A Study of Women in Leadership at the University of Florida and Higher Education

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Honors Thesis

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Abstract

This study focused on six women in leadership positions at the dean level or above at the University of Florida (UF), a higher education institution. The purpose of this study was to utilize established national studies of women in leadership positions at higher education institutions, including associate and full professors with tenure, chief academic officers, members of governing boards and university presidents and then compare the University of Florida in its active support of women in comparable level leadership roles. The research method utilized a semi-structured in-person interview of women in past or present leadership roles at the University of Florida. The compiled results from the interviews showed that the participants are aware that UF is beginning to move towards having comparable percentages with men and women in leadership roles, but that work needs to continue. The majority of women in leadership roles at UF who were interviewed felt that the opportunities for women to attain leadership roles is and continues to move forward. There were a few themes that were common among the participants in this study. The first theme expressed by this groups would be to keep moving forward and not let real or perceived barriers define who you are or your career path. The second theme that was shared by these women was to focus on finding what your passion is and then look for leadership opportunities within that area. The third theme was the importance of having a supportive spouse or partner. The women in this study agreed that women in leadership positions must be prepared to look for opportunities, demonstrate confidence in their abilities, have perseverance, and the ability to navigate the conversation in every interaction.
Introduction

This study provided insight into the experiences of six women in senior leadership positions at the University of Florida (UF) and compared their thoughts, experiences, and views to the national report from the American Council on Education, “Pipelines, Pathways, and Institutional Leadership – An Update on the Status of Women in Higher Education” (Johnson, 2017). Through a collection and analysis of qualitative narratives, the women participants in this study describe what obstacles still exist and provide additional insight to help increase the percentage of women in leadership positions at UF.

This study explored the “pipeline myth” which is the idea that there are not enough degree holding or qualified women to fill leadership roles. Yet, the research shows that since the mid-1980’s women have earned over 50% of the bachelor and master degrees to hold these positions (Johnson, 2017). The concept of the “glass ceiling”, a metaphor used to explain the elusive, almost invisible obstacles women face when trying to rise higher than a middle management position, is also discussed (Schwanke, 2013). Research has shown that the higher the leadership position is, the less likely it is that a woman will be in that leadership role (Johnson, 2017). Over the last 30 years, even though there have been qualified and competitive women candidates, women fill only 30 percent of the seats at the level of president at higher education institutions (Johnson, 2017). This percentage also stands when it comes to seats on the governing boards of institutions (Johnson, 2017).

Two separate studies have shown that while young women have the qualifications to be in a leadership role, they are not moving towards these traditional leadership positions. In higher education there are a greater number of women moving into leadership positions than women in business (Longman & Madsen, 2014). However, recent data shows that women in academia are
more likely to hold teaching-only positions and less likely to hold full or associate professor positions then their men counterparts (Johnson, 2017). Supporting women seeking leadership positions is a particularly relevant topic to address in a higher education atmosphere. In these institutions the leadership has the ability to influence future generations in a culture that focuses on learning and making a societal impact (Longman & Madsen, 2014).

Research Objectives

1. Determine the real or perceived obstacles that still exist for women to rise into leadership positions within higher education academia and administration at the University of Florida.
2. Outline methods or strategies that could be utilized in higher education and UF to support women in attaining leadership positions.

Literature Review

Women in Leadership

The leadership labyrinth is used to describe the complicated challenges that women face when moving from middle management into senior leadership positions as compared to men (Schwanke, 2013). The labyrinth has three main categories human capital, gender differences, and prejudice. Human capital refers to level of education, length of work experience, opportunities for development, and work-home conflict. Gender differences refers to style and effectiveness, self-promotion, commitment and motivation, negotiation skills, and traits. Prejudice refers to gender stereotypes, biased perception and evaluation, vulnerability and reactance (Northouse, 2016).

Women experience external barriers from societal expectations which include stereotyping, blatant and subtle sexism, and discrimination. Gender stereotyping can impact
women and their desire to be leaders, “gender stereotypes introduced in childhood are reinforced throughout the lives of women and become self-fulfilling prophesies. Most leadership positions are held by men, so women don’t expect to achieve them” (Sandberg & Scovell, 2017, p. 22). There is also the societal view that women should be the primary caregiver for a family and career compromises are expected. This viewpoint can impact the path to a leadership level position for women (Sandberg & Scovell, 2017).

