

Spring 2008

Reflections of women leading community colleges

Pamela L. Eddy

College of William and Mary, pamela.eddy@wm.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/educationpubs>



Part of the [Community College Leadership Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Eddy, Pamela L., Reflections of women leading community colleges (2008). *The Community College Enterprise*, 14(1), 49-66.
<https://scholarworks.wm.edu/educationpubs/125>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Education at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in School of Education Articles by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.

Reflections of women leading community colleges

Pamela L. Eddy

Dr. Eddy is an associate professor of Higher Education and doctoral program director in the Department of Educational Leadership at Central Michigan University in Mt. Pleasant, Michigan.

As the “people’s college,” community colleges have a reputation of being more welcoming of women—as students, faculty, and administrators (Townsend & Twombly, 2006). However, the current percentage of women leading community colleges, which is hovering at 29% (American Council on Education, 2007), begs the question of why parity is not witnessed at the helm of these colleges, especially when 57% of community college students are women (NCES, 2004). The present phenomenological study investigates the positions six women presidents hold, critical incidents that have impacted their career decisions, the role of mentoring, and how these leaders are encouraging others that will eventually take their places. Key emergent themes include the role of serendipity, encouragement by others to test the leadership waters, self-determination to pursue a presidency, and career sequencing based on family.

Introduction

Community colleges are often viewed as more friendly to women’s career pathways (Townsend & Twombly, 2006), especially since these institutions have double the number of women leading them compared to doctoral granting institutions and more overall than any other institutional type (American Council on Education (ACE), 2007). Yet, the progress masks a slowing advancement. Despite the fact that women leaders have achieved greater representation at the community college than at other institutions, the rate of advancement has slowed in the past decade. From an inauspicious start of a mere 8 percent of women presidents lead-

ing two-year colleges in 1986, in the past half decade, the number of women in the community college presidential office has grown by only 2 percent since 2001 (ACE, 2007; Corrigan, 2002).

Juxtaposed against the changing gender composition of the presidential office is an anticipated leadership turnover in community colleges. Currently, 45 percent of two-year college presidents are 61 years old or older (ACE, 2007). Moreover, 70 percent of community college presidents indicate they plan to retire in the next 10 years (Shults, 2001). While some of the transition in presidencies has begun, more awaits these institutions. Knowing how women advance in their careers may aid other women in mapping out a pathway to the highest level campus office.

Literature review

As bureaucratic institutions, community colleges reward and rely on an organizational hierarchy (Birnbaum, 1992). Thus, the route to the presidential office is often marked by a series of promotions up the career ladder. Indeed, for current community college presidents, 60 percent of them came to their current position either from a previous presidency (26 percent) or from the Chief Academic Officer position (34 percent) (ACE,

2007). One route to the presidency then might be through these offices. Women represent 21% of deans of instruction (or similarly titled positions such as vice president for academic affairs or chief academic officer) at community colleges (Weisman & Vaughan, 2002) providing a stepping stone to the presidency, but still not a level of parity. Mitchell (2004) has reported, however, that women in the chief academic office often arrived at the position without it as a career destination, again raising the issue of how women view the career pathway to a presidency.

The roots of a male dominance in community college presidencies can be traced back to the “great men” who led the early junior colleges and were the founders of most of the modern day community colleges during the growth period of the 1960s and 1970s (Twombly, 1995). The acceptance of the male norm in the presidential office was reified by the language used in the community college literature which focused on the roles of these leaders. Amey and Twombly (1992) used deconstruction of language to study leadership at community colleges. They have discovered that the discourse used to recount the organizational development of the community college sector continu-

ously reinforces male norms for leadership based on the research by and about a relatively small collection of white male scholars and practitioners.

Change in thinking about leadership is occurring, however. Eddy and VanDerLinden (2006) have found little difference in how men and women describe what it means to be a leader. Moreover, they note that while half of the respondents to their survey still identify their leadership based on position, a clear expansion in concept of what it means to be a leader is occurring since at least half of the respondents describe their leadership using more inclusive language and relying on expanded definitions of what it means to be a leader. More differences are found, however, by position, thus raising questions regarding the route to the presidency. Previous positions along a career pathway influence conceptions of leadership. Women working as mid-level administrators may be most greatly affected by mobility factors within a single institution.

