The Working Woman: How Societal Perceptions of Female Leaders Affect Staffing and Generate Obstacles for Women in Higher Education Organizations

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Abstract

The American College President study shows a significant gender gap between men and women in upper-level higher education positions (Cook, 2012). Perceptions of what it means to be a ‘leader’ have been shaped by our social environment, which largely determines what we perceive (and what we ignore) and which channels the ways in which we cognitively process that information (Goode, 2000). This research addresses the inequality within senior leadership in higher education by asking, how societal perceptions of female leaders affect staffing and generate obstacles for women in the workplace, specifically in higher education organizations.

The research methodology for this study consists of a collective case study, in which the goal was to collect qualitative data from both male and female professionals in higher education positions on North Central College’s campus. The results show underlying staffing issues that may contribute to the lack of female leadership in higher education, such as different standards for male and female leaders, negative influence of boards and consultants, and the difficulty of achieving work and family life balance. These findings provide the context for developing recommendations for staffing senior level positions at higher education organizations in the United States.

Keywords: higher education, leadership, staffing
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Identifying the Problem

In recent years, research has shown that a meager 2.2% of the Fortune 500 CEOs are women (Ely, 2011). Women hold about 14% of executive officer positions, 17% of board seats, and constitute 18% of our elected congressional officials (Sellers, 2012). The gap is even worse for women of color, who account for about 12% of the managerial and professional labor force (Ely, 2011). However, other related studies show that women are increasingly outperforming men in the classroom, earning about 57% of the undergraduate and 60% of the master’s degrees in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). If women are becoming the overpowering force on college campuses, why is it that the leadership of these women fails, at times, to transfer over to the workplace? Looking at how our society views women, it can be said that the majority of our perceptions of female leaders may be heavily influenced by our social environment (Goode, 2000). The proposed research question addresses gender inequality within higher education, specifically from a leadership context. By investigating how perceptions of female leaders inhibit women from reaching their full potential as leaders in the higher education field, we can uncover staffing issues and find ways institutions can be a part of a progressive future.

Starting in the nineteenth century, women began taking on a more active role outside of the home. Women’s lives had been evolving, starting certain trends like having fewer children, marrying later, and taking jobs outside the home more often (Collins 96, 2010). During World War II, women were asked to go to work, working on factory assembly lines, which eventually led to a booming economy (Collins 98, 2010). Organizations began to see the value of women’s skills and how they could contribute positively to the workplace. Women began encouraging other women to break away from typical gender roles and become part of the work force.
As the number of women joining the work force continued to increase, society began to adjust to the idea of women having jobs. In 1975, 47% of all American mothers with children under age eighteen worked for pay, and by 2000, the rate had risen to 73% (Bureau of Labor, 2001). The institutionalized concept of the American housewife was being challenged, which ignited the rising trend of changing gender ideologies within marriage and an increase in divorce. The overall divorce rate for married women increased by 45.7% in the 1960 to 1969 span (Krishnan, 1974). This trend continued on and became a prevalent topic in research. Researchers, like Arlie Russell Hochschild, studied the way dual-income families dealt with gender roles and coined the phenomenon of the “second shift”. Hochschild describes the second shift as “You’re on duty at work. You come home, and you’re on duty. Then you go back to work and you’re on duty” (Hochschild 7). It is the idea that one’s home life feels like a second job. This phenomenon has affected families in ways that have started conversations about work and family life balance and has helped researchers understand certain elements of how gender roles create obstacles for women in the workplace.

Women in the higher education field have gone through similar transitions to get to where they are now. In 1840, Catherine Brewer Benson was the first woman to receive her degree from the Georgia Female College, the first college in the world chartered to grant degrees to women, now known as Wesleyan College (Wesleyan College). Out of twenty girls listed in her Junior Class, Catherine was one of eleven who graduated on July 16, 1840 (Wesleyan College). This created the gateway for women who wanted to pursue a college career during a time when education was limited to only men. Currently, women are increasingly outperforming men in the classroom, earning about 57% of the undergraduate and 60% of the master’s degrees in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012).
Then, in 1978 Hanna Holborn Gray became the first president of a major university, the University of Chicago (The University of Chicago News Office, 2014). Since 1978, women in higher education have become an integral part of its development and growth as a field. The percentage of college presidents who are women more than doubled in the 20 years between 1986 and 2006, according to the American Council on Education’s most recent American College President Study of 2,148 colleges (Cook, 2012). Although there has been significant advancement in leadership opportunities for women in higher education, the trends appear to be stalled. Currently, only 26% of institutional leaders are female (Cook, 2012). This percentage has been consistent for the past few years and it could be that the contributions of female higher education professionals are often missed in considerations of tenure, promotion, recognition, salary increase, and leadership succession (Alex-Assensoh, 2012). This oversight could be caused by society’s perceptions of women in leadership positions.

