

EXPERIENCES SUSTAINING A CONFERENCE AND BUILDING A NETWORK

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ABSTRACT

The Women in Educational Leadership Conference (WELC) was founded at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in 1987. The 28th conference was held in October 2014. A database related to the conference has been maintained throughout these years. Using these data, the following report includes the factors that have sustained the conference, the network that has developed through conference attendance, the research studies that are underway related to the conference and conference attendees, the successes and challenges experienced by conference attendees, and the unintended benefits and opportunities provided through the conference.

INTRODUCTION

The Women in Educational Leadership Conference (WELC) was founded in 1987 at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. This was a time in the U.S. when Title IX was new and few women held leadership roles in higher education or K-12 settings. Affirmative action was a national concern at the time. In 1987, 2% of the professors of educational administration were women. The University of Nebraska-Lincoln hired its first woman professor in the department of educational administration in 1986.

At that time, the department was experiencing a steady increase in the number of female students in the traditionally, all-male educational administration program. To address the challenge, a survey of women educators was conducted in 1986 and served as the basis for developing WELC.

The conference was designed as a benefit to the graduate students in the educational administration program at the university. The conference featured women administrators and faculty members from higher education and K-12 settings as invited presenters. These individuals were to serve as potential role models for the graduate students. From the beginning women and men have attended the conference.

During the past 28 years, the conference has developed into a national event. Conference presenters and attendees throughout the years have come from all 50 states and other countries as well.

HOW WELC HAS BEEN SUSTAINED

In the U.S., professional associations and conferences have experienced difficulty in sustaining membership and attracting the necessary attendance at conferences to meet the expenses of the events. Petersen in 2000 conducted a study of three prominent national educational professional associations to identify the organizations' experiences sustaining membership and activities. The associations reported declining numbers and difficulty attracting participation at the conferences that were sponsored.

The core theme of WELC has continued to be leadership. The topic has not faded in importance in the field of educational administration. The conference has been strengthened and sustained through a) a continuous emphasis on research, b) attendees who have attended the conference multiple times, c) "word-of-mouth" endorsements of the conference, d) individuals who bring colleagues to the conference, e) the role of graduate students in the conference, and f) the opportunities that arise from conference attendance. Each of these aspects is discussed in the following sections.

Research focus

In the early years, the conference attendees were predominantly teachers and administrators from K-12 settings. Individuals from Nebraska were the core audience. However, when school district policies changed in the state, the teachers and administrators were required to "stay in their buildings." For a time, there was limited funding for professional development. This led to decreased participation by the K-12 individuals.

In recent years, an increase in postsecondary faculty attendance has enhanced the research focus of the conference. In turn, the conference has been a welcoming experience for individuals who are traveling the promotion and tenure track. Increased attendance by postsecondary administrators has emphasized the practice of educational leadership during the sessions and in the conversations. This transformation has extended the reach of WELC from a Nebraska phenomenon to a national and international event.

Doctoral students have the opportunity to present their research in its various phases and receive “constructive” feedback from a supportive audience who “get it.” Professors from other universities sponsor their graduate students at the conference as well.

In the early years of the conference, the presenters were invited speakers. However, the practice of issuing an annual call for proposals for conference presentations became a regular feature of conference planning by the fifth year of the conference. In the first years of the conference, there would be as many as four keynote presentations and no more than ten concurrent sessions.

Since the conference’s fifth year, 75 proposals for concurrent presentation are accepted each year and typically two keynote speakers present as well. This process has increased the value of the conference to attendees who have multiple session options. The content of the conference has been enriched as well. The presenters for the 75 sessions have “ownership” of the conference through their active participation in the event.

Repeat attendance, “word-of-mouth” endorsements, and bring a colleague

Throughout the years of the conference, some individuals have attended every conference since its founding. Some individuals have attended many conferences. Some first-time participants attend each year. The repeat attendees continue to return for a variety of professional and personal reasons.

Word-of-mouth endorsements became evident by the fifth year of the conference. At this conference, it was announced by a first-time conference attendee that as a new, untenured woman professor at a Texas university, she had been strongly encouraged by a male colleague in her department to attend because he knew the conference coordinator and had heard about the value of the event. This was a critical point in the history of the conference since it was clear evidence of the word-of-mouth aspect of spreading the network for women in educational leadership. The professor from Texas has returned to the conference many times.

Individuals have developed allegiances with the conference because of their involvement as graduate students. Professors welcome the opportunity to present their research. Conference attendees have access to contemporary research on women and leadership. Individuals bring colleagues or graduate students as guests to the conference. Individuals come to the conference to announce faculty and administrative positions at their institutions or to seek papers for journals they edit. Job connections and publication opportunities have been created through the network. External reviewers for promotion and tenure files have been identified by meeting new colleagues at the conference. Mentoring relationships have been formed among conference participants.

Role of graduate students

Throughout the 28 years of the conference, a graduate student assistant has been assigned to work with the conference coordinator. With one exception, these students have been completing doctoral studies at the university. The students who assist with the conference have been considered conference co-coordinators. The graduate assistants participate in all aspects of the planning, organization and delivery of the conference. Additionally, the students have been the point of contact for many of the conference presenters. They interact with the presenters and through this process increase their network with faculty and administrators from institutions throughout the U.S. and other countries. The conference coordinator’s doctoral students have had responsibilities at the conference as well.

Unintended consequences and benefits

The conference has led to unintended consequences and benefits. The students in the educational administration program and the conference coordinator have experienced professional benefits.

As students pursued faculty positions at other universities, they have used their role in the conference as evidence of their leadership activities during their doctoral programs. Some students have benefitted from their involvement in the conference through the positions they have acquired upon completion of their doctoral degrees.

The *Journal of Women in Educational Leadership (JWEL)* is an outgrowth of the conference. The journal provides an extension of the conference for the participants who choose to submit their presentations as formal papers to be submitted to the refereed journal.

A number of other opportunities can be linked to the conference. The following are examples of these opportunities.

An invitation to participate in the founding of Women Leading Education Across the Continents (WEL) is an example of the unanticipated benefits of the conference. This organization was founded in 2007.

An invitation to participate in the Advancing Theories of Women in Leadership initiative was another unexpected opportunity that emerged from the conference. This has led to research on Purpose and Calling related to Women as Leaders.

RESEARCH STUDIES

Throughout the years of the conference, contact information for the attendees and presenters has been maintained. Additionally, the topics presented at the conference have been recorded as well as the subjects addressed by the speakers.

Data from the conference is in a format that provides the basis for research. Data exist for 3,467 individuals who have attended the conference. Using the information from the conference, surveys and interviews of past participants are underway. The following questions guide these studies.

- What have been the career trajectories of women who have attended the conference?
- What challenges have the women faced as they pursued their careers in leadership?
- What colleague relationships emerged from attendance at the conference?
- What opportunities emerged from conference attendance?
- What led participants to attend the conference for multiple years?
- According to the participants, how has the status of women in educational administration changed since their first conference attendance?

The network that has been created through the conference continues to sustain the visibility and success of the annual Women in Educational Leadership Conference.