



Advancing Women in Leadership

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Full Length Research Paper

The Invisible Labor for Emerging Women Leaders: A Critical Analysis of Literature in Higher Education

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In this article, we present findings from a review and synthesis of contemporary research on women in higher education leadership. Through the use of critical analysis, we argued that to understand the stubbornly small percentage of women who comprise upper leadership positions in higher education, we must examine the dominant discourses in the vast body of literature addressing this topic over the past 20 years. Despite this ever-growing literature, institutions retain patriarchal structures that women must navigate, an approach that has yielded slow and modest change. Second, we argued that the literature unifies around three predominant and well-worn categories of proposed “solutions”: (a) institutional change; (b) identity work; and (c) professional development. We interrogated problematic framings within each of these categories that reinforce the notion that women, individually, are responsible for additional, often invisible, labor to be successful, which leaves alternative solutions unimagined.

Keywords: Gender, leadership, leadership development, institutional change

In recent years, a key concern in higher education leadership and administration in the United States has been on facilitating women leaders. As the numbers of women college students have swelled, scholars have noted the stagnant state of women in high profile roles such as the presidency (Johnson, 2016). According to a 2022 report by the American Council on Education (ACE), women accounted for just 30% of all college presidencies (Johnson, 2022). Moreover, for women of color, the statistics tell an even starker story with slower gains on leadership positions (Stefanco, 2014). As of 2017, only 5% of college presidents were women of color (WOC) (American Association of University Women, 2020). As such, a profusion of scholarship and practical advice has emerged to examine and propose solutions for increasing the number of women leaders in academic institutions. Given the slow rate of change, there remains ample reason to generate further questions and possible paths forward in order to achieve progress.

For years, higher education literature and popular culture have perpetuated the “pipeline myth” that there were too few women in the pipeline to fill leadership positions in higher education. Recent data however, including that described in the 2022 ACE’s report as well as a 2017 study conducted by the College and University Professionals Association of Human Resources

(CUPA-HR) (Johnson, 2022; McChesney, 2017), indicated that there are more than enough qualified women in the pipeline. ACE’s 2022 report, as of 2017, women had earned more than 50% of all doctoral degrees since 2006, 50% of all master’s degrees since 1991, and 50% of all bachelor’s degrees since 1981 (Johnson, 2022). Despite this, women are not obtaining senior-level positions, including president, chief academic officer, and even full professor at the same rate as their male peers, and women hold a greater share of service, entry-level, and teaching-only (less prestigious) positions (Johnson, 2016; Snyder et al., 2016). Consistent with the phenomenon described by Nidiffer (2002) as “the higher, the fewer,” these recent analyses found that the higher in position rank or selectivity of institution, the fewer women are found at the top of the institution. According to CUPA-HR, the percentage of women in high-level positions is less than 30% (McChesney, 2017). Similarly, the wage gap between men and women in higher education has not changed in 15 years, with an average gap in salaries of \$20,000 (Bichsel & McChesney, 2017). Specifically, women administrators experience an approximate 20% gender gap and college presidents a gap of under 10% (American Association of University Women, 2020). Thus, what may look like a “pipeline” issue on the surface is actually a much more nuanced problem. Scholars and administrators continue to

grapple with the complexities and stubbornness of gender diversity in leadership.

Given the scope, scale, and longevity of gender inequities in higher education leadership, it is no surprise that scholars have developed abundant literature on the topic over the past 20 years. Motivated by the need for new, creative solutions to a persistent problem and in light of our own subjectivity as emerging women leaders who seek guidance from such writing, we critically analyze three predominant themes in the literature: (a) professional development; (b) identity work; and (c) institutional change. Within the theme of identity work, we pay particular attention to WOC and marginalization. We assert that much literature reinforces the idea that women must take on additional labor in order to be successful (an idea that places responsibility for success on individual women), is targeted primarily at an insular, gender exclusive audience, and promotes working within existing structures even while acknowledging the need for structural change. Our goal, ultimately, is to develop new ideas and questions for future research and not to discount the rich body of existing research and advice. As such, we frame this review around the guiding question, “What are the available discourses surrounding women and higher education leadership in the U.S.?”