The lack of women in upper-level leadership positions in higher education is an issue that needs to be addressed. In a profession that is often associated with women (75% of U.S. school teachers, not including professors, are female), the number of female college presidents is shockingly low (Brown, 2009). Molly Broad, president of the American Council on Education, says the dearth of female college presidents comes down to the hiring process (Stripling, 2012). The axiom is that women are hired based on what they have done, while men are hired based on their potential (Cook, 2012). By understanding how colleges and universities conduct their hiring processes, we can begin to uncover some of the obstacles that prevent women from achieving these senior-level positions.

Certain problems arise as a result of underrepresentation of women in senior leadership. First, a lack of women in senior positions may indicate to lower-level women that aspiring to an
upper-level position is unattainable (Hoobler, 2011). This may cause women who are highly qualified and experienced not to apply for upper-level positions. From a human resources perspective, this could result in organizations losing the opportunity to capitalize on the skills and talent of a portion of their workforce (Hoobler, 2011). Further, when employees perceive a lack of women in upper management, they may form ideas about the implicit values and culture of the organization, such as it being an “old-boys club,” or discriminatory in its hiring and retention practices (Hoobler, 2011).

Additionally, women’s underrepresentation in upper management is problematic because when there are fewer women in senior leadership positions, women lower in the organizational hierarchy have few, if any, female mentors with experience in upper management (Hoobler, 2011). Since there are already a reduced number of women in leadership roles, it is not possible for the junior women to get enough support unless senior men jump in too (Sandberg 71, 2013). However, it has been found that 64% of men at the level of vice president and above are hesitant to have a one-on-one meeting with a more junior woman (Hewlett, 2010). Therefore, by unraveling some of the complexities of this issue, we can begin to understand how societal perceptions of female leaders may affect staffing and generate obstacles for women in the workplace, specifically in higher education organizations.
Methodology

The methodology for this research consists of a collective case study, which incorporated a semi-structured interview. The semi-structured interview included 5-10 open-ended questions that dealt with leadership and staffing concepts. By utilizing a semi-structured interview method, the end goal was to collect qualitative data from a total of 7 male and female professionals (4 female, 3 male) in higher education positions on North Central College’s campus. In addition, participants completed a 10 question survey on Survey Monkey prior to the interview. The survey included questions that related to leadership and staffing issues at North Central College, specifically. The survey was used in order to help the professionals to begin to think about leadership qualities and how society’s perceptions of leaders may or may not affect the way people think about female leaders in the higher education field.

The sample consisted of higher education professionals from a small liberal arts college. The sample was selected based on access and the rapport that has been built between these professionals and the researcher. The individuals in the sample varied in position level, age, gender, and years of experience in the higher education field. The sample provided knowledgeable information related to the concepts of staffing in higher education organizations and insights on the lack of female leadership in upper-level positions.
Leadership

Leadership in higher education can take on many forms. Leadership can vary from para-professionals to middle management to senior level positions. Upper-level management is what we come to find as the core administration of a higher education organization. This includes, but is not limited to, college presidents, vice presidents, and deans. Research shows that leadership traits can be categorized by gender perceptions and stereotypes (Korabik, 1990). The way in which a male or female chooses to lead can be influenced by or hindered by these generalizations, as shown by previous research and by the research participants in this study. It is likely that in order to be successful in a managerial capacity, women may pattern their behavior after that of their male colleagues (Korabik, 1990). This then leads to question what specifically constitutes a person as a leader.

Trying to define the term “leader” can be challenging, especially when most people hold individual views on what a leader truly is. Even when looking up the definition of “leader”, one is greeted with multiple possibilities. The dictionary states that a leader is a person who has commanding authority or influence (Merriam-Webster), however, according theorists claim that leadership is about creating vision and strategy, communicating, and motivating action (Kotter, 2012). Interviewing higher education professionals at North Central helped to identify character traits they deem essential to being a leader in higher education. There were certain traits that were repeated among the participants. Yet there were also some differences between the responses from the male and female professionals.

When identifying the most repeated leadership characteristics listed by the professionals, all of the participants indicated that a leader must be honest, have a vision, and or be ethical. Being honest and ethical provide a strong foundation for a promising college president,
according to the participants. As one North Central professional stated, “A leader should be unswerving, knowing there are areas where there is a line you should not cross and will not cross as a leader. You cannot lie, cheat, treat people poorly or talk about people behind their backs. No one would ever trust you as a leader.” This is important when it comes to leading any type of organization, including colleges and universities, because leaders often come across ethical dilemmas that can affect their leadership abilities and professional reputation. For example, college presidents are generally responsible for fundraising, budgets, community relations, strategic planning (Cook, 2012), faculty, and staff. Being responsible for an institution can expose college presidents to situations where their ethics and honesty will be tested. In extreme cases, college leaders will be terminated for behaving otherwise. For example, in 2011, there was a news frenzy involving Graham B. Spanier, who was fired as president of Pennsylvania State University for covering up child sex abuse allegations involving a former assistant football coach, Jerry Sandusky (Stripling, 2013). A college leader has a duty to be honest and ethical in their work, otherwise their leadership capabilities are jeopardized and they fail to lead their organization in a positive direction.

