leaders' perceptions of impediments to advancement differentiated by community college classification (rural, suburban, urban) are outlined in Table 2. The two personal impediments with the highest mean scores across all three classification settings were first "balance professional/ personal life" and second "unwillingness to move; geographic immobility." The women leaders at urban institutions scored hiring, promotion, and salary practices as the organizational structure impediment with the highest mean while

Table 1. Responses by Three Subscales of Impediments

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Personal/internal subscale	1.94	0.63
Organizational structure subscale	2.07	0.88
Organizational culture/external subscale	2.14	0.92

N = 346.

Table 2. Six Items with Highest Mean Scores by Institutions' Classification Setting

Item (Subscale)	Rural (n = 188)		Suburban (n = 99)		Urban (n = 90)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
“Good ol’ boys” network and culture of power (Org. Culture)	2.96	1.35	2.69	1.36	2.79	1.41
Hiring or promotion practices/policies, salary gap (Org. Culture)	2.62	1.30	2.48	1.34	2.79	1.35
Balance professional/personal life (Personal)	2.41	1.23	2.48	1.14	2.67	1.08
Unwillingness to move; geographic immobility (Personal)	2.44	1.40	2.47	1.35	2.46	1.36
Existence of “glass ceiling” effect (Org. Structure)	2.45	1.25	2.18	1.22	2.38	1.24
Existence of gender roles or gender gap (Org. Culture)	2.34	1.18	2.24	1.19	2.35	1.22

leaders at rural institutions and suburban institutions also ranked them as moderate impediments.

The item “good ol’ boys’ network and culture of power” was consistently the organizational culture impediment with the highest mean score for all three classification settings. Women leaders’ perception of the impediment of the “good ol’ boys” network at rural institutions had the highest mean score, urban institutions the second highest, and suburban institutions the third highest. Additionally, the mean score of “good ol’ boys’ network and culture of power” from leaders of rural institutions had the highest mean score of all 24 items factored by all three classification settings.

Discussion

The professional literature on the community college consistently reports on the retirement plans of presidents and senior administrators, and it regularly indicates an imminent demand for community college leaders while also documenting the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions. The existence of impediments to advancement have been identified in three categories: personal/internal, organizational/structural, and organizational/ cultural. Within these categories, the present study compiled the 24 most commonly reported impediments. The current study confirms the findings of previous research reported in the literature: the lowest mean score ($M = 1.45$) was for the personal impediment “lack of spousal/family support” and the highest mean score ($M = 2.85$) was the organizational culture impediment “‘good ol’ boys’ network and culture of power.”

The findings of the present study confirm that when applied to the 24 identified impediments of the survey instrument, the three models of impediments (personal, organizational structure, organizational culture) continue to represent types of perceived barriers to advancement. In the current study, findings of the analysis of the three subscales indicate organizational culture impediments were ranked with the highest mean composite score, followed by organizational structure impediments and personal impediments, respectively. Participants in the current study indicated their personal situations were less of a barrier to advancement than the structural or cultural barriers found at community colleges.

Personal/internal impediments. Personal/internal impediments were early identified themes among women leaders who were surveyed or interviewed in earlier studies (Stout-Stewart, 2005; Vaughan & Weisman, 1998). Personal impediments might involve (a) marriage and family responsibilities (including lack of mobility and spouse support) and (b) gender stereotyping which can guide women to non-leadership roles that limit their opportunities to show others their ability to lead (Harris et al., 2004). Findings in the current study indicate that among the eight personal impediments, the impediment with the greatest strength and highest mean score is “balance professional/personal life.” Another example of personal impediments is an “unwilling to move; geographic immobility.” Women leaders continue to perceive their lack of mobility, including a hesitation to move children while they are in school, as an

issue in their advancement. As Eddy and Cox (2008) found in their qualitative study, most women leaders would not consider a job that would require them to move away from their family.

Organizational structure impediments. Organizational structure impediments were evident in earlier studies of women leaders and the community colleges in which they held positions (Eddy & Murray, 2007). Organizational structure impediments may include age and discrimination, lack of administrative support, and ignoring skills that are often strengths of female leaders. Findings for the current study confirm organizational structure impediments persist in women leaders' perceptions of impediments to advancement. Being marginalized within the organizational structure of community colleges was indicated in earlier studies of women leaders (Cejda, 2008), and there is a perceived lack of structural support to integrate younger women into the organization as future leaders. In the current study, findings indicate the structural impediment of a "marginalization of women as 'outsiders'" is not among the highest mean scores of the eight organizational structure impediments, indicating that, perhaps, there has been progress in this regard in recent years.

Hiring and promotion practices are also barriers to advancement that fall within the organizational structure of community colleges. This impediment contributes to maintaining the status quo of community colleges by historically hiring males in leadership positions. In the current study, women leaders' perceptions of hiring and promotion practices, as well as the persistent salary gap, was very clear, as this factor had the highest mean score of all eight of the organizational structure impediments.

