

## Gender Differences in Resilience of Academic Deans

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### *Abstract*

*The purpose of this investigation was to determine the difference in the levels of resilience characteristics between male and female deans within a state university system. Resilience is the ability to operate in a changing environment while consistently maintaining one's effectiveness. This quantitative study utilized the survey, Personal Resilience Questionnaire (PRQ). Responses were received from 35 deans, 16 males and 19 females, and the results showed that the average means scores suggested that female deans had a higher level of resilience. The Mann-Whitney U-test showed that only one of the resilience characteristics – Proactive (.046) – was significant at the .05 level. Numerous studies have shown that females tend to face more difficulties within the workplace (e.g. Trentham & Larwood, 2004; Reskin, 1993). Presumably the accumulation of these challenges has enhanced resilience for women. The identification of resilience levels within academic administration can assist university leaders to operating effectively during times of change.*

Leadership in higher education is a topic that has been widely studied by scholars. The leadership characteristics of university presidents, provosts, academic deans, department chairs, and faculty have all been studied, illustrating their role within the institution and how their leadership impacts the educational setting. One aspect of higher education leadership that has not been adequately researched, however, is the concept of gender differences in resilience. The ability of individuals to be resilient is important in the field of higher education as the constantly changing environment provides many challenges and adversities for administrators to overcome.

Higher education today is operating in a constantly changing environment. Advances in technology, mission creep, changes in educational policy, financial limitations, changes in student demographics, and the increased call for accountability are just some of the factors that have required the field of higher education to respond in a manner it has never had to before (Del Favero, 2005; Lucas, 2000; Gmelch & Miskin, 1993), and its constituents to respond accordingly. This constant change creates an environment where it can be difficult for higher education professionals to be successful. To overcome these challenges, it then becomes important for academic administrators to be effective in operating within such an environment and have the skills necessary to be successful despite adversities.

Astin and Astin (2000) spoke to the turbulent and changing environment that encompasses today's society, and to higher education's role and responsibility to help facilitate and manage that change. Though they spoke more of societal problems such as global warming, religious and ethnic conflict, the increasing ineffectiveness of government, and the misdistribution of wealth and opportunity, they underlined the fact that transformative leadership stemming from the university and its teachings is a key component to bringing about positive change. Astin and

Astin pointed out that higher education plays a critical role in training and shaping leadership in society, and further situates higher education's presence in a constantly-changing environment. Operating within an external environment that experiences persistent and continuous change, it is inevitable that higher education will have to contend with change as well. This is not only a by-product of its response to the external environment, but also of its own change management issues. The influence that change has on the field of postsecondary education makes it a factor that higher education professionals need to be cognizant of, with an intentional, stated objective of being successful and productive despite the challenges posed by a changing environment.

Trowler (1998) gave specific examples of how academe had responded to "rapid changes in higher education." Though he concentrated primarily on the credit framework – in itself a response to changing needs in higher education – Trowler also alluded to the size of the system, the composition of the student body, available resources, the purpose of higher education, and future objectives as being factors that had been altered in recent years to respond to change. Individually, each of these factors is a critical component to any system of higher education. Taken as a unit, however, changes in each factor could result in a shift in the postsecondary education paradigm.

Though changes have been made to respond to these factors, it is difficult for higher education to react quickly enough. Walker and Salt (2006) declared that humans are typically good at acknowledging and responding to rapid change, but not as good at responding to things that may change slowly. It can be argued that many of the changes that affect higher education today are slow, gradual changes, such as increases in enrollment, changes in student demographics, and institutional culture.

Traditionally, higher education has been slow to respond to change, but the increasing acknowledgment and acceptance that change is a prevailing force which must be addressed has resulted in administrators being charged with an increased responsibility to perform effectively within change. Kittelson and Transue (1984) outlined four centuries of history in the creation and development of universities, and illustrated numerous external factors which threatened the continued existence and success of postsecondary institutions. Generational differences were the major form of adversity, but universities and its members have managed to overcome these challenges despite the constant changing environment. Spitz (1984) explained this by stating that "universities are tough, resilient institutions capable of surviving dormant periods, hostile forces, and even then of emerging as revitalized centers of new learning" (1984, p. 63). This notion of universities being resilient and being able to transcend adverse situations would imply that ideally university staff be resilient as well.

Due to current demands, professionals must be successful in leading their organizations through change by having the knowledge and skills necessary to do so. It is important for university administrators to be well-equipped and effective at implementing and maintaining this positive change, and for them to exhibit these characteristics in such a manner that other members of the organization reflect similar behavior.