Amey, VanDerLinden, and Brown (2002) researched mid-level leadership in community colleges, an area of little research attention. They focused on career paths, mentoring, and types of professional development. They found that 22% of the current community college presidents came from

within the institution, 56% of the participants had a mentor, and the career trajectory of presidents followed a traditional academic pathway of promotion through the hierarchy. They concluded that the path to the presidency was changing with more routes becoming open to the top leadership spot. At the same time, the authors concluded that work remained in generating candidate pools for the senior level positions, and in particular, providing entry level administrators the breadth of experiences to acquire the requisite skills necessary for future promotions.

In writing on the pathway to the presidency, Boggs (1988) focused on the characteristics of sitting presidents. Some of the requisite skills include an advanced degree, a willingness to move, active roles in the community, and ability to speak before large audiences. More recently, a focus on leaders as learners (Amey, 2005) emphasizes the flexibility presidents require to lead increasingly complex institutions and to be continuously learning how to be adaptable leaders (Heifetz, 1994). Developing skills in the full array of college functions such as learning theory, community outreach, budgets, and admissions provides a knowledge base for those seeking a presidency (Barwick, 2002).

Professional development training often fills the gap for aspiring presidential candidates. McDade (1991) reported on a wide variety of leadership and development programs for professionals. The focus of the training opportunities covers the spectrum of college functional areas and allows for a means to acquire new skills outside of a direct job related experience. Little research has occurred that follows the influence of professional development opportunities such as the executive institute of the League for Innovation or the workshops for presidential hopefuls sponsored by the American Association for Community Colleges (Eddy, in press).

In a study of women chief academic officers focused on career paths, McKenney (2000) found that gender influenced the amount of time in each position and that women were moving faster through their career paths relative to their male peers. Yet, the increased pace of movement has not significantly influenced the number of women ultimately obtaining their own presidency. Clearly, something is happening for women along the route to the president's office.

Methods

The present study uses interviews conducted with six women com-

munity college presidents who participated in a larger study on organizational change. The prime source of data collection is individual interviews. Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. Each of the women has been leading her institution for less than five years, with one of the participants serving in her second presidency. Pseudonyms are used throughout the manuscript to protect the identities of the participants.

A phenomenological research method was employed to better understand the issues the participants experienced along their career pathway. Phenomenology research searches for the central underlying meaning of an experience, in this case the understanding by women community college presidents as they reflect on their careers, and uses data reduction to analyze specific statements and themes for possible meanings (Creswell, 1998). The research methodology focuses on how individuals consciously develop meaning via social interactions (Creswell).

Transcripts of the interviews were reviewed for elements that reflect the career pathway experience. Interviews were coded for descriptions of participant background, specific references to critical incidents in their careers, experiences related to gender—in particular how that has influenced

their leadership, and identification of mentoring relationships. In addition, future career options were coded for analysis. NiVivo software was used for coding transcripts. Thematic groupings put assorted statements in separate categories that indicated various perspectives on how the participants framed leadership. Patterns and categories were identified using what Marshall and Rossman (1999) refer to as “reduction” and “interpretation” (p. 152). The process of reduction allows for the sorting of data into manageable portions with similar themes.

Findings

Several key findings emerge in the research. A lack of intentionality along the career path is evident. Key opportunities, however, provide the women presidents with the requisite skill base that allows them to be competitive presidential candidates. Influencing factors in the decision to pursue a presidency generally follow two lines. The first is an innate sense or awareness that they *could* do the job of the college president. The second is a mentor tapping the participant and convincing her that she could do the job. Finally, family obligations have played a critical role in career sequencing decisions.

