

Moving on Up

Over the last decade, women have fractured the glass ceiling that once separated them from community college leadership roles. But many female leaders say more effort will be needed to truly break the gender barrier.

BY KRISTINA LANE



Four women who have climbed the ranks of leadership in Florida's higher education system. Pictured in front of a student activities center at the joint Broward Community College-Florida Atlantic University campus in Davie, Fla., are: (from left) Dr. Patricia Caldwell, BCC provost; Dr. Lois Bolton, BCC dean of academic affairs; Dr. Joyanne Stephens, vice president of FAU's Davie campus; and Dr. Carol Ross-Black, BCC dean of student affairs.

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Pictured, left to right: Dr. Deborah DiCroce; Dr. Martha Nesbitt; Dr. Narcisa Polonio.

WASHINGTON — In the middle of a recent meeting at a community college searching for a new president, Dr. Narcisa Polonio, whose job at the Association of Community College Trustees includes helping trustee boards conduct presidential searches, was pulled aside by a trustee. In hushed tones, he thanked her for suggesting several female candidates, but he said the college was not ready for a woman president. According to Polonio, he said, “We want the next president to be successful ... we want a very strong male presence.”

Several weeks later, with the search winding down, all three final candidates were women, Polonio said, and the doubtful trustee embraced the idea of a woman at the school’s helm.

Polonio attributes the trustee’s turnaround to the ineluctable fact that effective community college leadership is not exclusive to one gender. Women in academia have had to battle that antiquated idea for generations, and none of them will tell you the battle is over. Many higher education leaders, in fact, believe women have cracked, but not yet shattered, the glass ceiling between them and community college leadership.

A Foot in the Door

Within all higher education institutions, including two-year colleges, the percentage of women presidents doubled between 1986 and 1998, from 9.5 percent to 19 percent of the total, according to the American Council of Education’s Office of Women in Higher Education. The highest percentage — 22.4 percent — are at community colleges.

Other research corroborates that finding. A study by the American Association of Community Colleges shows that one-third of all community college presidents hired during the 1997-1998 school year were women.

Dr. Claire Van Ummersen, vice president and director of ACE’s Office of Women in Higher Education, said one reason community colleges have more female presidents than other higher-education institutions is because they are more gender diverse than four-year schools, and are often more open-

mined about women in leadership positions. According to the American Association of Community Colleges, 58 percent of community college students are women, while only 55 percent of the student population at four-year institutions is female.

Dr. Martha T. Nesbitt, president of Gainesville College in Gainesville, Ga., said the relative newness of community colleges to the higher education system has also been a boon for women.

“We are the newest kid on the block. Most two-year colleges really got their start in the 1960s and 1970s, so they weren’t as bound by tradition as universities and state colleges,” Nesbitt said.

And sometimes, because some community colleges are smaller than four-year schools, they give women more opportunities for leadership, according to Lynn C. Coleman, vice president of administration and finance at Howard Community College in Columbia, Md.

“You have more roles and responsibilities than at a four-year school. It’s sort of like being a big fish in a little pond,” Coleman said.

Mentors: A Critical Link in the Chain of Success

While community colleges may be more receptive to female leadership, many women in academe say role models, mentors, and supportive spouses and families have also contributed to their progress.

While women tend to have different types of mentors — men and women, colleagues, friends or bosses — most agree that without the guidance of these individuals, they could not have gotten where they are today.

Dr. Deborah DiCroce, president of Tidewater Community College in Norfolk, Va., said her mentor played a vital role in her success.

“When you ask a woman who was her mentor, oftentimes in the early years it was a man. It certainly was for me: a good old boy from Alabama, George Pass,” DiCroce said. “You would have looked at Dr. Pass and said, ‘Would he have ever looked and seen potential in a woman to rise to the presidency?’ No, it didn’t fit his style. But he saw something in me that sparked potential.”

DiCroce said Pass encouraged her to apply for leadership positions and

appointed her director of Tidewater’s institutional self-study, which demonstrates a college’s ability to meet accreditation requirements.