While external forces can create many challenges to working in higher education, university administrators are faced with many internal adversities as well. Jacobs, Cintron, and Canton

(2002) spoke to the challenging environment associated with working in academe, providing narratives of gender diverse scholars who have persevered to be successful in American academia. The authors presented examples of some traditional challenges associated with succeeding in academia, such as evaluation, tenure, an understanding of internal politics, and scholarly expectations of rigor, quality, and productivity. The primary focus of this work is the achievement of faculty in “retaining their self-identity and self-respect in the face of prejudice, biases, and disrespect from colleagues, peers, and administrators” (p. 9) but the authors also illustrated that resilience is an important attribute for any scholar looking to ‘survive’ in academe, particularly those from underrepresented groups.

The issue of change in higher education is not a new one, however, as these internal and external factors have created a challenging working environment for higher education professionals for many years. Faculty, staff, and students have had to adjust to evolving cultures and environments since the initial inception of colleges and universities, and scholars have documented this change. The era that we operate within today, however, is creating a new culture that affects higher education on numerous levels, posing new challenges such as budgetary constraints, the rapid expansion of information, virtual universities, technology, emphasis on diversity, and an increased call for accountability from higher education institutions and its constituents (Lucas, 2000). Gmelch and Miskin (1993) also identified changing student demographics, disintegrating college curricula, and shifting attitudes and practices of faculty as being major challenges that higher education has to cope with. The culmination of these challenges creates an environment that can be difficult to operate effectively within.

To counteract the challenges posed by a changing environment, Hiatt and Creasey (2003) and Luecke (2003) discussed numerous change management principles that organizations can employ to operate efficiently during times of change, including organizational assessments, sponsor preparation, value systems, and the ADKAR (Awareness, Desire, Knowledge, Ability, and Reinforcement) model. Among these are organizational and individual resilience – with resilience defined as “the capacity to absorb high levels of change while displaying minimal dysfunctional behavior” (Conner, 1992, p. 219) – which are key constructs that can assist institutions of higher education to be successful in a changing environment.

Organizational leaders’ ability to be resilient during change and professional challenges, and how they can use that resilience to effectively guide the organization and its members towards institutional goals and objectives, is critical given this environment of constant change (Brooks & Goldstein, 2003; Reivich & Shatte, 2002; Deevy, 1995; Conner, 1992). Resilience is a tool that higher education professionals can use to be successful in a changing environment, and to assist the field in its response to both internal and external factors. The proper development and utilization of the concept of resilience can provide benefit to organizations, is the cornerstone of this study. The ability to operate in a changing environment while consistently maintaining one’s effectiveness as a higher education professional, can have meaningful results to the success of the organization as a whole. Having resilient academic administrators in place to lead the organization during difficult times can help alleviate some of the challenges associated with such a dynamic environment.

The purpose of this investigation was to determine the difference in the levels of resilience characteristics between male and female academic deans within a state university system. This quantitative study utilized the survey method in its research design involving an instrument that evaluates and measures resiliency, which was sent to the target population of academic deans via e-mail.

The guiding research question in this study is: What are the differences in the levels of resilience characteristics between male and female academic deans? The following were the hypotheses for this quantitative study: ***H1o (Null Hypothesis)***: There are no significant differences in the levels of resilience characteristics between male and female academic deans. ***H1a (Hypothesis)***: There are significant differences in the levels of resilience characteristics between male and female academic deans.

## Method

### Participants

The participants for this study was all academic deans employed at public universities in a large state university system. At these institutions, there were a total of 87 academic deans, who provided the main source of data for this study.

### Sampling Procedure

The presidents of each institution were contacted to garner support for the study and to obtain permission to contact their academic deans. Of these institutions, all but two granted permission to proceed with the study. For those institutions that granted permission for their staff members to be contacted, all 87 deans recognized as such by their respective institutions were surveyed, regardless of the academic area they worked in, including those of professional schools, undergraduate studies, and graduate colleges.

Respondents were asked to complete the survey by a specific deadline. Once this deadline passed, the survey request was sent out two additional times in an effort to garner more responses and achieve statistical validity.

### Data Collection Instrument

The data collection instrument used in this study is a survey developed by Daryl Conner and his company, formerly known as ODR-USA, Inc. The Personal Resilience Questionnaire (PRQ) measures individuals' resilience across each of the seven key resilience characteristics: being positive about the world, positive about themselves, focused, flexible in their thoughts, flexible towards others in their social environment, organized, and proactive, and is comprised of 75 questions. All questions are based on a six-point Likert-type scale, measuring the individual's response to each situation as being: strongly disagree, disagree, slightly disagree, slightly agree, agree, and strongly agree.

Respondents' answers to these questions result in scores for each of the seven resilience characteristics, with each score based on a 100-point scale. This score is a percentile measuring

their results against all persons who have taken the Personal Resilience Questionnaire (PRQ), which is a population of over 64,000 people and include individuals from a broad composition.

