So Few Women Leaders

It's no longer a pipeline problem, so what are the root causes?

By Francesca Dominici, Linda P. Fried, and Scott L. Zeger

Despite good intentions and occasional interventions by leaders in higher education, women are still underrepresented in academic leadership positions, both absolutely and relative to the eligible pool of tenured women. This finding has been documented extensively in the literature on academic leadership, by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and by many academic institutions that have undertaken self-evaluations (a list of these institutions and links to their self-evaluations are available at www.biostat.jhsph.edu/~fdominic/NIHwomen/other.html). Department chairs and academic deans can be key agents of change in efforts to diversify the academy, encouraging new approaches to recruitment and equity in promotion and tenure. However, women are even less well represented among academic deans and department chairs than among full professors, raising questions about the root causes for the persistence of gender inequity at the highest ranks of academic leadership.

In July 2008, the NIH published a request for applications to support research on causal factors and interventions that promote the careers of women in the biomedical and behavioral sciences and engineering. This request for applications signaled a recognition of the need for evidence that will guide efforts to increase the number of women in academic leadership positions.

There is already sufficient evidence of a widespread problem. The tangible manifestations of gender-based obstacles—lower salaries, appointments at lower ranks, slower rates of promotion and lower rates of retention, and less recognition through awards—have been described extensively.

For women in academia, the timing of tenure decisions often coincides with the optimal childbearing years, requiring women to resolve individually the conflicts between biological and career clocks. One possible manifestation of these conflicts is that tenured women in academic science are twice as likely as tenured men to be single. Moreover, women academics who have children still shoulder the majority of domestic responsibilities, and those with children of prekindergarten age are less likely to be in a tenure-track job than their male counterparts.

A study by economists Donna K. Ginther and Shulamit Kahn found that women are less likely than men to pursue tenure-track positions in science but that the gender gap in such positions can be explained by fertility decisions. That is, women in science are less likely to move up the academic job ladder after their early postdoctorate years if they have children. For men, by contrast, both marriage and children increase the likelihood of advancing in an academic science career.

While such problems have been observed at many universities, businesses, and governmental agencies, few studies have formally probed the experiences of senior

women faculty leaders and reported their views of the root causes of the underrepresentation of women in academic leadership positions.

In 2002, Johns Hopkins University provost Steven Knapp and president William Brody established the University Committee on the Status of Women. The committee and university leaders agreed that successfully cultivating women leaders was essential to efforts to promote gender equity at the university and decided to focus on how the university could achieve significant and sustainable change in this area. Recognizing the root causes of the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions—that is, the gender stereotypes that inform cultural assumptions about leadership potential and effectiveness—is the first concrete step toward the elimination of the obstacles women face. The University Committee on the Status of Women initiated a formal process of interviewing senior women faculty to identify these root causes.

Methods and Findings

Twenty-seven senior women faculty with primary appointments in the major divisions of the university, including public health, engineering, medicine, nursing, music, arts and sciences, and business, participated in five focus groups for the committee's study. Of those twenty-seven women, eight held a rank of department chair, dean, or provost; the others were full professors (five), associate professors (eleven), or assistant professors (three). The following questions were asked of the participants in a semistructured interview:

- What are the characteristics that identify a leader in academia?
- What do women need to know about leadership?
- Are women faculty attracted to leadership positions as currently designed?
- Do women have access to an environment (mentoring and access to information) that is conducive to their growing into leaders?
- What is it about leadership roles in our institution that could be problematic for women?

Analysis of the focus group discussions identified four themes reported or endorsed by more than half of the participants.[1]

Paths to leadership are slower and often blocked for women. Participants thought that women are not being recruited to leadership roles in a conventional way. Administrative positions in academia have a welldefined hierarchy, with progressive ranks that are fairly uniform nationwide, from division director to department chair, dean, and then university leadership positions. Academic administrators are generally expected to progress through these positions sequentially. Participants observed, however, that women are recruited into the administrative ranks less often than men and, therefore, fewer women are available to progress sequentially through these ranks. Instead, women's paths to leadership often involve directing academic programs, chairing committees, or leading research centers or institutes that they initiate and for which they often obtain funding themselves.

Participants said that understanding and addressing the causes of the underrepresentation of women among department chairs is important for a number of reasons. First, because the department chair is the only administrative leadership

position for a specific discipline, being offered the position enhances a candidate's credibility as a scholarly leader within her field. Second, being a division director or department chair provides a basis for developing skills and credentials in administration, and thus offers an opportunity for women to develop expertise and a track record of effectiveness as administrators that prepare them to compete for more senior leadership roles. Third, being a department chair increases a faculty member's visibility as a leader, both within the institution and externally. It also offers women the opportunity to determine, through experience, whether they would find ongoing careers in academic administration attractive, and it allows them to provide mentorship and role modeling to others.

