

The Stories We Hear, The Stories We Tell What Can the Life of Jane Barker (1652-1732) Tell us about Women's Leadership in Higher Education in the Twenty-first Century?

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Abstract

Jane Barker—poet, novelist, farm manager, student and practitioner of medical arts—was not allowed to attend university because she was a woman. Yet she was Oxford-educated in the most modern of medical theories of her time. By the end of her life, unmarried by choice, Barker was writing for pay under her own name in an emerging genre—the novel—and publicly challenging the dominance of male authors. Aspects of her life prompt reflection upon women in higher education leadership today: assumptions about women's competence in a male-dominated domain, personal decisions about marriage and childbearing, and the consequences and rewards of choosing the difficult career path.

This essay is based on printed sources such as American Council of Education data (2009) and recent interviews with seventeen women leaders in private colleges and universities in the United States. The stories of these provosts and presidents illuminate challenges faced by women seeking and living in positions of authority and influence. These leaders negotiated suspicions that women could be decisive or have expertise in finance, and they were faced with difficult decisions as institutions responded to the late-2008 economic downturn. Women in this pool made a wide range of decisions about marriage, childbearing, and gender roles in a marriage. Generational and racial differences influenced their approaches to their work. Administrators, especially presidents, negotiated the isolation inherent in their positions. Concerns have arisen, in fact, that the constant scrutiny or “fishbowl” life of a president has decreased the traditional applicant pipeline of provosts. The essay concludes with an overview of women's choices about leadership in higher education today.

The Life of Jane Barker

Poet, novelist, farm manager, student and practitioner of medical arts, Jane Barker was not allowed to attend university because she was a woman. Yet she was Oxford-educated in the most modern of medical theories of her time through the tutelage of her brother, a medical student at Oxford. A Jacobite and Papist, she suffered legal and economic discrimination. She was single by choice. By the end of her life, she was writing for pay in an emerging genre—the novel—and challenging in a public preface the dominance of male authors like Daniel Defoe. While Barker may seem unconnected to today, her life prompts thinking about similarities to women in leadership positions in higher education today. This essay draws upon printed resources about characteristics and life stories of women in higher education and upon my interviews with seventeen women, most of whom are provosts or presidents in private colleges or universities in

the United States. The most important themes that emerged were: expectations or suspicions about women in male-dominated areas (e.g., finance, decisiveness), watershed moments in their careers, decisions about marriage and children, campus policies that are considered family friendly, and generational and racial differences among interviewees and among their campus constituents.¹

Barker began her career as a gentlewoman of modest means and member of a circle of college men who wrote poetry: she was called Galesia in this group of coterie poets.² Her poetry and semi-autobiographical fiction reveal that she was well versed in medical studies through her brother, and she even wrote a poetic tour of the body that reveals her excellent knowledge of the circulation of blood. Her brother and father dead, she attempted to manage inherited leasehold farm property but eventually moved to London with her mother. This “Dr. Barker” created and sold a plaster for gout through London booksellers. Converting to Roman Catholicism and ardently supporting James II, Barker was one of many Jacobites who fled into exile at St. Germain-en-Laye near Paris when William of Orange invaded England and captured the English crown from James. Her best poetry of that period speaks powerfully of war, widows, famine, and disease of the years in which supporters of James sought a Stuart restoration. Returning to England, she attempted to earn a living by writing novelistic fiction, at first anonymously and then boldly, entrepreneurially marketing her fiction under her own name. She claims in her preface to *A Patch-Work Screen for the Ladies* (1723) that readers should buy up her wares, which are more truthful than those of popular authors like Daniel Defoe and which, the product of a woman, strive to create community in a world torn apart by political and religious conflict. Legal documents reveal that she had oversight of two grand-nieces, allegedly abandoned by their mother.

Barker, then, worked in fields where men were the most visible practitioners.. Over the past thirty years, women have increasingly entered provostships and presidencies, primarily the domain of men, in the United States. In 1975, the first year that the American Council on

¹ All examples are taken from interviews with seventeen women academic leaders conducted spring and summer 2009. Examples are crafted to protect anonymity.

² All references to the life and works of Jane Barker are from Jane Barker, *The Galesia Trilogy and Selected Manuscript Poems of Jane Barker*, ed. Carol Shiner Wilson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), xv-xliv.