Method

Critical Analysis

In analyzing the literature as discourse, we followed the lead of higher education researchers Turner, Norwood, & Noe (2013), looking at how meanings are configured at a macro-level, leading us to analyze which issues about women and leadership in higher education are important, dismissed, and unexplored in the literature. Critical analysis, a heterogeneous approach to language and discourse, allowed us to examine the relationship between language and power. From a critical perspective, power and hierarchy are produced and reproduced in language. The goal of critical analysis is to provoke social criticism and “expose hidden power and taken-for-granted assumptions” (Holland and Novak, 2017, p 295).

Critical Analysis and Meta-synthesis

It is important to note that this research is interdisciplinary, both in terms of the literature analyzed and the intended scholarly audience. When undertaking an interdisciplinary project, it is important to carefully consider methodological approaches and how to situate them for an interdisciplinary audience. It makes sense given both the topic and the author’s disciplinary expertise, that we would first draw upon our own expertise. The first author is in the field of Communication Studies, in which a macro-interpretive literature review of a topic or theme is a common and identifiable scholarly output. For example, the journals *Review of Communication and Communication Yearbook* have published extended literature reviews that use critical analysis to advance thinking about certain topics, themes, and questions. The second author is in the field of Higher Education, in which critical literature reviews can be found as a

primary methodology. For example, the journal *Review of Educational Research* provides a forum for such scholarship.

Given the authors’ disciplines and the object of inquiry (women in higher education), we primarily drew upon past educational research to guide our methods. As such, we used a

a meta-synthesis process to conduct our literature review. According to educational researchers Wolfe and Dilworth (2015), in meta-synthesis, the researchers aim to synthesize qualitative content, past literature in this case, in order to identify categories and interpret greater meanings (Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015). Following the lead of educational researchers Wolfe and Dilworth (2015) in their approach to literature review methodology, we first developed a guiding research question, “What are the common, available messages in the literature on women and leadership in higher education?” Second, we embarked upon a phase of selecting literature, developing and refining criteria to analyze an array of literature that was manageable, relevant, and timely. The next two phases involved deep reading, analysis, and synthesis – iterative processes that mutually informed each other.

Although we relied primarily on previous education research to guide our literature review methodology, it is important to note that many disciplines engage in forms of meta-synthesis as a valuable genre of inquiry. For example, as management scholars Point et al. (2017) asserted, findings and discussion from this type of literature review can “push the discipline – or the disciplines – forward in their theoretical and practical insight” (p. 197). In the field of psychiatry, Lachal, et al., (2017), advocated for metas-synthesis as a way to systematically review the findings of qualitative studies, specifically. They assert that this is a way to bring a measure of objectivity and scientific rigor to analyzing qualitative studies that are contextual, and ultimately to impose generalizability on such empirical work.

Our review of literature is informed by this broad-scale concept of meta-synthesis. More specifically, though, we use a critical interpretive lens to analyze the literature, commonly found in communication and education scholarship, to understand the texts as discourse (see above). In the following section, we outline the procedures we used to engage in selection, analysis, and synthesis.

Procedures

To begin answering our research question, our literature search began simply with the terms “women and leadership in higher education.” Quickly, we realized the enormous scope and scale of this work. For example, a Google Scholar search of those terms in the past three years yields over 75,000 results. We developed selection criteria, ultimately focusing on: (a). research dated from 2005 till present; (b) scholarship focused on the U.S. higher education system; and (c) peer-reviewed journal articles and academic edited volumes. We also chose to focus primarily on literature in education journals, using our library databases (i.e. Academic Search Complete, Communication and Mass Media Complete, ERIC Database, and JSTOR) to target journals

by subject area. This, however, was a softer criterion as the field of education is broad, with porous disciplinary boundaries that overlap with other disciplines.

