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The Road Less Traveled: Career Trajectories of Six Women Presidents in Higher Education

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Most research on the career pathways of women presidents has been dedicated to the traditional career path and the paucity of women in positions leading to a four-year college or university presidency. This leaves little research on women who achieved the position by following a nontraditional trajectory. This qualitative study explores the career trajectories of six women presidents who described their journeys to the highest leadership position as “nontraditional” or “unusual.” Using Bateson’s (1989) concepts of improvisation and adaption to examine their professional and personal experiences, the presidents unveil they were responsive to new opportunities, responsibilities, and challenges leading to their presidencies. Their backgrounds led them to develop an understanding and appreciation of institutional and organizational practices and cultures, community relations, campus relations, and a sensitivity to the importance of relationship building with an array of stakeholders. The study concludes by discussing the necessity of considering broader career frameworks to identify and increase the number of potential women candidates for the presidency.

Keywords: women presidents, career trajectories, higher education, women’s leadership

Introduction

Statistics on women presidents suggest that they are making inroads into the highest senior leadership position in American higher education. Currently, women account for 26% of all presidents, representing a three percent increase in women presidents from 2006 (ACE, 2012). The percentage of African-American and Hispanic women presidents increased slightly from 2006, but women of color in presidencies are still disproportionately low and have a “rare presence” in the position (Fitzgerald, 2014). At four-year public and private colleges and universities, women filled 13.8% of presidential positions at doctorate-granting institutions in 2006 and occupied 22.3% of presidencies in 2011. At master’s-granting colleges and universities, the percentage of women presidents increased slightly from 21.5% in 2006 to 22.8% in 2011, and at bachelor’s-granting institutions there was a slight decrease in women presidents from 23.2% to 22.9%.

The concern regarding the disparity between females and males transcends raw numbers as the lack of diversity in this leadership position may also reduce the opportunities for colleges and universities to increase their effectiveness (Gangone & Lennon, 2014; Witcher Jackson Teague & Bobby, 2014). A national study of Fortune 100 companies found that when a meaningful number of women occupy leadership positions, productivity and

revenue are higher, sales are greater, and influence and scope in the industry are more extensive (Colorado Women’s College, 2013). Kanter (1977) suggested that when women make up 35% of an organization’s workforce they move towards collective action as a result of their larger membership, thereby affecting change. Further, United Nations Women (2016) contends that women need to achieve a critical mass of 30% in political positions to influence their nation’s political policies. Although it appears that women are achieving one third representation in the academic presidency, the rate of change in their numbers remains slow and uncertain (ACE, 2012).

Previous research on the career pathways of women presidents has not explored in detail women who achieved the position by following trajectories outside the normative academic career path. Emerging from a larger study on women presidents and their relationship building practices, this study represents an opportunity to gain insights about the career histories of women presidents who described their paths as “unusual” or “nontraditional.” Their previous positions were essential in accumulating, developing, and enhancing competencies that helped them eventually to become candidates for the highest administrative position in higher education. It concludes by discussing the necessity of considering broader career frameworks in order to identify and increase the number of women candidates for the presidency.

Pathways to the Presidency

The “traditional” route to the presidency means that a president moved through every (or almost every) level of the academic hierarchy: faculty member, department chair, dean, and provost (Birnbaum & Umbach, 2001; Cohen & March, 1974). This trajectory is historically recognized as the path that develops an individual’s competencies for the presidency, a position that has an array of functions, constituencies, and expectations. It is unclear from studies on presidential effectiveness if this pathway results in an effective president (Darden, 2006; Fisher, Tack, & Wheeler, 1998; Mangels, 2008; Minor, 2001; Woodlee, 1992). It does, however, reflect a progressive, linear and formal approach to leadership development (Bornstein, 2008; Madsen, 2008) that dominates current hiring practices across industries (Hertneky, 2012).

Negatively affecting the number of women represented in the traditional pipeline is the lack of women occupying senior level positions in higher education overall. In 2012, ACE reported that 43% of women presidents held the post of chief academic officer (CAO) or provost immediately prior to their presidency. However, this represents only a slight increase from 40% in 2007. A follow-up study examining pathways to the presidency indicates that women comprise 41% of CAO positions in the nation (ACE, 2013). It is uncertain from these data how many women CAOs are interested in pursuing a college presidency, however, the results of an earlier national survey of CAOs found only 25% of female CAOs indicated an interest in pursuing a presidency and another 28% were uncertain if they would eventually pursue a presidency (Meckel, Cook, & King, 2009).