“He gave me the opportunity to grow professionally ... and compete successfully,” DiCroce said. “The role of a mentor in anyone’s professional development, male or female, is critically important. And to me, those who have made it have an obligation to extend a hand to those who have the potential to make it.”

For Dr. Debbie L. Sydow, president of Onondaga Community College in Syracuse, N.Y., the leading role model was the female president of Cuyahoga Community College in Cleveland, Dr. Jerry Sue Thornton. Sydow met Thornton in 1999, during a one-year ACE fellowship that allowed her to spend time studying leadership styles at CCC.

Sydow, who began her career in higher education as an English professor at Southwest Virginia Community College in 1988, said Thornton was an ideal mentor because there were very few women in leadership positions in Virginia.

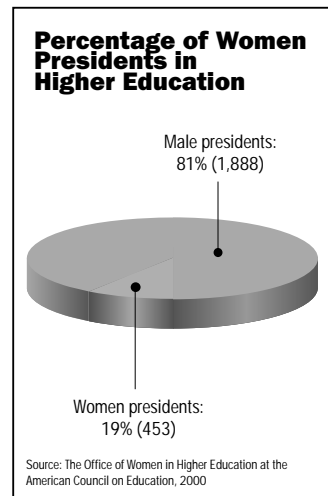
“What I had seen with women (in Virginia) is that those who became presidents tried to adopt a male approach to the job, and that’s not something I was willing to do,” Sydow said.

Sydow said Thornton showed her it was possible to be an effective leader by being a woman, instead of mimicking a man’s leadership style.

Two men were prominent mentors for Dr. Gena Proulx, president of the Community College of Baltimore County in Dundalk, Md.

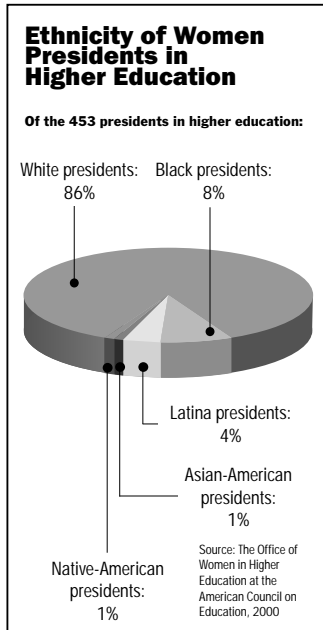
Proulx became acquainted with Dr. John Garmon, then a dean of academics at Clinton Community College in Plattsburgh, N.Y., when she was an assistant professor of business administration there. Proulx said Garmon — now president of Vista Community College in Berkeley, Calif. — persistently nudged her toward leadership roles, in spite of her initial hesitancy. Under Garmon’s guidance, Proulx assumed several leadership roles at Clinton. And, again at Garmon’s urging, she eventually left Clinton to become associate dean of career and vocational education at Genesee Community College in Batavia, N.Y.

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— DR. NARCISA POLONIO, DIRECTOR OF BOARD SERVICES, ASSOCIATION OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE TRUSTEES



Pictured, left to right: Dr. Merna Saliman; Dr. Gena Proulx; Dr. Shirley Pippins.

to get experience (with) ... leadership. He really went out on a limb to bring about change,” Proulx said.

Dr. Stuart Steiner, Genesee’s president, was another key figure for Proulx.

“The first thing he did (when I started) was give me the application for grad school to begin a doctoral program. He literally handed it to me and said, ‘This is something you need to do,’” Proulx said. “He also laid out for me why I needed to go for a Ph.D. as opposed to an Ed.D.”

During her tenure at Genesee, Steiner kept in close touch with Proulx, taking her to meetings where she was able to network and learn more about college leadership. Proulx said Steiner still mentors her and is always supportive.

Home Is Where the Help Is

Equally crucial for their success, say many women in community college leadership, is an understanding and supportive family. Community college leadership positions often require a woman to move several times from one state to another, and her hours extend well beyond the 9-to-5 realm. Having a family that not only understands these demands but that is willing to alter its lifestyle to accommodate the profession’s demands has helped many women succeed.