Additionally, participants had much to say about the connection between vision and leadership. For example, one professional stated, “A good leader is never sitting back. A leader should always be restless for something better and be able to teach their staff to be restless for something better. Some people honor being consistent, but that’s bureaucracy.” There has to be a certain degree of vision and drive to move an organization forward that will allow a leader to succeed in their role. For example, North Central’s president, Dr. Troy Hammond addressed part of his vision for the college in his Inaugural Address in spring of 2013. He stated:
There are three crossroads, in fact, that I would like to touch on this afternoon. If we approach them with creativity, integrity and tenacity—as we always have in the past—then we’ll have an unprecedented opportunity to shine, to make a profound difference in the lives of our students and the well-being of our region and our nation. We’ll have the chance to lead the way from a promising start into a brilliant future (President Hammond Inaugural Address, 2013).

Throughout the speech he focused on the need to lead with vision for a “brilliant future” for North Central College. By speaking in these terms, he reinforces the perception that he is a capable leader for the college. For other college presidents, their perspectives on vision could mean finding ways to increase retention and persistence or developing ideas for new facilities that will be needed on campus in the future.

Apart from honesty, vision, and ethics, there were some differences in male and female preference in regard to other characteristics of an effective leader. The female professionals identified traits such as “concern or care for others” and “creativity” as being important leadership traits; whereas the male professionals focused more on traits dealing with “motivation” and “skill”. For example, a male participant in this study stated that it is essential for a leader to be motivated in such a way that they are constantly thinking “where am I taking this department?” or “what about 20 years from now?”.

From a female perspective, being a leader and having a genuine concern or care for others could be part of society’s gender role conditioning. Sandberg cites research stating that we believe not only that women are nurturing, but that they should be nurturing above all else (Sandberg 43, 2013). This type of expectation could influence the way in which women choose to lead. Looking at these leadership traits and understanding how each gender places value on
certain types over others leads to a discussion of common perceptions and stereotypes of female leaders in society today.

As we look at the 25/75% (Cook, 2012) female to male college president ratio that currently exists, we must try to understand some of the layers that contribute to these statistics. Gender stereotyping seems to account for why women are often overlooked for upper-level administrative positions at colleges and universities. According to a business study, female candidates are allegedly passed up for promotions based on a conscious or unconscious belief that women do not have what it takes to lead men (Mason, 2009). Some organizations feel that gender discrimination is not part of their workplace environment, but perhaps they are just not aware of it. Research participants in this study were able to list quite a few stereotypes they knew of female leaders. Also, many of them admitted to witnessing some of the following stereotypes at their past and present institutions. For example, participants addressed the differences between an aggressive versus passive leader. The participants claimed that a strong, assertive female leader can be perceived at times as “not very friendly” or “not well liked”. However, a weaker, more passive female leader can come across as “not intelligent” or “lacks credibility”. Both extremes are real and the perceptions associated with these character traits can portray women in a negative disposition.

The participants also shared stereotypes such as, “women are emotional and not logical”, “non-collaborative”, “female leaders often have cliques”, and “being compassionate or caring for others is a sign of weakness”. Gender stereotypes such as these can impact the way others view women as leaders and undermine their ability to succeed. It is interesting to compare the answers from each participant to what the rest of society thinks. Sheryl Sandberg, Chief Operating Officer at Facebook, writes that if a woman is competent, she does not seem nice enough. If a
woman seems really nice, she is considered more nice than competent (Sandberg 43, 2013). There seem to be double standards for women and it makes it all the more challenging for them to progress in their careers. Sandberg goes on to say that although acting in stereotypically feminine ways makes it difficult to reach for the same opportunities as men, defying expectations and reaching for those opportunities leads to being judged as undeserving and selfish (Sandberg 43, 2013). This can discourage women from behaving outside of what society deems is appropriate behavior for women in leadership roles. Women may also feel discouraged to pursue leadership positions if they see that men do not have to face the same obstacles in order to be considered a leader.

Also, participants identified some stereotypes that stood out, such as “women are afraid” or “women go home early because they have other responsibilities”. Women might be perceived as being afraid or not being brave in situations where they are responsible for confronting their employees or having to terminate an employee. This mindset is caused by gender stereotypes that claim that women are too emotional or too nice to be able to handle these types of tasks. But, just because society thinks this way does not make it true. For example, a female participant in this study indicated that she has witnessed many of her male colleagues “cry at work” or “stomp out of meetings”. Most would have expected her to behave this way, but the stereotypes do not always apply.

