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Brent D. Cejda

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, bcejda2@unl.edu

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The Value of Professional Development Activities in Advancing the Careers of Women Chief Academic Officers in Community Colleges

Brent D. Cejda

Previous research has shown that there are not distinct career lines leading to the chief academic officer (CAO) position in community colleges. Rather, it appears that a variety of skills and experiences contribute to advancement to this position. This paper examines the perceptions of women CAOs as to the importance of professional development activities to their career advancement. Responses from women community college CAOs from nine states (Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Texas, Utah, and Wyoming) indicate that current position holders perceive that a number of professional development experiences were important to their advancement to the CAO position.

Women make up an increasing proportion of CAO in the community college sector. In 1985, Moore, Martorana, and Twombly reported that women made up 15.9% of the CAO population in community and junior colleges. Several years later Vaughan (1990) surveyed the same population and found that 21% were female. Hawthorne's (1994) survey of two-year institutions determined that women held 27% of the CAO positions in community colleges. A national study at the turn of the century found that women comprised 39% of the public community college CAOs (McKenney & Cejda, 2000). The most recent data (Amey, VanDerLinden, & Brown, 2002) indicated that 42% of the CAOs at community college were women.

In examining representation, Kanter (1977) identified 35% as a minimal level necessary to reach "critical mass," the point at which a category of individuals moves from "token" representation to a collective "group." This concept of critical mass has continued to be incorporated in research focusing on academic women (Riger, Stokes, Raja, & Sullivan, 1997; Twombly,

About the Author

Brent Cejda is an Associate Professor in the Department of Educational Administration at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and also serves as the Executive Director of the National Council of Instructional Administrators an organization that is housed in the Department. His research interests include the career paths of postsecondary administrators, transfer issues, and issues related to access and equity. Cejda serves as the editor of *Instructional Leadership Abstracts*, and *Community College Exemplary Initiatives*, is a book review editor for *Christian Higher Education*, and is a member of the Council for the Management of Education Finance. Email: bcejda2@unl.notes.unl.edu

1999). Recognizing the demographic evidence, Clark (1998) called for research on women faculty and administrators in the community college that moves beyond male-versus-female comparisons to in-depth investigations of their experiences and professional advancement.

The majority of career studies on community college CAOs have been individual in orientation, reporting demographic and background characteristics. Studies that have utilized a structural orientation have focused on the sequence of positions, or the career lines of those that hold the office. Twombly (1988) was the first to suggest that a variety of experiences, rather than just the position held, contribute to career advancement. A study of women CAOs in community colleges (McKenney & Cejda, 2001) supports this contention. The purpose of this investigation is to determine the perceptions of women community college chief academic officers regarding the importance of external and internal professional development experiences to their advancement to the CAO position.

Interestingly, the professional development activities of CAOs has received little scholarly attention. Studies have instead focused on the activities of community-college presidents (Cavan, 1995; McFarlin, Crittenden, & Ebberts, 1999; Merriam & Thomas, 1986; Reichard, 1995; Wallin, 2002) and other instructional personnel such as faculty and department chairpersons (Fugate, 2000; Spangler, 1999; Williams, 2002; Wolverson & Poch, 2000). Some researchers have inferred the inclusion of CAOs in broadly describing professional development for community-college administrators (Anderson, 1997; Gutierrez, Castaneda, & Katsinas, 2002; Hopkins, 2003; Stolzenberg, 2002; Valeau, 1999).

Two possible reasons may explain why researchers have overlooked the professional development activities of community college CAOs. The first

involves a degree of scholarly “economy of scale.” Murray, Murray, and Summar (2000) and Vaughan (1990) indicated that CAOs occupy a position between institutional presidents and faculty members. Having generated volumes of professional development information regarding these two positions, scholars may simply have sidestepped the issue as it applies to CAOs—to avoid duplication.

Community college experts may also have discounted the role external professional development can play in career advancement. Vaughan (1990) noted that CAOs oversee from 48 to 168 internal duties. Researchers may have glossed-over the importance of external experiences because CAOs possibly do not have the time for such activities. Findings from Martin and Samels (1997) and Mech (1997) tend to support this notion. Since most CAOs receive little or no training before beginning their instructional-leadership role, they must focus almost entirely on internal matters. This may cause some institutions to view only internal professional development activities as a necessity.