Internal barriers should be considered for women in attaining leadership roles. These include the lack of self-confidence and internalizing negative messages that have been heard throughout their lives, such as being assertive or outspoken is wrong. The term “lean in” was coined by Sheryl Sandberg and is now commonly used to describe women that are ambitious. Instead of “leaning in”, women tend to pull back from the leadership table and fewer women than men aspire to leadership positions (Sandberg & Scovell, 2017). The 2011 McKinsey report showed that women are promoted based on what they have already accomplished while men are promoted on their potential (Sandberg & Scovell, 2017).

In the study "Barriers for Women to Positions of Power: How Societal and Corporate Structures, Perceptions of Leadership and Discrimination Restrict Women's Advancement to Authority," research has shown that professional organizations commonly view leadership traits that are consistent with male characteristics (Schwanke, 2013). These are termed agentic traits that include assertiveness, independence, and control. Communal traits, such as helpfulness and gentleness, are seen as consistent with women. These stereotypical generalizations lead to the perception that these two traits cannot coexist. Women leaders find that this creates complicated expectations and is a difficult balancing act where they can be criticized for being too masculine and too feminine at the same time (Schwanke, 2013).
Women in Higher Education Leadership

The report compiled by the American Council on Education (ACE) states that the “pipeline myth is the persistent idea that there are too few qualified women (e.g., degree-holding women for leadership positions)” has not been the case for over 30 years (Johnson, 2017, p. 2). The report shows that women now hold a higher percentage of bachelor, master and doctoral degrees than their male colleagues, but a lower percentage of higher education leadership positions. This percentage of women also declines the higher the leadership level. The ACE report for Leadership and Advocacy is beginning the initiative to “move the needle” created to move women into leadership positions in higher education. In January 2016, ACE created a national campaign and is energizing governing boards to actively recruit and hire women into executive-level positions at the institution and understand the benefits of a gender-diversified leadership team. ACE provides practices and models which can be followed to provide experiences and skills for rising women leaders. This campaign focused on having presidents of higher education institutions sign their name to a commitment list of supporting women leaders. As of this study, the University of Florida is not listed, but over 500 presidents have pledged their commitment. These include notable institutions as Arizona State University, Syracuse University, University of South Carolina, University of South Florida, and Penn State (Johnson, 2017).

In the study “Persistent Inequity: Gender and Academic Employment,” it states that “full professor status, remains an elusive goal for women” (Curtis, 2011, p. 2). In addition to external and internal barriers, hidden barriers continue to exist for women in an academic environment. Blatant discrimination against women is not as apparent or out in the open as it was decades ago.
The women of today experience inequitable challenges that accumulate during their career versus a single insurmountable hurdle (Curtis, 2011).

Motivators for men and women are different and using male-normed leadership development tools is not working to inspire the women with the qualifications and skillset to move into senior-level leadership roles (Longman & Madsen, 2014). Understanding this is essential for the future of higher education institutions and society in order to have the voice of women at the leadership table to provide diverse perspectives during the decision making process (Longman & Madsen, 2014).

Research Methodology

This qualitative research method utilized a semi-structured in-person interview of six women in past or present senior leadership roles at the dean level or above at the University of Florida. Each research participant was assigned a number to ensure anonymity and signed a consent form acknowledging that they were being recorded. Each interview was held in a private office, audio recorded, and transcribed. The table below mimics the categories of data collection for women presidents which are referenced in the ACE report. Please note none of the study participants felt they had paused their career path to care for a family member. In the ACE report 32% of the women presidents had this box checked.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Participant</th>
<th>Master’s degree</th>
<th>Doctoral degree</th>
<th>Currently Married</th>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Altered career for dependent/spouse/partner, or parent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RP1</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>RP2</td>
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<td>RP3</td>
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<tr>
<td>RP5</td>
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<td>RP6</td>
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Transcriptions were saved on the researcher’s computer with a locked passcode. The individual interviews were scheduled for one hour at the interviewee’s office or chosen conference room. Each study participant was given a printed copy of the “Pipeline, Pathways, and Institutional Leadership - An Update on the Status of Women in Higher Education” ACE study, and a printed list of the questions.

As the researcher, a subjectivity statement is relevant for this study. I am a long-time professional woman that has worked in information technology at UF for over 30 years and a single mother of two grown children. My degree path has been non-traditional, I earned my associate of science degree in programming in 1986. Over 25 years later, when both of my children had left home to attend college, I returned to school to finish my associate of arts degree and then transferred to UF to complete my bachelor’s degree in Communication and Leadership.

During my career, information technology has been a traditionally male dominated industry at the senior level leadership levels. In the last few years, progress has been made to improve the ratio of women to men in associate director and director leadership roles. For over half of my career, I have held multiple middle management positions and worked alongside both men and women leaders at UF, which included vice presidents and financial controllers.

