

# Challenges Facing Female Department Chairs in Contemporary Higher Education

Emerging Research and Opportunities



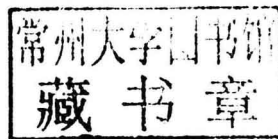
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# Challenges Facing Female Department Chairs in Contemporary Higher Education:

## Emerging Research and Opportunities

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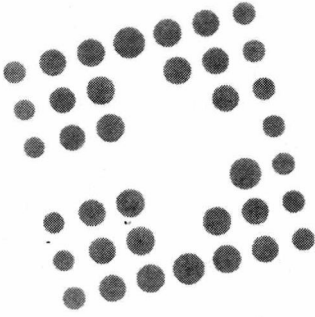
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# Preface

*Think Like a Boss*  
*Dreams Don't Work Unless You Do*  
*Find Yourself and Be That.*  
**BOSS**  
- *Fifth Harmony*

Unlike acclaimed Japanese author, Haruki Murakami (2014), who famously described his initial conviction that he could write a novel as something that fluttered down from the sky and that he caught in his hands, the idea of writing this book wasn't at all like that for us. When we first became department chairs, we certainly didn't think about writing a book. We were doing all we could to keep our heads above water, learn the job, and clean up messes that were left by our predecessors. We were surprised at how little training or resources were out there to help newly minted chairs. We did receive help from colleagues who were current and former chairs, and our Dean helped as he was able to, or as he thought we needed it. But for the most part, we were on our own to swim upstream, in category six rapids, without a paddle...or a boat...or a life preserver. But we did have each other, thankfully.

After a few years, and a learning curve that looked like a straight, vertical, line, we realized that we had actually learned some valuable lessons. Lessons that might be useful to other department chairs, and we joked about how we should write a book. Pretty soon, the jokes started turning into serious, reflective, conversations and we realized, that yes, we really should write a book. So when the opportunity to create this Research Insight came up, we jumped at the chance. Initially, we proposed writing a more general publication, directed at all department chairs (because there is precious little out there written for any of us). However, the editorial staff responded to our proposal and really liked one of our chapters in particular – Advice Especially for Female Department Chairs – and requested that we make our entire book about the uniqueness of being a woman department chair in higher

education. When we received the request, we realized that the editors were right. For as little as is written for department chairs in the academy overall, there really isn't anything specifically designed for women. And indeed, the particularities (and peculiarities?) of being a female in higher education have their own special brand of subtlety, and sometimes, overt, challenges. Hopefully, we've written something that contains the special sauce to help navigate those adversities and at the very least, give other women department chairs something to relate to. As you read this, if we get at least one nod of the head, an "mmmhmmm," and an "I hear you sista," then we know we've hit the nail on the head with this book. (Please email us if you say or do any of those things. A fist bump emoji would be appreciated too!)

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Murakami, H. (2014). *Introduction to Wind/Pinball*. New York, NY: Knopf.

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# Chapter 1

## Looking Back

*Well behaved women rarely make history. - Laurel Thatcher Ulrich*

Hillary Rodham Clinton became the first female to win the Presidential Nomination of a major American Political Party. After all the Delegate votes were cast, she declared via video (Bloomberg Politics, 2016), “We just put the biggest crack in that glass ceiling yet.” There are more glass ceilings yet to be cracked beyond the political arena. Academia still presents leadership challenges for women and it is our purpose, in this book, to identify those challenges, share lived experiences, and propose possible solutions for making leadership in the Academy more viable. Although it is hard to know the impact of our book, it is our hope to see increased cracks in the ceiling of higher education.

In this book, we seek to examine a long standing societal problem, the limited number of women in leadership positions. In particular, our goal is to study factors in the disparity of women and men in leadership positions in higher education. While we will focus on our experiences as “Department Chairs,” we acknowledge there continues to be a gender gap in all levels of leadership in higher education. In this book, we will share our experiences and provide some historical context. Our intentions are to recap historical context, values, and beliefs and contribute some new understandings and context to the existing body of knowledge. In this chapter, we hope to contextualize this social issue in academia with research and by outlining some of our underlying beliefs and values.