Literature Review

As mentioned above, the overwhelming majority of research concerning professional development has focused on community college presidents and instructional personnel. The literature has, however, revealed several common activities that might advance the careers of CAOs. Wallin (2002) emphasized the critical nature of professional development for community and technical college presidents. She defined professional development “as those activities and experiences that increase job-related skills and knowledge and support the building of positive relationships” (p. 27). Her research found that presidents place great emphasis on networking with peers and local politicians, and attending professional conferences and leadership seminars. McFarlin et al. (1999) identified professional development as a key ingredient for successful community-college presidents. Formalized leadership opportunities, like those offered through the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), Harvard, and the University of Texas, and participation in mentor-protégé relationships and peer networking all served as common activities. Substantial participation in professional development was also found to be a key factor in a study of female presidents at two-year institutions (Deitemeyer, 2002).

Spangler (1999) showcased the Administrative Leadership Institute (ALI) of the Los Angeles (CA) Community College District. ALI specifically focuses on developing the leadership skills of community college department chairs. Lindholm (1999) also chronicled ALI and similar

professional development activities at North Carolina State University and The Chair Academy. She explained how these training programs were critical for department chairs to succeed in their many challenging tasks. Lindholm also championed these activities as a way to help cultivate the senior community college administrators of tomorrow.

Kirkpatrick (2001) advocated national workshops and conferences as excellent tools to enhance faculty diversity and better support the community-college mission. Fugate (2000) analyzed the careers of faculty members and found that, although many participants did not follow a predetermined path to their teaching careers, all saw a direct link between professional development activities and their ability to teach. Senn (2002) examined faculty members who advanced into community-college administrator positions. Participants in her study identified professional development as essential for transitioning successfully into a leadership role. Comparing experiences in the career paths of female community college administrators in California and North Carolina, Hawkins (1999) found that attendance at various leadership institutes increased the odds for organizational advancement.

In one of the most comprehensive studies to date, Amey and VanDerLinden (2002) explored the career paths and backgrounds of senior community college administrators. Many respondents acknowledged participation in a variety of external activities such as attending conferences, serving as board members of professional forums, and working as paid consultants. Lesser numbers of administrators reported participating in highly-selective and well-recognized programs such as the American Council on Education Fellowship Program and the League for Innovation's Executive Leadership Program. Internal activities included institutional task forces, specialized committees, staff development, and personnel actions.

With CAOs performing some of the most important tasks to support student learning and teaching, professional development must play a key role in the careers of these administrators. As Laden (1996) remarked, these activities can provide the "opportunity to gain practical and conceptual orientations, improve interpersonal skills, learn the latest management and technological skills, develop network alliances, and keep abreast of changes" (p. 57).

Methodology

The information used in this study is drawn from a survey sponsored by the National Council of Instructional Administrators (NCIA). To conduct its research, NCIA obtained permission to use the instrument from *Today's*

Community-College Administrators (Amey & VanDerLinden, 2002) to survey two of its organizational regions—VI and VII—encompassing the states of Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Texas, Utah, and Wyoming. The NCIA study included the entire population of CAOs ($n = 202$) at two-year institutions located in the aforementioned nine-state area as identified in the *Higher Education Directory* (Rodenhous, 2002). Two mailings yielded the return of 115 (56.9%) usable instruments. Included in the returns are 46 (40%) responses from women CAOs.

The portion of the survey used for this study consists of multiple-rating lists containing 26 single-response items on external professional development activities, external community activities, and internal professional development activities. Alreck and Settle (1995) have advocated the use of multiple-choice, single-response items “when only one alternative is to be singled out from among several by the respondent” (p. 115). The survey requested respondents to identify whether they had participated in external and internal activities and how they viewed the potential of each for advancing one’s career.

Results

Table 1 provides information about the level of participation in nine external professional development activities. More than two-thirds of the respondents had participated in four of the nine activities: attendance at a professional forum for women; presentation of scholarly work; serving as a board member for a state or regional organization; and publication of scholarly work. Table 2 presents the same information in a different way, by rank order of those who perceived the activity to be important to their advancement to the CAO position. The four external professional development activities that women CAOs most frequently reported are ranked seventh, third, second, and sixth, respectively, in terms of the perceived importance to obtaining a CAO appointment. The activity perceived most important to career advancement, participation in state or regional leadership programs, is tied for seventh in the ranking of participation. It should be noted, however, that among those who participated in each of the nine activities were perceived as important by two-thirds or more of the respondents.

Table 3 presents 10 external community activities by rank order of participation. More than 70% of the respondents participated in 4 of the 10 activities: philanthropic or cultural; church or religious organizations; local schools; or economic development and business. Table 4 presents the same information, by rank order of those who perceived the activity to be important to their advancement to the CAO position. The four external

community development activities that women CAOs most frequently reported are ranked sixth, seventh, second, and fifth, respectively, in terms of the perceived importance to obtaining a CAO appointment. More than two-thirds of the respondents perceived 6 of the 10 community activities as important to obtaining the CAO appointment, and less than the majority of participants perceived that two of the activities were important to their career advancement.