When my children were young and due to financial concerns, I accepted an additional position at UF as a part-time adjunct lecturer for an introduction to programming class for multiple semesters. For one semester, due to the needs of my children, I altered my career path to teach full-time and reduced my information technology appointment to part-time. When I returned to information technology in a full-time position my career path began to move forward. I was promoted to a higher level position, with a degree waiver in place and an increase in salary. My interest in women in leadership positions grew after graduating from the 2008-2009 class of
the “UF Next Level Leadership” program which increased my awareness of inequities that could exist for women in leadership positions.

The following questions were included in the interview guide:

1. What was your degree path?
2. What is your opinion on the “pipeline myth” which is the idea that there are not enough qualified and degree-holding women to fill leadership roles?
3. What are your thoughts on the “glass ceiling” barriers that seem to exist for women?
4. What have you considered blockers during your career?
5. Have you experienced gender bias during your career?
6. How did you overcome these?
7. Have you had to alter your career path to care for a dependent, partner, or parent?
8. When you are in a meeting of peers, what would you estimate is the percentage of women to men?
9. Do you think young women appreciate the historical struggles and sacrifices that women made to reduce the percentage gap between men and women in leadership roles?
10. What approaches would you recommend to encourage women to strive for leadership roles and be successful?

Research Findings

In this section, responses to each question listed will be reviewed in total. The goal is to provide qualitative data that will examine the experiences and perceptions of this group of women leaders at UF, provide additional understanding of the current environment, and ideas for encouraging women to strive to attain future leadership roles.
Degree Path

The objective of the first question was to determine if there was a relation of the degree path of participants and their movement into leadership roles. In this study two of the research participants, RP5 and RP6, followed the traditional degree path that was defined as completing high school, a bachelor’s degree, and master’s degree with no interruptions. Each of the participants attended graduate school and earned a master’s degree, with 50% of the women also earning their doctoral degree. Each woman earned their academic degree in the vocation in which they would eventually become a leader. For example, RP6 knew what subject she wanted to study and make her career from as early as middle school. Two of the women, RP2 and RP3, were first-generation students. One research participant, RP2, took a two-year break between degrees to work in her field and ensure that she was pursuing the degree for which she was passionate. Another participant, RP1, determined that she needed her master’s degree to move up in the organization and finished her degree while working at UF. One participant, RP3, chose to start college, stopped, and then made the decision to return to school eventually earning her doctoral degree. An alternate path was chosen by one participant, RP4, who had a ten-year timespan between earning her master's degree and her doctoral degree. A quote from one of the participants, RP2, was particularly pertinent when talking about educational mentors, “one of the things I got as an undergraduate and having strong women mentors was that I wasn’t intimidated. I had seen them navigate situations and this gave me a level of confidence that was helpful in my growth and advancement in higher education. Seeing those women early and getting a sense of, ‘OK, I can do this.’”
Pipeline Myth

This question focused on participants’ opinions on the “pipeline myth” which is the idea that there are not enough qualified and degree-holding women to fill leadership roles. Each woman felt that there were enough women with degrees to hold leadership positions and that this is indeed a myth and RP1 mentioned that this had been used in the past “as an excuse for not hiring women” into leadership roles. However, several women brought up that it may depend on the discipline that is being discussed. For example, in industries where jobs are traditionally held by women, such as nursing, librarians, teachers, social workers, or human resources, the path to a leadership position may be more direct than in the science, technology, dentistry, medicine, engineering, or math (STEM) fields. In those fields, there may not be enough degree holding women or moving into leadership roles in these disciplines is and will continue to be more challenging for women. Both RP2 and RP4 mentioned that even in traditionally women-dominated fields, the answer would have been much different 20-30 years ago when the majority of leadership roles would have been filled by men.

In the current academic climate, RP2 and RP4 commented that at UF approximately half of the deans were women and that this was in line with peer institutions in the Association of American Universities (AAU) and this speaks well for UF. A positive note is for the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences (CALS) where the total undergraduate numbers for men and women have been about 50/50 for the last ten years. About four years ago this same goal was reached for graduate students. In the Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS), two out of three dean positions are held by women.

RP2 discussed the process of filling leadership positions and how hiring committees are formed to fill leadership roles, and many people naturally fall back on what they know. For
example, if the previous position was held by a man with a specific style and skillset, the committee may look for a candidate with similar characteristics. She said, “Our view is so narrow that it tends to lock in on those things that have been traditionally seen and often are male characteristics.” She also pointed out that most leadership job descriptions will say that having an organizational “vision” is a requirement, but “vision” may be articulated differently by men and women.