Although this review covers a broad range of scholarship, it is important to note that the critical analysis approach is not intended to be exhaustive. Rather, the depth and breadth of the literature reviewed yields a viable analysis of the prevalent discourses surrounding women, gender, leadership, and higher education. In the initial phase, working with the selection criteria above, we reviewed approximately 125 articles. We then identified approximately 50 key articles and traced their citations to see how ideas evolved in the discourse over time.

In phase two, continued in-depth review of the approximately 50 articles, generating categories and themes within each category to delineate our findings (see Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015). First, we read and annotated the literature, identifying broad categories that characterized the main topics, concepts, and questions. The primary categories developed in this phase included identity, institutional change, and professional development. Second, we constructed themes by interpreting possible category meanings. For example, one early primary category we identified was mentoring, and we analyzed this category by asking, “What does it mean for women leaders if mentoring is theorized and presented in these ways?” We also looked for counter-points and counterexamples in the literature to our developing themes. This phase allowed us to see patterns of discourse in the selected texts and to conceptualize extensions of and alternatives to the current literature.

Our third phase of literature review research involved analyzing concept saturation. Concept saturation occurs when further literature search on a specific idea or concept leads to more of the same understanding and approaches to that concept. To extend the above example, mentoring is a concept and practice often discussed in this literature. Once we developed analytical themes about mentoring based on our selected literature, we again searched for additional literature on this topic specifically. We read this additional literature to discover if there were other conceptualizations of mentoring dominant in the literature, and if the additional sources lead us to deeper analysis. Once we reached concept saturation, we chose not to include additional literature.

Finally, we moved into deeper critical analysis of the literature as our synthesis evolved. We questioned the limits of dominant categories and themes that characterize the literature, interpreting assumptions underlying, for example, the overwhelming quantity of literature focused on professional development for women. We observed in this process several ways in which the discourse of “women and leadership in higher education” could shift and change to create new normals of leadership – ones that are more inclusive, less deficit-based, and not purported on women’s ongoing invisible labor.

Ultimately, our goal was to support new ways of thinking about and researching women and leadership in higher education in

order to promote deeper, more systemic gender inclusiveness, equity, and diversity. We acknowledge that it remains clear that the vast majority of literature over this time period focuses on cisgender, white women and reinforces a gender binary, although the discourse is slowly changing as the field of higher education changes and as a result of increased opportunities for academic publishing such as this one. It is important to note that our selection terms above, presentation of our themes, and critique of literature conducted and reported from a gender binary perspective is not done as an endorsement or perpetuation of the idea that only cisgender men and women work in higher education, but rather as a reflection of the literature that exists. We hope to spark conversation that shifts discourse and practices of how we frame our research on women and leadership in higher education.

Limitations

A limitation of literature review as a method can be selection bias and the quality of the search conducted. We have attempted to address this limitation through the design of our search strategy which drew clear boundaries around our search criteria and dates as described above. We do however acknowledge some limitations of our review. First, although we reviewed and synthesized a select range of literature that is not intended to be exhaustive, exclusive use of the databases available through our library may have resulted in an incomplete set of articles. Second, our results that follow do not include a critical review of each individual study’s validity, but rather assume that each study is indeed valid. Third, the search selection terms themselves may have limited our findings; a broader set of terms certainly would have allowed for more research to be considered and analyzed for its contribution to our research question. Finally, as qualitative research, it is important to acknowledge our own personal biases as researchers and the ways in which our world views and experiences shape our analyses and assumptions.

Findings

In this section, we present the findings of the critical analysis of the literature. The findings are organized into three main sections that emerged in analysis: identity work, institutional change, and professional development. In each section, we highlight how meanings are constructed and reinforced in ways that both enable and constrain the discursive possibilities for women leaders in higher education. Ultimately, we argue that a common thread woven throughout the literature is an expectation of invisible labor for women leaders, a concept we engage in depth in the discussion.

