Leading or Following? Women Learning Leadership Roles in Higher Education

Catherine A. Hansman
Cleveland State University, USA

Recommended Citation

Leading or Following? Women Learning Leadership
Roles in Higher Education

Catherine A. Hansman
Cleveland State University, USA

Abstract: Women faculty members in higher education are reaching senior status at levels before unseen. Understanding both the challenges/obstacles and help these women received as they achieved advanced status will help future generations of women scholars who also aspire to a senior faculty position.

The concept of formal and informal mentoring as a part of adult development and learning has become a more frequent topic of both research and study in recent years. Although research and descriptions of mentoring relationships and programs may describe the benefits and "how to's" of both formal and informal mentoring relationships and programs, there is little discussion that accounts for how adults actually learn and develop in mentoring relationships, and how not only protégés but mentors also learn within mentoring relationships. In higher education in particular, women faculty members are reaching senior status at levels before unseen. Understanding both the challenges/obstacles and help these women received as they achieved advanced status will help future generations of women scholars who also aspire to a senior faculty position, as well as help higher educational institutions plan formal mentoring programs to further faculty members' careers. Furthermore, since some research has pointed out the difficulties of finding women mentors for women faculty, this research will further understanding of how women senior faculty view themselves as mentors.

The problem this research project seeks to address is the gap in the research and literature concerning the role mentoring relationships play in the careers of senior faculty women and how mentoring relationships encouraged and/or challenged them throughout their careers. This project seeks to examine how senior women faculty learned and developed within mentoring relationships, as well as the kinds of mentoring that they provide to newer faculty members. The purpose and goals of this research are to explore women professors' experiences and views of mentoring within academia from a critical feminist perspective. This perspective allows the examination of learning within mentoring by analyzing the power relationships within the mentor/protégé relationship and the intersection of these relationships with gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and organizational values.

Formal mentoring programs are designed and implemented within organizations to provide opportunities for mentoring between diverse groups, achieve some gender and racial equality among executives, and promote workplace learning (Hansman, 2002). Early research concerning mentoring were based largely on white males; the gender, race, class, ethnicity, ability, and sexual orientation of either mentors or protégés were not considered significant thus not affect the quality of the mentoring relationship. However, more recent research points to differences, both in compensation and quality of mentoring, based on gender and race in mentoring relationships (Hansman, 2002). For instance, some studies by show that male protégés with male mentors were more highly paid than female protégés with male mentors; female protégés mentored by females were paid the least. Thomas' (2001) research involving three major corporations shows that formal mentoring programs have failed to remove barriers to the advancement of marginalized groups. Besides these issues, concerns surrounding the power

mentors may exert in mentoring relationships may affect how protégés and mentors interact and negotiate their relationships.

Since the issue of power has been largely unexamined in the field of HRD (Bierema, 2000, Hansman, 2000, Hansman, 2002) formal mentoring programs in organizations planned by HRD professionals may promote the replication of existing power relationships within those organizations (Hansman, 2000). To this end, Shied, Carter, and Howell (2001) assert that HRD professionals seldom analyze or acknowledge the existence and consequences of power within the programs they plan -- including mentoring programs where more knowledgeable employees are matched with less experienced protégés. Cunningham (1993) concurs, and asserts that corporate HRD professionals who plan mentoring programs, and employees chosen to act as mentors within these programs, may promote corporate (organizational) rather than human interests in their interactions with protégés.

This research project is on-going and consists of qualitative interviews of senior women faculty participants. Participants have been recruited through personal contacts and through professional knowledge of senior women faculty at several different universities in the United States and Canada. Ethnographic methodology is being used to elicit rich descriptions of women's journeys to leadership in higher education institutions. In addition, the researcher herself tells her own story utilizing auto-ethnographic methodology. All the participants' stories form an evolving and colorful tapestry concerning academic women's roles in higher education, their perceptions of themselves and other women as leaders in higher education, their journeys to leadership, and their perceptions of the role mentoring relationships played in their career development. The ethnographic nature of this inquiry allowed women's voices to be heard regarding race, class, and gender issues they encountered along their career paths, as well as discussions concerning the learning they experienced as mentors or protégés.

These issues are important to the field of adult education because mentoring is a form of adult learning and development. Examining how some of the concepts of leadership and the role mentoring plays in the lives of senior women faculty in real world practice may provide answers concerning how best to plan formal mentoring and leadership programs to benefit other women and minorities in institutions of higher education.

References

Bierema, L. (2000) Moving beyond performance paradigms in human resource development. In A. Wilson & E. Hayes (eds.) *Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education* (pp. 278-293). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Cunningham, P. M. (1993). The politics of worker's education: Preparing workers to sleep with the enemy. *Adult Learning, 5* (1)*,* 13-14, 24.

Hansman, C. A. (2000) Formal mentoring programs. In A. Wilson & E. Hayes (eds.) *Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education* (pp. 493-507). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

Hansman, C. A. (Ed.). (2002). *Critical perspectives on mentoring: Trends & issues.* ERIC Information series No. 388, ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, Vocational Education.

Schied, F. M., Carter, V.K., & Howell, S. L.(2001). Silent power: HRD and the management of learning in the workplace. In R. Cervero & A. Wilson (eds.) *Power in practice: Adult education and the struggle for knowledge and power in society*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Thomas, D. A. (2001). The truth about mentoring minorities: Race matters. *Harvard Business Review, 79*(4), 99-107..