Glass Ceiling

The “glass ceiling” question addressed their thoughts on the barriers that seem to exist for women when attempting to move into senior level positions. Many agreed that there still are some real barriers, and some perceived barriers. One of the real barriers is whether women have to stop or pause their careers to have children. A couple of the participants, RP4 and RP5, made the pragmatic statement that only women can physically have children and there is still not equal distribution of childcare and home responsibilities between men and women. RP1 is concerned and said that “sometimes women sacrifice having a family in order to have a career.” While men, in order to have a family, may decide to alter their career to reduce travel time or work less hours, they do not have to decide whether to have a career at all. Several participants felt many organizations were working hard to remove these barriers and provide a supportive environment for families and both RP1 and RP5 point out how critical it is to ensure there are systems in place to prevent discrimination. For this group of participants, two participants out of six had children. Both women, RP4 and RP6, took brief maternity leaves, RP4 had only two weeks off before returning to teach her classes. Each woman that had children also had a supportive spouse who helped with the home and childcare duties.
Several participants responded to “the glass ceiling” question with the comment that this varies significantly by profession. One participant, RP3, went more in-depth on this question and the complexity of it, saying “that it has to do with what society expects of women, in terms of gender stereotypes and gender roles and what women expect from themselves in these terms.” The example was given in the fields of medicine and education. Women physicians typically go into ascribed areas that are female, pediatricians, general practitioners, gynecology, and obstetrics, while men predominately are the urologists and surgeons. In schools, elementary level schools will have women as the majority of teachers where in high school and college there are more male teachers. The idea is that there is gender stereotyping aspect of jobs in particular professions. For example, a “glass ceiling” would be more apparent for a woman surgeon than a woman pediatrician.

RP6 had a very interesting journey in her career. Never thinking she would get the opportunity to move into a senior executive position, she went through the glass ceiling and became the most senior woman in the history of a government agency. Until her appointment, the agency was led by men and was run by the “old boy’s network.” She was then told by the head of the agency to create an “old girl’s network.” Knowing that no woman would join this, she named the new group “the wise women,” and she then successfully changed the culture of the organization from hierarchical to one of inclusion for both men and women.

All the participants commented that they do not define themselves by the “glass ceiling” barrier. An important point was made of reminding women to be aware that this can happen especially with the topic of salary equity and that there does seem to be a plateau for women at some point in their career. Women need to recognize this and then continue to push through to
move forward in their careers. There was some consensus that women may have to put in more effort than men to get to the same point in their careers.

All the participants mentioned that it was essential to pay attention and recognize when opportunities present themselves and that, as a society, individuals need to push the definition of what it means to be a leader. It is necessary for society to move away from the traditional view of leadership and start thinking of leadership in a broader sense. While both women and men can lead, with a woman the leadership traits or style may have a different look and feel.

Blockers or Barriers

This question focused on barriers or blockers that participants have encountered during their careers. During the interviews, it was clear that this question needed further explanation. The example was presented of an effective, dedicated working single mother supporting two small children and how this limited the opportunities for promotion early in her career. RP4 shared a similar story when she took a non-tenure-track position in a move to an institution that gave her husband a tenure-track position. At this point, she decided to pursue her doctoral degree and, sharing the similar tenacity character trait as the other participants, continued to move her career forward. She and her husband would eventually make the decision to move to another institution where she was offered a tenure-track position, and he would take a job offered at the same institution.

While the women in this study did not define themselves by the challenges they have had to face, each did tell a story of inappropriate or demeaning comments or behavior from men during their careers. All agreed, that while none of their situations rose to the level of harassment that each remembered the experience well. In RP5’s case, it prompted her to make a temporary job change. Several of these women have also heard comments in recent years, such as “a
woman doesn’t need a job, she doesn’t have a family to support” or “a woman’s place is in the home, having babies” or “women should not be allowed to vote” which these study participants thought had come and gone. While these comments were not directed towards the participants necessarily, all the women were astonished that these statements were still being said and heard in their presence.

The most important outcome from this question, was that each woman was clear that they did not define themselves by these inappropriate comments or behaviors. They each made a mindful note of the experience and went on to move their careers forward, so they did not consider these events true blockers. It order to further stress this point RP5 said, “it is important not to let these moments define you” and emphasizes “women who see everything through that lens will limit their own happiness and career progression.” Each of this study’s participants has a strong sense of self and commitment to their roles as leaders. As a woman leader RP2 said, “I know it is my responsibility to convince the person across the table from me that I can do this. I am nimble enough that if a blocker presents itself, I know how to respond to it in that environment.”