Identity Work

The first theme identified through this critical review is that of identity work. The literature on women and leadership in higher education often emphasizes the work involved in embodying a “female identity” while pursuing advancement. On one level, these messages raise awareness about the realities of gender bias in the academy; but, on another level, the messages reinforce the

notion that women cannot succeed without laboring to overcome and compensate for their identities. For example, according to Sulpizio (2014), women must first develop a gender-aware identity before they can effectively learn leadership skills. When solutions like this prescribe a linear path to success, they imply additional steps (work) women must take. Scholars sometimes even refer explicitly to gendered identities as obstacles, framing the problem as, “women can be successful leaders when they recognize and know how to overcome the complexities of female leadership” (Wilson, 2011, p. 263). Messages that are meant as helpful how-tos in the literature can be discerned as reminders that a gendered identity as a woman is a liability when it comes to leadership. This framing, used repeatedly, assigns the work of increasing women leaders to a limited audience, those women seeking leadership positions.

Another iteration of the focus on identity work in the literature can be found in the many accounts of personal experience from women leaders in higher education. These accounts include, for example, women university presidents (Madsen, 2008), mid- to senior-level leaders (Smith & Suby-Long, 2019), women moving from clerical to professional positions (Iverson, 2011), and women college presidents at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) (Cubbage, 2020). One of the purposes of this first-person account research is to advise other women on how to become leaders. Much of the advice echoes’ themes found across the broader literature and can be summarized as:

- Take control and strategize your career advancement (Cubbage, 2020; Irby et al., 2014; Jackson & Johnson, 2011; Madsen, 2008; Wolverton et al., 2009)
- Seek mentorship
- Seek professional development
- Network
- Be participatory and consultative
- Be adaptive
- Commit to lifelong learning
- Enact a high level of integrity and ethics
- Be a good listener
- Have a sense of humor
- Be commanding and assertive

Women’s stories vary, though their “lessons learned” remain relatively consistent as does the intended audience — other women.

Several scholars have deepened and broadened the repertoire of available personal narratives from women leaders by focusing on the additional complexities and challenges facing women of color (WOC). This literature centers gender and race as sources of marginalization. As Sims (2020) pointed out, all aspects of higher education are racialized and gendered, from texts assigned in classroom learning to bureaucratic management practices in the organization. As such, these narratives also pass on stories of identity work and the differing expectations WOC face to perform leadership identities, with strategies emphasizing survival and overcoming adversity (Jackson & Johnson, 2011; Irby et al., 2014).

Although there is increasing attention to the intersections of gender and race, other identity intersections receive little or only implicit attention in the literature. Class is addressed often implicitly in personal narratives of struggle. For example, in a profile of former Berkeley College President and current President of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) Mildred Garcia, she shared, “I identify with my students because our lives run parallel. I was born in Brooklyn...When I was twelve, my father passed away and we moved into the Farragut Housing Project” (Wolverton et al., 2009, p. 39). Esterberg and Wooding (2013) also mentioned class in relation to students, citing from their research that faculty from working-class backgrounds working at institutions serving primarily working-class students were happiest. When acknowledged, class is either an implicit factor in the stories women share of their backgrounds or it is mentioned in connection to first generation and underrepresented students. Sexual orientation receives scant explicit attention in the literature on women in higher education. However, cisgender and heterosexual norms permeate stories of women and the presidency both in telling of their couplings and singlehood (see Wolverton et al., 2009).