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## DISCLAIMER

Before delving too far into our conversations, we do want to put forth a disclaimer that we are sharing our lived experiences. We have done a rather thorough review of the literature and recognize our journey is not an anomaly to most women in leadership positions; however, we acknowledge our sharing comes from our two lived experiences. We strive to provide an open and sincere dialogue in order to provide our sisters with awareness, insight, confirmation, or affirmations regarding the labyrinth women navigate. Through this research and reflection we are engaging in what Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky (2009, p.7) refer to as “getting on the Balcony” and above the “dance floor” so we can glean a more distanced and informed perspective.

Heidi and Denise have navigated through many obstacles and challenges, gender included. As reflective practitioners, we have looked at those barriers and sought to construct meaning and gain a greater understanding of them. Hopefully by sharing our stories, experiences, and lessons learned we can inspire, support, and inform others. We believe there is a critical need for women in leadership to share their journeys through the web of challenges and celebrations of successes.

## HOW DID WE GET HERE?

We have served as “Department Chairs” for nearly a decade. Our official titles are Coordinators; however, we essentially serve as Department Chairs within the structure of Institutions of Higher Education (IHE). Approximately ten years ago our Teacher Education Programs, at a crossroads, needed to make shift happen in order to earn accreditation. Our former Dean established annual retreats, away from campus, to allow us to focus on the work at hand and minimize daily distractions. As a result of those retreats, every one of our degree programs was revised significantly. The revisions created an increased need for faculty to teach content across programs, which created a new conundrum, *collaboration of faculty across disciplines*. This meant in addition to our new programs we needed to examine our five-department organizational structure and the viability of them in light of our new programs. Faculty worked tirelessly over the summer, yes summer! They developed a new structure which removed departmental silos that were organized around degree programs. This created an understanding that faculty would be expected to teach across degree programs. Faculty also decided that in this structure, we would also change the name (albeit not the responsibilities)

## **Looking Back**

of the department chair to be a “Degree Program Coordinator.” Our Unit established the Coordinator title in an effort to speak to the global nature of the roles and responsibilities of a department which expand beyond paper pushing and to debunk the perception of silos in our degree programs. We also instituted Program Leaders to work collaboratively with Coordinators (which in itself is unique in an institution that tends to embrace hierarchy). Program leaders are elected by the faculty in the individual degree programs? So the sentence could read something like, “Program Leaders, elected by faculty in each degree program area, are instrumental, and focus primarily on student issues and concerns, and the Coordinator fulfills the remaining department chair responsibilities. At the conclusion of these planning meetings, the new governance structure was adopted, Coordinators were elected, and that is where this journey began! Note for simplicity, we will use the term department chair in lieu of Coordinator throughout the course of this book!

Our particular structure is rather unique in that there are three department chairs collaborating to provide support, guidance, and leadership to nearly 20 degree programs. Additionally, faculty teach across degree programs; in fact, a chair can be a faculty member in another chair’s program which took some time to wrap our heads around! Moreover, some students progress through one chair’s program as an undergraduate student and transition into another chair’s purview seamlessly as a graduate student. These defining characteristics require ongoing communication and collaboration at all phases of program design, development, implementation and assessment.

## **WHAT WE STAND FOR**

One of the keys we hold is the need to be aware of our core beliefs and values. In our opinion, knowing oneself and her colleagues is an important aspect to open communication, trust, and leadership. Sometimes individuals are not always forthcoming, and that makes it very difficult to plan for and accommodate as a leader, but we also recognize we can only work with the tools and information we have. We are far too familiar with the phrase, “You know what happens when you ASSUME?!”

Over the course of our tenure as department chairs, we have come to understand that we both value the importance of community. There are almost as many definitions of community as there are members. Our beliefs around “community” are aligned with such researchers as Gardner (1990) and Barab and Duffy (2000) who maintain that community is an interdependent system; defined by collaborative efforts of its members; and involves shared values,

caring for one another; and an appreciation for cooperation. We embrace Wenger's (1998) expansion of the definition of learning community, by adding the concept of a "Community of Practice" (CoP). Wenger and Wenger-Traynor (2015, p.1) state, "Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly." It is important for both of us that the community provides a space where individuals communicate truthfully, take risks, accept vulnerability, establish rich connections, and have opportunities to lead, as well as work through issues in an ongoing and respectful manner.