**Gender Bias**

The question addressed whether the participant had ever experienced gender bias during their career and how they overcame it. One of the gender biases mentioned by the participants is that women bring forth “soft skills” as part of their skillset. These are the aspects of a job that include taking care of the people and making sure everyone is ok. In discussing this, RP2 stated that the gender bias comes into play when a woman leader pushes back on coordinating the social events of the office because “she needs to focus on the real business of getting things done.” To overcome this, one must have confidence and be ready for the reaction that may occur
when the word “no” is said. In order to soften the “no,” the woman leader may decide to offer another staff member’s time to help with the event.

Another mention of gender bias was the way that men and women communicated differently, both verbally or non-verbally. Recalling an article she had read, RP2 talked about what it means when a woman nods her head when a speaker is speaking, and that it simply means “I heard what you are saying but I do not necessarily agree with what is being said.” This non-verbal behavior is now something she pays attention to in her meetings. Another point was that from a gender perspective, women are continually required to prove themselves and must be prepared so that their input is not dismissed based on gender bias, even if it is not intentional. Women have to walk into the room ready to “hold their own,” RP2 said, where men do not necessarily think about that before sitting at the conference table. There is also the concept of how close you are sitting to the power source in the meeting. For example, with a cabinet meeting, it would be how close you are to the president. For women, this is almost always a conscious decision that is made before entering the room.

RP6 discussed two different experiences with gender bias, with the same group of working class or “blue-collar” men. Her first experience was as an educated woman and years later as a woman leader. Several years before being appointed as their supervisor, she worked alongside this close-knit group of men who had been working together for years since their apprenticeship program in the printing industry. During this time, she felt like an outsider and says “I did not have ink under my fingernails and I had a completely different background” and “I was never going to be a member of that club.” Years later she would come back to supervise this same group, and the challenge now was for her to help implement a cultural change of inclusivity. From her perspective the gender bias from this group of men was expected for the
environment she was in, so she just kept moving forward. While she felt respected, there was still some resentment. One way she conquered this was by using her public speaking skills to give credit to this same group of workers for the technological advancements that the office was now able to accomplish due to their hard work. In return, they appreciated her doing all the public speaking for the office. This close-knit team of workers eventually came around and printed her a plaque for her office that said, “You do all the work, and we take all the credit.” The culture had officially been changed.

Gender bias may also follow women into retirement. While RP1 was fortunate to have great mentors during her career, both women and men that gave her great opportunities, she noticed that being asked to be on committees or boards commonly fell to her male peers. After her retirement, the experience has remained the same. She said, “When men retire from the position I held they continue to be asked to sit on committees or boards, where for women it does not happen as often.”

Family Considerations

This question reviewed whether participants altered their career path to care for a dependent, spouse/partner, or parent. Each participant felt they did not need to change their career path to provide care, although, RP1 did retire early to care for family members and one reason RP3 is retiring is to be able to spend more quality time with family. Several participants pointed out that women commonly do have to make this choice and at the leadership level it is common for the women to be married, but not have children. While the decision to have children or not is personal one, and not necessarily made for career growth, RP5 points out by not having children a woman may have more time and attention to pursue her career and leadership opportunities. For any family considerations the study participants agreed with RP5 who said, “A
supportive spouse is incredibly important whether you are married or have children and it makes all the difference.”

Two out of six of the women interviewed have five grown children between them, and both had spouses who helped support their careers and take care of the children. The stereotypical situation is that men always have supportive spouses, but in this case, both women and their families benefited from the support of their husbands. All of these children were born before the Family and Medical Leave Act was implemented in 1993; it was passed to protect the jobs of both women and men for family health-related issues. Consequently, both women took short maternity leaves and at times brought their children to the office or on business trips with them. In RP4’s experience, the baby came two weeks earlier than expected and at the beginning of the semester. With best plans laid, she had to return to teach after two weeks of leave, with her newborn in the hospital. She admits that she may not have taken care of herself very well in trying not to alter her career path. In this participant’s case, the family could hire a caregiver to help, and to have a family with children; there will be compromises to keep your career on track.

One of the participants, RP6, faced the loss of her spouse and close family members over the last 10 years. During this challenging time, she continued to work using remote communication to keep up with everything. She points out how supportive UF was of her and that in turn, she continues to make sure that her staff receives the same consideration. She said, “You have to say family comes first; there are times when that just has to happen.”