At issue here is the conceptualization of gender as a primary source of identity and marginalization in the academy, as an obstacle to be overcome by individual women, and the narrow audience to which the rich and provocative personal accounts are aimed. Women’s voices need to be heard, in all their plurality, and especially those who have been historically (and continue to be) oppressed by the white, patriarchal, elite, and hetero norms of U.S. higher education. Moreover, women need to be able to enact leadership identities that are multifaceted and intersectional, not just gendered. We assert that the emphasis in the literature on identity work reinforces the well-worn ideas that: (a) gender identity is an obstacle; (b) success is dependent on individual ability to overcome gender identity; and (c) women are the primary audience, and therefore stakeholders, for research and discourse about how to advance more women in the academy at the expense of foreclosing discussion about sustainable institutional change.

Institutional Change

Institutional change is the second theme we identified. It is increasingly recognized in the literature on women in higher education as an acknowledgement of the structural and systematic barriers to success and advancement. Literature within the past 10 years has been consistent on the ways in which the experiences of women leaders differ from that of men in the academy, including increased rates of incivility from colleagues and students (Neuman & Keashly, 2010; Lampman, 2012), increased rates of part-time employment (Glazer-Raymo, 2008), higher levels of academic service loads for faculty (Guarino & Borden, 2017; O’Meara et al., 2017), and a persistent wage gap that has not changed in 15 years, with an average gap in salaries of \$20,000 (Bichsel & McChesney, 2017).

Research points to several institutional and organizational considerations for these phenomena, not the least of which includes the history of the structure of academia in the U.S. which was by and large created historically for men, influencing the process and timing associated with the tenure process which coincides with women's reproductive years (Jamieson, 1995; National Academy of Sciences, National Academy of Engineering & Institute of Medicine, 2006). Despite attempts to enact family-friendly policies that "stop the tenure clock" and allow timing extensions for large stops in productivity such as caring for an infant, recent studies indicate such policies may not actually benefit women (Antecol et al., 2016). The academy also provides an ideal environment for bullying due to the fact that productivity, tenure and promotion are assessed subjectively by faculty colleagues (Keashly & Neuman, 2010).

Finally, recent literature points to major historical practices within academia that contribute to the current gender pay gap including the use of student evaluations in promotion and tenure and the use of obtaining outside offers to increase earnings. Ratings of evaluations of teaching have been consistently shown to be biased (Fan et al., 2019; Magel et al., 2017; Merritt, 2007; Peterson et al., 2019; Stark et al., 2016). In an analysis of salaries at a research institution, Magel et al. (2017) found that when male faculty student ratings went up, so did their salary; when women's student ratings went up, salaries decreased. Additionally, the common higher education practice of using outside offers to negotiate a higher salary at your current institution also has implications for the gender wage gap, as rank and gender have been shown to be two factors that affect who receive outside offers; men receive more outside offers than women, and bias based on partner status can affect offers as well (O'Meara et al., 2017).

Institutional Solutions: Work within the System or Change

Institutional best practices and solutions cited to address barriers for women in higher education abound, from calls of transparency for hiring, evaluation and promotion practices, to trend analyses and self-audits, to systematic review of policies and procedures (Babcock & Laschever, 2008; Erickson, 2015; Simmons, 2014). These considerations often offer a nod toward inequalities but focus mostly on how to advance within current organizational structures. The articulated systemic barriers, while met with suggestions for policy change at an organizational level, are also often met with suggestions for the woman to work around, navigate or overcome something such as invest in more professional development, develop stronger professional networking, and increase the pipeline through mentoring as previously discussed (Bornstein, 2008; Glazer-Raymo, 2008). For example, a common solution posed to address the wage gap is to improve the negotiation skills of women (Babcock & Laschever, 2003, 2008; Compton & Palmer, 2009; Falcon, 2016; Kelsky, 2019; Kennedy et al., 2017; Kugler et al., 2013; Leibbrand & List, 2012; Simmons, 2013 & 2014). Proposed solutions to reducing barriers for women in educational leadership also may exacerbate the problem; for

example, a common solution of including women on search committees results in women spending significantly more time on academic service (including committees), devaluing their work and increasing time to tenure (Guarino & Borden, 2017).