Further decreases in the representation of women in the presidential pipeline are reflected in academic dean and faculty positions. In 2013, the share of women in dean positions was 27%, and this position is most likely to launch individuals into the CAO (ACE, 2013). Deans’ positions are typically filled by department chairs or senior faculty members, and, again, women are significantly underrepresented in the faculty ranks. According to the National Center on Education Statistics (NCES) (2015), fewer women than men were employed as professors at four-year institutions at Title IX degree-granting institutions in the United States during the 2010-11 academic year. NCES also reported that 35% of White women comprised the total of full-time instructional faculty in degree-granting institutions while 6% were comprised of Black and 4% Hispanics; the breakdowns by gender for Black and Hispanic faculty were not available or were too small to report. Since data does not indicate how many women faculty members desire to pursue administrator roles, there can be no assumption that a critical mass of women will be seeking positions that will lead to CAO positions, then the presidency.

Bornstein (2008) suggests that female candidates are often not considered for presidencies because of their career histories, revealing how women and men can navigate differently through the traditional pathway. Fitzgerald (2014) opines that the “patchwork of careers of women as a result of educational and

career breaks or fractured patterns of employment due to life circumstances do not easily align with traditional academic career routes and structures” (p. 52). Women may move through faculty ranks and administrative positions more slowly than men because of taking time to focus on family obligations, including childrearing or caregiving (Bornstein, 2008; Fitzgerald, 2014; Glazer-Raymo, 2008). In their study on productivity in the academy, Butterwick and Dawson (2005) found that females, regardless of their faculty rank or administrative position, consistently contend with competing work and personal demands more than their male counterparts. Interruptions as result of those demands cannot only delay a woman’s progress through the traditional pipeline but could prevent a woman from making critical relationships that can provide support, encouragement, visibility, and training (Bornstein, 2008).

There is another pathway to the presidency that is commonly referred to as “nonacademic” or “nontraditional.” Birnbaum and Umbach (2001) define nontraditional paths as presidents whose careers included positions in both higher education and external organizations, as well as those with no professional experiences in higher education. Even though more women are represented in other senior administrative leadership positions, specifically chief diversity officer positions (49%); chiefs of staff (72%); and executive vice presidents (36%), these positions only account for a small percentage of prior positions held by women who become presidents (ACE, 2012). For example, in 2012, 9% of women presidents came from senior executive vice president positions other than CAO; 4.2% came from senior executive student affairs positions; 5.9% from senior executive business positions, and 3.5% came directly from chair or faculty positions (ACE, 2012). There are even fewer women presidents who worked outside of higher education prior to becoming president. Only 2.1% of women held administrator position in K-12 and 1.9% came from business and industry (ACE, 2012). Over 9% came from other positions that were not specified (ACE, 2012). Again, it is unclear from these data how many women in these positions actually desire to pursue a presidential position.

Men and women who followed the traditional pathway dominate the occupancy of the presidency. As a result, women who face delays or interruptions in their career paths or who pursue non-academic positions or careers may be perceived as lacking the necessary skills sets, constructive experiences, or professional and social networks that work towards their leadership abilities and advancement in higher education. However, there is no evidence in the presidential effectiveness literature (Darden, 2006; Fisher et al. 1988; Mangels, 2008; Minor, 2001; Woodlee, 1992) supporting the argument that individuals who possess the most sufficient experiences and skill sets to be president are those with traditional career backgrounds. It may be within alternate or nontraditional pathways that women are indeed performing functions, creating and engaging in networks, and developing and accumulating experiences that become valuable resources transferable to a presidency. In other words, women are creating, investing, and mobilizing their resources to generate substantial social capital outside the traditional

conceptualization of the presidential pathway. What is unknown from the current literature is how the nontraditional career backgrounds of women presidents worked towards meeting the desired qualifications for their institutions presidencies. Therefore, the findings of this research address the void by exploring the career paths of presidents who developed and enhanced their leadership, skills, and knowledge through unique pathways.

Theoretical Framework

Bateson (1989) examined the narratives of five successful women and concluded that their lives were about “life as an improvisatory art, about the ways we combine familiar and unfamiliar components in response to new situations, following an underlying grammar and an evolving aesthetic” (p. 3). Women’s lives are particularly prone to constant subjugation to struggles, ambiguities, and discontinuities as a result of multiple commitments arising from work, home and relationships. Yet, these circumstances can lead to new discoveries, directions, and responses through improvisation that relies on a person’s creativity, talent, and ability to adapt, leading to opportunities for reinvention. She argues that “being an effective banker or restaurateur or general means that one has relearned one’s craft more than once” (p. 9). Using Bateson’s framework, the lives of women (and men) can be interpreted as a series of inventive practices and creative opportunities instead of single goals and monumental achievements. Thus, there can be multiple interpretations of linear (continuities) and non-linear (discontinuities) experiences in a woman’s personal life and professional career/s (Bateson, 2004), particularly when seeking meaning beyond a chronologically ordered vitae with job titles.