From a different perspective, RP2 talks about how being a single woman with no children presents a unique situation. In the conference room, people assume that all women are married and supporting either a child or husband. She still feels that this is part of her future and that she has not exchanged this balance in her life for furthering her career. A similar comment was made
by RP1 who was a single woman with no children at the beginning of her leadership career, “It can be difficult to be a single and attractive woman and be taken seriously as a leader.”

**Ratio of Women to Men in Leadership**

This question asked participants to estimate the percentage of women to men in the meetings they attend that include their peers. RP6 points out that this ratio was much lower when she began working at UF. At that time, UF had a women’s dean meeting that was separate from the general meeting and was mainly a support group that immediately made her feel “very welcome and comfortable.” Over the years as UF has increased the hiring of women into dean-level positions, this group has become less active, due in part to busy schedules but also the culture of women leaders at UF has become less of an anomaly. She continues to welcome new women deans with their first Gator pin in order start creating “a bond and a relationship” with them.

In RP3’s response she did not notice a specific gender dominating the meetings that she attends. She considers her peer group as both gender and racially diverse. In the peer group of RP4, she estimates the number of women to be right around 50 percent. She also feels that UF is ahead of higher education institutions across the country at the associate dean level when the primary responsibility is teaching versus research.

**Historical Struggles**

This question focused on the participants’ view of young women and their appreciation of the historical struggles and sacrifices that women have made to reduce the percentage gap between men and women in leadership roles. Several of the participants mentioned that the recent #METOO movement has been instrumental in giving women’s past and current issues a higher profile and more women, both young and old, are speaking up. While this movement
started with sexual harassment and assault, it has expanded into equal pay and other women’s issues.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, RP5 expressed a warning. While some young women may not appreciate the decades of women rising to the challenge to change the culture of how women are perceived, there are some women who are “hyper-aware and are looking for bias” in every situation. A couple of the participants feel that, in general, young women do not appreciate the history because they are young and naïve, RP3 said: “The world is always a little better than it was before because you don’t know any better.” A conversation of young college women was overheard by RP4 saying “this is where you find your mate” and was discouraged about any real cultural progress of women. RP3 additionally pointed out that as these young women get older, they will start to pay more attention and notice if women are in a better place or losing ground.

Another perspective from RP2 was that she appreciated the confidence of younger women and that it is not apparent to them that they may have to face some of the same struggles as the women of the past. She said:

“I think that it is where you are that really makes this vibrant in your life or not. If you are in an environment that is predominantly male, I could say that your experience is very different then someone who is thinking about going into teaching. That it is more of a lived experience than historical knowledge.”

She points out that the challenges of women in today’s world “does not look as blatant as it may have been in the past with a dress code that says women have to wear skirts” as it may have been in the past. This participant discussed the recent national event with the first female senator
having a baby and bringing her infant onto the Senate floor. The senator even made sure her baby girl had a blazer on since that was a Senate floor rule.

Young Women and Leadership

The last question addressed how to encourage young women to strive for leadership roles and what steps they can take to be successful. Several participants recommended that young women find out what their passion is. RP5 said:

“It is a passion for the profession that positions you for leadership roles, and that means along the way you are learning as much as you can, taking advantage of opportunities, and positioning yourself to be a resource for others. The leadership roles come to you because you have a vision for moving something forward or an aptitude for bringing people together and achieving certain outcomes.”

Some participants spoke about next steps for young women, and how to make it part of the culture for women to be leaders; it needs to start at an early age. R4 points out that as a society, we need to be aware of “how we recognize achievement and how we talk to boys and girls. It is still common for people to say a little girl is pretty or her dress is cute or for a boy how strong or brave he is,” instead of what she/he is accomplishing. RP1 said that “efforts being made in the STEM area is going to help with women and it needs to start in the schools.” She suggested that in addition to providing support and encouragement, to create opportunities for young women to be “in charge” of a project or club or be the captain of the team as early as grade school.

It was also pointed out by RP4 that current educational assessments place emphasis on high grades, essays, or written work which tends to favor young women. She said,
“I think some of ways that schools have changed in order to accommodate more narrowed testing, losing activities, losing arts, and losing physical education are some of the reasons why women are out-competing men in college admissions. Some of that is certainly intentional because women were behind, but I think the pendulum has swung a little bit in terms of what we consider important in education to start disadvantaging boys.”

In the workplace, R1 pointed out the need to make sure women know that they do not need to choose between a leadership career and having family. She used the tenure process as an example, which allows tenure-track faculty to “pause” their career path without a penalty. She said, “Create workplace policies that give flexibility around family, work, and life to encourage them into leadership. If they have to make a choice, you can lose some talented people.”

