

**Lessons Learned from the Experiences of U.S. Women College Presidents: What They Wish
They Had Known When They Began Their Presidencies**

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Abstract

This qualitative study examined the reflections of 15 women college and university presidents in the United States. The purpose of the research was to gain a deep understanding of the lessons learned while serving in the role of college president. This research suggests that women presidents learned about the role of the president, the importance of mentors, the role of their male spouses, and how to take care of themselves while steering their way through the difficulties of the office. Implications for practice and future research are provided.

Introduction

According to *The American College President* (American Council on Education 2012), 26% of the college and university presidents in the United States were women in 2011, compared with 23% in 2006. The ‘graying of the academy’ (ii) was confirmed by Jacqueline King and Gigi Gomez (2008) as over half of all college presidents are 61 or older. The American Council on Education’s (ACE) *Report on Presidents* (2012) predicted that, in the next ten years, over half of current college presidents will exit, suggesting a ‘significant turnover in presidential leadership due to retirements in the near term [and] presenting an opportunity to further diversify the presidency’ (American Council on Education 2012, xx). Starting in 2014, approximately six thousand vacant administrative positions are anticipated annually in higher education (Ben Leubsdorf 2006). The data suggest that more women will become U.S. college presidents in the next ten years as this turnover happens. During this time, preparing women to be successful in a higher education presidency becomes even more important. This study investigated the lessons learned from the experiences of women U.S. college and university presidents. It summarizes what they wished they had known when they began their presidencies.

Review of the literature

The number of female college and university presidents in the U.S. increased from 23% in 2006 to 26% in 2011 (ACE 2012). Among the top-10 elite institutions, women comprised 36% of sitting presidents in 2012 (Best Colleges 2012). In 2013, women presidents were leading half of the Ivy League institutions (Zweifler 2014). Overall, the data suggest that women are more likely to hold presidencies at community colleges (33%) (Cook 2012).

Benchmarking Women’s Leadership in the United States 2013 (Colorado Women’s College 2013) reported that 57% of middle-level managers across the sectors studied represented the pipeline of women for potential sector leadership. The researchers then compared the pipeline of potential women leaders to the actual percentage of women leaders and found tremendous disparity, with women representing approximately 19% of positional senior and executive leaders, and, conversely, men represented 81% of positional senior and executive leaders (Colorado Women’s College 2013). These researchers also found that female academicians ‘earned the majority of research awards, and that female administrators were more likely to hold the presidency or chancellorship within the top-ranked, top-10 institutions than among all doctoral-granting institutions as a whole’ (Gangone and Tiffani Lennon 2014, 7). Data trends across all 14 sectors indicated that women are often among the highest performers and yet are disproportionately underrepresented in leadership roles, and frequently their institutions perform better than peer institutions without female leaders (Colorado Women’s College 2013).

‘The U.S. college and university presidency is a complex position that requires an exceptional combination of expertise, life balance and leadership’ (Switzer 2006, 13). So what has been published on the lessons learned from women college presidents?

Madsen (2008) wrote about the life experiences of female university college presidents; the contributing factors included childhood background, youth activities, young adulthood and college years, professional positions and experiences, non-work roles, personal information, and leadership

philosophy. Bornstein (2014) provided three keys to a successful presidency: leadership legitimacy, managed authenticity, and emotional stability. Julianne Basinger (2001) discussed the importance of campus chiefs forming networks to face the pressures and demands of their jobs. Moore (2005) suggested the importance of mentorship for female college presidents by seeking out their own mentors, male and female. Fisher, Koch, and McAdory (2005) suggested that female college presidents are more innovative and entrepreneurial than male presidents. In addition, they stated that females are more inclined than males to take measured risks in their job as president.

Switzer (2006) wrote extensively about the journeys and adaptations of women college presidents. She described how women got into a presidency (a few aspired while most fell into it), their approaches to leadership, family statistics (married, single, with children or not), and housekeeping and other demands. One of the most interesting findings from this research study is how constituents' expectations of women college presidents differed from male presidents: they did not expect the women to be able to make tough decisions, and they perceived that women needed to be more accessible than their men counterparts. 'People think they can just walk in[to] a woman's office' (Switzer 2006, 6), noted one president.