Bateson’s participants included herself, an anthropologist and college administrator, as well as a physician and psychiatrist, an electrical engineer and CEO of a high technology company, and anthropologist and college president. While each participant had multiple successful careers, their stories also reflect set-backs along with their abilities to reimagine the future. They admitted their aspirations could have been limited and restricted by male privilege, racism or other forms of exclusion. Nonetheless, the women remained open to new opportunities and to the development of competencies and abilities, thus creating something new and better for themselves. When faced with professional or personal adversity, the women responded by developing new dimensions of responsibility, adaptability, leadership, clarity, identity, vulnerability, and resilience. Bateson suggests that the process of self-invention makes it impossible to know how far these women’s achievements would stretch into the future and contends that they are “conservers, holding onto skills and relationships that may be recycled at a later date” (p. 235).

Methods

The data for this study were derived from a larger qualitative research project exploring women presidents’ (N = 12) approaches to instrumental relationship building (Woollen,

2015). The original study examined how participants identified and fostered relationships with stakeholders whom they recognized as possessing resources that worked towards institutional outcomes. It also analyzed how they secured those resources for their campuses. The results shared here are limited to participant responses regarding their career trajectories that were self-described as different from the traditional, normative, and linear route to the position.

In the original study, data were generated from narratives collected during face-to-face or over the telephone interviews. Face-to-face interviews were conducted in the presidents’ offices and all interviews ranged from 1.5 to 2.5 hours in length. A semi-structured interview schedule was used to elicit their experiences and perspectives about how they leveraged their leadership to identify and build relationships that could lead to institutional resources. The interviews were audio-taped and later transcribed verbatim with the aim of identifying major categories and themes.

One theme in particular is the focus of this paper. Those presidents (n = 6) who described their paths to the presidency as “nontraditional” or “unusual” were included in the current analysis. Five were presidents of private institutions and one was president of a public institution. All were first-time presidents. An examination of their specific narratives suggests that the skills, knowledge, and experiences to be a college or university president may also be developed and enhanced through a variety of professional and nonacademic positions in an array of fields.

The Road Less Traveled to the Presidency

The presidents in this sample describe circuitous paths to the position, and all acknowledged the value of experiences gained through a variety of positions that may first appear unrelated to that of a college or university president. The following are brief biographical sketches that introduce each president and chronicle the events leading to her presidency.

Callaghan has served as president of a faith-based, small liberal arts university for over 10 years and declared that hers is an “unusual journey.” In a career that spanned over 20 years in the corporate sphere, Callaghan, who earned an MBA, moved through the management of a natural gas and electric utility company to the position of senior vice president for its electric and natural gas distribution, ultimately becoming the president of that company. As the senior executive, she was asked to serve on the board of trustees of her current university, because the company was a “friend” of it. Upon retiring from the utility company, Callaghan continued her service on the university’s board and was eventually asked to be the interim president for two years when the then-president left after a short tenure. Finding that she liked many aspects of the presidency, she applied for the permanent post and was chosen to be the university’s eighth president.

Graham, who also possesses an MBA, was president of her small, liberal arts university for over 20 years. She opened her pathway story with, “the first thing you need to know is that there’s

nothing *usual* about *me* or my *presidency* or my *style* or how I got here” (emphasis in original). After holding a position of director of student activities, as well as coordinating conferences, she managed the campus’ hotel for four years until she was offered the position of assistant to the president for student life at her current university. The then-president of the college learned of her reputation and experiences with work colleges, and, as such, he wanted her to become a part of his own leadership team. The then-president had broad hiring authority, so Graham, without submitting a resume or going through a formal interview or vetting process, was offered the job. She was responsible for facilities, student life, and personnel, noting that she was really responsible for “everything except academics and development.” After her first years, three main events took place. The board of trustees declared financial exigency; the then- president resigned the following year; and finally she was appointed president, again, without going through a formal search process.

Another president rising through Student Affairs was Sinclair. She finished her fifth year as president of a public, regional university and also affirmed that her rise to the presidency was “probably more nontraditional” than other participants. While working on her master’s in College Student Personnel Administration, she worked in residence life. After graduating, she accepted a position at a private university. In 13 years, she moved from the coordinator of student development to dean of students. After she earned her doctorate in education, she successfully aligned her position with the other two senior staff positions, becoming the vice president for student affairs. The then-president became one of her mentors, providing advice that would help her achieve her own presidency. Sinclair left that institution for a similar one at a larger, public institution in order to broaden her professional skills and experiences. Eventually, she applied for and was offered her first presidential position.