Dr. Judith K. Winn, president of Bergen Community College in Paramus, N.J., since 1995, has had to relocate twice for her career. Without the understanding of her husband and children, she would not have succeeded, she said. Despite the long hours her job requires, Winn said she’s been diligent about spending time with her family.

For Dr. Susan Salvador, vice president of student services at Monroe Community College in Rochester, N.Y., her husband’s flexible schedule has made a world of difference. As a teacher, Salvador’s husband has been able to spend more time with their children, picking them up from school and attending their after-school events.

“If he worked in a similar environment as me it would have a much greater strain on our family,” Salvador said. “It makes a big difference on my psyche knowing my husband is there with my children rather than a caretaker.”

Proulx of CCBC said balancing her personal and professional life was a feat she

couldn’t have met without her husband’s help. While raising three daughters, Proulx and her husband had to move each of the four times she took a new leadership position at a different college.

Proulx said a majority of the women she has met who hold leadership positions at community colleges are either single or divorced. A statistic from ACE’s Office of Women in Higher Education is somewhat in keeping with Proulx’s anecdotal evidence: According to 1998 data, for all higher education institutions, 57 percent of women presidents were married, while 90 percent of male presidents were married.

Dr. John Roueche, director of the Community College Leadership Program at the University of Texas at Austin, said spousal support is vital to a woman’s success.

“One of the problems in (the leadership program) is that so many of the women are going to school over the objection of family members, and that’s tough,” Roueche said.

Roueche, who has been directing the leadership program since 1971, said there had only been one female graduate of the program at that point. Since 1971, 65 percent of the program’s graduates have been women

and students of color, he said.

Roadblocks, Past and Present

Although women have recently experienced greater support and success on the path to leadership, they continue to confront a number of obstacles.

Polonio of the ACCT, who was president of two community colleges before her current job, said women have often faced unreasonably high expectations about what they can achieve, especially if they are the first females to fill certain positions.

“By being unrealistic with our expectations of them, we set them up for failure,” Polonio said.

And if a woman quits or is fired from a presidency, Polonio said, it is often blamed on her being a woman.

“Women still get labeled as a bitch, as overly emotional, hysterical. That’s the dark side of this,” Polonio said. “If men fail, they are not described in those terms. They are described as overtaken by their circumstances.”

The stress of these high expectations, compounded by the fear of failure’s consequences, has been difficult for women to overcome, and remain resilient obstacles to success, Polonio said.

Boards of trustees have posed another challenge for women, according to several higher education leaders.

“It may not be as prevalent now, but when I was interviewing (for presidential positions), most members of the boards of trustees were men. Most presidencies to which I applied never had a woman in the role, and I had to get the trustees ... over the hurdle of considering seriously a woman for the presidency,” said Winn, president of Bergen Community College. “People have a tendency to hire people like themselves.”

But Winn also said boards have become increasingly more diverse, and many of them now include women.

Dr. Shirley R. Pippins, president of Thomas Nelson Community College in Hampton, Va., said boards still tend to appoint men as presidents.

“Men are still basically in control, they control boards and therefore control decisions,” Pippins said. “Human nature is that ... we will replicate ourselves in the choices we make. Trustees are comfortable picking a man.”



The percentage of women presidents at all higher education institutions doubled from 9.5 percent of the total in 1986 to 19 percent of the total in 1998.

Source: The Office of Women in Higher Education at the American Council on Education, 2000



Pictured, left to right: Dr. Belle Wheelan; Dr. Susan Salvador; Dr. Debbie Sydow.

ACE's Van Ummersen said women who are appointed to the top jobs at colleges may also have to confront unsympathetic boards in salary negotiations. Some boards, expecting a woman to be less assertive than a man, might not offer a woman the same salary and benefits they give a man, Van Ummersen said. She said she urges all newly appointed women presidents to work with a financial adviser before agreeing to salary and benefits.

Proulx said she still has difficulty dealing with lawmakers and corporate executives — professions still largely dominated by men. She said it can be difficult to get men in these fields to take a woman seriously, and sometimes they are unwilling to work with women at all. Gainesville's Nesbitt said it is important to remember that the obstacles women grapple with are often very subtle, and therefore difficult to directly confront.