Education (ACE) started tracking the number of women presidents, there were 148; today there are over 600. Recent ACE statistics indicate that 23 percent of all college and university presidents were women.³ Progress has also been made at all institutions for Chief Academic Officers (CAOs). Women hold 40% of CAO positions, with the greatest percentage at associate-degree granting schools and the smallest percentage at doctorate-granting institutions. Eighty-five percent of these individuals are white.⁴

The mantle of responsibility is particularly heavy for a president, including the ultimate responsibility of decisions that can determine the health and direction of the institution far beyond her own tenure. In interviewing candidates for presidencies, Boards of Trustees probe deeply to find leaders who understand and have had significant experience with finances. This test is particularly difficult for women because of the perceptions that finance is a man's domain. Website descriptions of appointments of four women presidents in my pool include narratives of women with academic credentials in the humanities that stressed to the public how savvy these incoming presidents were about finance and technology. Women with more technical backgrounds—law, engineering, economics—and previous experience with university rather than college budgets reported having less pressure to prove themselves.

Institutions were particularly challenged by the economic distress of the past year. Employees, current and prospective students and their parents, and others looked to presidents for reassurance in public presentations—periodic oral reports and written communication on and beyond the campus—about the health of the institution and its actions in light of global financial woes. Working internally with president's staff, finance committees of the Board of Trustees, and others, while projecting an honest yet positive face was important. The presidents I interviewed, along with male presidents of many institutions, were consistent in the principles set down in public messages and in actual budget decisions: avoid layoffs and preserve academic quality. Institutions with more resources were able to go ahead with some, if not all faculty hires. In all institutions, however, any position newly vacated would be examined to see whether resources should continue there or reallocated. Presidents and provosts of several institutions

³ Peter D. Eckel, Bryan J. Cook, and Jacqueline E. King, *The CAO Census: A National Profile of Chief Academic Officers* (Washington, DC: American Council on Education, 2009), 27.

⁴ *Ibid.*, ix.

indicated that economic realities actually gave their institutions the opportunity to move away from an accretive model of building budgets toward zero-based budgeting or a similar model. The institutions in my pool ranged from those whose budgets relied significantly on income from high endowments to those whose budgets depended heavily upon student tuition. When decisions were made about salaries and benefits for the 2009-10 academic year, responses ranged widely, from institutions with standard or merit increases at approximately 3% to salary freezes or decreases. Perhaps more significant was the range in contributions to retirement programs such as TIAA: from full contributions to partial or no contributions. Most presidents volunteered that even harder decisions about institutional agendas and financial constraints were ahead. Fund raising in this climate has become even more pressured, with the decline in the economy, lower foundation incomes, and cautionary tales like the Bernard Madoff scandal. Since fund raising is among the skills most expected of presidents, it is curious to note that this is the main area that new presidents indicated they were insufficiently prepared.⁵ It is, however, also an area that all of the presidents I interviewed said they enjoyed. With the recent economic situation, Boards will be looking even more carefully for evidence that presidents are fiscally astute. The burden continues to fall unevenly on women to prove that point.

While Boards of Trustees are changing in their demographic, five of the presidents I interviewed indicated that Boards, still male- and corporate-dominated, want qualities more often associated with men than with women: decisiveness, a projection of authority, and deep-voiced, genial laughter. One president indicated that, during the search process, she had had a tutorial, in essence, by a former college roommate in the corporate world on the language Boards would trust: "I can do that. . . Let's take it to the next level." They universally noted the importance of the language of clothing to convey competence: dark suits and blue blouses, perhaps a red jacket. One president noted switching clothing modes for her interview: the black suit one day, a pink suit the next. Presidents noted the power of persuasion and influence as more important than position authority in their work, including one with a JD and experience as a litigator. Self-confidence is as important a part of the presence as that black suit. While all women indicated that their collaborative style was different than that of male leaders, it may be awhile before most

⁵ Ibid., 50.

Boards adopt that approach as exemplifying strong leadership. That change may be tied to more Board participation by women.

