

WOMEN AND LEADERSHIP: What Should the Role of Women Leaders be in the 21st Century

Abstract

The major purpose of this study was to examine the role of top-level women leaders in the 21st century. The study was conducted in Spring, 2005 as a part of the WS History Month Program. Five prominent women leaders were invited to a university campus as a community outreach initiative. The panelists included: One 4-year College President of a HBCU; one 2-Year college president of a small, suburban technical college; one college provost and chief operating officer of a large PWU; one Superintendent of a medium size rural school district; and one director of a non-profit organization. The panel group was very diverse: Two African American Leaders; One Asian Leader, and two White top level leaders. The researcher also invited an Associate Provost (white) of a large suburban PWU to introduce the event. The pilot study, panel discussion group format was similar to a focus group study. According to Krueger & Casey (2000), "Focus groups are typically composed of five to ten people, but the size can range from as few as four to as many as twelve (p. 10). Two themes emerged as a result of this pilot. One theme related to mentoring. The second theme related to the need for leadership programs to help develop women leaders.

A review of the literature supports the outcome of this study. This study can be used to further review the topic of women and leadership.

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In the spring, 2005, the researcher moderated a panel discussion group, which included inviting five prominent women leaders to a university campus. The event was one of the many events that were sponsored by the WS Department at a large predominately white northeast university (PWU). The university event was held in the late evening starting at 7:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. to increase attendance to include both the university campus as well as the surrounding communities as a part of an outreach initiative.

The purpose of the event was to determine how top-level women administrators felt about their role as institutional leaders. This preliminary research study can be used to conduct a national study on top-level women in administration. The focus of future studies should be limited to higher education or post secondary education administration.

The study was designed with an open-end question format, which is the topic of the panel discussion group session.. The research question is, “ What should be the Role of Women Leaders in the 21st Century? The panel/discussion group is similar to “focus group” research format.

The researcher observed that the majority of the audience was from the African American Community. This was the case event though the event was widely advertised to all the surrounding communities, and the university campus using various media mediums. Even though the format of the panel group was designed to include a diverse group of women leaders, the event was not widely attended by the University campus including students, staff, faculty or administrators other than African Americans. It is only speculated why this occurred. No evidence of causation can be assumed without further investigation.

A future research initiative with a greater number of participants and women leaders at the regional, national or international administrative level may explain why the audience was as it was.

Five top-level women administrators participated in the project primarily from higher education or secondary school institutions. One top-level administrator, Associate Provost and researcher on women issues, agreed to introduce the event. The participants were: two college presidents, one Christian 4-year college president and one 2-year college president; one provost and chief operating officer; one superintendent, and one executive director of a non-profit organization. The total number of panel members who participated in the discussion group was five: two African Americans, one Asia, and two white females. The moderator/researcher of the event was African American. (See Table 1 for racial identify of the participants).

The researcher/moderator introduced individual panelists just prior to their presentations. The moderator also discussed ground rules for the audience and the guest participants. The researcher forced order of presentation to assure that diversity of race was evenly distributed over the presentations. Job responsibility was also considered when the structuring the presentations. For example, although all of these leaders are at the very top of their organization, the researcher used the college president from the 4-year college as the “keynote speaker”, placing her last in order of presentation. Feedback from those who indicated that they would attend stated that Dr. Sebetha Jenkins was the primary reason they were attending the event. Dr. Jenkins also traveled the longest distance to participate. She traveled from Texas to Ohio to participate in the event. Also, it is important to note that she had previously worked at the host institution as Director of Minority Affairs. The most

important note is that she had served as a member of the host university's office of the president.

Table 1 Panel Participants by Race, Title, Role and Type of Institution

Race	Title	Role	Type of Institution
African American	Professor	Moderator	PWI Public Large Urban
White	Assoc. Provost	Introduction	PWI Public Large Suburban
White	Provost and CEO	Member	PWI Public Large Urban
African American	Superintendent	Member	Rural Public Medium Size
White	President	Member	Two-Year College Public Suburban, Technical
Asian	Executive Director	Member	Non-profit organization
African American	President	Member	4-Year HBCU Christian College

Discussion

Some of the participants asked for guidance in writing their prepared presentations. Similar to conducting focus group studies, the researcher purposefully offered little to no guidance other than to advise panel members to present what they felt appropriate; i.e., they were asked to share their perspectives on what should be the role of women leaders in the 21st Century. Using this approach, which is used in focus group studies, assured that everyone would present separate and independent opinions about what they felt the role of

women leaders should be in the 21st century. In reporting on focus group studies, Krieger & Casey (2000) reported that moderators will ask participants to imagine how things could be different (p.53).