"Men in some colleges and organizations simply devalue women and keep them out of the loop," Nesbitt said. "In a meeting when a woman speaks, not as much attention is paid as when a man says the same thing. It's not ignoring women, but it's not giving them the same credibility."

The Road Ahead

Most higher education leaders agree that while women have reached unprecedented heights in community college leadership, new hurdles await them in the future.

According to the ACCT, about 70 percent of all community college presidents will be up for retirement within the next 10 years. Polonio views this as both an opportunity and a challenge for women. She said she expects this wave of turnovers at the top to usher in a larger-than-ever crop of new women leaders. But the changing of the guard will also usher the first significant cohort of women into retirement. Polonio says it is critical to keep this newly retired generation of female leadership pioneers engaged after they leave, because their guidance will be vital to future leaders.

Salvador, of Monroe Community College, agreed that the pending retirements are a chance to bring more women into leadership positions, but she emphasized that more women must be actively groomed for leader-

ship if they are to seize the opportunity.

"What are we doing for those who have great potential, so when these jobs open they are ready? If we don't nurture and mentor ... women at the entry executive level, they won't be ready for these presidential positions," Salvador said.

Pippins is concerned that increasing numbers of women are being discouraged from pursuing leadership positions because they believe they will have to sacrifice their personal lives for the job. Pippins, who serves on ACE's Commission on Women in Higher Education, said the commission has been looking at ways to encourage women to seek leadership roles.

"I think more women are deciding it's not worth it, and it's a huge problem for higher education," Pippins said. "They hear horror stories about not having a life, about working 24/7, about how hard it is, and people don't want to make that choice."

Nesbitt said she is equally concerned about some women's lack of leadership ambitions.

"One of my biggest concerns is we don't have enough women aspiring to these lead-

ership roles, and I wish there was something we could do," Nesbitt said. "I think sometimes we paint too dark a picture of leadership roles and in particular the isolation of the presidency."

Nesbitt said more women leaders should talk about the advantages of their jobs, and how they can even be — sometimes — fun.

Nesbitt also said mentors should remind women to be selective about the presidencies they choose.

"Women are often so eager to take a presidency that they take the wrong one and therefore set themselves up for failure," she said.

Dr. Merna Saliman, president of Maple Woods Community College in Kansas City, Mo., said she is concerned with a second glass ceiling. This second ceiling, Saliman said, overlays the first one, preventing women from ascending to the very highest echelons of academic administration, such as the presidencies and chancellorships of the nation's largest districts and college systems.

One woman who recently assumed one of these higher-profile jobs is Dr. Belle Wheelan, former president of the Northern Virginia Community College system. Wheelan was appointed Virginia's first black female secretary of education in late December by incoming Gov. Mark Warner.

DiCroce said to generate more interest in leadership positions among women, those already in these positions should make it clear that the presidency is not the only college leadership job worth having.

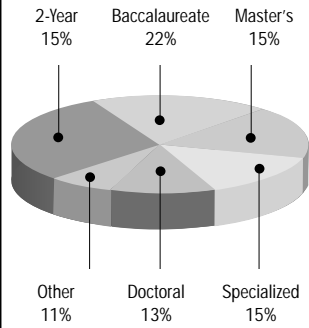
"We make a mistake if we say the ultimate goal for a woman in community colleges is to be a president. That should be an option, a very viable career path for women, but it's not the only path to being a leader," DiCroce said.

She said she believes the greatest need today is for mid-level leadership, and those jobs are just as important as the presidencies.

Regardless of their goals, DiCroce said, women must not be driven by ambition alone.

"Don't just say, 'In five years I'll be doing this, and a college president.' If you do that, you miss the greatest joy of all, and that's the journey. The getting there is the greatest part of it all," DiCroce said. ▲

Women Presidents in Higher Education, By Institution



Source: The Office of Women in Higher Education at the American Council on Education, 2000

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The percentage of women presidents at public and private institutions

Source: The Office of Women in Higher Education at the American Council on Education, 2000