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## Women University Presidents: Learning through Leadership Development Programs

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**Abstract:** Women administrators face a number of challenges in their pursuit of a university presidency. Leadership development programs provide valuable learning experiences that strengthen their potential of becoming a university president.

### Background

Over the past decades women have grown in number among the college and university presidencies; however, their numbers still do not reflect equality in this position. The latest comprehensive presidential study by the American Council on Education, ACE, reports that women account for only 30.1 percent of all college and university presidents (Gagliardi, Espinosa, Turk, & Taylor, 2017), which is a 21 percent increase since 1986. Literature suggests that this low percentage could be a result of the challenges that women administrators encounter (Ballenger, 2010; Brown, Van Ummersen, & Phair, 2001; Jackson, & Harris, 2007; Madsen, 2012). Hence, scholars continue to study positive and negative factors that impact a woman's path to a college presidency and the role as president (Ballenger, 2010; Commodore, Freeman, Gasman, & Carter, 2016; Jackson, & Harris, 2007; Madsen, 2006; Madsen, 2012; Trombley, 2007).

There are many challenges aspiring women presidents encounter. Research shows that in addition to the struggle of navigating the academic career pathway (De Los Santos, & Vega, 2008; Haro, 1995; Jackson, & Harris, 2007; Madsen, 2006; Wilson, 1989), women have difficulties finding mentors (Cox, 1994; Hill, Rouner, & Bahniuk, 1987; Ibarra, 1993; Stutz, 2014), balancing work and family life (Ehrich, 1994; Gorena, 1996; Wrushen, & Sherman, 2008), and gaining enough administrative experiences needed to be president (Gagliardi, et al., 2017). While all of these remain significant challenges on their own, many of them create compounding issues. For example, university presidents are predominantly chosen from the positions of provost or chief academic officer; however, these positions require a certain level of administrative experience and are more easily realized with the assistance of a mentor. Despite this, there are activities and opportunities that assist in career progression. For instance, leadership development

programs are an important means through which women can gain the knowledge and training needed to become a university president (Madsen, 2012).

Although these leadership development programs can be of great value for women and their career advancement, scholarly research on this topic has only recently been published and information on this topic has not been shared across the masses (Madsen, 2012). Therefore, research in this area is both needed and significant. Furthermore, Martineua, Hannum, & Reinelt (2007) provide a list of reasons to evaluate leadership development programs, which include: understanding the benefits for individuals and organizations; improving the program; finding links between development training and the performance of the organization; and recognizing important leadership characteristics that are valuable for certain settings. In light of this, more articles are needed that offer information about leadership development programs that could serve both women administrators as well as institutions looking to establish these programs on their campus (Batlodano, Carlson, Jackson, & Mitchell, 2012; Madsen, 2012; Madsen, Longman, & Daniels, 2012).

Therefore, the purpose of this literature review is to explore the research on women university presidents and their learning experiences in leadership development programs that assist in preparing them for the presidency. Through this analysis we gain a better understanding not only of the learning experiences but also of the importance of this learning in the career progression of women presidents. In addition, in an attempt to provide a clearer understanding of leadership development programs, a literature-based definition is presented.

### **Defining Leadership Development**

Although studies (Bello-de Castro, 2010; Vaughn, & Weisman, 2003) classify a variety of activities under leadership development such as: graduate education programs, professional associations, and formalized leadership training, this paper refers to leadership development solely through the lens of trainings offered by associations or centers in an effort to prepare leaders to assume presidential positions, which is important because there is a need to purposefully prepare higher education administrators (Madsen, et al., 2012). These programs have the qualities and characteristics of professional development, which Wallin (2002) defines as “activities and experiences that increase job-related skills and knowledge and support the building of positive relationships” (p. 28). Vaughn and Weisman (2003) suggest that leadership development focus on the “skills, abilities, and knowledge that are unique to the presidency,” but should be broader and further specialized in comparison to other leadership programs (p. 52).

While there are a variety of job-related skills that could potentially be addressed during these programs, they typically establish support networks, discuss role responsibilities, and depend upon funding from foundations (León and Nevarez, 2007). As such, it is understandable that these programs have been described as “rungs on the ladder” (León and Nevarez, 2007, p. 363). With this in mind, there are also differences in programs. According to León and Nevarez (2007) leadership development programs can be categorized in one of two ways: programs focusing on all individuals or women and programs focusing on minorities.