McKay is president of a single-sex, religiously-affiliated college and also expressed that her career path is “very nontraditional.” She began her professional career as a licensed mental health practitioner later to become president of two hospitals, one a faith-based hospital and one with a psychiatric focus. Her extensive service in the community led to an appointment as a trustee of a private four-year institution. During dinner with the president of that university, she was asked to become its chief executive officer (CEO). Despite having no background in higher education, the president thought she would “be a good fit.” As CEO, she was “in house doing the nitty-gritty trench work” while completing a doctorate in higher education leadership, management, and policy. After six years as CEO, she was contacted by a search firm and asked to apply for the position of president at her current college. McKay was extended an offer; however, she learned she would need surgery and a year to recuperate. The college refused to reconsider other candidates, agreeing to wait for one year, and she remains its president over 10 years later.

Murphy described her presidential route as a “very unusual one” even though the latter part of her career appears to follow a

traditional pathway. She began her career as a public school teacher and taught English in one of the local high schools for over 20 years. She became an adjunct faculty member at a local university. After completing her doctorate in urban education, she was hired as an adjunct at her current college, a single-sex, religiously-affiliated institution. Eventually becoming a full-time faculty member, she was later appointed director of the graduate program, dean, vice president, interim president, and president. Although she never formally applied for those positions, she made it clear that she was vetted for them. She is the college’s 11th president and celebrated her fifth year in the position.

At the time of her interview, Drummond was president for three years of a religiously-affiliated institution. Similar to Murphy, the latter part of her journey reflects a traditional pathway, but she clearly emphasized her early career history in her narrative as being nontraditional. She began by stating her story is “different than the traditional and especially male dominated journey.” Drummond was a farmer’s wife, worked at a grain elevator, opened her own commodities firm, and worked for a national tax company when business was slow in agriculture. After she and her husband divorced, she started college at the age of 40, earned her bachelor’s in agriculture, went on to complete a master’s in agricultural economics and a doctorate degree in education leadership and policy studies. She worked for a major foundation on several significant agribusiness/education grant projects before accepting an adjunct position at her current institution. She later accepted a tenure-track faculty position and was voted faculty council chair, vice president of operations and systems, provost and interim president, then permanent president. Drummond was the 26th president and first woman president of the institution.

Results

Three major themes emerged from their narratives. First, two acknowledged their credentials and experiences were questioned by some stakeholders; however, other presidents believed stakeholders considered their professional backgrounds as being well-suited for their positions and subsequently for their institutions. Second, they recognized that their trajectories reflected an entrepreneurial spirit they embodied throughout their careers. They believed their trajectories provided them with extensive and pertinent knowledge and skills for leadership positions in higher education. The third theme that emerged focused on understanding and appreciating relationships. All the presidents agreed that their previous positions allowed them to intentionally leverage their leadership with others through relationships.

Skeptics and Supporters

Despite their prior leadership and administrative competencies, two presidents acknowledged they were confronted by constituents about their qualifications and preparation for the presidency as a result of their nonlinear paths. However, there were three others who sensed stakeholders supported their hiring. The skepticism appears to be primarily from internal

stakeholders, particularly faculty who value the tradition of moving through the ranks. Researchers (Allan, 2011; Chliwniak, 1997; Eddy, 2009; Niddifer, 2001) also suggest that women in leadership are often challenged by traditional images or accepted norms of leadership because those models represent white, male leaders. In an example of uncertainty regarding her qualifications, Callaghan recalled being asked “What makes you think you can do this job?” to which she responded:

First of all, I’m not sure I can [laughter], so let’s deal with that first! But I pointed out I do have the background and experiences that could be very helpful here. I understand the importance of team work... Things are different in higher education than it is in the corporate world. I do appreciate that, and we’ve tried to meld the best of both.

Her understanding of the question was driven by the academic credentials of her college’s previous presidents, as well as her administrative experiences outside of higher education. Callaghan said, “They were used to that very traditional environment – the previous president – all the previous presidents had some type of academic connection.” Then, she added with the confidence of a president with over 10 years tenure in the position that “there had only been eight [presidents], so it’s not like there was a lot of people rotating through these offices.”