A number of articles offer advice to future women presidents. Dianne Harrison (2007) suggested that presidential aspirants should 'seek as many university-wide experiences as possible' (6). In addition, she offered, 'Candidates must look for a good fit between their skills and values and those of the institution' (7). Switzer (2006) also provided advice: do not be negative about one's presidential predecessor or act as though nothing happened before they arrived; prospective presidents should learn as much as they can about finance, strategic budgeting, laws governing institutional accounting practices and investments. 'It's all about money,' said one president (Switzer 2006, 11). Another president described the presidency as being a job that consisted of five thirds:

One third involved strategic and long-range planning. The second third was *administrivia*, the daily tasks of running the institution. The next third was personnel work, including hiring, developing, supervising, evaluating and mentoring. The fourth third was the *being here* third, the time it took to be at campus events (athletic competitions, lectures, concerts, art exhibits, receptions). The final third was advancement and fundraising. A president with a job that has five thirds must bring clear priorities and intentionality about schedule in order to survive and thrive. (Switzer 2006, 11)

With the 'graying of the academy' (King and Gomez 2008, ii), meaning there will be more turnover at the top and a likelihood of an increase in more women becoming presidents of educational institutions (ACE 2012), the authors of this study wanted to research the lessons learned from women college presidents. Not enough has been written on this topic, and we believe these reflections and learnings could help not only current women college presidents, but also those aspiring to the role.

Theoretical framework

Learning organization theory served as a theoretical framework for the study. As suggested by Senge (1990), in his landmark book, and by Watkins and Marsick (1993), in their research and in the many research studies that have been undertaken to validate their dimensions of a learning organization. For an organization to become a learning organization, it must learn from both its successes and its failures. For colleges and universities to be learning organizations, which one would expect them all to be, their administrators must understand what is to be learned by the experiences of other administrators. This study, then, focused on the lessons to be learned from a specific group of higher education administrators—women.

Purpose, need, and justification of the study

In an article in *Forbes*, Ashgar (2013) argued that being a university president or chancellor is possibly the *most* challenging leadership role in the United States. Penney (2014) agreed: 'A college

president is one of the most important and rewarding (yet sometimes frustrating) positions for a woman to undertake in the 21st century' (205). If this is the case, it is imperative that current or future women college presidents learn from those who have served in the role before them. This is the purpose of this investigation.

Methods and methodology

In this section, we describe the research design and methodology, the participants, the data collection processes, and the data analysis.

Research design/methodology

In this study, we used a qualitative methodology with a descriptive approach. This methodology allowed us to probe for the experiences of participant female college presidents related to their tenure (Creswell 2007). In-depth interviews were conducted with 15 women presidents in higher education in the U.S. Lessons learned while in the presidency provided an extensive description of what the women presidents wished they would have known at the beginning of their presidencies.

Participant selection and characteristics

According to ACE (2012), women make up 26% of all current college presidents. Through multiple searches on Google, we created a list of current female college presidents in the U.S. Seventy female presidents were identified. After gaining the approval of the Institutional Review Board at Gustavus Adolphus College a letter was sent to each one inviting them to participate in the study. The communication provided them with a description of the study, its purpose, the benefits and risks, a guarantee of anonymity, and a request to audiotape the interviews. One respondent cancelled due to lack of time in her schedule. Fifteen interviews were conducted.

Data collection

All 15 participants participated in the interview via telephone. One author conducted the interview, while another transcribed. The interviews averaged 30 minutes. The questions were: How long have you been a president? What do you wish you knew at the beginning of your presidency that you know now? What lessons have you learned as a result of being a woman college president? What should interested female presidential candidates be doing now to get prepared for the role? Probing questions, with no intent to lead the interviewees, were also asked to help the participants dig deeper into their experiences. A follow-up e-mail was sent to all non-respondents encouraging their response.

Ages of the participants ranged from 50-76. Thirteen self identified as Caucasian, one as black, and one as Hispanic. The average tenure for these women in the role of president was 8.7 years.

Data analysis

The transcripts were summarized within each question asked. The authors read the transcripts carefully, both before and after summarizing the questions posed. After writing the findings, the authors again reviewed the transcripts in light of the findings to ensure that the most salient comments were included in the findings.

Findings

The results are organized into the four lessons learned about: (a) the role of the president; (b) mentoring; (c) male spouses; and (d) taking care of self as president.

Lessons learned about the role of the president

The responses to this question reinforce how complex and dynamic the role of president is today (Bornstein 2002; Broad and Ferguson 2002; Longman and Madsen 2014; Rhodes 1998; Selingo 2005). The woman presidents compared their role to a business CEO, and most talked about juggling many tasks, people, and issues at the same time.