Lack of intentionality

Several of the participants noted that they did not have a presidential position in mind when they started working in higher education. Holding a variety of positions at the community college provided some of the women with a broad base from which to draw experiences that aided their current leadership role. Debbie Taylor was serving in her second presidency within a college district. She commented,

People come to [the presidency] from such a different way. My trek was through the academic world, through the community college, just having every kind of job that you can possibly have in a college and then well, what else is there?

The presidential office was not the sought after destination, rather the only position left within the college for a promotion. Following the hierarchy naturally led to the top level position. Recently, Taylor had been appointed to her current presidency by the chancellor of the system. The rather unusual appointment allowed Taylor to prepare a new college to open within the district.

At a sister institution within the system, the chancellor also appointed another woman as president. The newly appointed presi-

dent of the college, Lauren Smith noted, "The guy that was the president here was really tired of being president, so the chancellor decided to switch us; nobody knew this." Smith left her position in the central office to take over her presidential duties. Like Taylor, Smith had almost 30 years of experience, with several years working within a multi-college system. She added, "It's interesting, you're going to see a lot of people here that have never been anywhere else." The conclusion suggests that a variety of experiences is good preparation for the presidential office, even if the position was not one she initially sought.

The experience of being tapped for higher level positions underscores the role of mentors in career advancement. Robin Bateman was in her first presidency when reflecting upon her advancement in the college ranks after working 25 years in the K-12 sector. Her first position at the community college was as an assistant to the president. The president served as a mentor for her, aiding in her appointment to vice president of planning and ultimately as provost at the college. Bateman reflected, "When I heard about the presidency, I did not apply the first time. I really liked what I was doing and I never really thought about being a college president." Her current institution had a failed

presidential search the first time. In the reposting of the opening, Bateman decided to inquire. She stated, "I wasn't really sure this [a presidency] is what I wanted; as a matter of fact, I was pretty sure I didn't want this. But then when I came here, everything changed. I started feeling like this is the kind of community that I felt I could really have an impact on. Because it's small, you can get your hands on the county that's this size." Ultimately, Bateman was the successful candidate for the position and has served as the college president for five years.

The other three participants in the study commented on their trek to the presidential office. Each of these women described a critical incident in which it became apparent to her that she could be successful as a college president. Cathleen Voss described an experience that occurred when she was consulting for another college. She noted, "I had a kind of epiphany about a year before I took the job. I was doing some consulting work, and the president was struggling with his board and was struggling with faculty. He asked me, how should I handle the board? Would you talk to the board? And I thought, "Wow, I could be doing the job!" That was an eye opener for me." Shortly thereafter, a colleague showed her an advertisement for the president position

at the college she was now serving stating that the position was a great match for Voss.

Like several of the other participants, Kristen Welch did not have initial ambitions to become a college president. She recounted her trek to the presidential office:

The past president decided to retire, and I made the decision to make application at that time. Prior to that, the presidency was not in my career path at all. I was very, very content with being a dean. I loved my job. I liked what I did. I got to work with very wonderful people, had a lot of contact with students, and was very, very content. It wasn't until the opportunity presented itself. Not that the president and not that the job came knocking at my door. It did not. But I think it's that fear of what you might get. That's what really prompted me to apply. Well, you know, this is a small community college, and we work very close as a team; and a colleague, who was very critical of our president and of the board, had indicated that he was going to be that next president. And I tell you, that's enough to take your breath away. And he makes the announcement to me not even thinking that anybody perhaps in the same leadership team might be in-

terested in being the president too. But in his mind, it was a done deal because he was the man for the job. And, then I thought now; well, they may not take him, but they may take someone besides him. And, then I went in and had a long, long conversation with the current president and decided after the end of that conversation that I was going to apply.

The fear of the alternative option led Welch to seek the presidential office. Previously, she served as dean of students.

The final participant in the study, Marilyn Lester, also noted her contentment as a mid-level administrator. She said,

Now I would have been happy to have been an academic dean or vice president for a long time. But when you are into a position like that, you recognize that you are one of the two types of people; either you can take direction and you like the detail work, the curriculum detail work, or you find yourself watching your boss and thinking he's making mistakes that I wouldn't make. Which is terribly unfair to a president and when a vice president starts thinking that way, she has a duty to apply for presidencies of her own and leave the poor people alone that she's working for.