Similar to Callaghan, Sinclair admitted that individuals on campus underestimated her abilities to lead a campus as a result of her Student Affairs background. However, her narrative reveals the depth of what her experiences bring to the presidency, as well as how she created and increased her social capital:

I believe that those of us from Student Affairs have breadth of the campus that our academic colleagues do not have, because we look at the whole institution. We have to partner. When I was in Student Affairs, I had to partner with everybody, because that’s what was good for students. I think that’s one of the best characteristics I bring is this big picture view of the institution.

Conversely, Sinclair shared that external stakeholders did not question her credentials or abilities to perform the functions of the position:

[For] most people in the community, it doesn’t matter what path I took to get here. As long as I’m effective in what I’m doing. They ask me about my discipline. Some folks ask “What did you study?” “What’s your discipline?” but they don’t say, “What was your previous job?”

Their comments support research (Martin, 2012; Risacher, 2004) that presidents or candidates from nonfaculty positions do not occupy privileged positions in the academic hierarchy, and this resistance or skepticism can be considered an overarching challenge to legitimacy in the position for presidents without faculty backgrounds.

There were three other presidents whose stories suggested their experiences and potential aligned with the needs and

expectations of their campuses. Graham acknowledged that there could have been some incredulous thoughts about her being appointed president. At one fall executive session of the board of trustees, her predecessor gave his 30 days’ notice and a directive that they should make Graham the president. With the college already in financial exigency, the board showed remarkable faith in her abilities to save the college from shuttering by appointing her. Their support of her was evident when she asked, “Do you want me to close this [college] in a loving way or do you want me to try and make it work?” to which the board responded they wanted to her to sustain the college.

The other two presidents are presidents of single-sex and faith-based institutions, many of which are led by lay persons. McKay’s predecessor was a member of the institution’s affiliated order; however, she acknowledged that her previous experiences as president of a religiously-affiliated hospital and as a lay administrator were appealing to her college’s constituents. Contrary to Keohane (2014) who found that women’s colleges possess pools of women who are interested and willing to hold leadership positions, McKay stated there was a lack of interest of potential candidates from the order:

There was no body in the order [of the college] who wanted it [presidency] or who could’ve done it at that point. The nuns were getting up there in years. The two who could’ve done it - they just didn’t want it. I have some very brilliant nuns that work here who are academics. They’re terrific, but they wouldn’t want the fundraising, the traveling. They like scholarly work. They write. They consult, but they wouldn’t like the life of a president.

Similar to McKay, Murphy is a lay president of a faith-based institution as was her predecessor. After mentioning that she never applied formally for any of her positions, Murphy emphasized that administrators were given opportunities to provide feedback to the president. “There wasn’t a search, but when I moved from acting vice president to vice president, the president met with all the department chairs and asked them for their thoughts.” The same process occurred when she was appointed acting president, then president. “The [religious order’s] leader went around and talked to everyone on campus to see if they were supportive of the move. I think I’m right in saying that it was well-received in each case.”

Being Entrepreneurial

The narratives of presidents suggest they were reinventing themselves, gaining experiences and knowledge and becoming strategic and purposeful at different points of their professional development. They thought and acted on a macro level to advance their organizations or constituents, reflecting research findings that effective presidents appear to be deliberate in their actions and considerate of long-term implications instead of being impulsive or spontaneous (Darden, 2006; Mangels, 2008; Minor, 2001; Rosia, 2006). Fisher et al. (1988) also found in

their study of presidents that effective presidents are action-ready, recognizing when to capitalize on opportunities.

In the following examples, three presidents shared examples of what one described as “entrepreneurial.” Murphy said she always thought of herself as being entrepreneurial “in the sense of looking for opportunities, looking for partnerships, looking for collaboration.” She mentioned an incident as a faculty member in the education department when she was asked by the president to meet with a trustee to initiate a teacher-training program. Initially, the trustee met with the department chairperson of education who said the program was not feasible. Disappointed by her reaction, the trustee told the president, “Don’t ever send her [department chair] again!” To repair the relationship, the president sent Murphy to meet with him, and she went with the attitude, “Of course, we can do that!”

I was thinking that this was a great opportunity for us. I’ve always been entrepreneurial. It wasn’t out of character that I would just go in there and figure out how to make it happen.

The relationship with the trustee led to other multimillion dollar funded projects. About five years into her tenure at the college, Murphy was asked by the president, “Have you thought about administration? You’re good at [it]. I’m going to make you a dean.”

In another example, Sinclair was entrepreneurial when she told the president she was willing to assume additional responsibilities outside “the normal Student Affairs functions.” She said she:

Oversaw and negotiated contracts with the vending partners [and] the bookstore. I also oversaw facilities management and custodial services for a period of time. I aligned with enrollment management. I learned about advancement. [I was] on some “asks” with potential donors and how they could enhance what we were doing in Student Affairs.