Seven sub-themes emerged: working with boards, leading teams/cabinets, legal issues, budgets, constituent relationships, institutional decision-making, and serving as the symbolic representative of the university or college every minute of every day.

Working with boards

A president's relationship with the Board of Trustees or Regents is critical to one's success (Tunheim and McLean 2014). One president articulated this:

You have to be close to the Board. Alignment between you and them has to be at least 80%. Your relationship is absolutely key. You and they need to see the big picture. Who are we as an institution? How can we build on our past? Where are we headed? Don't break with the past. Build on the past and bridge/reinterpret to the future.

Another president reported the surprise she felt when she began her presidency with her relations with the board:

It would have been good to know several things when I first took the job: What promises my predecessor had made to the trustees and others; what the board had promised to my predecessor in his retirement; how many resources the board was willing to give me for travel, time, etc., to reach our campaign goals; and finally, what the plan was for board chair succession. There were too many surprises that took a while for me to figure out. It added undue stress to an already stressful job.

If the relationship between the president and the board is compromised or trust is broken, the president is less likely to be successful. Women presidents need to understand this going in. If there are surprises, they and the board members need to work to resolve these via conflict management and communication so that the entire institution benefits.

Leading teams/cabinets

Six of the presidents mentioned the importance of being a strong team leader as a president. Building a strong team emerged as a common comment:

Women presidents have to take a personal inventory of the things they do really well and build on those. I specifically look for traits in other people that are going to work with me that make me look good. That sounds terrible, but I don't hire people who are just like me. I hire people who are opposite of me who, together, make us a stronger, more integrated team.

Another president stated it in a slightly different way:

Good college presidents need strong provosts. Learn to work through your direct reports. Then you don't have to do it all yourself. That's a hard lesson to learn. I have painfully learned that you can put yourself out there when there are a lot of times when someone on your staff could have handled it. Experience teaches these kinds of lessons as a leader.

A third president summed it up well:

You need a strong executive team that you work with daily. The presidency is not just about one person. The president has the final say, makes the final decision, but you need that team around you that you trust who has the same vision, the same commitment, the same work ethic. These people have skills that are different from you. Every good leader eventually realizes that she is good in one area but maybe not so hot in another. I am not afraid of having people on my executive team; in fact, I cherish it, who are much better in some areas than I am. We work well as an executive team to get it done.

Finally, being a strong performance manager is important in the role as well:

Our job is to make everyone else successful. It's not about me. I need to make all of the vice-presidents successful. Their jobs are challenging and constantly changing. Their jobs are important. Be a good delegator. Terminate someone who is not working out. Get the right people on the bus. It is difficult to let vice-presidents go, but if they are bad, they are just holding back the entire team and institution. You must be strategic and make the right calls in these challenging situations.

Leading teams and cabinets effectively is an integral part of leading the college or university effectively.

Legal issues

One president reported the surprise by saying:

I wish I would have known how much time I would have to spend on complicated legal matters or crises that arise for which there are no easy answers. These situations or tasks are enormous *time sucks* away from valuable work that really makes a difference to an institution. But in our litigious society and the glare of social media, we have to be far more careful about this matter than 15 years ago, when I first became a college president. These situations did not exist then.

Budgets

Selingo (2005) suggested that being a Chief Financial Officer is 60% of the job of a college president. A number of the presidents interviewed mentioned this fact:

You have got to be a quick learner as a college president. You can't come into the role knowing everything. I had to become smart about budgets. You don't have to be an accountant, but you sure better be able to read a budget sheet and if you can't, you'd better get some training so you know what you're looking at. Investments are important, too. I meet with an investment firm quite often. Now I know about hedge funds, large caps and small caps. They were not a part of my world as a faculty member. You have got to be a quick learner because you cannot look uninformed in front of trustees who often live in the business world focusing on these types of topics.

Another president reinforced how different her academic training had been compared to the real world work of a college president relative to finances:

When it really comes down to it, as a president, you are running a large not-for-profit business. I wish I had gotten an MBA before taking this job. No one ever told me how much time I would be spending in meetings looking at budgets, cutting costs and trying to balance all of the finances.

Finally, a third president highlighted the importance of athletics at these institutions:

Budgeting skills are critical. You also have to understand athletics. The president has to be responsible for athletics, which is a major expense for the college. Know the rules. Compliance is important, too. You can kill a university in six months if you don't know what questions to ask.