Like several of the current presidents, Lester was interested in pursuing a presidency since she had worked through several layers of the college administrative structure and was looking for the next challenge. Lester also noted a pivotal event earlier in her career. She stated,

I can remember the night that I met with the president. I was interim dean of academic affairs at the point, and I was going to apply for the permanent position. I met with him, and I don't even remember what got us started, but there was something that he wanted to do that I had a strong disagreement about, and I told him that in my firm way, which was probably too blunt and bitchy. And he called me a bitch and I remember walking out of there. I mean I held my own, but I walked out of his office and said, "I can't work for this man, and what's more, I probably can't work for anyone. I've got to be my own boss."

The pattern of thinking of the men she reported to led Lester to the conviction that she was better suited than they as a leader. Thus, it was her self-designation as a leader which ultimately drove her to the presidential position.

The women in the study were either encouraged to seek their current positions by search com-

mittees; or in the case of Taylor and Smith, appointed to their positions by the chancellor; or ultimately sought the position for fear of the alternative; or as the next logical step in the career pathway. Central to these women obtaining their current positions was a skill set obtained from a variety of experiences gained over a long career. The next section discusses in more detail key areas of support and opportunities experienced by the participants.

Key support or opportunities

The ability to draw from a range of previous experiences aided the women in the present study. As noted above, several of the participants had well over 30 years in the trenches of community colleges or a combination of years within two-year and public K-12 institutions. Both good and bad experiences provided learning opportunities. Debbie Taylor related the following:

I think it is pretty powerful to really have had experience in academic decision making and in dealing with student issues, and working with the community. Leading groups to accomplish things within an organization, particularly in large organization, is important. I've had some experiences where the institutions did not want to change. That

was a very painful lesson, but it was a really good experience that was pretty valuable for me—not comfortable—but boy, you can learn a lot from being in an institution where change is just really rejected as a value.

Figuring out how to deal with resistance can be a valuable lesson in preparing for change at other institutions. Robin Bateman, reflected on the role of failure as a learning tool. She said, “I learned from mistakes; I learned from things I would never do again. I mean—it’s good to go through bad times because you learn so much from them.”

Key learning opportunities also occurred when the participants were open to opportunities. Kristen Welch came from student affairs administration, not academics. Only 6% of current community college presidents came to their presidency from student affairs leadership (ACE, 2007). Welch stated,

Well, I think that one of the things that helped me is that I’ve always been a person who is willing to step in and do anything that’s required to get a project completed. I had an opportunity to work with literally every type of position on campus. I worked with faculty, I worked with staff, I worked with administrators,

I worked with legal counsel, because I gave myself—not permission—but I just created opportunities not knowing that I was doing this for a reason. And, so I was fortunate enough that I was able to gain exposure to lots of areas that the typical dean of students would not have had.

Again, the variety of experiences serves as a central theme for all of the participants. An awareness of the campus environment and people was also noted by President Smith. “I had some advantage having worked in the district already, and I was on the campus a lot for meetings, and I pretty much knew what the culture was. It was one of the reasons I was really interested in coming here.” Exposure served these women well.

One of the women commented that she attended one of the national leadership academies. She reflected, “I think it was not so much the organizations, but the networking and learning from lots of good friends and mentors around the county that I look to and get advice from and learn from all of the time.” Another woman wished she would have had the opportunity to have attended some training workshops to avoid making the missteps she did in her first year. Marilyn Lester stated pointedly,

I didn’t look closely enough

at some of the problems the institution had, and I think that's a mistake that maybe people might make in their first presidency. Particularly, if they don't have a lot of mentoring and I didn't. Maybe it's changing, but I just have a sense that some of my male colleagues have stronger mentoring arrangements than I did. I think there's a lot more formal mentoring going on now for women. I don't think the informal network is as strong yet, even though it's getting better.