Table 5 presents seven internal professional development activities by rank order of participation. The overwhelming majority (89% or above) of the respondents participated in four of the seven activities: in-service staff development; special task forces, committees, and commissions; opportunities for additional responsibilities; and formal performance reviews. Table 6 presents the same information, by rank order of those who perceived the activity to be important to their advancement to the CAO position. The four internal professional development activities that women CAOs most frequently reported are ranked fourth, first, second, and sixth, respectively, in terms of the perceived importance to obtaining a CAO appointment. Three-fourths or more of the respondents perceived six of the seven internal activities as important to obtaining the CAO appointment.

Table 7 considers all 26 activities, presenting the top 10 by rank order of participation. In terms of the level of participation, activities from the internal professional development list are most often reported. Four of the top five activities involve internal professional development, with 89% or greater of the respondents participating. Among the other activities in Table 7, three are from the external professional development and three are from the external community development categories. Table 8 also considers all 26 activities, presenting the top 10 by rank order of perceived importance to advancement to the CAO position. More than three-fourths of the participants in each activity viewed the activity as important to obtaining the CAO appointment. Five of the activities in Table 7 also appear in Table 8. The activity with the greatest level of participation, however, does not appear in the rankings of perceived importance. However, the two activities with the lowest levels of participation are both included in the rankings of perceived importance. Among the activities in Table 8 are three from the external professional development, three from the external community, and two from the internal professional development categories.

Discussion

The respondents to the survey participate in a wide range of professional development activities, as half or more participated in 16 of the 26 items

listed. Internal professional development is most-often reported, as four of the top five activities, in terms of participation, are internal activities. Respondents perceived that two internal professional development activities were the most important to their career advancement. Amey et al. (2002) found that 52% of community college CAOs had been hired from within the organization. Serving on task forces, committees and commissions and accepting additional responsibilities are internal activities that provide the opportunity for the participant to gain administrative-like experience and demonstrate leadership skills and also may serve as a 'testing ground' for the institution to evaluate administrative candidates.

One of the predominate themes that appeared in the literature of professional development was participation in leadership seminars and workshops. Two leadership program categories based on geography were included in the survey, state or regional and national. Participation in these two categories ranked in the bottom five of all activities. Considering the attention placed on this type of activity in the literature, a greater level of participation was expected. State or regional leadership programs ranked third among all activities in perceived importance to advancement to the CAO position, supporting the importance the literature has placed on this experience. This particular finding raises several questions. Is the limited participation by choice or because of lack of opportunity? Why have so few women CAOs participated in national programs? Given the level of participation, why are there so many professional development programs?

The literature also stressed the importance of networking in the community and with politicians as important to the career advancement of community college leaders. Respondents to the survey tended to participate more in external community activities offering a direct impact on the institutional mission and, in turn, enhancing one's career. Cultivating a future student base by participating in the functions and governance of local schools, networking with community leaders in the areas of economic development and business, and participation in civic and cultural activities all fit with the mission of a community college. For a CAO, the career-enhancing benefits of these experiences are obvious.

This study also raised additional questions about the career advancement of women CAOs. Why did they perceive certain activities as important to their career advancement? What specific knowledge, skills, or abilities were gained or developed in these activities? How could the respective professional development activities be improved? Are the perceptions of CAOs the same as the perceptions of women holding other leadership positions, such as chief student affairs officers or presidents? Additional research to answer these questions is warranted.

Graduate programs preparing community college leaders are also challenged to answer questions raised by the findings of this study. Can the experiences gained by serving on task forces, committees, commissions, or by accepting additional responsibilities also occur in simulations, case studies, or internships? What are the similarities and differences between the curriculum of professional development programs and courses in the degree program?

Most important, however, may be the benefit of these findings to aspiring women CAOs. Current women CAOs perceive that professional development activities were important to their career advancement. From the list of 26 activities, more than the majority of participants perceived that 24 of the 26 had been important to their career advancement. Simply put, it appears that the woman who is doing something in the area of professional development is more likely to advance to the CAO position than the woman who does nothing. The activities perceived as important by the greatest percentages of respondents are not national in scope, but can be found at employing institutions, or within the state or region. Participating in the community through service in civic or fraternal organizations, with the local school, and with political or governmental entities are also viewed as important to career advancement. When possible, make scholarly presentations at conferences and conventions.

More women occupy the position of community college CAO than any other upper-level administrative position in higher education. The study described in this paper contributes to the understanding of how the current position holders advanced to their position. Additional research is necessary, however, to more fully understand the contribution of professional development activities to the career advancement of these women and to increase the percentages of women occupying other leadership positions.