Constituent relationships

Half of the presidents mentioned the importance of good communication skills. Spending time 1:1 with many constituents, working with people in many meetings a day and giving public speeches are all constant tasks as a president:

You have to deal with politicians, alums, foundations, students, parents, faculty and staff – many different audiences with many different agendas. You are constantly shifting gears as a communicator to be successful with the many different constituents.

Another president reinforced the importance of working with legislators:

I was surprised at how much time I spend on community and governmental relations. Lobbying takes a lot of time to do it well. Lobbying at both the state and federal levels is critically important for our institution.

A third president reinforced the importance of getting involved nationally:

I wish I had started earlier in my presidency to build relationships with governmental officials and legislators. I was so focused on my regional constituents, it took me a while to realize I needed to look out farther to the state level. I also needed to engage more in national organizations.

I attended some of the national conferences, but I didn't get involved or engaged until later. I would up serving on the NCAA board and executive committee. It was very helpful for my institution to get that kind of national recognition. I learned it was part of my role as president to promote my institution at those levels. I wish I had understood that earlier and had devoted more time to those kinds of important activities.

This same president added more on the same topic yet in a different manner by saying:

No one does this job alone. You need to work well internally and externally. Get good at relationship building with your constituent base. Without their support, you won't accomplish anything. Develop action plans, hold people accountable, and constantly work on alignment. You must build support with your constituents to be successful at every level.

Institutional decision-making

Leaders are only as good as the decisions they make (Knicki and Kreitner 2009). One president clearly articulated the importance of making difficult decisions in the role:

Women in leadership roles have to make really tough decisions just like men do, and when it comes right down to making the tough call, your gender doesn't really play a factor. You have to make decisions with your head based on the information you have at the time. Sometimes you are absolutely dead on correct and sometimes you're only 70% correct. You have to be willing to do the hard work and take the lumps because criticism will come. It doesn't feel good when that happens and you just have to push through it. That doesn't mean you are immune to it or you don't respond to it but you sure don't give in to it.

Another president suggested the following with regard to communication, change and decision-making:

Don't be afraid to make changes. Communicate more than you think makes sense. Understand that you aren't going to be able to make everyone happy. That is the result of having to make decisions. If everyone agreed, you wouldn't have to make difficult decisions.

A president who served as a corporate leader before she was appointed to the academic leader role talked about how different decision-making is for her now:

The first thing I wish I would have more fully understood is the process and timeline differences there are when managing in an academic setting in comparison to a corporate setting. I knew going in it would be different but with shared governance, it is extremely different. I am used to a corporate setting where the hierarchy allows you to make decisions that are not necessarily more effective but certainly are more efficient. Top down decision-making is not how things are done in academia.

When I have stumbled here in this new role is when I have not assessed how long it will take with regard to the time needed to deliberate a decision. If I think of an idea, I must plan farther ahead. It means I need more time on the front end. Our strategic planning process is a good example. I am used to appointing members to a committee. They say yes to participating. I call the first meeting the next week and we lay out a plan. Here at our institution, it will easily take me two months even to get a team of people staffed to the committee. Live and learn! The end result is that you must start the process so much earlier in academia. It influences the entire timeline, process and end result. On a corporate team, the forming, storming, norming and performing just happen more quickly. I wish I had figured this out earlier.

Decision-making processes and timelines help make or break college presidents and their overall effectiveness as leaders at their colleges and universities.

Symbolic representative of the university or college

Presidents reported, 'The buck stops with you' and 'I can't step outside or go to the grocery store in sweats because I always have to look like the president.' A third president reported:

It's not that you don't socialize, but it's all business all the time. If we go to a 4th of July party, I'm still on duty. You know, I'm the president. I wear that hat all of the time. I never go out of the house without looking like I could go to a meeting on or off campus.

A difficult part of this position was articulated by this president's quote, 'People are watching every move and making impressions, good and bad!' Another president said, 'You are always on. This is a 24/7 job. You are the symbolic representation of the institution – always!'

On a more serious note, one president described how in the role, she had to become a spiritual counselor, as she represented the college in specific roles at times:

I wish I had known how often I would be called on to attend funerals and counsel employees and students. I have experienced three faculty deaths, two student deaths, and so many family and alumni deaths I can't count them in the past seven years! In many ways, you become a symbol of the priest or counselor they expect to see at these events.