In her case, Lester attributed some of her mistakes to the lack of good mentoring. Other participants, however, recounted how their strong mentoring relationships provided them with resources to draw upon during their first critical months on campus.

President Bateman referred to the president of her previous campus as a strong mentor for her. She did note some limitations to his mentoring, however, since she was now at a smaller institution that provided a much different context than the large urban college that her mentor leads. Bateman went on to state that she was, "very fortunate in K-12, I started 31 years ago. That experience really helped me so much; because of that I was a chief negotiator for contracts. You have to know labor, you have to know curriculum, you have to

know finance, you have to be able to raise money, you have to care about students the most, and strategic training." The variety of experiences exposed Bateman to key elements required in the presidential position. She was quite clear on the role her mentors played over time in having high expectations that resulted in her not wishing to disappoint them.

Family and career sequencing

All of the women in the study were married, whereas only 85% of all sitting two-year college presidents have a spouse (ACE, 2007). Family life clearly influenced the career paths of the women in the study. Several of the women stated that they waited until their husbands retired prior to seeking a presidential position. Cathleen Voss commented, "Two academic career families are hard to find. My husband is a professor of mathematics and retired to come here with me." Further, she referenced her family in her first convocation piece. She commented, "I was particularly well suited to the financial challenge [on campus] because we had raised a family on a single faculty member's salary, since I didn't work when our children were young; but I was always pinching pennies and managing, so I was very well equipped for the job." Voss's role as a wife and mother were integrated into her career

choices and preparation.

Family played a central role for Marilyn Lester's career pathway. In particular, she recounted her decisions to delay career advancements:

I did tinker with administration. I flirted with administration. When I was division chair, my son was in junior high. I took a couple years as an assistant dean when he was a toddler. Now that position I could've kept longer. I decided to get out of it because it was just obvious to me that a) I wasn't giving my child the attention that he needed, b) at some point there were fewer opportunities to stay in administration at an institution than there are opportunities to stay in a faculty. It was clear to me at that point when he was just 3 and 4 years old that I could not take an administrative position and protect what was important to me, which was the stability of my marriage, my son's growing up in a stable environment. So the only thing I could, I left the associate dean's position, took a sabbatical, got back into teaching.

Lester did not enter into administration again until her son was in high school. It was not until her son was out of college that she sought a dean position again.

Children influenced the decision making of President Bateman as well. She described her decision making as follows:

I consciously made a decision very early on that my first priority would always be my family. I want to be a good mother, I want to have a good marriage, I love being an aunt and all those other things. And if I wasn't that, I couldn't be good at what I am doing now. I know who my priorities are meaning that if someone offered me a job and it happened to be in—I don't know, say Florida—I'd love it but it would take me away from them. I wouldn't even think about it in a heartbeat.

Career decisions for several of these women presidents were made with their family's well being in mind. A stable home front provided a sense of foundation for these women, but also added constraints with respect to their ability to easily move for career advancement.

The location of the college served as the reason Kristen Welch initially sought her dean's position at her present institution. Four years after arriving on campus she stated, "My kids were already established in their roles in school before I made the switch to being the president. And they already had their own personality,

and it was—it was fine. My kids already had their own identity in schools and stuff, so I don't think they'd have any negative reaction." Welch went on to say that she saw herself staying at the college another decade and not looking for another presidency. She added, "No, [I'm not interested in another presidency] because I had really not ever thought of being the president here. And now that I have the one, I'm not even interested in leaving. And I have had a couple of opportunities to have those conversations and have not pursued them at all. They made me feel very good, but I am not interested in leaving." Her husband was a public school teacher with a stable position, and they liked the region of the state. Welch's extended family was nearby, which she stated "helps keep things in perspective and balance."

The concept of next moves came up during several of the interviews. President Lester stated frankly, "I thought when I came here—I thought this would be the first presidency, and I would be a president again. In fact there was part of me that really wanted to come back to my last college and take over when that president retired. But you know, I'm not a young person any more; I'm about to turn sixty in another year." It was clear that Lester felt she did not have time for another move.