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Table 1

External Professional Development by Rank Order of Participation

	Level of Participation	
	<i>n</i>	%
Attendance—Professional Forum for Women	43	93.5
Scholarly Presentations	39	84.8
Board Member—State or Regional Organization	36	78.3
Scholarly Publishing	32	69.5
Paid External Consultant	25	54.0
Attendance—Professional Forum for Minorities	21	45.7
Board Member—National Organization	17	36.9
State/Regional Leadership Programs	17	36.9
National Programs	8	17.3
ACE		
Kellogg		
League for Innovation		
Harvard		

(Respondents *n* = 46)

Table 2

External Professional Development by Rank Order of Importance

	Participated AND Important		Participated but NOT Important	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
State/Regional Leadership Programs	15	88.2	2	11.8
Board Member—State or Regional Organization	29	80.6	7	19.4
Scholarly Presentations	31	79.5	8	20.5
National Programs ACE Kellogg League for Innovation Harvard	6	75.0	2	25.0
Paid External Consultant	18	72.0	7	28.0
Scholarly Publishing	23	71.9	9	28.1
Board Member—National Organizations	12	70.6	5	30.4
Attendance—Professional Forum for Women	29	67.4	14	32.6
Attendance—Professional Forum for Minorities	14	66.7	7	33.3

(Respondents *n* = 46)

Table 3

External Community Activities by Rank Order of Participation

	Level of Participation	
	<i>n</i>	%
Philanthropy/Cultural	39	84.8
Church/Religious	34	73.9
Local Schools	34	73.9
Economic Development/Business	33	71.7
Civic/Fraternal	29	63.0
Health and Social Services	25	54.3
Political/Government	19	41.3
Social/Environmental	15	32.6
Veterans/Military	9	19.6
Elected Position at Local Schools	5	10.8

(Respondents *n* = 46)

Table 4

External Community Activities by Rank Order of Importance

	Participated AND Important		Participated but NOT Important	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Civic/Fraternal	25	86.2	4	13.8
Local Schools	29	85.3	5	14.7
Elected Position at Local Schools	4	80.0	1	20.0
Political/Government	15	78.9	4	21.1
Economic Development/Business	25	75.8	8	24.2
Philanthropy/Cultural	26	66.7	13	28.3
Health and Social Services	14	56.0	11	44.0
Church/Religious	19	55.9	15	44.1
Veterans/Military	4	44.4	5	55.6
Social/Environmental	5	33.3	10	66.7
(Respondents <i>n</i> = 46)				

Table 5

Internal Professional Development by Rank Order of Participation

	Level of Participation	
	<i>n</i>	%
In-service Staff Development	45	97.8
Special Task Forces, Committees, and Commissions	43	93.5
Opportunity for Additional Responsibilities	43	93.5
Formal Performance Reviews	41	89.1
Formal Career Reviews	30	65.2
Temporary Job Rotation	21	45.7
Subbatical	7	15.2
(Respondents <i>n</i> = 46)		

Table 6

Internal Professional Development by Rank Order of Importance

	Participated AND Important		Participated but NOT Important	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Special Task Forces, Committees, and Commissions	41	95.3	2	4.7
Opportunity for Additional Responsibilities	41	95.3	2	4.7
Sabbatical	6	85.7	1	14.3
In-service Staff Development	34	77.3	10	22.7
Formal Career Reviews	23	76.7	7	23.3
Formal Performance Reviews	31	75.6	10	24.4
Temporary Job Rotation	13	61.9	8	38.1
(Respondents <i>n</i> = 46)				

Table 7

Top Ten Activities by Rank Order of Participation

	Level of Participation	
	<i>n</i>	%
In-service Staff Development	45	97.8
Attendance—Professional Forum for Women	43	93.5
Opportunity for Additional Responsibilities	43	93.5
Special Task Forces, Committees, and Commissions	43	93.5
Formal Performance Reviews	41	89.1
Philanthropy/Cultural	39	84.8
Scholarly Presentations	39	84.8
Board Member—State or Regional Organization	36	78.3
Local Schools	34	73.9
Economic Development/Business	33	71.7
(Respondents <i>n</i> = 46)		

Table 8
Top Ten Activities by Rank Order of Importance

	Participated AND Important		Participated but NOT Important	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Opportunity for Additional Responsibilities	41	93.5	2	4.7
Special Task Forces, Committees, and Commissions	41	95.3	2	4.7
State/Regional Leadership Programs	15	88.2	2	11.8
Civic/Fraternal	25	86.2	4	13.8
Sabbatical	6	85.7	1	14.3
Local Schools	29	85.3	5	14.7
Board Member—State or Regional Organization	29	80.6	7	19.4
Elected Position at Local Schools	4	80.0	1	20.0
Scholarly Presentations	31	79.5	8	20.5
Political/Government	15	78.9	4	21.1
(Respondents n = 46)				