### **Methodology**

This literature review analyzed studies that directly related to women administrators and leadership development programs. A total of 14 studies were relevant and were included in this literature review. These studies included empirical studies, literature reviews, program analyses, and two dissertations, and they focus on both national and campus programs. This paper is primarily concerned with programs affiliated with national associations. Although not all of the included studies focus specifically on national programs, they all provide relevant information that contributes to the study at hand. The following section reveals the findings of this analysis and is followed by a discussion of these findings in relation to existing literature on women university presidents.

### **Leadership Development Literature**

Literature on leadership development programs is frequently discussed in relation to the human resource development, HRD, framework (Baltodano, Carlson, Jackson, & Mitchell, 2012; Bonebright, Cottledge, & Lonquist, 2012; Hornsby, Morrow-Jones, & Ballam, 2012; Madsen, 2012; Madsen, Longman, & Daniels, 2012), institutional programs (Baltodano, et al., 2012; Bonebright, et al., 2012; Hornsby, et al., 2012), national programs (Anderson, 1997; Weissner, & Sullivan, 2007; White, 2012), or community college leadership (Anderson, 1997; Bello-de Castro, 2010; Krause, 2009; Vaughn, & Weisman, 2003). The analysis of literature revealed several key components emerged that contribute to the success of these leadership development programs. While there may be some differences between institutional based and national programs or from one program to another, all of the programs encompassed: administrative topics, opportunities for mentorship, internships/campus visits, mock interviews, and self-understanding.

## **Administrative Topics**

Literature suggests leadership development programs typically cover a wide range of administrative topics such as: planning, budgeting and financing, politics and government, leadership theories, diversity, fundraising, managing and investing strategic resources, leading change, comprehending the new higher education, understanding the board and the hiring process, self-reflecting, viewing situations through different perspectives, technology, and conflict management (Anderson, 1997; Bello-de Castro, 2010; Krause, 2009; Madsen, et al., 2012; McDade, 1987; Weissner, & Sullivan, 2007; White, 2012). These topics include the majority but not all of the ones that are commonly addressed in these programs. In addition, not every program covers each of the mentioned topics; however, the programs present rich enough information and discussion that several studies found that the participants gained a new and valuable understanding. A participant from Weissner and Sullivan's (2007) study reflected by stating the following, "I have a new appreciation for presidents; their job duties expand far beyond what I was aware of" (p. 101). Although not all programs cover the same material, all programs have common goals of developing promising administrators (Anderson, 1997).

Leadership development programs not only provided an avenue for leaders to learn and understand these topics, but these programs gave an opportunity for critical analysis and discussion by the participants (Bello-de Castro, 2010; McDade, 1987; White, 2012). Participants valued these opportunities because the discussions allowed for multiple perspectives on an issue (Bello-de Castro, 2010; Weissner, & Sullivan, 2007). White (2012) illustrates this in a study, stating that participants were viewed as practitioner faculty who were able to contribute their own expertise and speak candidly with one another.

## **Opportunities for Mentors**

A majority of the leadership development programs incorporate a mentorship component (Anderson, 1997; Bello-de Castro, 2010; Baltodano, et al., 2012; McDade, 1987; Madsen, et al., 2012; Weissner, & Sullivan, 2007; White, 2012). One study described this as a structured mentorship where the senior officer "monitors" the participant's activities and "provides advice and support" (McDade, 1987, p. 36). Participants in several of the studies reflected on the importance of mentors (Bello-de Castro, 2010; Krause, 2009). Even more so, they discussed the significance of having multiple mentors, regardless of gender, as well as mentors from other institutions (Bello-de Castro, 2010). In one study a participant shared the importance of her mentoring experience stating, "he took me everywhere and told me what was going through his mind" (Krause, 2009, p. 115). In another study, a participant voiced how working with the program reestablished her belief that "all aspiring leaders need champions, mentors, and role

models and that experienced leaders need to be those champions, mentors, and role models” (Baltodano, et al., 2012).

While not all relationships lead to mentoring, leadership development programs contributed toward networking relationships, which are also valuable for leaders (Bello-de Castro, 2010; Bonebright, et al., 2011; Krause, 2009). These relationships are so important that McDade’s (1986) study revealed that administrators ranked networking in leadership development programs as more beneficial than discussing issues or skills. In fact, a participant from one study stated the following in regards to a conversation with a dean of another university, “I realized that she was working on issues that were similar to some of my own challenges. We can learn from each other” (Weissner, & Sullivan, 2007, p. 103).