In my study, I found particularly intriguing the responses to the question about watershed moments in these women's careers: moments when they were faced with a situation and associated decision(s) that took them into a realm completely unlike any they had experienced before. Sometimes, that is an internal moment in assuring that Board members maintain the line between overseeing and micromanaging. Early in her presidency, one woman firmly and diplomatically invited two Board members out of a internal conversation with her managers on a sensitive campus issues. In another instance, a new president combatted vigorous staff unionization efforts through publication of accurate information on the web and transparency of process. For most provosts and presidents, that watershed moment was associated with personnel situations that led to termination. In three instances, the terminations (forced retirements or resignations, actually) were of long-time campus administrators who had small but vocal followings. Many of the instances mentioned by my interviewees were tied to managing the hunger of the press for a story while the institution was conducting confidential internal investigations. One president was faced early on in her tenure with a public scandal: a member of the staff of one part of the institution had allegedly made improper overtures to an external constituent; his spouse was at a senior level of administration. One president recalled the awful feeling when, at her previous institution, she heard from the ombudsman that research students were worried because their faculty mentor, a well known researcher, had misrepresented data to achieve results more quickly. Another college president was, in her first year of tenure, the person giving comfort and advice to internal and external members of the campus community in response to the murder of one student by another. As one of her colleagues noted: "You are the college mom." With porous and rapid communications—texting, blogs, and more—and journalists more and more on the hunt for "hot" news, making thoughtful decisions about sensitive issues has become harder than ever before.

Such situations are only one mark of the felt weight of the mantle of responsibility and the accompanying isolation. Most often coming from the institutions where they had been faculty members, provosts remarked how relationships with colleagues changed: they were treated like

the role rather than the person they were and felt some separation. That separation of the person from the role, while strange at first, is significant in keeping perspective. Presidents, who rarely come from the institution where they serve as chief executive officer, noted that they could disclose to some extent with some members of senior staff but rarely if ever with faculty. Other presidents were often their sounding boards. They may also turn to a family member—the spouse, an older daughter, a father or mother—or friends from the past for a nourishing conversation and honest criticism. As Susan Madsen notes, being able to “hear criticism, separate it from their own identity and confidence” was important in the development of women leaders.⁶ One provost noted ongoing analysis as helpful in keeping perspective. One president noted the effect of even a casual remark: “You look out the window and muse that a bush is in the way of the view. Suddenly, an hour later, it’s gone. That wasn’t the intention.” Off the cuff remarks can be perilous. One president recalled commenting candidly in a quiet conversation about a controversial regional issue, finding that a college newspaper reporter had overheard. She and the student agreed that printing the remark wasn’t in the best interest of the institution. As that president remarked, there is the Larry Summers lesson: he thought he was just chatting with fellow economists but found but himself the center of controversy because of remarks about women. The President is always the President, and what s/he says is interpreted as the voice of the university. There is little relief or personal space.

Decisions about marriage, divorce, and childbearing are significant for any woman. Jane Barker was unmarried by choice, with all the disadvantages that meant in her time. However, she had control over her small inheritance and what she earned. While childless, she did oversee the care of two grandnieces. The range in marital and birth or adoption choices among my interviewees was wide and reflects generational differences. Of the provosts and presidents, most indicated that they had been intentional about when or if to have children. Not surprisingly, May was the target date for delivery when these women were in faculty positions. According to the *CAO Census*, 68.8 percent of CAOs were married, 14.4 percent divorced, and the remaining never married or other. (Of male CAOs, 90.5 % were married.) Of female presidents, 83.2 percent were married, 6.1 percent divorced, and the remaining never married or other. (Of male

⁶ Susan R. Madsen, *On Becoming a Woman Leader: Learning from the Experiences of University Presidents* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 88.

presidents, 89.3% were married.) Of the CAOs, 69.1 percent had children, and only 14.5 percent had children under 18. Female presidents were close to those figures, with 68.3 percent having children and 11.5 percent children under 18.⁷ Of the college presidents interviewed in their forties or fifties, all but one were married with children. Children were as young as two and as old as mid-20s. One president reported not marrying until age 40 and having a commuting marriage for over two decades. (For some years, the commute was an hour; sometimes half the country away.) One provost reported that she and her husband, together thirty years, decided to adopt a child before she turned fifty. One provost and one president reported very difficult pregnancies and births of first children when they were in their first full-time teaching positions. With no maternity leave at their institutions, each had an extremely difficult year of teaching following the birth. In both instances, spouses were highly supportive, and one husband took a different shift at his work so he and his wife could care for their child. Institutions were flexible about class times, but there was no physical rest for these women.