Her delay in seeking higher level administrative positions early on resulted in fewer high ranking career opportunities. The fact that her current college is near a resort area in a region she and her husband enjoy also gave her pause to leave the area.

Bateman tested the career waters recently and did interview for a nearby presidential opening. Ultimately, she withdrew her name from consideration stating,

I realized there were all these things that I was accomplishing [at her college] that to leave in the middle of having nothing done. I just believe that if you do what's right, other opportunities will come, if it should be. Will I ever look for another job? Well, let's put it this way, it's not my career goal, but nothing has ever been my career goal. If something should come up, I would probably take a look at it, but is it my desire to leave, no.

The ties to her current college and a sense of desire to complete her strategic agenda are now keeping Bateman off the job market.

Several of the women in the study spoke pointedly about the career decisions they made due to their family obligations. Delaying career moves or opting not to seek new opportunities due to family ties were central for many of the women. The voices missing from

the section include President Taylor and President Smith, the two presidents appointed within the same district by their chancellor to their presidential positions. These women led colleges in a large urban area, affording them more career options without a physical move.

Playing with the boys

The male model of leading a community college has been a factor in the careers of the women in the study. Bateman referred to what she termed “the woman factor.” She expanded, “I think that especially when you’re a petite woman you find that all these people want to help you. Well, that’s a good thing, but sometimes you don’t want their help; it’s like I can do it myself, thank you!” She perceived her gender served as a reminder that she may not be up for the job of president. She recalled how one of her board members suggested that she wear glasses so that people would take her more seriously. Bateman’s gender influenced the first perception those within the college had of her leadership, an issue which could impact her future career choices.

In reflecting on her initial year at her current campus, Cathleen Voss commented, “They needed somebody who had some strong leadership but also would be willing to be a team player and invite a lot of input and make changes.”

Often the language used by the women in the study reified a male model of leadership, indicating that these traits were ones they thought were necessary for a presidential position. The need to “play with the boys” was also apparent to Voss. She offered,

I’m trying to learn to play golf. But you know, I’ll go down to the golf course to have a lesson and 4 and 5 people button-hole me about this problem, or that problem so it’s a small fishbowl. I’m looking at expanding the foundation board from an “old boy” network of 12 or 14 golfing friends to 25 to 30 people who would be in the position to give us money. I need to build an expectation with council and foundation board that if they are going to be on these boards that they need to pony up.

Clearly, Voss saw the role of learning to play golf as necessary for her to be successful. The golf course provided a place to meet with campus constituents, to build up expectations on giving to the college, and as a mechanism for breaking into the “old boys” network. Welch also noted that she often attends sporting events at the college and how these appearances allow her to have a presence in the community. The fact that she likes to socialize and relax by attending these events allows her to do something she likes and to

have the added advantage of representing her college as well.

Discussion and implications

Existing research on career pathways in the community college shows expansion of the routes to the presidential office (Amey, VanDerLinden, & Brown, 2002). The experiences of the women in the study verify that alternative routes are possible. While several of the women in the study still came from the traditional academic pathway, others had stopovers in student affairs, enrollment, and presidential support offices. The diversity of experiences represented is encouraging as it opens up options to more individuals.

As Mitchell (2004) found, however, even women in high level institutional offices often do not consider advancing to a presidency. For the women in the study, if it were not for encouragement from mentors or self-initiative emanating from a critical career incident, they may not have made a move to the top-office either. In general, the women were all satisfied with their previous positions. Wolverton and Gonzales (2000) reported how deans in their study were not interested in moving up the career ladder. In fact, many wanted to move back into the classroom. The lack of intentionality of seek-

ing a presidential position evidenced by the women in the current study supports the previous research showing a leveling off of career trajectories. What remains to be teased out of the outcomes is the reason why the careers are short-circuited.