Overall, the respondents clearly articulated the challenging role of serving as a college or university president. A few presidents provided comments that summarize things quite well. One stated:

We need to protect the role of the president. When I went to presidency school 15 years ago, it was one role. Now it is another. I can honestly say that it's not as much fun as it used to be. It's hard to make change on a college campus. It's difficult to attract talent. Lack of civility in the academy is prevalent. We are not collegial anymore. That's unfortunate. We are charged with prepping students for society and we, ourselves, don't serve as role-models in this area any longer.

Finally, one president philosophically reflected upon the role of president by stating, 'Remember that you are more than the role you play as president. Don't over-identify with the role. In the end, it's not about you!'

Lessons learned about mentoring

Of the 15 presidents interviewed for this study, 10 or two-thirds reported having been mentored in their career and five or one-third stated they had not. Many different quotes referred to this topic:

'I never had a mentor but I learned from bad examples of leaders along the way.' 'No one ever really sponsored or mentored me to the role.' 'Even though I never really had a mentor, I still think we should be better mentors, ourselves.' 'While I was never lucky enough to have a mentor, I do still think that was part of the journey. I just had to figure it out myself along the way.'

Others indicated they had some significant help through the years of developing as a leader in higher education. 'Yes, I had lots of people who influenced me.' 'Many good leaders gave me advice.' The most inspiring comment given on this topic was, 'Instead of thinking about what you can get from a mentor, instead focus on what you can give others along the way.'

The research on women president's leadership development points to the importance of mentoring and sponsorship (Longman and Madsen, 2014; Madsen, 2008; Moore, 2005). It is important for all leaders to mentor others and look for mentors throughout one's career journey. In this study, two-thirds of the presidents explained they had been mentored to the role of president. One-third had not.

Lessons learned about male spouses

Two sub-themes emerged from the data on this topic: the changing expectations for the college community with a male spouse and how important a spouse is as a partner to a college president.

Changing expectations for the college community with a male spouse

Two presidents discussed the changing role for the campus community relative to the role of a male spouse. The first summarized:

I knew that the husbands of several women presidents had chosen not to live in the president's home with their wives. They had chosen a primary residence elsewhere, spent most of their time away from campus, and lived a pretty separate life. What I wish is that I had taken the time to understand why. I finally figured out that no one knows what to do with a male president's spouse!

Another president said:

During large events on campus, I have a lot of help from employees, so my spouse only attends events that don't conflict with his full-timework schedule outside of the college.

During my inauguration, my spouse's role was mostly to take care of our family members that were present for the event. I know that female spouses often play a large role with event planning for the college.

A third president reported, 'The presidency is not for everybody. I know some people who went through the process of interviewing and it became clear it was not right for the male spouse.'

Importance of male spouses as partners to presidents

In addition to the changing role of the spouses if they are male, the presidents in this study reinforced how important the presidential spouse is as a partner to the president:

I could not do this job without a supportive husband. He gave up his job as a tenured faculty member and I know that was not an easy thing to do.

Seven of the 15 presidents mentioned the importance of having a once a week *date night* for them as a couple. It appears to be a best practice for presidential couples. Another president described how well it works for them as a couple:

The burden has been relieved because I have a spouse who is very supportive. We are a good team and we had an agreement that he would retire when I took this on, so he is at home planning receptions and programs. He is just a great partner.

She went on to explain an important personal decision they made as a couple relative to the work of the spouse:

We decided we did not want him to be paid. Whatever he did he did voluntarily. That allows him to go to Florida for a couple of months in the winter. I know that we have some presidential spouses who feel very strongly that they should be in a paid position. I'm uncomfortable with that. I just think that if you can get by without it, you should. Everyone is always on the alert for the president's spouse. It has gotten some presidents into trouble and hurt the institution at times.

A final quote from a president summarizes this area up well:

I have a very supportive spouse. He helps give me perspective that I need and welcome his point of view. We have learned at presidents' meetings that every presidential couple struggles with things. You have to be a team in this role. The pressure is just so intense. You need each other for survival.

Lessons learned about taking care of oneself as president

The final theme that emerged from the data is about the taking care of oneself as a college or university president. Six of the 15 reinforced, 'This is a lonely job.' Four of the 15 stated, 'You can't really have any friends on campus, because ultimately every single person reports to you.' Another reality is, 'The loss of privacy and the constant schedule is just relentless!'