Several participants pointed out that women need to be aware of and look out for opportunities and to “stretch” their confidence level to take advantage of those opportunities. R3 said:

“Trust other people if they tell you that you are doing a good job. Understand that you may not always have the best picture of who you are and that others may see things in you that you don’t see and you need to listen.”
Summary and Conclusion

This study utilized the national ACE infographic brief “Pipelines, Pathways, and Institutional Leadership – An Update on the Status of Women in Higher Education” to compare women executive leaders at the University of Florida who participated in this study to the national averages for higher education. One common theme throughout this study was that each woman initially had a passion for their chosen career where they would eventually be a leader.

Each participant took different degree paths to their leadership positions. According to the ACE report, the national average shows women earning more than 50% of all master's degrees than men. In this study, all of the participants had earned their master's degree. Half of the participants had also earned their doctoral degree, and this matches the national average percentage. In these conversations it was interesting to note that two of the women were first-generation students and only two had followed the traditional degree path.

The participants discussed the “pipeline myth,” the idea that there are not enough qualified and degree-holding women to fill leadership roles, and each woman agreed that it was a myth and this finding was in line with the ACE national report. One part of this study that was thought-provoking was looking at this question from the standpoint of which field a woman chooses to enter. Using the example of the STEM fields which are predominantly male then the pipeline myth may be true or the journey to a leadership role more difficult for women. The ACE study did not make this distinction, and the reason more women are not in the STEM pipeline should be studied further. Another angle is to look at and evaluate how leaders are selected for leadership positions. Subconsciously, the hiring committee may be looking for male traits, since a male was previously in that position. Conscious thought and effort should be made by the committee to understand and recognize this bias before interviews begin.
There were similar sentiments about the “glass ceiling” barriers that seem to exist for women, and the “pipeline myth” where it depends on the profession that women choose. Society still follows gender stereotyping when it comes to certain professions. At a higher education institution, it would be more likely to have the dean of nursing be a woman than a man. In a profession that is perceived as a male-dominated, the dean would likely be a man. Consequently, a woman engineer may experience a true “glass ceiling” when it comes to leadership positions since this is a traditionally male-dominated field. The message was the same from each research participant which was that they do not let this perceived barrier define them. Each participant is dedicated to their field, works hard, and pays attention for opportunities as they present themselves.

One of the real barriers is whether women have to stop or pause their careers to have children. Each of the participants discussed this and none felt they traded having a family or children for a leadership position. It was noted though that by not having children, women leaders might have more time to dedicate to their position, which in turn could impact their ability to move up into leadership positions. In this study of UF women in leadership positions, 30% had children which is much lower than the comparative national study, and the women had their children before coming to UF. In the ACE study which asked women presidents if they had children, the percentage was 74% compared to men with 89%. Also, the two women in the study who did have children took short maternity leaves, as little as two weeks, due to the commitments of their job and they did have to make compromises, with their health and time spent with family. A recurring theme for most of these women was that they were successful due to the support and committed partnership with their spouse.
There are two issues to consider when talking about creating a culture at higher education institutions that genuinely does not penalize employees, both women and men, if they pause their career to take care of family. One of the leading cultural issues is the United States does not require paid maternity leave similar to many other industrialized countries (Sandberg & Scovell, 2017). In my opinion, this creates a culture where the importance of family and a career are not in lockstep and this can cause a conflict for women leaders or slow down their career progression. For women, institutional policies need to be updated to safeguard women during a pregnancy or post-pregnancy recovery time. Institutions must do more to protect faculty and employees for doing what any responsible family member would do when caring for their children or an ill family member (Williams & Lee, 2016). In this study, RP1, suggested that a family-friendly policy should be put in place for all UF employees when it comes to having and caring for family. This policy could be similar to the tenure-track faculty policy known at some institutions as “stop-the-clock” (Williams & Lee, 2016). At UF this is considered an extension of the tenure probationary period and allows up to one year without a penalty to tenure-track faculty who become a parent or responsible for of a family member ("Guidelines and Information Regarding the Tenure, Permanent Status and Promotion Process for 2018-2019," 2018).

The University of Florida provides a generous parental leave policy of up to six months unpaid leave for the birth or adoption of a child and allows advancement of parental leave time, in lieu of paid leave, for the first six weeks ("FMLA," 2018). It is noteworthy that none of the participants in this study utilized UF’s parental leave benefits or the tenure extension policy. Further research could be exercised to determine if a faculty or employees career path could see negative impacts if they took advantage of the family leave plans offered.
While the participants in this study were impressed with the accomplishments and confidence of college-age women, it is noteworthy to mention that until the national #METOO movement, the appreciation of women's historical perseverance was substantially limited. It is essential to keep the momentum and visibility into women’s issues that this movement created active and alive to continue to move women forward.