Additionally, other research studies show women often experience scrutiny for taking time off or leaving work early (Ely, 2011). In the book The Second Shift, Arlie Russell Hochschild tells the story of married couple, Peter and Nina Tanagawa. Peter was in book sales and Nina worked in personnel for a large corporation. Both were serious in their careers, but the pressure of running the household and handling various responsibilities at the company lied on
Nina’s shoulders. She had requested to work part-time versus full-time in order to be able to juggle both aspects of her life, but then fellow employees gossiped about how “serious” Nina was about her job (Hochschild 95). The longer your hours, they reasoned, the more serious and committed you were (Hochschild 95). Her husband, Peter, disliked Nina working so much, yet her supervisor felt she was not a committed employee if she cut down on her hours at work. It leaves readers wondering why women are often questioned about their dedication to their jobs, while men are not usually questioned at all if they have to leave early from work or if they have to take time off. One of the female professionals interviewed indicated that she had experienced passive remarks in the past from colleagues about leaving early from work for certain family matters. Her reaction was that, “Men think we cheat the system or institution because we have to leave to tend to other responsibilities at home or outside of work. But, did they come in to work at 5am? No, didn’t think so.” It seems like women have to explain themselves in order to make their claim valid when leaving early or taking time off. Although they are not cheating the system, to others who do not witness the efforts these women put forth to succeed in their organizations, it may seem like they are.

Similarly, in regards to the higher education field, female college presidents are forced to face questions and criticism on their leadership style, as well as their “seriousness” to the job. Aside from observing their work schedules, people tend to judge their capabilities due to the way they look and what people expect from them versus their qualifications for the position. In the article, “40 Years of Title IX: Leadership Matters for Women in Academe”, the author claims that being a female academic or administrator is a lot like wearing a suit that was made for someone else (Alex-Assenoh, 2012). This can be frustrating for many women who want to be college leaders, but are dealt with this unfortunate circumstance. The author continues by saying,
“I have witnessed the many ways in which most institutions are blind to those ill-fitted suits, to the realities of the 21st-century woman and the dual roles that men and women play in today’s society” (Alex-Assenoh, 2012). It is unfortunate to see that we still have to partake in conversations about gender equality within the workplace. By taking a step back, we realize that it could be that the stereotypes of women and perceptions of female leaders still hold true in our culture. They are ingrained in our society (Goode, 2000), which concludes that these perceptions continue to affect women who want to climb the ladder in the higher education field, along with every other industry.

**Other Barriers to Obtaining Senior Leadership**

With the progress of women entering the workforce, there has been a struggle to finding balance between work and family life. In 1960, 62% of American households were made up of a bread-winner dad and stay-at-home mom with one or more children (Collins, 2010). By the middle of the 1980s, only about 10% of American households held this type of structure (Collins, 2010). Now in 2014, the percentage continues to decline and it shows a sign of progress for women in the workplace. However, female leaders in higher education, along with other women, continue to share some challenges they find when trying to be both a leader in the workplace and a leader in their household.

When interviewing the higher education professionals, it was surprising to hear their thoughts on the issue of work-life balance. From one professional’s perspective, work-life “harmony” is a much more realistic term to use when describing work and family life. The participants described work-life harmony as more flexible and attainable. For example, the professionals claim that balance implies a correct answer. Using harmony allows the scale to tip a little bit where an individual’s energy needs to be that day. Some days a professional may need
to work late at the office, whereas some days there needs to be more focus on family or friends. From another professional’s perspective, work-life balance is simply seen as an excuse for women in the workplace to use, to say, “Don’t expect a lot from me” or “Don’t make me work very hard”. Both perspectives are extremely powerful and in some cases, participants mentioned that expressing the challenges of work and family life can result in a woman not getting hired and or puts them at risk of losing their job. In this study, female participants in upper-level positions were not advocates of work-life balance, yet those in middle-management positions saw it as a normal part of their lives. Perhaps this contrast could be contributed to the experiences that these upper-level administrators have had in the past. For example, one participant, as she was eating her lunch, stated that she felt like the worst person in regard to balancing both work and family life, but that women in mid-level positions in higher education have the hardest time with work-life balance. Women in mid-level positions are generally working long hours, helping at school functions, or addressing emergencies on campus. They are also either working on advancing their degrees, starting a family, or in the pursuit of finding a partner. There are also other work and family demands that many experience and it can be overwhelming. This is where work-life balance can become a hindrance for women who seek advancement in the higher education field.

A survey done by the American Council on Education examined work-life balance amongst college presidents, with results showing only 63% of female presidents surveyed were married, compared with 89% of their male counterparts (Mason, 2009). Generally, 24% of women presidents are either divorced or were never married and only 7% of male presidents fall into these categories (Mason, 2009). Additionally, it was found that female presidents have more education than their male counterparts but are much less likely to have a spouse and children at
home (Alex-Assensoh, 2012). It seems that women in upper-level positions experience greater pressure to sacrifice aspects of their lives, like marriage and children, in order to see themselves succeed or advance in their careers. From the male perspective, it would seem as if men have the best of both worlds, so to speak. They can have the career and the family too. A male participant in this study indicated that he had found that having a family has forced him to have to find a better sense of harmony because more people are depending on him. He continued by saying that “having the responsibility to know you have multiple roles you have to fill helps you understand your constraints”. Yet, if it were that simple we would see more women in leadership positions. It seems that the layers of missed opportunities, family obligations, and small and large slights build up over the years, slowing a woman’s career progress compared with men (Mason, 2009).