Four suggestions were offered by the presidents to help them cope and be resilient: pace yourself, build in boundaries for your schedule, develop a thick skin and eat right and get exercise.

Pace yourself

One president's story reinforced the importance of treating the presidency like a long race versus a sprint:

Our senior cabinet used to go on these retreats. I was the only woman with these other guys. They were like mountain goats – they would bike, hike and run early in the morning. My president liked to hike. One day at one of these retreats, he said to me, ‘Come along with me on my hike.’ It was really quite a challenging six-mile hike. He kept saying to me, ‘You have to pace yourself. You’re going too fast. You have a long way to go here. You need to pace yourself.’

I have had to learn to pace myself as a president. Our days are so driven by the schedule. If I worked all weekend long, then I need to adjust a bit on Monday and take some time to recover. It is ok not to be in the office 100% of the time. There are many late nights in this job. I have never been on a vacation where I haven’t gotten a work call. Give yourself permission to pace yourself.

Build in boundaries for your schedule

Many lessons of experience were shared with regard to setting schedule boundaries by the presidents. Time off, holidays, the partnership of a president’s assistant and an escape place were all mentioned:

Time off. One respondent said:

One of the things I have learned to do is I try not to schedule appointments on Thursday. I try to stay home and work in my office there. If I want to wear flip-flops all day, so be it. I can get a lot of focused work done. I take one day off a week, a weekend a month, and one month a year. I don’t do night flights. I don’t start work before 8:30-9:00 a.m. I go and visit my aging parents.

Another said:

Balance is hard to achieve. I worked 24/7 initially. Now I go to the calendar in January and mark off summer vacation time. You can give it back later if you don’t want it. I mark out time for weekends after each semester and during the summer. It’s best for the institution if you get time for personal reflection and professional development. The institution will benefit if you are intentional about it.

Holidays. Another observation was:

I have learned to not work through Thanksgiving and Christmas. We are with family then with our undivided attention. It gives us a chance to refresh and recharge. We are more effective when we come back to work after that.

Another said:

Time with your family over the holidays is very important. A president needs to celebrate just like everyone else. You need to give yourself permission to take the time off.

Partner with personal assistant. One president said:

You and your personal assistant have to say no. Everyone wants the president at everything. It is your responsibility to manage this. I’m not going to work seven days a week. Remind yourself you do not owe them 24/7.

And another asked:

How many nights a week am I willing to be out? I have determined that I will let my assistant

book me three to four nights a week. Then I have to pick the four most important events. I actually love to double book. As a president you don't have to go to the entire event. Sometimes just showing up and giving a short speech is enough.

My assistant would book me 12-13 appointments back to back all day long. I have learned to have them book me early in the morning with the difficult stuff. Then I need time to eat, do email and reflect a bit.

My assistant and I have determined that when I sleep at the condo, I can get another hour of sleep. So we do that a lot. You learn to be in control of your own time and schedule so that the job doesn't kill you.

Escape place. Another way of taking care of self was expressed as:

We decided to buy a cabin on the lake. I don't go there often, but when I do, it's wonderful to be in nature and get away from campus. It is way more peaceful there when I can look at the lake. It reminds me that there is more to life...with broader purpose and meaning. It's not all about the institution.

And another handled escape in this way:

I take the month of July off to go to Greece. I have a house there. I like to escape. I use Skype and Face Time. I work four hours a day from there. As a president, you set an example that it's ok to take time off. I have a presidential colleague who has a cabin up in Canada. She has no meetings or calls while there. There are no podium events that month. We both think it's ok that the presidents' houses go dark for at least four weeks in the summer.

Building in boundaries for a president's schedule appears to be extremely important and incredibly difficult to do. Many good suggestions were offered by these women leaders for others to consider.

Develop a thick skin

Another sub-theme that emerged was to develop a thick skin to handle the criticism. Four of the 15 women discussed the reality of being criticized often in the presidential role:

This job is too hard. Don't just be sold on the idea of being a president. Analyze whether it is in your own being to take risks.

Can you make tough decisions? Can you take criticism if things don't go well? Are you willing to be fired? There are lots of positive things about being a president, but when there is a student suicide, the faculty senate attacks you, or the state audit is out of compliance, a woman president realizes very quickly that it's just not about wearing nice suits and going to parties!