Finally, solutions proposed for institutional change speak to a limited audience, often focusing on the experiences of white, cisgender women. In the earlier example posed, Guarino and Borden (2017) found that members of underrepresented minority groups spend significantly more time on academic service including committees and mentoring due to issues of proportionality (there are fewer women and people of color in some academic units), meaning the very solution proposed to enact change has the unintended consequence of overburdening women of color.

Professional Development

Over the past 20 years, researchers and practitioners have steadfastly promoted professional development for emerging leaders within the literature and discourse on women and higher education perhaps more than any other concept or practice. Professional development receives frequent attention across policy-oriented, empirical, and personal narrative genres. For example, one predominant approach in this literature is to focus on specific, formal professional development programs for women. These include campus programs funded through the National Science Foundation's ADVANCE program (Brown & Severin, 2014) and other well-known national level programs such as the American Council of Education (ACE) Fellows Program (Turner & Kappes, 2009) and HERS Institutes (White, 2012). Scholars and seasoned leaders also frequently laud mentoring and networking as professional development activities essential to the success of women leaders. Professional development, then, refers to a wide range of formal and informal activities promoted, primarily to emerging women leaders, as not just worthwhile but necessary for advancement.

Profiles of professional development programs generally advance the argument that "Professional development opportunities in higher education are critical, especially for women seeking leadership positions in the field" (Turner & Kappes, 2009, p. 149; emphasis added). According to the literature, the important components of formal programs include leadership skills, managing organizational change, and developing mentoring and networking relationships within and beyond participants' home institutions. Although researchers frequently prescribed such programs as essential to the ability for women to attain and maintain positions of influence (Madsen, 2012), many also noted that prestigious national programs have high barriers to access due to cost, selectivity, and time and that the majority of U.S. colleges and universities offer leadership development programs for women (Dean, 2009).

Mentoring

Mentoring is one of the most commonly discussed practices in literature promoting women and leadership. Lauded for its

benefits to both institutions and individuals, mentoring is a facilitative and developmental relationship between protégé and mentor (Briscoe and Freeman Jr., 2019; see also Eby 2010). In managerial and Human Resources Development literature on higher education, mentoring is discussed as a recruitment and retention strategy and formal mentoring programs are encouraged in institutions. In literature on higher education and individual development, scholars position mentoring as a critical component to individual advancement (Turner, Hale Tolar, 2012) and women are guided to seek and cultivate mentoring relationships, as well as serve as mentors, throughout their career. In empirical research on female university presidents and other female leaders, mentoring features prominently as a critical intervention to their success (Hill & Wheat, 2017).

Scholars most often situate the work of mentoring with individual women. For example, women are encouraged to seek out productive mentoring relationships. The idea is that university presidents, successful in their leadership quest, cite the importance and value of these relationships. The literature largely portrays this as “The presence of mentoring is expected to benefit and advance an individuals’ development, and the absence of mentoring is understood as a deficit” Tolar, 2012, p. 173). Another way mentoring labor is situated with individuals is through encouragement to give back, and to reciprocate by mentoring others. There is an undercurrent of selfless giving within this literature.

Although scholars have documented the plentiful benefits of mentorship, there are increasing examples of more nuanced arguments that question the efficacy of mentoring as a one size fits all solution for emerging women academic leaders. For example, Hale Tolar (2012) found that mentoring is a critical factor in career development, but as both a help and a hindrance. In the study, about half of women reported not having a mentor, and discussed the benefits of developing self-determination and independence in decision-making. Women also expressed the need for opt-out strategies, and alternatives to mentoring as traditionally conceived. Buzzanell et al. (2015) also picked up on the contradictions of the “grand mentoring narrative” rife throughout literature on women and academic leadership. This narrative, they argued, suggests that “mentoring is required for academic career and life success...” (p. 441). Calling this normative, master narrative into question, they found that women of color expressed a lack of faith in formal mentoring systems and discussed the emotional and performative labor involved in adhering to unquestioned and assumed positive outcomes of participating in mentoring.