Biological sketches. The researcher collected a brief biological sketch from each of the participants. This data showed interesting experiences related to the career paths that these women leaders took to their current top-level administrative positions. The data collected showed that:

One college president reported that she previously served as an educator and college administrator. She reported that she had been an administrator in a two-year college. In addition she had been special assistant to the president.

Another college president reported that she had administrative and faculty experience. She reported that she had been vice president of instruction, dean, and that she had taught on the high school, community college and university level.

The provost and CEO reported that she had been a tenured professor, associate dean, then and dean of college.

The superintendent reported that she had been a professor in higher education, a public school teacher and an assistant principal and executive assistant to the superintendent and then deputy superintendent. She reported that she is now serving in the second superintendency position after having spent six years in the first.

The community leader reported that she had participated in many leadership programs at the community and state levels. She also reported that she had a professional license as a Professional Clinical Counselor.

Interestingly, in reviewing the background of these leaders, once they had served in their current leadership positions, it appeared that other opportunities to expand their growth and development opened up for them. For example, as president of a university, one leader reported that she had had the opportunity to serve on numerous prestigious boards and was appointed to the President's Board of Advisors on Historically Black Colleges and Universities by President William Clinton. The other president reported that she had served on the Board of Directors of the American Association of Community Colleges for Teacher Education in Washington, D.C.

Reporting the findings. The majority reported the importance of *mentoring* as an important engagement activity for women to other women. Some reported that men serve as mentors for females as well. Nearly all reported the importance of leadership programs to help women achieve top-level administrative positions.

ف The four-year college president reported, "Today there are yet challenges, but we are growing in numbers and we mentor, network and model for those who are in the pipeline, we give you a legacy rich in struggle, crowned with triumph to do what we must as we educate the masses who will lead us in the future" (Dr. Sabetha Jenkins, 2005).

ف The two-year college president reported that she had religious parents who believed in work and prayer. She reported that she had males and females as role models to support her toward career advancement to presidency (Dr. Laura Meeks, 2005).

ف The provost and CEO reported, "women can have more than one mentor; and men could serve as mentors (Dr. Elizabeth Stroble, 2005).

ف The director of the non-profit organization reported that she had participated in a structured leadership program.

ف Both college presidents reported the significance of leadership programs designed to help women gain top-level administrative experience. They reported on the importance of *leadership institutions* with an emphasis on *mentoring and grooming* women for CEOs at colleges and universities. The Gallup Leadership program, and the American Association of Colleges and Universities Millennium Leadership Initiative are the two leadership programs.

Supporting the findings in this study, Brown (2005) in a study of 91 female college presidents found mentoring and professional development programs to be important for recruitment and preparation (p. 659). She reported that the majority, 63.1% had one to three mentors. Also, the majority, 64.4%, served as mentors themselves to both men and women. In addition, she found that, 72.5% had attended one or more professional development program designed to develop or enhance skills in college administration (p. 662).

Hubbard and Robinson (1998) in a study of six state regional public and private institutions reports that few women are moving into top level positions in academic institutions. Also, though there are major obstacles many women are striving for administrative positions within education. They wrote, “females reported having female mentors more often than male mentors in their early professional careers” (p.296.). They went on to report that mentors cannot only provide advice and guidance but can help deal with politics and procedures as well. Lastly they reported, “female mentors can help expedite plans for career advancement” (p. 291).

In conclusion, the panel discussion group provided a forum to discuss what top-level women administrators felt about the role of women leaders in the 21st Century. The five participants had previous experience as administrators prior to being appointed to their

current positions. Although the number of women leaders is growing gradually, it is clear that these leaders felt that mentoring and leadership programs should be considered as a significant positive resource options for all women. A future study with more participants would be helpful to determine if other themes will emerge.

References

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