Leadership positions, as currently defined, are less attractive to women than to men, and possibly are becoming unattractive to an increasing number of men. Many administrative offices appear to be understaffed and underfunded. To compensate for the lack of needed resources, leaders must be available 24-7 and take on an inordinately extensive range of duties. Success in such positions often seems to depend on having a spouse who can shoulder domestic responsibilities. The senior women interviewed observed that not only are most leaders male, but also many, if not most, male leaders have spouses who do not work outside the home. Participants believed that academic leaders are expected to be available to work at any time. This expectation makes leadership roles less attractive to many women, in part because they are likely to have personal obligations that they cannot delegate to others. The participants saw these expectations as being anachronistic in a society in which both men and women have full-time jobs and two-career families are the norm.

Focus group participants also suggested that male, transactional, and hierarchical models of leadership are the current standard. Many women felt that these models of leadership did not foster collegiality and collaboration or were not consistent with the altruistic academic mission. Further, such leadership styles were deemed to be antithetical to environments in which women would choose to lead. Some women noted that the literature on academic leadership recommends more transformative leadership styles, which are conducive to multidisciplinary problem solving and innovation.

Women already in leadership roles are not as well recognized as men or appropriately rewarded within their institutions. Although many women provide leadership within the university, focus group participants reported that these women appear to be less respected as leaders by their colleagues or by others within the university because most do not have designated leadership positions. However, many are, at the same time, recognized nationally and internationally as leaders in their fields of expertise. Many participants reported that these women leaders have developed centers or programs that address important unmet needs and have often done so without support from either their departments or the university, with little encouragement, and with only tacit approval from their department chairs and deans. Despite these circumstances, women have found external funding to support the programs and have worked internally to secure space and other resources, often over several decades. These programs typically have benefited the university by producing significant scholarship. However, women's leadership roles in and contributions to these programs are often underappreciated. The focus group participants observed that the experiences of the senior women who have led such programs discourage younger women faculty from

taking similar initiatives or from assuming leadership positions in the programs when the founding leaders leave the university or retire. The perceived lack of institutional support for such programs may undermine their longevity and hamper efforts to recruit younger women into leadership roles.

Women are more often excluded from the informal network of intellectual leadership than men. Deans and department chairs cultivate the intellectual leadership capabilities and productivity of faculty members. Newly appointed faculty rely on senior faculty for the transition to the collegial culture of academia as well as for mentoring, networking, and supporting efforts to develop a robust research agenda that complements or enhances established research streams. The acculturation process for new faculty builds on natural affinities of experiences, outlook, and interests with senior faculty. Male faculty members are more likely to build substantive collegial relationships with other men than with women, often leaving newly appointed women to fend for themselves because the majority of senior faculty are men. The decreased access to informal networks appears likely to reduce mentorship and increase marginalization.

Conclusions

Our analysis suggests that several thematic areas require further consideration: factors in the slowed development of women's careers; causes of women's decreased access to leadership and to mentorship; reasons for the inadequate recognition of women's leadership contributions, which undermines women's career trajectories as well as their stature and job satisfaction; and current norms regarding valued leadership attributes and support for leadership roles. All of these issues appear to affect women's access to leadership roles and likelihood of succeeding in such roles.

The findings of our study are based on the experiences of a small group of women faculty at Johns Hopkins University and may be unrepresentative. The hypothesis that there are root causes for the disparities of leadership opportunity for women and men will need to be further tested in a much broader population, perhaps by conducting a nationally representative survey. We expect that findings might also differ by field of study.

Yet we hope that our study will provide a basis for further evaluation of these issues and for the development of interventions that target root causes and seek to correct the manifestations of gender bias. Such interventions will be critically important to increasing the proportion of leaders who are women and positioning them for success.

It is also important to consider needed cultural changes. Institutions across the United States have recommended policies meant to close the salary gap between men and women and establish a more family-friendly culture. The implementation of these policies will have significant impact on the pipeline of women in universities as well as the success of women. For example, since the Massachusetts Institute of Technology implemented a policy change that gave women paid time off from teaching to allow them to care for their children, the number of women faculty has increased by 50 percent. Further, plans for building more diverse and inclusive faculties are being proposed at institutions across the country.

We need to assess whether the appointment of more women in highlevel administrative positions affects the careers and satisfaction of women in academia. Examination is needed of the informal practices that are inherent in current leadership selection as well as some of the implicit assumptions about the value that women might bring to leadership roles. Institutions also need to attend to the cultural changes that establish inclusiveness and equality of opportunity for success. Finally, these cultural changes recommended for faculty and students now need to be brought to the design and implementation of leadership roles and the expectations of leaders.

Note

1. The focus groups were led by Francesca Dominici, chair of the faculty subcommittee of the University Committee on the Status of Women, and Emma Stokes, a member of the committee. Two of the five focus group interviews were taped; the other interviews were summarized in written notes. Data were originally collected for a programmatic evaluation and not for research. The committee analyzed the focus group summaries by first reading the summaries to identify distinct comments and then used these comments to construct themes. The process was repeated several times until the list of themes appeared to be complete. The committee then conducted an extensive literature search to evaluate the areas in which perceptions and opinions were consistent with the published literature.

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AAUP: http://www.aaup.org/article/so-few-women-leaders#.U4X7AF_D_h4