



Petty Principles for Women in Higher Education: Realistic and Practical Advice for Success in Higher Education Leadership

Tanjula Petty, EdD • May 20, 2019

According to recent research, women in higher education continue to consistently be underrepresented at the administrative levels of dean, chief academic officers, provost, and president (Gallant, 2014). There are numerous motives identified by researchers for the persistence of the underrepresentation of women in the top ranks of leadership in higher education institutions. Many women are not afforded the opportunity for advancement to these positions due to lack of knowledge, skills, or political maneuvering; many of these positions are dominated by men.

Similarly, women are painfully aware of the impact of gender in positions of power. Although most administrators (both men and women) are conscious of the consequences of gender labeling, there are

examples of differences. For example, a strong assertive male leader is respectfully known as the boss, a woman with those same traits may be described with an altogether different label (Reinarz, 2002). This is not to take away from the work that men have done, but there are many strong female leaders who have the abilities, knowledge, and skills to be in leadership positions at institutions across the country, and whose voices should be equal to the men that surround them. As a leader who has served in a number of capacities, I wanted to share some learned lessons with other women in higher education to help them become successful in their careers.

Find your balance

Working in higher education can be time-consuming. As family responsibilities pervade the careers of all parents, women have disproportionate work in the care of children/home (Reinarz, 2002). As I began working in higher education, I was a single mother with two small children. Family and caring for my children were my priorities. I knew that I had to find a balance in order to be successful in my chosen field. I do not have the magic equation with the exception of faith, family, and career. I know if you put your faith and family first, everything will work itself out in your career. Therefore, find a strategy unique to you to balance career and family.

Develop your niche

Higher education is no different than any other organization. Women in higher education must be willing to seek out and utilize resources in an inconsistent environment (Reinarz, 2002). In my 15 years of experience working in higher education, one thing I have noticed is there are some professionals who have defined their niche and have a clear picture of what and whom it is they are working for. Then, there are others that tend to waiver or be unsure of their niche. Once I entered higher education, I learned more from the men; they were more apt to develop a niche and grow in it, versus jumping from one niche to another. Be the best at your niche, for example, retention and student success, and learn other important components along the way.

Be creative

In higher education, it is no secret that we serve many populations of students, from adult learners to at-risk and disadvantaged students to scholars. There is not a one-size fits all solution for the situations which we are faced with in higher education. Therefore, being an out-of-the box creative thinker, beyond black-and-white policies, will allow you to be a mover and shaker in higher education. Remember there is always more than one way to skin a cat; we are responsible for being unique and strategizing ways in which our students can be successful, whether you are directly or indirectly involved.

Do not take it personally

Working in higher education is a calling, and we work tirelessly to provide educational opportunities to our students. Although the work we do should be taken seriously, do not take the tone of communication from your colleagues too seriously. Depending on the communication style of others, this may create problems for anyone. However, it is possible that criticism directed at a woman leader may take a more personal tone than that for a man. (Reinarz, 2002). Depending on personal style, this tendency may create problems for anyone. Do not wear your feelings on your sleeves and remember that you are there to serve. If you cannot come to this conclusion, higher education may not be for you.

Find a mentor

In higher education, it is not difficult to find a mentor; however, it is difficult to find a mentor who is willing to commit and be engaged to help women leaders grow. My advice is, at the beginning of a new role, you will need the guidance of a mature and seasoned role model. Much has been written on the

necessity of mentoring. The lack of an appropriate mentor has had significant negative consequences on administrators (Reinarz, 2002). Find a mentor to help you yield positive results in your career.

My mentor did not even know she was my mentor. My first supervisor in higher education was a woman leader who was admired and respected to the utmost. So I began to watch her as she led gracefully and professionally. She eventually became a college president. Until this day we still remain in contact and she provides me with the knowledge nuggets that I need to grow professionally and strategically. Therefore, as soon as you can, be diligent in identifying a mentor who is the right fit for you. I must warn you; you should not limit your search only to someone like yourself or only to others in your field. Identify one or two trusted confidants on your campus (who may or may not be personal friends) who can serve as a mentor who willing to listen and provide directives to lead you down the right path.

Build a support network

Have you heard the old adage, it is not what you know it is who you know? In higher education, networking is so important. Women administrators or those aspiring to grow in their roles should connect to a network for advice beyond their campus. Consider participating in presentations and workshops at national and regional meetings, as well as state drive-in conferences. These provide a chance to share information, build self-confidence and find rejuvenation.

Grace is her name

In all things, remember that you are a lady first. You must remain poised, professional, and respectful with humility at all times. For women administrators, there can be unique challenges, and it is recommended that women should explore a variety of support opportunities to find workable solutions. With very few women in administrative ranks, even when you think people are not watching, they are. As a woman administrator, I have come to know all too well that my actions and behaviors are scrutinized more than those of my male colleagues. So regardless of your title and your legal name, “Grace is your name”.

Gallant, A. (2014). Symbolic interactions and the development of women leaders in higher education. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 21(3), 203-216. doi:10.1111/gwao.12030

Reinarz, A. (2002). Women’s issues in higher education administration. *Academic Advising Today*, 25(4).

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