Several barriers to career advancement may be considered. First, the male norms represented in the community college presidency (Amey & Twombly, 1992) provide few models to which women may aspire. In particular, the addition of family concerns and balancing career aspirations with family responsibilities may prove too much for women. Indeed, Williams (2000) portrays the “ideal worker” (p. 17) as one based on men and their ability to have limited responsibility for family work and undivided attention for work demands. Clearly, the women in the study discussed their family responsibilities and family influence on career choices. The inability of women to be both “ideal” and responsible for the domestic realm and child rearing presents a dilemma. Community colleges as gendered organizations (Acker, 1990) create barriers for women’s advancement and enactment of leadership (Eddy & Cox, 2007).

The implication of the double bind for women aspiring to advanced career options points

out the need for institutions to consider how to become less gendered. Despite the reputation as institutions of access, community colleges still have not provided an even playing field for women to advance, especially if they are measured against a male norm. The ability to move within the organization is critical for women who may have less flexibility to move (VanDerLinden, 2003).

Second, mentors have a critical role in the advancement of women in the community college. Support via advice, opportunities to acquire diverse experiences, and access to leadership development provide critical career skills. Some women may not consider upper level positions on their own, adding increased importance to the well placed suggestions by mentors. The role of mentoring is a two-way street. Senior administrators should look to selecting individuals to encourage, and individual women should seek out a variety of mentors to provide a range of advice on skills.

Finally, women should consciously reflect on their career pathway. As noted throughout, the women in the current research study had not intentionally sought their presidential appointments. What allowed them to be successful was the fact that they were prepared for the opportunity when it presented itself since they

had broad based experiences in the college system. Questions to pose for reflection might include: What types of job activities do I enjoy? What are the responsibilities of upper level positions? How might I acquire the skills required for advancement? What opportunities should I seek out to further develop my repertoire of leadership skills? Who might provide me with advice and access to opportunities? Taking the time to consciously think and plan out career moves may result in quicker advancement through the career ranks. Higher levels of self-actualization prove a strong lever for the women studied here to contemplate the option of moving up the career ladder.

Conclusion

The view the women in the study provided in looking back over their careers highlights the role of serendipity in their career paths. None of these women initially aspired to a presidential position, even when she was tapping at the ceiling in second-in-command positions. Two forces ultimately moved these women ahead. For some, the route to the presidency emerged as someone encouraged them to apply and gave them the confidence that they could do the job—in essence, pulling them up. For others, it was a push up to the position, generally resulting from

a level of self-awareness that they could do the job or the fear of what would happen if someone else did the job. A level of self-actualization was required for these women to make the move to the top level position.

Whether via a push or a pull, institutions should be thinking of how to better open the doors to the community college presidency to more individuals. Diversity in gender, race, ethnicity, and experience would bring historically marginalized individuals to the helm. Why are more women not advancing their careers to the presidency? Several reasons may lie behind the sidetracking of women's career pathways. First, as noted by the participants in the study, women are satisfied in their current position and as a result, are not contemplating a career move. Second, women do not perceive a college presidency as a career option. The women in the research reported here note how they did not initially consider a presidential position and were in fact surprised to think how they got there. Part of the reason women do not consider a presidency is because no one has encouraged them to seek such a level of leadership. Consider how Lester's president called her a "bitch" when she attempted to exert her opinion in a meeting and how Welch's male colleague assumed he would be the next college president.

To advance women to the president's office at the community college, both a push and pull approach is necessary. The sticky floors and glass ceilings in colleges provide resistance along the career pathway. Organizational barriers need to be removed to help in career advancement, in particular those related to work/family balance. Opportunities for women to test the leadership waters would aid in providing a chance for women to acquire the requisite skills and experiences and provide a safety net for them as they envision themselves in the presidential role. Several leadership development opportunities exist nationally, but to be most effective, in-house opportunities are required to allow more women the chance to still blend family responsibilities with career ambitions. Given the anticipated leadership turnover facing community colleges, more attention needs to be paid to supporting women in climbing the career ladder and in thinking of expanded conceptions of leadership. The voices of the women in the study emphasize the role of mentoring and the influence of family on career decision making. As more examples of women community college presidents become available, more women may intentionally aspire to these positions rather than ending up in the top office by chance.