Conner Partners administered the survey and agreed to tailor the first part of the *Personal Resilience Questionnaire* to include the demographic question of the number of male and female academic deans.

Conner Partners were the only organization capable of scoring the *Personal Resilience Questionnaire* and the responses and they agreed to facilitate the collection of the data. Once all submissions had been received, Conner Partners provided the researcher with the results for the analysis.

### Data analysis

Means were calculated for each resilience characteristic and comparisons made to evaluate which gender position exhibited higher results. Additionally, the Mann-Whitney *U* test was used to test whether differences between the two populations (female and male deans) were significant. The Mann-Whitney *U* test is a non-parametric test for testing and estimating differences between two populations and is useful for populations with arbitrary sample sizes and shapes (Hettmansperger, 1991).

### Results

This study measured the resilience of male and female academic deans at institutions of higher education. At these institutions, there were a total of 87 deans. Responses were received from 35 deans, for a response rate of 40.2%. Of the 35 academic deans who participated in the study, 16 were male and 19 were female. The mean scores for deans were as follows: See Table 1.

Table 1  
*Mean Scores for Female and Male Deans for Each Resilience Characteristic*

	Female	Male
Positive: World	74.37	70.69
Positive: Self	83.79	80.63
Focused:	77.84	67.44
Flexible: Thoughts	80.26	65.44
Flexible: Social	74.58	62.75
Organized	57.84	51.75
Proactive	79.05	61.19

The average scores shown in Table 1 illustrate that female deans in this study had a higher level of resilience in each of the seven resilience characteristics than did male deans, indicating that females, on the average, tend to be more resilient.

Although females averaged a higher level of resilience in each of the seven characteristics, the Mann-Whitney *U* test employed indicated a significant difference on one of the seven resilience characteristics between male and female deans.

Results of the Mann-Whitney *U* test are found in Table 2 below.

Table 2  
*Mann-Whitney U Test for Differences Between Female and Male Deans*

	Mann-Whitney U- test	Z-scores	Asymp. Sig(2 tailed)
Positive: The World	140.500	-.383	.702
Positive: Self	133.000	-.636	.525
Focused	110.000	-1.404	.160
Flexible: Thoughts	107.000	-1.495	.135
Flexible: Social	109.500	-1.413	.158
Organized	131.000	.697	.486
Proactive	92.000	-1.994	.046

The Mann-Whitney test in Table 2 shows that although female deans in this study averaged a higher level of resilience on all seven resilience characteristics than did male deans, only one of the resilience characteristics – *Proactive* (.046) – was significant at the .05 level.

In conclusion, based on the results of mean scores, the researcher answered the research question that there are differences in levels of resilience characteristics between male deans and female deans. Additionally, based on the results of the Mann-Whitney *U* test, the researcher accepted the hypothesis, that there are a significant difference in the levels of resilience characteristics between male and female deans.

### Discussion

It is noteworthy that female academic deans exhibited higher levels of resilience than male academic deans in each of the seven characteristics (*Positive: The World, Positive: Yourself, Flexible: Thoughts, Flexible: Social, Focused, Organized and Proactive*) with one of those characteristics (*Proactive*) being significant, as that supports the hypothesis that there is a significant difference in the levels of one resilience characteristic, *Proactive*, between male and female academic deans.

This hypothesis was based on the notion that higher levels of resilience prepares individuals for higher levels of success. Numerous studies have shown that females tend to face more difficulties within the workplace (e.g. Trentham & Larwood, 2004; Reskin, 1993). Presumably

the accumulation of these challenges has enhanced resilience for women, or it may just have been necessary for women to be more resilient to compete for the position at each level. Researchers have recognized the changing environment of higher education and the impact that can have on the success of deans, and are looking for new competencies that can guide these administrators through these difficulties.

The significant characteristic of resilience, *Proactive*, indicates that resilient individuals tend to challenge the world around them, tending toward “active rather than reactive approaches to problem solving” (ODR, n.d.). Failure is viewed as an opportunity to learn, and in the face of adversity strive to take active strategies rather than use avoidance and withdrawal strategies. This decision to view risks as desirable enhance adaptation effectiveness by leading people to set high standards, which can lead to high performance, and their assertiveness may detect early signs of “potential changes and discrepancies and the facilitation of quick and effective responses (ODR, 1995).

Resilience is a key construct of leadership in a changing world and with so many individuals looking at you to lead, resilience is important to be effective. Having an understanding of one’s resilience is beneficial not just because it shows the areas where you may be more effective, but more so because it identifies areas that can be improved upon. Enhancing resilience could be a key thing to elevate one’s performance above these challenges and provide the skills needed to be effective despite these obstacles.

The identification of resilience levels within academic administration can assist university leaders in understanding whether their institutions are maximizing their potential for operating effectively during times of change.

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