Leadership in the Postsecondary Political Machine: Lessons for Men from Women

4th Annual COACHE Women’s Leadership Forum
at the 2014 Annual Meeting of the Association of Public Land-grant Universities
Sunday, November 2, 11:45 a.m. to 1:15 p.m.

“What does power require of me beyond a thick skin?” Harvard University President Drew Faust asked this question before a panel of women leaders she assembled in April 2014. “Do women exercise power and, if so, do they choose to or do they have to? Does being a female leader offer someone a special opportunity in any way? Can it ever be an advantage?”

Since the nineteenth century, women scholars in America, self-proclaimed “lone voyagers,” banded together to form alliances and organizations designed just for them; to nurture “protégé chains” where senior women scientists sponsored and mentored younger scholars; and to foster a “sense of being social and academic pioneers, creating a shared commitment to a strong educational mission” (Thelin 2004).

Today, women represent just 23 percent of all college presidents and only 18 percent of the highest-paid presidents across the academy. Their underrepresentation is in part a factor of the pipeline: just 23 percent of full professors are women, with even worse ratios at doctoral-granting universities (Cook & Kim 2012). For women who lead in higher education’s public sector, they find that, on average, men outnumber women three to one in elected state legislatures and two to one on public university boards. As they climb the tenure ladder to administrative heights, women find themselves more and more in a man’s world. Generational shifts, more and stronger networks for women, and recent changes to tenure and promotion policies may eventually yield greater diversity in the president’s office. Until that time, however, female academic leaders must understand and be understood in the male cultures where trusting partnerships are necessary for lasting success.

How can women leaders be their authentic selves in these environments? What are the pitfalls and success strategies? And what should men—who still comprise the vast majority of politicians and college presidents—know to better understand and partner with women in leadership? What can they learn from women about succeeding in this context?

Taking up these questions in a “roundtable” format will be three success stories: Linda Katehi, Chancellor, University of California, Davis; Renu Khator, Chancellor, University of Houston; and Nancy Zimpher, Chancellor, State University of New York.

Representing decades of experience in the arena of public higher education—and plenty of crisis and controversy—our discussants will share the lessons they have learned navigating the male-dominated realms of politically-appointed trustees, public meetings, state legislatures, mayors and local councils. The participants will consider how gender affects their work, whether and how cultures have changed, and how they see them changing in the future. As COACHE’s last three years of women’s dialogs at APLU have proven, the richest perspectives are likely to emerge from the audience’s questions, reactions, thoughts, and shared experiences—of both women and men. Altogether, this open forum will help future leaders, no matter their gender, learn from women who have succeeded in the academy’s highest ranks.
Preliminary questions for panelists

1. How does gender (yours or others’) affect your work?

2. How can women leaders be their authentic selves in the environments in which you operate?

3. What should men in political power know to better understand and partner with women in university leadership? What can they learn from women about succeeding in this context?

4. Have postsecondary political cultures changed since you entered this space? If so, how? And how (if at all) do you see them changing in the future?

Past panelists on the COACHE Forum for Women Leaders

2011:
- Nancy Marlin (San Diego State University)
- Susan Martin (University of Tennessee Knoxville)
- Mary Ellen Mazey (Bowling Green State University)
- Susan Phillips (University at Albany)

2012:
- Judy Genshaft (University of South Florida)
- Gretchen Bataille (American Council on Education)
- Randa Safady (University of Texas System)

2013:
- Sharon Gaber (University of Arkansas)
- Mildred Garcia (California State University Fullerton)
- April Mason (Kansas State University)
- Suzanne Ortega (University of North Carolina)

Resources