In all instances, women reported supportive spouses. Younger presidents with children under 18 noted that husbands did much of the work traditionally thought of as mothers' work in today's America: chauffeuring children, attending offsprings' athletic competitions or concerts, and attending parent-teacher conferences. Their children's schools or outside communities sometimes found the arrangements odd, although younger generations of faculty on campuses found a reflection of the expectations of gender roles in their own lives. Some also noted assistance such as nannies or child-care centers on campus. The president with the commuting marriage, when asked about campus expectations for her spouse, noted that her husband came to campus for major events such as Commencement or Board meetings. But the model of hiring two people, she declared, was a "very 50s notion." Presidents and provosts reported that the wife's career and life needs were at the center of the family's routine, sometimes because it had been from the beginning of the marriage and sometimes because it was "her turn."

While these interviews suggest heterosexual relationships and supportive male partners, it is important to note that there are lesbian or bisexual provosts and presidents in higher education. In some institutions, that person may be single without a visible partner; in others, there may be a

⁷ Ibid., 48.

partner at another campus or on the same campus. Whereas the decision of a faculty member to become provost or a provost to seek a presidency has multiple dimensions and can be complex, the lesbian or bisexual needs to negotiate institutional fit in on yet another level.

Many campuses pride themselves on being “family friendly” these days. The Mellon Foundation and the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation are two organizations particularly visible in encouraging institutions to be flexible for tenure-track and tenured faculty. According to a University of Michigan study, formal written policies providing paid time off for new biological mothers during the period of “disability” existed in 78% of all institutions and policies stopping the tenure clock were available in 65%.⁸ To what extent does it make a difference—or do campus communities assume it makes a difference—if the provost or president is female? One female provost, whose child was five, said that the fact that scooters were outside the male president’s office made her feel better about accepting the position as CAO. Thirty years ago, we recall, women faculty would give birth and try to be invisible as mothers. They would not, it was assumed correctly, be taken seriously as teachers and scholars. Some of that generation are now resistant to frequent campus visibility of children in offices of male or female colleagues. Some presidents and provosts noted the presence of baby and crib in an office and less-than-discreet nursing. In other instances, children too sick to be in school were in the parent’s office or parked with a departmental secretary.

While family friendly policies are interpreted as good ethically and good for morale, they are also understood to be good recruiting tools for faculty whose generation increasingly notes preference for quality of life—and a balanced life—over a single-minded dedication to a job. Men are more participatory in child care, and male and female faculty often seek flexible teaching schedules to allow more time with children and less expense for child care. Many institutions have child care facilities on campus. Of the women I interviewed, half pointed to fine on-campus facilities, open to faculty and staff, or relationships with nearby facilities and programs like Head Start. Most of the officers I interviewed indicated faculty-friendly policies such as stopping the tenure clock for pregnancy or other family issues. Institutions in areas with

⁸ University of Michigan Center for the Education of Women, “Family-Friendly Policies in Higher Education,” December 2007, 17.

several colleges and universities report assisting academic spouses with identifying employment. Phased retirement is another opportunity that can benefit both junior and senior faculty. Some of the most robust benefits packages included: payment for *in vitro* fertilization or oral contraceptives; health, pension and death coverage for domestic partners; 80% of health insurance payments for individual, couple or family. A good benefits package is often expensive to the institution.

While benefits are democratic in an institution, provosts and presidents acknowledge a social divide when it comes to flexibility and child care. One president, echoing other presidents and provosts, noted that more than one class had been cancelled because of child care issues. The secretary or grounds crew worker with a sick child or suddenly faced with school called off for a snow day has far less flexibility. At times, male faculty have felt an undue burden because they have picked up courses not taught by female faculty on maternity leave, especially mid-semester. Moreover, frustrations can occur when scheduling meetings become difficult because childcare schedules for some faculty trumps committee responsibilities. The female president and provost, then, are typically expected to be more sympathetic to family needs. At times, junior faculty may feel that *she* isn't caring enough for their particular life situation. Presidents are also expected by Boards of Trustees to manage expenditures in an era of escalating health care costs, which can come in conflict with faculty expectation for flexibility. Much remains to be done in creating a more equitable climate among faculty and between faculty and staff.