The findings of this study support “the higher, the fewer” theory from the national ACE report. This phrase is used to describe the leadership trend that indicates that the higher the position is, the less likely there will be a woman holding the position. During this study, the participants recognized this ratio has improved across higher education over the last decade especially at the associate dean and dean levels. Each participant acknowledged that women leaders would in all probability experience a plateau in their careers, and several felt they would have to work harder to attain their goals than their male counterparts.

The University of Florida is seen as equivalent with its peers in the AAU in the ratio of women to men in leadership roles. In some UF colleges, even at the dean’s level, there is a higher ratio of women to men. Once the UF cabinet level is reached, the ratios of women to men decline rapidly and are approximately 17 percent to 83 percent respectively ("Cabinet," 2018). Since UF was founded in 1853, the highest leadership level of the president has always been filled by men and the provost seat has been filled only two times by women.

To improve the number of qualified women in leadership positions at UF, executive support to move women upward is essential. One step would be for the UF president to sign his name to the commitment of the ACE Leadership and Advocacy campaign to “Moving the Needle” where the vision is to have half of the chief executives at higher education institutions by 2030 (Johnson, 2017). The participants in this study agree that UF is moving forward in
recruiting and hiring women into leadership positions, but to increase the ratio of women to men there needs to be continuous progression towards this goal.

Another key point is women in leadership positions sharing their experiences and showing support for other women at all stages of their careers. Several participants mentioned how support from mentors, both men and women, helped them by providing opportunities which gave them confidence to advance their careers. Fortunately at UF, there is a formal organization for women to do just that. The goal of the Academic Association for Women (AAW) is to position women for success at each stage of their career at UF. This association is currently sponsoring the “Women of Influence” series and discusses the history of women at UF and how their positive actions impacted the UF women of today. They also review topics that include promotion and negotiating salary increases ("Association of Academic Women: University of Florida," 2018).

There are several strategies that could be utilized in higher education and UF to support women in attaining leadership positions, including the presidency. According to the ACE report, as of 2016, 30% of presidencies were held by women across all institutions of higher education. This percentage is lower than the Ivy League universities where three out of eight are currently led by women presidents at the University of Pennsylvania, Brown, and Cornell. This number dropped from 50% in 2015 to 37.5% in 2018.

The University of Denver’s Colorado Women’s College, Benchmarking Women’s Leadership in the United States report offers active solutions in this initiative:

- Actively recruit women into senior executive-level leadership positions, including vice presidents, chief academic officers, and provosts. The report states: “These positions are stepping-stones to the presidency.”
Hiring or search committees for senior executive-level positions need to be diverse and include women and minorities. By diversifying this committee there may be a broader range of qualified candidates that are considered.

Examine the proportion of women to men in tenure track positions in each college. If the numbers are disproportionate then the hiring process should be evaluated and ensure that women are included in the pool of candidates.

In addition to hiring practices, it is important to develop women as leaders. It has been noted in this study that women lead differently than men. In the People Matters, 6 Barriers for Women’s Career Advancement article, it offers suggestions for organizations to support women in leadership:

- Recognize that women are both intelligent and ambitious in today’s workplace, but unintentional barriers still exist for women that strive to make it to the highest leadership levels. Organizations need to make an effort to reduce these barriers that include:
  - The traditional perceptions of leadership that are associated with male qualities
  - The hesitancy of women to advocate for themselves
  - The double bind of being capable or liked but not both
  - Family responsibilities

- Provide individual development in order to build a woman’s “leadership identity.” A leadership identity includes taking on challenging assignments, being aware of opportunities and the willingness to take risks. These development tools would include:
- Develop women leaders in an all-women setting. This fosters an environment where women can network and learn from current women leaders.

- Develop women in mixed gender settings. This creates the real world dynamic and provides a setting where men and women can exchange ideas and have a better understanding of each other.

In higher education and at UF, all of these goals are possible and the upward trend of women in leadership positions is promising. In order for progress to continue to be made and for the number of women to not decline, institutions need to continue to pay attention to the rise women leaders. There is still the need to recognize real and unintentional barriers that exist and work to mitigate these. In order to continue moving forward, both current and future women leaders should find their passion, not let barriers define them, support other women, challenge outdated rules and policies, and be open to new challenges and opportunities.
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