Theses sacrifices can impact the way entry-level women in higher education view their likelihood of advancing in the field. For example, a participant in this study shared a story of her experience at a student affairs leadership conference. She attended a panel of all female chief student affairs officers from colleges and universities from across the United States. During the panel, an audience member stood up to ask the panel a question. The audience member was a young female professional, who was pregnant at the time, and in an entry-level student affairs position. She spoke to the panel, saying that she noticed that none of the panel members had children and that a majority of them were single. She felt passionate about her career in student affairs, but due to her pregnancy she was unsure if she would ever reach the success that the panel members had experienced. The young professional asked if any of the other women in the room had children and only two women stood up. Only two. Her hopes of continuing on as a higher education professional and having a family were quickly shattered. Helping women overcome this barrier may increase the likelihood of female college presidents in the future.
In addition to work-life balance, discrimination can be an obstacle women face when trying to advance in their careers. Many organizations over the past years have incorporated training programs that teach employees about issues like discrimination, sexual harassment and how to prevent such behavior, yet these behaviors are still prevalent in the workplace (Sandberg 2013). Women face real obstacles in the professional world, including blatant and subtle sexism, discrimination, and sexual harassment (Sandberg, 2013). The majority of the research participants in this study agreed that discrimination still affects women in higher education.

From the interviews conducted, it was found that many women in middle to upper-level administrative positions in higher education think that there are different expectations of men and women in similar positions. For example, one female participant indicated that from her experience in the field, she had witnessed instances where “if a woman makes a mistake, it ruins the rest of her potential. But if a man makes the same mistake, it is overlooked”. A male participant shared his experience in this type of situation. He claimed that he had experienced different treatment due to his gender at his previous organization. There was an underlying tone that was overt and covert pertaining to the expectations of his position and his gender. For example, at times his fellow colleagues would explicitly tell him he was not a good fit to the organization due to his gender. These different sets of expectations for men and women may create a harmful workplace environment, contributing to the hindrance of a woman’s access to leadership positions.

Additionally, another female participant pointed out that in her experience, as an individual advances in higher education, the expectations become harder because it is expected that they are going to be a “white male”. This could be a reason why we see even fewer college presidents of color, in addition to gender being a factor. For example, women of color are 17% of
all sitting women presidents, but only 10.7% of those recently hired (Cook, 2012). Studies show
that racial and ethnic minorities are diminishing as a share of all presidents, most being African
American or Hispanic (Cook, 2012). It is interesting to see the trends between women of color
and the type of environment they lead. Most Hispanic college presidents tend to lead two-year
community and technical colleges, while African American college presidents lead four-year
colleges and master’s universities (Cook, 2012). These trends may help identify where further
problems lie within the issue of leadership opportunities for women in higher education,
especially for women of color.

Finally, when speaking to higher education professionals, it became evident that having
mentors in the field has an effect on an individual’s success. These mentors are typically
individuals who have been where people want to go and they are what people want to become. A
mentor can be a knowledgeable resource and can provide information on how to achieve career
advancement. Unfortunately for women, men often have an easier time acquiring and
maintaining these relationships (O’Brien, 2010). Molly Broad, President of the American
Council on Education, stated in an interview that tips on navigating the interview process and
news about job openings tend to stay among the insiders: men. It [isn’t] called the ‘old boys’
network’ for nothing; it applies to academia, not just Wall Street (Brown, 2009). If women have
limited to no access to mentors or networks, it puts them at a disadvantage when trying to attain
senior leadership positions within higher education organizations. A survey of women in
corporate leadership positions by Catalyst, an organization that works toward the advancement
of women, found that 41% of respondents cited “exclusion from informal networks” as a barrier
to their overall advancement (Mason, 2009).

The lack of networks and mentors and its effects are especially true for women of color.
From the professionals interviewed, one female participant stated that “there are not many people that look like me [at North Central], so it is good to find a similar group of people that you can ask questions to and rely on”. According to an article in “Women in Higher Education”, out of the 26% of female presidents, 34% are African American women, 38.7% are Hispanic women and 20% are Asian American (Cook, 2012). This may seem progressive, however, women of color are 17% of all sitting women presidents, but only 10.7% of those recently hired (Cook, 2012), as previously mentioned. Having access to networks and mentors can create new opportunities for women who want to be leaders and who want to help others develop in to leaders as well.

Therefore, we see that among the stereotypes and perceptions of female leaders lay other obstacles for women to obtain senior leadership. These other obstacles include work-life balance, sex discrimination, and lack of networks and mentors. Being aware of these factors throughout the staffing process may create more effective ways to go about hiring a new college president.