In addition to interpersonal challenges to mentoring relationships, scholars also acknowledge access to consistent, high-quality mentoring as a structural barrier for emerging women leaders. This problem becomes more challenging the higher up the career ladder women aspire to climb. Many women chief academic officers (CAOs), for example, report that they do not intend to seek a presidential post, thus suggesting the challenges are not only related to creating robust leadership

pipelines of women candidates (Stefanco, 2014). One reason for this, researchers cite, is an absence of mentoring: CAOs can experience tension in relationships with their presidents rather than encouragement and support for career development. In addition, there are few opportunities through formal organizations and networks for cross-institutional mentoring among presidents and CAOs, with much professional development aimed at one group or the other. To date, the college presidency remains predominantly white and male, thereby limiting possibilities for women to seek mentorship from other women in top positions. This limitation is yet starker for minority women leaders seeking mentorship perspectives from other minority women leaders (Cubbage, 2020).

Studies of women who have advanced through academic leadership ranks also point toward the invaluable role of mentoring in their ascent. Drawing on studies of women and work in corporate settings, higher education researchers make the case for mentoring as essential to women’s success (Vongalis-Macrow, 2014). In general, this research argues that mentoring is an active, generative relationship that yields both professional and psychosocial benefits for mentees (Brown, 2005). For women mentees, strong mentors can help in developing an expanded knowledge base, greater organizational visibility, and access to important professional networks both formal and informal. In addition, psychosocial benefits can include friendship and emotional support (Dean, 2009). Given these positive effects, it makes sense that mentoring features prominently in research and policy writing on how to increase the numbers of women higher education leaders.

Taken together, the vocabulary of professional development, including that centered on mentoring and networking, often situates women as needing to learn and do more in order to succeed. The literature on women and leadership in higher education places emphasis on how individuals can engage in development activities that better situate them for career advancement. Drawing on a wealth of data from personal experiences of women leaders, the advice to seek mentorship and develop strong networks is grounded in, and reinforces, the idea that these are essential activities for women’s advancement and success. While prescriptive messages proliferate, this research in general does not significantly explore the outcomes of mentoring and networking nor does it consider the gendered labor of engaging in these activities. This practice allows, for the most part, a grand narrative of “shoulds” directed at women, and assumptions about individual achievement to go unquestioned. Although educating women leaders in higher education about the benefits of mentoring and encouraging them to seek it out is important, it is a problematic solution in and of itself.

Networking is also prescribed to women academic leaders in ways both similar to and distinct from mentoring processes. Advancing one’s individual career, rather than seeking developmental feedback or relational support, underscores the push for women to build their capacity to network. As with mentoring, researchers present networking as both a problem

and solution. The advice, though, can be contradictory and confusing. For example, Vongalis-Macrow (2014) offers that networking is a challenge for women, arguing that women are generally “good at formal networking,” the type that happens through committee participation and other forms of traditional service work, but challenged by informal networking. The author suggests that women are excluded from informal networks because (a) they are centered around male interests and activities, and (b) they undervalue them in relation to their daily tasks. The author uses the following as evidence to support this point:

a female colleague came to work and from the moment she arrived until the moment she left for the day; she hardly left her desk. She was working hard to finish all that she had to do within the tight frames of a typical day. It used to annoy her to walk past her two male colleagues who would be in their office talking about their weekend and their passion for yachts. She often wondered where they got the time to sit and chat. My colleague understood the formal networks at work, and the need to be included on committees and power teams and so forth, but she could not decode the value of the informal networking as demonstrated by her male colleagues. What she saw was a waste of time, was something else. (p. 79)

Networking, then, is essential to career progress, and especially to those at risk of mid-career stalling. The solutions, when presented this way, rely on women learning to better collaborate, speak up about their aspirations, and learn to spend more time and attention on informal, personal interactions.