Organizational culture impediments. Organizational culture holds an institution together by providing shared interpretations by socializing members into common patterns of perception, thoughts, and feelings (McGrath & Tobia, 2008), and it is defined as "a powerful though subtle and largely invisible force in the lives of students, staff, and administration" (p. 43). The findings for the present study provide support for organizational culture's capacity to affect impediments to advancement of women leaders. In this study, of the 24 impediments studied, the impediment that women leaders perceived to be the strongest was the existence of a "good ol' boys' network and culture

of power.” Chin et al. (2007) described the “good ol’ boys network” as “a solid barrier to advancement because it filters out those who the network members believe can lead and those who they believe should not be allowed to lead” (p. 240). The current study also indicates the composite score for the organizational culture subscale was the strongest, having the highest mean composite score of all three subscales. This indicates women leaders perceive their institutions’ culture has the greatest impact on the impediments to the advancement of women in community colleges.

Classification Settings and Impediments to Advancement

The community college literature points to some clear differences in the nature of these college settings, especially in relation to the mission, location, culture, and constituencies of rural, suburban, and urban colleges (Eddy & Murray, 2007; Pennington, Williams, & Karvonen, 2006). Findings in the present study indicate the impact of classification and setting on women leaders’ perceptions of impediments to advancement in community colleges. Of the items in the personal impediments subscale, the highest scoring impediment across all eight items was “balance professional/personal life” for all three classification settings, but women leaders in urban settings scored this impediment higher than did suburban and rural leaders. Another personal impediment with a higher score across three settings was “unwillingness to move; geographic immobility.” Suburban leaders who were unwilling to move from their current positions scored this impediment higher than both rural and urban leaders. Overall, the composite score of all items of the personal impediments subscale factored with all three settings indicate that urban leaders scored personal impediments more highly impactful than did their rural and suburban counterparts.

Findings for the organizational structure impediments indicate the highest mean score for the impediment “hiring or promotion practices/salary gap.” Urban leaders scored this impediment to advancement higher than both rural and suburban leaders, respectively. Rural leaders, however, scored the “existence of ‘glass ceiling’ effect” higher than either their urban or suburban colleagues. Although the “glass ceiling” effect was first identified in the 1990s as a barrier to advancement among leaders in corporate positions, higher education studies also used the term to describe the subtle, indirect obstacles that stem from

labeling and stereotyping and impede the advancement of women leaders (Chliwniak, 1997). The findings of the current study concerning the “glass ceiling” effect support the continued existence and impact of this organizational structure impediment on the advancement of women leaders.

The organizational culture subscale produced the highest of all mean scores for the “good ol’ boys’ network and culture of power.” Findings of the current study indicate that this impediment impacted the perceptions of women leaders at rural community colleges as “a significant impediment” compared to all other mean scores of identified impediments. Urban and suburban leaders also responded with high mean scores for this impediment to advancement. The findings of the present study support the continued and prevalent existence of the “good ol’ boys” network as an impediment to women’s advancement in all contexts: rural, suburban, and urban community colleges.

Unanticipated Findings

One unexpected finding from the current study was the continuing existence of the perception of the “good ol’ boys’ network and culture of power” impediment to advancement of women leaders in community colleges. Community colleges established during the 1960s, a period of great nationwide expansion for two-year colleges, have now experienced their 50-year anniversaries. As a result of the passage of time and the advancement of women in business and political sectors as well as educational institutions, colleges would have expectantly progressed past the original “good ol’ boys” networks. In the second decade of the 21st century, women participating in the current study are still reporting the “good ol’ boys’ network and culture of power” as the strongest cultural impediment to advancement within their institutions.

Another unexpected finding from the present study was the continued existence of the “glass ceiling” effect, a barrier to advancement that was given its name in the 1990s in studies of the experiences of corporate women leaders and eventually in studies of higher education women leaders (Chliwniak, 1997). Although the term “glass ceiling” is less prominent in the corporate world, women in the current study still consider the existence of the “glass ceiling” as more than a “slight impediment” within the structure of their institutions. It is important for community college leaders to recognize that the glass ceiling still exists in some places and to take proactive steps to address

this impediment and to ensure that emerging women leaders are given every opportunity to develop as institutional leaders.

Implications for Action

The factors that constitute barriers and impediments to the advancement of women at community colleges have evolved as the institution of the community college has changed throughout its history. The community college has become known as an entry point to higher education for those who have historically been under-served: women, minorities, first-generation students, and the economically disadvantaged. Today, the community college is becoming an entry point for those who want to lead institutions of higher education. A growing body of literature is devoted to women leaders and their roles, leadership styles, career pathways, institutional experiences, perceptions of institutional cultures, and common experiences with the challenges such as the gender gap and the “good ol’ boys” network. The findings of the current study extend the body of knowledge found in the literature that examined the perceptions of women leaders to impediments to advancement at community colleges as well as suggest the impact of classifications of community colleges (rural, suburban, urban) on the individual impediments.

The current study calls on emerging female leaders to find and maintain a balance in their personal and professional lives. Upholding their commitment to this balance will help all leaders, not just women, to avoid the feelings of isolation and loneliness often found in senior level positions. Prospective and advancing leaders should spend time reflecting on strategies to maintain a work-life balance and to minimize the impact of their demanding professional lives on their personal lives. Community college governing board members and others involved in hiring decisions should not only respect leaders who require balance but also understand that work-life balance creates more effective and productive leadership. Governing boards need to commit to helping emerging leaders, particularly women, to resolve family issues by finding ways to balance their professional and personal lives to lessen the effect of personal impediments to leadership.