**Staffing**

Now, trying to understand the impact these obstacles have on women in senior leadership positions in higher education can be achieved by reviewing staffing practices. The Human Resources discipline has certain functional areas. These functional areas include Planning, Staffing, Development and Training, Performance Management, Compensation and Benefits, and Employee Relations. Staffing is just one of the main components of Human Resources that was focused on in this study. It includes three sub-functions which are recruitment, selection and retention. According to *Staffing Organizations*, staffing is a mutual process by which the individual and the organization become linked in an employment relationship (Heneman, 2012). In order to understand the staffing process and how it corresponds to leadership, it was important
to break down each sub-function in order to identify its contribution to the lack of female leadership in higher education.

**Recruitment**

When recruiting for a new college president or upper-level administrator, most institutions rely on their Boards of Trustees, search consultants, search committees or all of the above to find their new leader. There are usually three goals during recruitment that must be fulfilled, 1) having an effect on the number of applicants who apply, 2) having an effect on the types of people who apply, and 3) having an effect on the likelihood that applicants will take the job if it is offered to them (Heneman, 2012). After doing the research, it seems that some factors that determine the outcome of each goal can depend on the type of language used in the job description, the types of people who are on the boards, and the types of people who lead the search committees. During the recruitment phase, boards and search committees try to attract people to fill the position of college president, as well as to separate those who can and will do the job from those who cannot and will not do the job (Heneman, 2012).

In order to attract potential candidates, organizations use job descriptions to identify the tasks, duties and responsibilities, and necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities of the job. Job descriptions can provide a brief overview of what the position will look like. According to the American College President Study, presidents cited fundraising, budgets, community relations, and strategic planning as the areas that occupy most of their time (Cook, 2012). College presidents must be able to take on these various responsibilities and perform in the best interest of the college. By analyzing job descriptions at North Central College, it was found that it is important to be aware of the type of language used in the context of higher education job descriptions for senior leadership positions. As a way to further investigate, the opportunity arose
to see if gender-charged wording would appear on these types of job descriptions and if so, whether it had the potential to impact the type of candidate attracted.

During this study, job descriptions for the positions of President, Vice President, and Dean of Students, provided by the Office of Human Resources at North Central College, were reviewed. After looking more in depth at the wording used in the job descriptions, it became clear that the language may suggest gender preference by including traits that can be perceived as feminine or masculine. For example, in the category “Distinguishing Characteristics”, in the Dean of Students job description, it was indicated that “it is essential that this individual have a genuine interest in and concern for the people they serve…and it is essential that the individual in this position consistently display empathy and compassion”.

*Excerpt taken from Dean of Students job description at North Central College

Although these character traits can be demonstrated by both male and female candidates, according to the interviews with higher education professionals, only the female participants mentioned “empathy”, “compassion”, and “genuine concern for others” in their response to the question, “how do you define the term ‘leader’?” The terms “having a genuine concern for others” were also listed in the Dean of Students job description.

*Excerpt taken from Dean of Students job description at North Central College

Subconsciously, this type of language could influence women in applying for the position versus men. For when the male participants in this research study were asked the same question, “how
do you define the term ‘leader’?”, the majority indicated traits such as “visionary” or “honesty” to being most important. Although there was limited access to the President and other officers of the college’s job descriptions, due to college confidentiality by-laws, it was interesting to find that the duties listed did not mention traits like “genuine concern for others”, but instead indicated a greater need for vision and competence.

For example, in the President’s job description, it focuses more on task-oriented responsibilities, like preparing the annual budget and recommending promotions. The brief job description leaves emotions out it and is strictly business. It seems that as the level of position increases, the more masculine the wording or language in the job description becomes. This in turn may determine the type of person who applies for positions such as President, Vice President, or Dean of Students. It is set up so that men may be more likely to apply for the position of President, while women may be more likely to apply for middle-management positions. According to Sandberg’s research, our stereotype of men holds that they are providers, decisive, and driven. Our stereotype of women holds that they are caregivers, sensitive, and communal (Sandberg, 2013). These stereotypes undoubtedly contribute to the way language is interpreted in these types of job descriptions and the way men and women perceive the wording, consciously or subconsciously.
Selection

Now, imagine that all around a long, wooden conference table sit members of the cabinet and board of trustees. These individuals are some of the most influential people that take part in decision-making processes for higher education institutions. Imagine observing each member, one by one, and finding that the majority of them look alike in gender, race, and age. It was made clear from the research participants that the members of these boards and committees are part of the explanation as to why we see more male than female college presidents.

When discussing the goals of staffing, it is apparent that powerful structures exist and are institutionalized in colleges and universities. These structures, resulting in Board of Trustee members, influence the number of people and the type of people who apply for upper-level administrative positions at a college or university. Looking at current patterns, today’s typical college leader is a married white male with a doctorate in education (Stripling, 2012). This is what college campuses have come to know and it is why we must take a step back and analyze what the people recruiting and hiring college presidents. Most institutions, including North Central, have a Board of Trustees that elect a President of the College are doing. Some colleges also use a search consultant in their presidential search and hiring processes for presidents. The share of presidential searches between 2007 and 2011 that used a search consultant was about 80% (Cook, 2012).