The *CAO Census* and other sources note that around fifty percent of Chief Academic Officers had no interest in becoming presidents, citing that the work of presidents is unappealing, including living “in a fishbowl.”⁹ Presidents noted that their motives for decisions were often second-guessed, despite efforts for transparency. Family roles, children's behavior, and one's own behaviors such as dress, exercise, alcohol use, and sexual activity are potentially up for public scrutiny. One provost, while acknowledging the challenges of a public life and necessary adjustments to her behavior and that of her family, was excited about moving on to become president of another liberal arts college. Her male president had welcomed her desire to have experiences such as fund raising that would prepare her for the next stage. No other provosts in

⁹ Ibid., 32.

this study indicated an interest in assuming a presidency, and one, who had begun a presidency and returned to her institution as academic officer, declared adamantly that she had far greater autonomy in her provost's position and would never again consider a presidency. Concerns exist, therefore, that the percentage of women presidents has hit a plateau since leadership from this traditional source is slim (25 %). The concerns are exacerbated by the relatively low number of historically underrepresented groups in academe. It may be that one source will continue to be women in fields related to academe such as law and development. Of my interviewees, one college president's highest degree is a JD. She came from an academic family and began to serve in academic administration within four years of finishing her law degree. College and university chief development officers, whose numbers are increasingly women, are another source of candidates for presidencies in private institutions. Political figures and corporate CEOs have long been sources for public institutions and some private institutions.

Race has taken little direct space in this paper, in part because my pool thus far includes only two women of color, both African American. Both indicated that their racial identity was important to them. They also said that their families had been powerful role models and provided wise guidance in difficult times. The mother of one had lived apart from husband and children while earning her Ph.D., thus providing a strong model for her daughter of combining higher education and family. Both interviewees noted how important they knew students felt about their presence on campus. One had come of age in the 1960s. The other, in her early forties, noted that she had eschewed the "multicultural box" to embrace broader issues. She noted it was important to "figure out that part of yourself early" and to determine to speak out on a variety of important issues.

Despite the rigors of their jobs, provosts and presidents interviewed embraced the opportunity to make a difference at their institutions and in higher education. They were focused, worked well with teams and thought strategically. What are the implications of women's leadership in higher education? The landscape has changed and will continue to change. But how? *A Measure of Equity* and other sources recommend that institutions, regional organizations, and national associations collect and update data to "create a clearer picture of trends" and to

implement programs to “remediate inequities.”¹⁰ Generations of faculty are changing, expecting that institutions respect their desire for life-work balance. That desire may diminish the number of women who develop, as faculty, the responsibilities that lead to an interest in academic administration at the CAO or presidential level. Or, that thinking may lead to a difference in how women use their time in those positions. Advice to junior faculty in an increasing number of books such as the recent *Challenges of the Faculty Career for Women* include being assertive, especially in saying ‘no’ strategically to assignments, finding a woman mentor, giving priority to getting teaching and scholarship in order for tenure, and making sure that the life partner is sympathetic.¹¹ Changing demographics of Boards of Trustees may lead to an acceptance of a collaborative model of leadership, primarily but not exclusively a woman’s realm. Institutions will continue to seek leaders with keen financial understanding. Development officers are speaking of increasing credibility through an MBA for junior members in their field, but will that degree or a JD become a plus in private institutions? And, of course, to what extent will the practices of women change as they become the most senior administrator at their institutions?

Intellectual, creative, audacious, and resourceful, Jane Barker, who could not attend Oxford University in her day, was part of a paradigm shift in imaginative literature: the emergence of what today we call the novel and the presence of the female author who wrote for pay under her own name. Her intellectual descendants—Iris Murdoch, Dorothy Hodgkin, Margaret Thatcher, Aung San Suu Kyi, and others—attended Oxford and excelled in a variety of fields at their colleges and in the world beyond. Their paths were more challenging, however, because they were women. Barker’s intellectual descendants also populate higher education leadership, facing challenges similar to other women in predominantly male domains. While the diversity has enriched the academy, much is left to be determined. Women must have opportunities to lead our institutions, basing their decisions on their aspirations and life circumstances. While this paper has focused on women provosts and presidents, it must be acknowledged that powerful and effective leaders may also carry titles such as dean, committee

¹⁰ Judy Touchton, with Caryn McTighe Musil and Kathryn Peltier Campbell. *A Measure of Equity: Women’s Progress in Higher Education* (Washington, D. C.: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2009), 31-32.

¹¹ Maïke Ingrid Philipsen, with Timothy Bostic, *Challenges of the Faculty Career for Women: Success and Sacrifice* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 249-256.

chair, director, or distinguished professor. It is essential, however, that the obstacles be recognized and eliminated for those women who do aspire to presidencies.

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