Discussion

The literature on women and leadership in higher education revolves around the central question of how to increase and support women in leadership positions. Although the research continues to grow in volume, the topics discussed and solutions offered have largely coalesced around the same themes over the past 20 years. This claim resonates with Gangone and Lennon’s (2014) assessment that the major discussion points coursing throughout the literature have remained stagnant; in order to make progress on gender equality in higher education we need to reimagine our questions, concerns, and solutions in ways that push beyond the current available discourses.

Our review highlights the ways in which emerging women leaders are messaged, explicitly and implicitly in the literature, that they must undertake substantial labor, often additional and invisible, in order to advance successfully. Professional development activities are recommended repeatedly, affirming the idea that individuals are exclusively responsible for their success and upholding grand narratives of unquestioned positive outcomes of such activities (Buzzanell et al., 2015).

The theme of identity work demonstrates how female gender identities are rendered liabilities in the literature, even with the benign intention of teaching women how to advance. Although

moves toward more inclusive examples of women as inhabiting multi-faceted and intersectional identities are becoming more common, the overarching emphasis remains on the unquestioned assumption that “women” leaders are a monolithic group that incur certain identity limitations. WOC academic leader identity narratives and marginalization experiences can be found, but the discourse of advice remains primarily one that ignores critical engagement of race, as well as sexuality and class.

The Invisible Labor for Emerging Women Leaders

Finally, our review shows that while there is much acknowledgement of the need for institutional change, the actual labor involved in doing so receives little attention. Our aim in highlighting these themes through the lens of labor is to surface problematics and offer possible paths forward. The first problematic area our review demonstrates is that of the gendered division of labor for developing dynamic university leaders. As mentioned, women are told repeatedly of the work they must take on in order to become a leader; work that involves individual time and resources on strategizing, bettering, learning, and cultivating relationships. At issue here is the contrast with how messaging occurs to leaders who are men; certainly, they are encouraged to engage in professional development activities, but, to what extent do we assign and expect additional preparatory labor to women, by framing these activities as “essential” and why? What would it look like to create expectations for leadership that were gender inclusive? The over-reliance, in the literature, to prescribe professional development also ignores issues of limited access to programs and relationships, as well as the differential experiences women have of these various activities. Instead, we propose work that disrupts these limitations in productive ways by focusing on how women experience mentoring, networking, and professional development, the limitations of self-improvement in addressing gender inequities, and the strategy fatigue women experience in being prompted to give time, energy, and resources to one professional development program after another often without empirical clarity on how it transforms gender inequities.

Second, our review of the literature makes clear that the implied audience is overwhelmingly, women. This stems, in large part, from the framing of gender equality as equal to “women in leadership.” We contend that the prevalence of audience insularity forecloses possibilities of discussing gender relations, and of developing solutions that go beyond what individual women can do to further their career. Widening the audience for this work can be a productive step in creating collective responsibility for transformational change.

Finally, the way that institutional change is discussed in the literature is problematic for the ways in which it eschews real talk about the unintended consequences and labor involved in taking on such change. For example, as illustrated above, many ways in which institutions strive toward change result in unintended burdens of labor for women and people of color in the academe. Similarly, calls for systemic institutional change with regards to more equitable institutional policies and practices

fail to consider very real questions of who is expected to lead and be involved in change efforts, and the fact that such change efforts, particularly for faculty, are not rewarded. In addition to tangible time and resources involved in such efforts, the interpersonal and political considerations of working to change old and established institutional norms and structures make the very idea of undertaking the work virtually impossible, particularly for those members of the academy with limited job security and power, which are often the positions in which women are more overrepresented. We therefore call on institutions to make explicit the institutional values that guide this work and to protect those taking on this invisible labor.

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