Now, if we look at the type of people who serve on these boards and committees, typically we see a structural pattern. The vast majority are white, male, and of a certain age group varying from late 50s to early 60s (Cook, 2012). These individuals have the power to decide who their next college president will be and, due to structure inequality, it seems that their choosing is not always random. Structure inequality indicates that some people will consistently
be in one structure (Kerbo, 2012), just like society has come to see mainly white males in presidential roles in higher education. This leads to some explanation as to why there is a lack of women in higher education administrative leadership roles.

Also during selection, some boards enlist the help of search consultants to participate with their presidential search committees. Search consultants provide expert hiring advice and assist throughout the staffing process (AESC, 2014). However, it has been found that incorporating search consultants can skew the results of the staffing process. For example, they have the ability to recommend people for the position and can imagine what the next president will be like. Yet, the use of consultants does not necessarily correlate with an increase in diversity placement (Stripling, 2012). Together the school’s search committee and the search consultant have to commit to diverse pools of candidates (Stripling, 2012), yet it seems that these groups of individuals tend to hire those who are most similar to them. A female participant in this study stated that, “More than just what society has come to decide what a college president looks like, there are structures in place that teach you to perpetrate the system. In the end, I think people hire people who are like them.” This could be why the pattern continues today. If most boards and committees are made up of white males of a certain age group then they may be more likely to hire a candidate that is also white, male, and of their age group. If boards and committees had more women or minority representation, there may be more openness and we would likely see more diversity among U.S. college presidents.

This does not mean that search committees are explicitly discriminating against candidates based on gender, but it does mean that there should be a level of awareness when recruiting for a new college president at any given institution. The idea that people hire people like them relates to trying to get a fit between the job and the person. According to the American
Sociological Review, studies show that employers sought candidates who were not only competent but also culturally similar to themselves (Rivera, 2012). Evaluators described fit as being one of the three most important criteria they used to assess candidates in job interviews (Luscombe, 2012). If fit is highly valued, it leaves us to wonder what makes a male candidate more desirable than a female candidate for the job of president or administrator of a higher education organization. It goes back to how men and women are perceived as leaders. Associating certain traits with certain genders makes it harder to picture a woman as a leader of a college when the higher education culture portrays a college leader as a man. In addition to perceptions, members of these boards and committees look for someone they can see themselves spending a lot of time with. Since these boards and committees work closely with the president, they begin to think about who they can imagine spending time with at fundraisers, board meetings or networking events. In turn, this affects the selection process and continues through retention.

**Retention**

For organizations without a track record of advancing female leaders, retaining their top female executive candidates is likely to be a challenge (Valerio, 2011). Women who seek advancement in their careers, but fail to see it in their current organization, are more likely to take other opportunities elsewhere (Valerio, 2011). This is where retention can become an issue for higher education organizations. During an interview with an upper-level female professional, she suggested that there is a certain phenomenon occurring among women in middle management within higher education that is affecting the retention of qualified and experienced women. This phenomenon can be recognized as a “pinching point”, in which women who hold mid-level positions in higher education reach a point in their careers where they are asking
themselves, “Why am I doing this?”. According to the professional, many women in this situation are not getting paid very much, want to start a family, and or are not seeing many opportunities for advancement. So, they start to evaluate their options and many end up leaving the higher education field to pursue a different career altogether.

During this “pinching point”, women have a difficult time seeing what the future could hold if they persevere through the low salary and the long hours. Additionally, the professional went on to say that many women in this field never get to the point where they do not have to work so many hours, are making a decent wage, and figure out they are a good leader. It seems impossible to them. This phenomenon could be why today’s typical college president is over the age of 60. According to the American Council on Education, 58% of college presidents are over 60 (Cook, 2012). As colleges and universities face a growing number of internal and external challenges, governing boards and search committees are likely looking for more experienced leaders (Cook, 2012), leaving women in middle management at a disadvantage. As more women are deciding to leave the higher education field, colleges and universities are missing out on leadership talent. This in turn is reducing the pipeline of future talent (Valerio, 2011).

**Recommendations for Higher Education Organizations**

With all of the barriers existing within higher education and in the workplace, there need to be ways for women to overcome these obstacles in order to be able to advance in the higher education field. By having women lead colleges and universities, it opens the door to women in a way that is not promoting women preferentially, but promoting the organization to being less likely to accept stereotypes that equate leadership traits with male socialization (Cook, 2012). Creating this type of visibility as top leaders will also help break down other people’s stereotypes of women (Cook, 2012) and their roles as leaders. In order to incorporate these ideals, higher
education organizations could consider changing their workplace structure, implementing networking and mentoring programs, as well as being more conscious of discrimination throughout the staffing process.