After moving to another institution, she oversaw environmental health and safety for two years, which, again, was not under the “normal purview” of Student Affairs. When a natural disaster struck her state, her unit took the campus lead in the preparations, response, and recovery of the event.

Finally, Drummond, who was working for a major foundation, also demonstrated an entrepreneurial spirit when she wrote a leadership grant aimed at promoting women faculty members and faculty of color into higher education leadership positions. She pointed out:

They didn’t know about budgets. They didn’t know about interpersonal skills. They didn’t know how the university structure worked. If they got the management skills, they needed leadership skills. That’s a different set of skills, but we weren’t preparing our own people for those jobs.

Through this program, participants were presented with:

[m]aterials on how the legislature works. How does the politics have to do with funding education, federal politics,

and state politics? How can you make a stronger team by having people with different learning styles? We talked about teaching in a classroom and the newest assessment laws and rules. How do you do assessment [and] student learning outcomes?

Understanding and Appreciating Relationships

Emerging from the body of literature on presidential effectiveness (Darden, 2006; Kuh & Natalicio, 2004; Mangels, 2008; Woodlee, 1992) is the reliance on relationships that presidents make with diverse constituents who can help them augment institutional development. The ability to realize relationships appears to be critical in developing and sustaining an effective presidential tenure. The presidents in this study suggest that they were aware of and sensitive to the importance of relationships and engaged in relationship building prior to their presidential positions. Their investments in relationships with a variety of stakeholders also indicate their strong understanding and reliance on social capital necessary to achieve outcomes. For instance, Callaghan said she relied on relationships as a corporate executive and understood how valuable relationships were with elected officials since the oil and gas industry is regulated:

I understood very well the importance of relationships. I had chaired the Chamber of Commerce, [college] board of trustees, the United Way Board, [for which] I chaired the community-wide campaign. In other words, [I was] very connected. I knew the importance of relationships with legislators, and I knew some of our elected officials both at the federal and state level...One of the advantages and benefit that I had was that I already had some very strong connections in this community and in the state and federal legislatures...I had developed those relationships years before.

After leaving her corporate position, Callaghan was still actively involved in community relations. The president of the Chamber of Commerce and the mayor asked her to chair a project with the aim of securing a grant to build an event center in the city, and they were confident Callaghan could bring together the diverse groups involved in the project. Callaghan collaborated with the mayor and the Chamber, meeting with city and elected officials and community leaders, and eventually through her leadership secured a \$20 million grant to construct the convention center. In her opinion, “you can’t be president of a university or gas company or anything else if you are not able to work with people in relationships. You have to have strong relationships and [those relationships] come from working together and sharing in the pain and the success and celebrating that together.”

Graham also understood the importance of relationships while she was in the position of hotel manager. She was required to serve on the local tourism commission, because the hotel was subject to the local bed tax. As a member of the commission, she went:

[i]nto the community, meeting community leaders [to] figure out how you work with businessmen and women. It's 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days out of the year that you're a public figure.

There was a certain amount of complexity in working with the different types of relationships and personalities to run the facility. Further, the college used the hotel to enhance their development base. In fact, she mentioned it was more important that the dining room and registration cards were sent to the development officers than for the day's receipts to go to the business office. Managing relationships meant making sure guests had "extraordinary experiences" in order for the college to successfully secure donations, and, according to Graham, any complaints or a lack of donations suggested otherwise. For her, the position had all the "pieces and pressure of being in a very public, high profile role" for her and the institution.

Sinclair admitted that being president created new learning curves for her in terms of developing relationships to build new constituent bases. She stated:

It's [relationship building is] not a choice. I had to realize that the relationships that I had [at] previous institutions may have been more internal, and I had to shift my thinking...mind shift to more external and how do you balance that [with internal stakeholders]?

Sinclair illustrated how her Student Affairs positions provided her with ample experiences to partner with multiple constituents. Her understanding and appreciation of institutional missions were what she brought to her presidency and relationship building. Despite not having external relationship building experiences, Sinclair recognized the significance of those relationships to an institution, as well as how both internal and external relations demanded a president's attention and effort.

Murphy knew that as provost her most important relationships were with the faculty, because "if the faculty were not supportive of me I could not be the chief academic officer of the institution, so I worked very [hard] at maintaining appropriate relationships with the faculty." She also understood the critical and essential role relationships play at all levels and in different types of positions. Consider Murphy's comment.