References

- Acker, J. (1990). Hierarchies, jobs, bodies: A theory of gendered organizations. *Gender and Society*, 4(2), 139-158.
- American Council on Education (2007). *The American college president: 2007 Edition 20th anniversary*. Washington, DC: American Council on Education.
- Amey, M. J. (2005). Conceptualizing leading as learning. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 29(9-10), 689-704.
- Amey, M. J., & Twombly, S. B. (1992). Revisioning leadership in community colleges. *The Review of Higher Education*, 15(2), 125-150.
- Amey, M. J., VanDerLinden, K., & Brown, D. (2002). Perspectives on community college leadership: Twenty years in the making. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 26(7), 573-589.
- Barwick, J. T. (2002). Pathways to the presidency: Same trail, new vistas. *Community College Journal*, 73(1), 6-11.
- Birnbaum, R. (1992). *How academic leadership works: Understanding success and failure in the college presidency*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Boggs, G. R. (1988, March). *Pathways to the presidency*. Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges, Washington, DC.
- Corrigan, M. E. (2002). *The American college president: 2002 edition*. Washington, DC: American Council on Education.
- Creswell, J. W. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Eddy, P. L. (in press). Changing of the guard in community colleges: The role of leadership development. In A. Kezar (Ed.), *New horizons for leadership development of faculty and administrators in higher education*. Baltimore, MD: Stylus Press.
- Eddy, P. L., & Cox, E. M. (2007, April). *Gendered leadership: An organizational perspective*. Paper presented at the American Education Research Association, Chicago, IL.
- Eddy, P. L., & VanDerLinden, K. (2006). Emerging definitions of leadership in higher education: New visions of leadership or same old "hero" leader? *Community College Review*, 34(1), 5-26.
- Glazer-Raymo, J. (1999). *Shattering the myths: Women in academe*. Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press.
- Heifetz, R. A. (1994). *Leadership without easy answers*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. B. (1999). *Designing qualitative research* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

-
- McDade, S. A. (1991). New Pathways in Leadership and Professional Development. *New Directions for Higher Education* No. 76 (*Administration as a Profession*), 19(4), 87-101.
- McKenney, C. B. (2000). Women Chief Academic Officers of Public Community Colleges: Career Paths and Mobility Factors. Access ERIC: FullText. Texas: 138.
- Mitchell, R. L. (2004, November). *Women chief academic officers: Career paths, challenges, and choices*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education, Kansas City, MO.
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2004). *Digest of Education Statistics, 2004*. Washington, DC: US Department of Education. (NCES No. 2006-005).
- Sagaria, M. A. D. (1988). Administrative mobility and gender: Patterns and processes in higher education. *Journal of Higher Education*, 59(3), 305-326.
- Shults, C. *The Critical Impact of Impending Retirements on Community College Leadership*. Leadership Series Research Brief No. 1. Washington, D.C.: American Association of Community Colleges, 2001.
- Smallwood, S. (2005). Doctoral degrees rose 3.4% in 2004. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 52(16), A10.
- Townsend, B. K., & Twombly, S. (2006, April). *The community college as an educational and workplace site for women*. Paper presented at the 48th annual conference of the Council for the Study of Community Colleges, Long Beach, CA.
- Twombly, S. B. (1995). Gendered images of community college leadership: What messages they send. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, 23(1), 67-77.
- VanDerLinden, K. (2003, April). *Career advancement and leadership development of community college administrators*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, IL.
- Weisman, I. M., & Vaughan, G. B. (2002). *The community college presidency, 2001*. AACC Research Brief. Washington, DC: American Association of Community Colleges.
- Williams, J. (2000). *Unbending gender: Why family and work conflict and what to do about it*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Wolverton, M., & Gonzales, M. J. (2000, April). *Career Paths of Academic Deans*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA.

Copyright of *The Community College Enterprise* is the property of Schoolcraft College, and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted on a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.