### **Internships/Campus Visits**

Literature shows that several leadership development programs have a traditional internship or campus visit scheduled into the curriculum (Bello-de Castro, 2010; McDade, 1987; Vaughn, & Weisman, 2003). These opportunities can present a different kind of learning experience. This more hands-on approach is essential to presidential preparation, and directly relates to Vaughn and Weisman’s (2003) stance, “much of the knowledge and many of the skills and abilities can be gained only through on-site experiences and observations” (p. 52). At least one study described a program that tasked the leaders to take on a project for a department outside of the women’s own department (Bello-de Castro, 2010). As a result, the study found that at least one woman believed the project gave her a broader understanding of the university and its mission (Bello-de Castro, 2010). This can be a helpful learning experience; however, Vaughn and Weisman (2003) caution that leaders must be fully included in the decision-making process that leads to change within the unit, which presents the best scenario through which leaders in the development program will grow.

### **Mock Interviews**

Although not as common as the previous components, some programs incorporated another extremely important activity, mock interviews. A few programs provided an opportunity for women leaders to go through a mock interview simulating one that would be done during the hiring process for a presidency position (Krause, 2009). As part of the project, the women were provided with feedback and a critique (Krause, 2009). For some programs, this preparation even went so far as to include a panel of women presidents who discussed how to dress and hairstyles for the interview (Krause, 2009). One participant from Krause’s (2009) study stated that the activity was a “humbling experience” (p. 114).

Furthermore, this exercise also gives women leaders a better understanding of the board, which is responsible for hiring the university president (American Associations of University Presidents, et al., 1966; Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, 2010). In relation, one study mentioned the inclusion of a presentation between a president and board member, which gave an inside view into the value of this relationship (Weissner, & Sullivan, 2007).

### **Self-Understanding**

As an outcome of the aforementioned, leaders gained a better understanding of themselves and their skill set with which they were able to compare with the requirements of a university president. Many participants reflected on similarities in skills such as confidence, creativity, and authenticity (Weissner, & Sullivan, 2007). One participant in Baltodano, et al.'s (2012) study expressed the following, "It is quite probable that I would not be the leader I have become...I consider OWHE and its ACE Networks an important part of my journey, instilling the how to's, the confidence, and the courage to lead" (p. 73). In addition, leaders were able to reflect on whether they still had the desire of becoming a president, whether good or bad (Weissner, & Sullivan, 2007). One participant recognized her readiness to advance to the next level, "I have to return to my college in a proactive mode and begin to apply for a dean level ASAP...Discovered that I am ready!" (Weissnar, & Sullivan, 2007, p. 104).

### **Discussion**

While it is important to note that leadership development programs are not the sole reason individuals are hired as presidents, they certainly present valuable trainings and are beneficial toward one attaining the presidency (Krause, 2009). In fact, there were a few studies (Bello-de Castro, 2010; Krause, 2009) that asked participants whether leadership development programs aided in their career advancement toward a university presidency. For instance, Krause's (2009) study on women presidents found that eight out of the ten respondents believed attending a program helped them advance. These programs, then, are beneficial because of their content, literature on university presidents, activities, and connections. Furthermore, based upon the existing literature, each of the common components of these programs are even more so important for women aspiring to be presidents.

Research has shown that administrators are not fully prepared when they become a college president (Brown, Martinez, & Daniel, 2002; León, & Nevarez, 2007; Selingo, 2013). In fact, one study revealed that just 44 percent of presidents felt very well prepared for the position (Selingo, 2013). Cohen and March (1986) suggest that presidents try to learn from their experiences, but there still exists a level of ambiguity with those experiences, which results from

a lack of having true experience in the position. Therefore, leadership development programs are avenues through which universities can hire senior level administrators (León, & Nevarez, 2007) because as this literature review shows, these programs address these administrative experiences and this gap in understanding of primary responsibilities through the essential topics covered during program sessions (Anderson, 1997; Bello-de Castro, 2010; Krause, 2009; Madsen, et al., 2012; McDade, 1987; Weissner, & Sullivan, 2007; White, 2012).