The findings of the current study also suggest women leaders’ perceived impediments are partially rooted in community colleges’ structure and culture. While prospective and advancing leaders should be

aware of the existence of these types of impediments as they pursue positions, they should familiarize themselves with the structure of prospective institutions. Knowing the strongest organizational/structural impediment is hiring and promotion practices, women leaders should familiarize themselves with the published hiring practices and trends of the college, functions of human resources departments and hiring committees, and structural elements such as leadership roles, divisions and departments structures, and institutional work flow. Women leaders should consider their knowledge of the structural workings of an institution as they apply for positions, prepare for job interviews, and consider their potential leadership strengths and weaknesses within the institutional setting.

In the current study, women leaders indicated their perceptions of organizational cultural impediments were the strongest of the three categories of impediments. Emerging female leaders' should make efforts to be aware of existing organizational cultural impediments such as residual "good ol' boys" networks, established gender roles, gender gaps, and male norms that may exist within the often subtle and underlying culture of community colleges. A knowledge or understanding of the institutions' culture would enable prospective leaders or advancing female leaders to decide if the institution is the right "fit" for their future.

Additionally, the current study has found that the geographic classification and setting of community colleges impacts the challenges women face in advancing to leadership positions. Clear differences do exist depending on whether the institution is in a setting that is rural, suburban, or urban. The types of challenges are different, the resources available at the institutions are different, and the opportunities for advancement are different, and emerging female leaders need to understand the advantages and disadvantages of each institutional setting and how their professional and personal background might "fit" within each setting.

Women leaders in rural areas, in particular, should be aware of the overall strength of structural impediments such as a lack of mentors or role models and the glass ceiling effect at small institutions. They should also recognize the ongoing, if perhaps unintentional, impediment of a "good ol' boys" network. The "good ol' boys" network, or some modified 21st century version of it, does exist and not only in rural areas. The current study found this phenomenon continues to be a highly identified barrier to the advancement of women.

As is the case for men, women seeking their first leadership position often apply at rural community colleges. According to the findings of this study, they should recognize the personal impediments that may factor into their career decisions. In the current study, women leaders in rural institutions identified the glass ceiling effect and “good ol’ boys” network as barriers to advancement, along with hiring and promotion practices. These emerging leaders need to “do their homework” to find rural institutions and college communities that will give them every opportunity to find success within their new leadership roles.

Recommendations for Practitioners and Leaders

Community college hiring selection committees should have well established, clearly published hiring and promotion practices and policies that adhere to and go beyond federal, state, system, and institutional policies which provide encouragement as well as equal opportunities for women to move into leadership positions. Institutional human resources departments should consider women leaders’ perceptions of impediments to advancement as they prepare selection committees for specific position appointments. Institutions should guard against structural gender inequity, double standards, salary gaps, glass ceilings, and other impediments within the organizational structure that prevent women from advancing or securing positions within their institutions.

Since women leaders perceive organizational cultural impediments to be the strongest barriers to advancement, leaders of rural and urban institutions should be particularly aware of overt and underlying cultural characteristics that form barriers to advancement. The lingering perception that the “good ol’ boys” network continues to exist, particularly among women leaders in rural areas, should be a signal to human resource administrators and search committee members. Additionally, the data from the current study regarding a lack of a “comfort zone” or ability to fit within institutional cultures should give current community college leaders an immediate opportunity to address these potential impediments to attracting qualified female leaders.

Community college leaders should also recognize the value of mentors and role models to incoming or emerging women leaders. Without mentors to guide them in navigating around institutions’ structural and cultural impediments, women leaders may feel isolated or marginalized in their new positions. Additionally, leaders should institute practices and support programs that successfully prepare women

for advancement within institutions. Professional development and advanced degree attainment openings that encourage advancement within community colleges are essential in building career pathways for prospective women leaders to senior level leadership positions. Emerging women leaders should be provided extrinsic as well as intrinsic motivations to pursue doctoral degrees and other leadership-related professional development opportunities.

Conclusion

The current and future demand for community college leaders brings greater focus to the underrepresentation of women leaders in senior level leadership positions. The findings of this and other studies of women leaders' perceived barriers and impediments to advancement provide opportunities for community college leaders to consider and reflect upon their institutions' structure and culture. Emerging female leaders should recognize their need for balance in their personal and professional lives as they assume new positions, face new leadership roles, and meet new challenges in finding their place in institutional hierarchies.

Community college leaders should anticipate gender-related issues such as salary gaps while incorporating hiring and promotion policies and practices that will garner a professional, equitable educational setting, regardless of whether the college is located in a rural, suburban, or urban community. They must also make policies and establish practices for professional development and career progression, mentoring programs and role model reinforcement, structural and cultural inclusiveness, and strategic goals to promote and grow their own leaders, who will be competitive and qualified in the demanding market for community college leaders.

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