## **LEAD LIKE A GIRL?**

In their meta-analysis of leaders, DeRue, Nahrgang, Wellman, and Humphrey (2011) found that gender has a greater impact upon leadership emergence than on leadership effectiveness. These findings imply a bias against women in attaining leadership positions in higher education; therefore, one of the first things we shall define is leadership. What is it and who are perceived as leaders? We looked at the historic intersection of gender and the theories of leadership. For much of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries the great man and trait theories were pervasive theories for identifying, defining, or describing leaders. Northouse (2010) explains that the great man theory evolved from military leadership and it depicts effective leaders as individuals, typically white males, who are born with innate abilities and characteristics. The "trait theory" implies individuals possess certain traits. McShane and Von Glinow (2009) describe the trait theory of leadership as the characteristics leaders possess such as desire/determination, intelligence (social and cognitive), integrity, motivation, judgment, and self-confidence. Fleenor (2006, p.831) indicates, "One of the concerns about such lists in leadership qualities, significant patterns emerge, with both men and women tending to see successful leaders as male." This creates a double bind for women who seek to attain leadership positions; not only do most men see men as leaders, so do women!

This double bind between male and females has led to a deeper examination of leadership and gender over the past several decades. One theory is a much more androgynous model, transformational leadership. Researchers (Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber 2009; Bass, 1998, Cetin & Kinik 2015; Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Kelloway, Barling, Kelley, Comtois, & Gatien 2003) have found Transformational leaders are often described as collaborative; able to motivate, empower, and inspire followers (subordinates) to create systems change and convey a clear vision. To take this point one step further, Eagly,

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Johannesen-Schmidt, and van Engen, (2003) conducted a meta-analysis and determined female leaders exceed men on overall transformational leadership. So we scratch our heads and wonder then why are there still so few female department chairs and even fewer women in upper administration in higher education.

It seems that even as girls become women, there are stereotypes and expectations regarding their roles, responsibilities, and abilities. Loughlin (2012) indicates that women leadership styles reflect classic “female” traits such as intuitive, collaborative, empathetic, and understanding. These characteristics are often seen as necessary to create change. It is quite interesting as we look at the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills (Learning, 2015) we seek to ensure our next generation possesses: critical and creative thinking, collaboration, communication, literacy skills, flexibility, initiative, social skills, productivity, and leadership which are often associated with female gender stereotypes.

## **WHERE ARE ALL THE FEMALE GRADUATES?**

As we examine women in leadership, Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) are of particular intrigue in large part because according to the U. S. Department of Education (2012) females earn over 60 percent of associate’s degrees and approximately 57 percent of bachelor’s degrees. Furthermore, the percentages of conferred master’s and doctor’s degrees for females are around 62 and 53 percent respectively. Of particular interest to us is the fact that the data show that more women than men earn master’s and doctoral degrees across races (Black, Hispanic, and White). Since terminal degrees are generally required to become faculty members at IHEs one of our wonderings is, “If more women than men have terminal degrees, why is there still such a disparity between the genders in leadership roles?”

Perhaps some of the disparity occurs because of the structures and processes in higher education. More men are in position of power in IHEs, and even the most open males may be hesitant to change the status quo. Much like any marginalized group, women in higher education need allies from the dominate group to help create change.

## **BARRIERS**

There are many large scale or macro factors that have limited the number of women in leadership within higher education. Such barriers like having the

appropriate education seem to have been minimized since more women are earning degrees at all levels. Historically, IHEs have been predominately gendered institutions, organized along gender lines and women tending to be subordinates. Acker (1992, p.567) indicates “The term ‘gendered institutions’ means that gender is present in the processes, practices, images and ideologies, and distributions of power in the various sectors of social life.” One such example is the need for females to use sick time for maternity leave. Furthermore, processes on most college campuses such as mentoring, research, networking, tenure... tend to favor males.

Another case in point of a gendered institution is in the social sciences/professions whereby faculty, who tend to be women, have greater responsibilities outside of the college classroom than the faculty in the sciences, who tend to be male. For example in Teacher Education (where we are from), for many years our teaching load was greater than that of our colleagues in the Arts and Sciences, and we have to supervise our candidates in the field. The increased workload creates circumstance which can limit time for research, minimize service on critical committees on campus, and compromise the expansion of one’s professional network, all necessary to ascend to leadership positions within the Academy.