Many of the topics addressed during these programs are key topics that present challenges for presidents, as well as ones for which they feel unprepared (Anderson, 1997; Bello-de Castro, 2010; Gagliardi, et al., 2017; Krause, 2009; Madsen, et al., 2012; McDade, 1987; Weissner, & Sullivan, 2007; White, 2012). Gagliardi, et al.'s (2017) ACE study on university presidents found that topics such as fundraising, technology planning, government relations, assessment of student learning, crisis management, governing board, and legal issues were areas for which presidents felt unprepared. All of these except one were identified within this literature review as topics covered during leadership development programs (Anderson, 1997; Bello-de Castro, 2010; Krause, 2009; Madsen, et al., 2012; Weissner, & Sullivan, 2007; White, 2012). In the same light, the ACE report also revealed that presidents were most frustrated over a lack of money and spent the majority of their time on budget or financial management, management of senior team, fundraising, and board relations (Gagliardi, et al., 2017), which were all directly related to key administrative topics from development programs (Anderson, 1997; Bello-de Castro, 2010; Krause, 2009; Madsen, et al., 2012; Weissner, & Sullivan, 2007; White, 2012). (Anderson, 1997; Bello-de Castro, 2010; Krause, 2009; Madsen, et al., 2012; Weissner, & Sullivan, 2007; White, 2012). As a result, these leadership development programs provide administrators an opportunity to gain knowledge about and prepare for these responsibilities.

Furthermore, this literature review illustrates that leadership development programs are avenues through which women can develop mentoring relationships (Anderson, 1997; Bello-de Castro, 2010; Baltodano, et al., 2012; McDade, 1987; Madsen, et al., 2012; Weissner, & Sullivan, 2007; White, 2012), which literature has shown is important for women. While research on mentors and women university presidents is limited (Brown, 2005), there is a vast amount of literature illustrating the positive impact mentoring can have on career advancement (Ballenger, 2010; Brown, et al., 2001; Commodore, et al., 2016; Jackson, & Harris, 2007; Savage, Karp, & Logue, 2004; Umpstead, Hoffman, & Pehrsson, 2015). In the same way, a lack of mentors is a barrier in career advancement (Ehrich, 1994). In fact, Brown, et al. (2001) found in their study that women are more likely to become a president if they receive mentorship. Furthermore,



another study found that the majority of women presidents had one to three mentors throughout their professional careers (Brown, 2005).

Despite this, it is difficult for women to acquire mentoring relationships (Cox, 1994), especially women mentors (Ehrich, 1994; Ortiz-Walters, 2009; Stutz, 2014). However, mentors are extremely valuable because they supply opportunities for networking and acquiring knowledge (Ballenger, 2010; Brown, et al., 2001), as well as the simple aspect of “having someone believe in you” (Ramos, 2008, p. 201). Mentoring allows women to overcome the “good ole’ boy network,” which tends to exclude women, and provides a network through which women can support each other (Rodriguez, 2005). Thus leadership development programs create an environment that enables the creation of mentoring and networking relationships to develop, which could prove difficult for some of these women to accomplish at their home institutions. While networking is important for career mobility, hands-on experience can also be a vital means of preparing for a presidency.

Although there is very limited research that addresses the significance of internships or campus visits, mock interviews, and self-understanding for women university presidents, these areas also contain their own value in career advancement. Internships or campus visits, as shown above, provide furthered opportunities of networking, in a cross-university or cross-departmental sense, new skill and knowledge building, and differing points of view. Mock interviews are a highly beneficial exercise in that they help demystify the presidential hiring process. This also provides participants with a better understanding and view of the board and its involvement with the university and president, especially considering the board is responsible for the hiring and firing of the president (American Association of University Professors, et al., 1966). Finally, presidents must have a firm grasp on their own self-knowledge even prior to their presidency if they are to withstand the challenges and barriers that they must face to achieve such a level of success.

### **Implications and Conclusion**

This study is important not only because it explores the valuable learning that occurs during leadership development programs, but also because it is this learning that provides women with a furthered progression of their skills and an increased probability of becoming a president. This study reinforces the importance of women’s involvement in leadership development programs and highlights the skills that can be gained. While leadership development programs are important catalysts in women being promoted, it is necessary that this professional development continue throughout their career, even to presidency and beyond

(Bello-de Castro, 2010). However, these programs are not a stand-alone means of fully equipping leaders to become university presidents (Anderson, 1997; Baltodano, et al., 2012). Baltodano, et al. (2012) state, “women need more than information and training to successfully advance into leadership positions,” and yet, these leadership programs certainly provide the needed training and opportunities that strengthen a woman’s resume toward becoming a president (p. 74).

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