I wish I had known that no matter how much of a demonstrated commitment to transparency, collaboration and cooperation I have as a president, there will be those at the institution who view the Administration as complete adversaries, instead of partners or advocates.

You must develop a thick skin in this job! There will always be critics. There will be those who disagree. Remember it is not about you! It is about the students and the institution as a whole.

Thick skin appears to be a requirement in this presidential position or a person will not be able to withstand the criticism inherent in the role.

Eat right and get exercise

Most of the women presidents spoke passionately about giving themselves permission to take time to focus on staying healthy physically, emotionally and spiritually, in order for them to sustain successfully in the job:

I make time to work out twice a week, get my hair done when it needs it and just take care of myself.

I have learned I have to stay in shape. There is a lot of food and alcohol at campus events. I need to learn to stay fit. I have to make it a priority because no one else will. Know your commitment to your family – parents, spouse and kids, every month.

I do work all of the time. It's interesting. I have two twin boys who are 22 years old. They always take time to work out! I know it will make me feel better. Men are really good at putting themselves first. Women always put others first. Just like the oxygen mask on the airplane. We have to learn to take care of ourselves first before we are any good to anyone else.

You must do things that make you fulfilled as a person. If you are a shell of the person you once were, you will not be effective. If you have no book reading, music or exercise, you will only be an ineffective administrative machine! I think piano, yoga, meditation, massages in the middle of the day, and healthy relationships are key to making me perform well.

When you burn out, you have to quit. It is a 24/7 job. There's no reason to get stressed out and angry in this job. It doesn't help anyone – least of all, you.

Taking care of self is absolutely critical in this demanding role. Many of the presidents wished they had done a better job of this earlier in their presidencies.

Implications for research and practice

More needs to be written on the experiences and lessons learned by women college and university presidents. The majority of journal articles discuss perceptions of community college presidents. As these women leaders retire and reflect upon their terms as presidents, their intellectual capital will disappear unless they document their experiences. Not much has been written from that group. As more women become leaders in higher education, we can expect a growing percentage of female presidents in the future. Thus, learning from current women presidents can be very useful for them in leading their institutions.

More needs to be researched about male spouses. Just as the number of female presidents is increasing, so, too, will the number of male spouses increase. Their perceptions are important not only for their own success, but for the success of their wives and the success of their relationships.

This research and literature can help prepare other women for the role of president and help them avoid mistakes learned in previous presidencies to ensure greater success. It might even be helpful for professional organizations to form networks for female presidents in higher education so that lessons, such as those identified in this research, might be shared more widely, leading to the success of the participants and the success of their institutions.

It might also be useful to conduct a quantitative study with the hope of getting a broader participation of female presidents. A survey could be created based on the findings of this study, to determine whether these idiosyncratic experiences represent female presidents as a whole. The same could also be done of male spouses.

This study was conducted in the U.S. only. As female presidents in higher education become more common in other countries, it would be useful to replicate this study in those countries, and, ultimately, to conduct comparative research among countries.

Limitations

There are limitations to this study. The 15 presidents all volunteered to participate. But they represent only about twenty percent of the women in college and university presidencies. These presidents should not be considered as representative of the 70 women college presidents in the role currently. Further, the study was restricted to the United States. Thus, the findings cannot be generalized.

Conclusion

Women presidents learned important lessons about the role of the presidency, the importance of mentoring, about their male spouses, and how to take care of self for sustainability and resilience in the position. They often did not know these things at the beginning of their presidencies. But, through experience, these lessons have helped guide them through the difficulties of the office.

While the role of a woman college president is a challenging one, a few comments emerged that highlighted the benefits of serving in the role:

‘Schools benefit from women leaders at the top!’

I learn something new every day in this job. You get to meet fascinating people. It’s definitely a hard job, but it’s worth it in the end. It certainly keeps me young!

The biggest plus in this job is to be able to help make a mission a reality in the lives of students who are learning at this institution. For me I get to have more influence on everything from strategic planning to operational issues. Just to have a bigger voice on some important issues affecting the institution is significant to me. I feel like I am truly making a difference.

The role of president in an institution of higher education is both difficult and rewarding (Bornstein 2002; Selingo 2005; Tunheim and McLean 2013; Tunheim and McLean 2014). Preparing women leaders to understand the role of a college or university president before they take it on and how to be successful once in the role is critically important for the future of our institutions and also for our country to compete globally (Broad and Ferguson 2012).

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