In addition to the barriers faced on an institutional level, women face challenges within their departments/schools as well. In her comprehensive literature review, Diehl (2013) identified Meso barriers such as tokenism, exclusion from informal networks, disappearing relational behavior, salary inequities, and discrimination. Tokenism is something almost every individual from a marginalized group has experienced. Our experiences around tokenism become most prominent when we, as the women in the group, express an idea outside of the “norm” of the institution or group think. If we do not conform to or fulfill our gender stereotype, we can become excluded from the informal networks needed for advancement within the institution.

Speaking of the informal networks, “the Good Ole Boys” group is alive and well in higher education. We have both felt excluded while male colleagues are afforded greater access to campus and community leadership, which creates a culture for advancement for male colleagues, and limitations for female advancement. This is evidenced by access male colleagues (not in leadership roles) are given to the offices of upper administration, the accolades male peers are given around quantitative activities, and the fact that women are not acknowledged for their tireless hours of service above their typical teaching load. Male faculty are often granted funds for purchasing such things as technology and conference travel, which provide greater professional development, thus greater vita building, and greater chances for tenure and

## **Looking Back**

advancement. Now one may argue women could request these things as well, but truth of the matter is, most men feel entitled to such perks, while women do not. In addition, males tend to form relationships with other males across the boundaries of roles. This is not typical for male/female relationships and is even limited when females are in the role of leader and subordinate. The cross boundary relationships between males also create increased opportunities for advancement for males.

Macro and meso barriers tend to be externally imposed barriers; however, we do recognize women themselves impact their capacity to navigate the labyrinth to leadership. Some of those obstacles relate to communication style. One does not have to go far to see this in the media. A female in a leadership position can be seen as too assertive or too aggressive or too soft, while ironically, we do not hear these things regarding our male counterparts. Another aspect most male colleagues do not have to consider is the home-work balancing act. Societal norms expect women to be the primary caretakers, yet taking time off can reduce their likelihood of promotion or tenure. We will examine these issues more deeply in later chapters, because they are critical to a female's being; however, being female is only one of the challenges on the path to leadership.

## **MENTORSHIP**

One of the critical components of success we have witnessed over the years is mentorship. Without getting into a debate regarding how mentorship occurs (self selection or assigned mentors), it seems gender matters both for the mentor and the mentee. In addition to offering personal support for navigating life around campus and within the community, a mentor is critical in providing upward professional growth and mobility opportunities within the institution for the mentee. According to Obers (2013), those mentors who are able to tutor their mentee to be goal orientated and more single-minded, both typical male traits, in their approaches to projects, in being competitive, strategic and focused, and in possess an outward vision had mentees who were more successful in attaining leadership positions. Given the shortage of females in these management/administrative positions within higher education it seems there is a need to break the status quo and support women. This process has inherent risks, so another requirement is for women in leadership positions to continue to pay it forward.

## **FOR THE GREATER GOOD**

Both in our experiences and in the review of the literature, we have found that men and women traditionally accept leadership roles for differing reasons. Sturges (1999) showed that women often base career success on intrinsic measures or a sense of accomplishment. Men on the other hand, tend to work toward individual gains, traditionally seek extrinsic rewards, and see promotions as competitions.

Research by Eagly and Carli (2007) have found women in leadership positions are more focused on mentoring and empowering subordinates and peers to help develop their full potential and thus make great and more effective contributions to the institution. Women have a strong sense of giving back to others and the community.

Women sometimes accept leadership positions at the cost of their own research or other opportunities due to a sense of obligation or commitment to other women. Hothos (2013) states women often have a sense they must take the role to contribute to the cause for other women. Conversely, men tend to have the freedom to say “No” or turn down a role because there will likely be other opportunities in the future.

## **GLASS CEILING OR SOMETHING ELSE?**

While Hillary Rodham Clinton indicated the glass ceiling has been “cracked”, we fully concur that women continue to face barriers to successes. The glass ceiling implies that if we can simply bust through it, equality can be readily achieved. We see the shattering of the ceiling as a component of the solution. We also note women tend to have to navigate a “labyrinth” on their professional journeys. While we are grateful the ceiling has been splintered, we feel the journey for women still has many twists and turns, and until these are satisfactorily confronted and addressed, the number of women in leadership will remain limited and higher education will remain compromised in best serving those in service and those from whom they serve.



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