Having a certain amount of emotional intelligence is really important. My years of being a teacher really served me well, because teaching is all about relationships with children, and you can't be a good teacher unless you have strong relationships with your students...One of the gifts that I bring to the presidency - I like people. I like people, [and] that helps a lot!

Adding to the human relations perspective, Fisher et al. (1988) found that effective presidents were "warm, outgoing people" (p. 88). When Murphy was vice president, she worked with donors and understood that "they want to feel that they are a partner with you. [They want to know] that the institution is moving forward. In order to move forward, you will need their support."

Prior to becoming president, she understood that relationships were pivotal in helping the institution achieve its goals and that whomever the donor works with needs to have a vision for the institution and the capacity to implement that vision.

Similar to the other presidents, McKay supported the necessity of building and sustaining relationships, and her prior positions provided her with a framework to develop productive relationships, as well as to understand the nature of relationships in higher education.

I did a lot of group work, and I think a lot of the work over the years in the mental health field has helped me, because I do try to be a good student of cultures and understand, too, that groups have different cultures, and you can't just go in there and impose [yourself].

This was evident when she first started in her CEO position. A month before she started, the faculty decided to unionize and tensions were high on campus. Their attempt was unsuccessful, but the process provided McKay with an understanding of the type and quality of relationships, as well as the tensions, that can exist between faculty and administrators. "I came into that environment where it was very tense and very, very challenging [at] times. The faculty were difficult. I wasn't in my happiest of days at times with the faculty." McKay added an additional asset her mental health professional background brings to the position:

At the end of the day, nothing gets done except through relationships. It's absolutely the way that it is, and, hopefully, healthy professional ones, not dysfunctional [ones]. You need boundaries. Sometimes it's hard. Donors, in particular, often think that you're their friend and to some extent they are but keeping the boundaries clear. That's where coming from a mental health background helps me. Seriously, understanding what's appropriate and what boundaries you don't cross.

Discussion

The purpose of this study sought to explore the professional pathways of six women presidents who described their journeys to that position as "nontraditional" or "unusual." Many presidents' words and actions reflect opportunities that were either presented to them or that they created for themselves to develop and enhance their leadership and administrative acumen. No one position they occupied provided all the implicit or explicit experiences and skills necessary to become a college or university president. Instead, they accumulated desired experiences and confronted challenges in a variety of industries, ranging from oil and gas, agriculture, tourism, P-12 schools, higher education, and health care. Events, anticipated or unanticipated, can be opportunities for a woman to realize new aspects of herself, to assume new functions, and to generate leadership (Bateson, 1989). Sinclair was the only participant who had an ambition to become a president, and, as such, directed her professional goals towards that end. Callaghan, Graham, McKay, Murphy, and Drummond did not map out their

careers with the same purpose of achieving a presidency, but they found themselves in positions or circumstances that identified them as the best qualified candidates for one. Not a single president expressed that her presidency was lessened as a result of her unique pathway instead each felt her pathway made her unique and fully capable of effectively executing the functions of the presidency.

The findings suggest that presidents accumulated knowledge, skills, and leadership through multiple positions held along the way. Many positions were not directly connected to administrative leadership in higher education but provided opportunities for the presidents to achieve competencies that ultimately prepared them to be considered candidates for the highest leadership position in academe. With the prospect of a significant number of presidents retiring or seeking second presidencies (ACE, 2012), it is essential that boards of trustees, institutional search committees, and search firms consider broader pools of candidates who can help diversify the position and include those candidates who possess desirable and legitimate qualifications. In doing so, the process to construct a new conception of how the pathway to the presidency can be imagined.

Two of the presidents (Callaghan and Sinclair) expressed their belief that their credentials and qualifications were questioned by internal stakeholders. The traditional route to the presidency is engrained in the minds of many institutional members as the only proper way to become a president and seeking and choosing a candidate who does not adhere to the normative pathway may appear less legitimate and credible to them. All presidents must confront legitimacy issues after assuming the position (Bornstein, 2003), but those with perceived deficiencies have additional hurdles to overcome. Rhode and Kellerman (2007) posit that in-group favoritism leads to greater allegiance, positive evaluations, and collaboration. The assumption of qualified presidents only emerging from a traditional pathway is also a stereotype that may deepen the mental glass ceiling of a woman being qualified to pursue a presidency, as well as the increasing discord that could occur as a result of the stereotype (Rhode & Kellerman, 2007). None of the presidents in this study commented that their gender negatively affected their selection or credibility, however, Rhode and Kellerman (2007) suggest that gender stereotypes may be involved when women's preparedness and qualifications are being considered for leadership positions. These conceptions of leadership devalue that leadership of women by comparing them to masculine stereotypes. Further, women are often criticized for attempting to embrace those stereotypes or faulted for not adopting or being willing to accept those standards, thus forcing them into a double-bind (Chliwniak, 1997). Conversely, McKay and Murphy applied for positions at single-sex institutions that were specifically seeking women to fulfill their vacancies. They are both lay administrators, and the religious orders did not have expectations that the leadership positions be filled with one of its members.