First, by changing the workplace structure, organizations will be addressing the issue of work-life balance. They can develop ways to accommodate work-life balance, along with providing opportunities for internal advancement within organizations as a way to help women in higher education attain top leadership positions. For example, offering flexible work schedules and family-friendly work environments could result in attracting qualified individuals and maintaining retention amongst women. According to *Organizational Dynamics*, organizations should work to create an organizational culture where family diversity is valued and appreciated (Hoobler, 2011). The author continues to say that while organizations should work to eradicate the family-work bias through training and accountability, organizations might consider celebrating the intersection of family and work (Hoobler 155, 2011). Many of the research participants in this study agreed that organizations that offer that type of environment tend to attract better qualified applicants to the organization. One participant stated, “People want to work more for those types of organizations because work and family become intertwined. It is not a bad thing, as long as you are finding success in both roles”. Traditionally, trying to separate work and family can create tension for employees, causing employees to leave their organization. Yet, organizations can change their mindset and practices in order to ensure the ability to attract and retain future female leaders (Valerio 4, 2011). These changes may encourage women to seek promotions or greater responsibilities within their organizations knowing that they will have the flexibility to juggle both work and family. This could encourage more women in higher education to become college presidents and set a different standard in the
In addition to changing workplace structure, organizations can implement networking and mentoring programs that can help women gain the type of support and guidance they need to advance in their careers. One study showed that women who found mentors through formal programs were 50% more likely to be promoted than women who found mentors on their own (Ibarra, 2010). The most effective formal programs help educate men about the need to mentor women and establish guidelines for appropriate behavior (Sandberg 73, 2013). Higher education organizations could be more cognizant of the benefits of implementing such programs. Many colleges and universities have mentoring programs for undergraduate students interested in higher education, yet fail to provide similar programs for professionals who are already in the field. The types of professional relationships built within these programs could serve as a ladder for women to succeed and obtain the type of senior leadership that they seek.

Finally, if higher education organizations become more aware of this issue and are conscious of potential discriminatory staffing practices, then they may be more likely to reevaluate their staffing process and see how it helps increase the number of women in leadership positions in their organization. According to Sandberg, talking can transform minds, which can transform behaviors, which can transform institutions (Sandberg 148, 2013). Creating awareness on the underrepresentation of women in senior leadership positions in higher education can start the conversations that are necessary in order to bring about change. Colleges and universities have the responsibility as an organization to be aware of any discrimination in their staffing practices, as well as explicit or implicit cases of sexism and sexual harassment. If these issues become ignored, they risk losing valued staff and may gain a negative reputation that will detract women from wanting to work at that organization. This is why it is useful to educate
oneself and others on the issue and commit to equity at the highest levels (Alex-Assensoh, 2012). According to research, higher education institutions should think about integrating Title IX into everything they do – research, teaching, service, administration, and professional organizations (Alex-Assensoh, 2012). Title IX protects people from discrimination based on sex in education programs and activities that receive federal financial assistance (U.S. Department of Justice). By setting this example for other institutions, it may lead to greater awareness and greater change within the higher education culture. Not only should organizations be aware of the underrepresentation of women in senior leadership positions, but women should be aware of it too. Many of the female participants in this study indicated that “women should not ignore the fact that there may be gender stereotypes at play”. By being aware of potential barriers and challenges, women have the opportunity to figure out ways to change or break down the barriers that may be in their way from achieving a leadership position, like a college presidency.

**Future Expansion on this Research**

After going through the research process, having a limited time span to complete the project caused the research to focus solely on professionals at North Central College. A sample size of approximately 7 interviewees (4 female, 3 male) may appear to be small, however, even with the limitation on the time frame given to complete this project the professionals’ insights provided quality data. For future expansion on this research, it could include speaking to college presidents from both private and public universities. It could also involve surveying college campuses to gain their perceptions of what a college leader looks like to them. Other angles could involve interviewing only female college presidents and seeing how the staffing practices at their organizations differ from other institutions with male college presidents. There are many
different ways that this research can be expanded on, but the importance is to understand why this issue is significant and how we can overcome it one study at a time.

**Final Thoughts**

As we can see, there is still work to be done in order to increase the number of female college presidents in the United States. The higher education culture has consistently been male driven, yet the 26% of current female college presidents (Cook, 2012) have the opportunity to influence those in the field to start conversations about this topic. As mentioned before, perceptions of female leaders along with language choice, work-life balance, lack of networks and mentors, and discrimination are obstacles that are preventing women in higher education from advancing in their careers. In order to overcome some of these barriers, higher education organizations may consider changing their workplace structure by incorporating flexible work hours and a family friendly environment. They may also choose to implement networking and mentoring programs for professionals. These programs could provide professionals the guidance and knowledge needed to advance in the higher education field. Colleges and universities may also decide to reevaluate their staffing practices. This can help higher education organizations identify the weaknesses found in their staffing process, such as areas of potential discrimination and bias. Overall, this study helps unveil some of the barriers in higher education that are in place for women. By identifying the areas that need improving, we can begin to use this conversation as a foundation for change.
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Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, 20 U.S.C. §1681