Consistent with research findings (Diehl, 2014; Hertneky, 2012; Madsen, 2008), this study's presidents achieved their positions through their leadership practices, which included embracing opportunities presented to them. Their circuitous pathways, albeit different, do not suggest lessened leadership qualifications. Callaghan and Graham did not earn doctorate degrees, and they, as well as McKay, did not teach at the college level. Graham, McKay, and Sinclair were identified by presidents who encouraged them to move into and through higher education administration because of skill sets developed respectively in hospitality, health care, and Student Affairs. Callaghan, Murphy, and Drummond developed relationships with their respective boards of trustees through community or campus based service activities that led to appointments as interim presidents. Drummond and Murphy were subsequently appointed president by their boards without searches, suggesting institutions may fill positions with individuals who already are tested and familiar with institutional missions, values, and culture. These narratives help inform us that presidents acknowledged that their accumulated knowledge collected on their unique pathways (e.g. oil and gas executive, hotel manager, Student Affairs, school teacher, hospital administrator and case worker) helped them to transition to their presidential responsibilities. These included experiences with managing and projecting budgets and resources, maintaining facilities, developing and maintaining client bases, collaborating with individuals who may have possessed divergent needs, and meeting a variety of different expectations.

From studies of the academic presidency, we learn that the ability to realize relationships appears to be critical in developing and sustaining an effective presidential tenure. A finding of this study supports the research that relationship building is characteristically a disposition of women that brings them into connection with others (Gilligan, 1993), and women tend to be more process-oriented, use networks, and establish relationships to generate cooperation from others than men (Chliwniak, 1997). Eagly and Carli (2007) argue that "good relationships make it possible to call on others for support, ranging from getting advice and information to setting up deals and transactions" (p. 144). Women in the present study were deliberate, strategic, and entrepreneurial in understanding the role and purpose of relationships, building social capital and capitalizing on their relationships. Burt (2001) argues that social capital is most valuable to managers, such as CEOs, divisional vice-presidents or entrepreneurs because they have the most to gain and benefit from information and control derived from social capital. This is supported by Lin (2001), who found that top-level executives are expected to possess rich social capital as they need to deal and manage people both inside and outside the firm.

Implications

These findings have implications for boards of trustees, professional development and search firms, institutional members, and women who may be seeking leadership positions

in higher education, including the presidency. Bateson (2004) reflected:

You cannot adjust to change unless you can recognize some analogy between your old situation and your new situation. Without that analogy you cannot transfer learning. You cannot apply skills. If you can recognize a problem that you've solved before, in however different a guise, you have a much greater chance of solving that problem in the new situation. That recognition is critical to the transfer of learning (p. 70).

The narratives of these presidents provide insights to the backgrounds and experiences that generated knowledge and skill sets that set them up for new positions, experiences, and challenges. They acknowledged that their experiences and backgrounds not only built the foundations for their presidential qualifications but made direct contributions to the efficacy to perform their current functions. For these women's institutions, a nontraditional pathway proved relevant in developing the competencies, vision, and strategies they felt necessary in choosing a president. With the exception of Sinclair, the presidents did not position themselves to assume the office. They did not have five or 10 year career plans that outlined the strategies they would need to follow to achieve the position, but not one president regretted her career path instead each emphasized the importance of those positions to her leadership development and capacity.

All the women presidents were connected to higher education at some point in their professional careers prior to becoming a president, and each possessed an awareness and understanding of the academic values and beliefs in which institutions operate. Their stories provide evidence that there are multiple avenues to become knowledgeable about how higher education operates organizationally, structurally, and culturally. Considering the pipeline to the presidency in only dichotomous terms, traditional and nontraditional, lessens the value of one, thereby, privileging the other. Reconceiving the pathway may help reinvent how women are identified and mentored for leadership development. Boards of trustees, institutional search committees, senior level administrators, and professional development and search firms may need to holistically explore the vitas of women candidates to measure their broader qualifications and to develop an appreciation of the skills, knowledge and relationships formed from and in previous positions. For women, they may conceive and conceptualize new career possibilities that lead them to participate in leadership development programs and eventually pursuing leadership positions.

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