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Why Not a Fifty-Fifty Goal?

Increasing Female Leadership in Higher Education

Sherry H. Penney and Nancy Kelly

One of the key factors determining the economic status and success of women is their level of education. Women have been turning to education in ever increasing numbers, and they now comprise the majority of students in our institutions of higher education. Yet women hold only 10 percent of the most senior positions — college and university presidencies. Clearly if institutions are to be responsive to the needs of all students, that percentage must change. Those who make up the ranks of this elite achieved their professional standing by overcoming inequities that linger in the academy even as we enter the 1990s and anticipate the challenges that will face higher education in the year 2000. If change is to occur, we must commit ourselves to a variety of strategies that will reach into the classroom and the boardroom.

In the mid-1970s, concerned about the lack of women in senior positions, I developed a brief article entitled “Higher Education’s Pyramid: Women in Higher Education Administration.”¹ The pyramid, I reluctantly report, exists nearly fifteen years later. And there is some disturbing evidence, at least at the level of presidential appointments, that the rate of advancement of women that existed earlier in this decade is dramatically slowing down. The problems discussed concerning the lack of women also apply to women of color, for whom the numbers are even more distressing.² National statistics show that in the years between 1975 (when the Office of Women in Higher Education of the American Council on Education first began collecting data on women holding CEO positions) and 1978, the number of women holding presidencies in four-year public institutions virtually doubled, from 5 to 9; between 1978 and 1981 the number more than doubled — to 25; between 1981 and 1984 the growth continued, but at a slower pace, and the number of women holding four-year public presidencies grew to 32. By 1987, the most recent year for which ACE statistics are available, the number had grown only to 39.

The figures for women presidents at public two-year institutions provide an even more graphic illustration: from 1975 through 1978 the number exactly doubled, from 11 to 22; by 1981 the number had more than doubled, to 47. Between 1981 and 1984 the doubling had ceased, but the number of women presidents grew to 72; between 1984 and 1987,

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Table 1

**Women Chief Executive Officers
in U.S. Colleges and Universities**

Type of Institution	Number of Women Chief Executive Officers				
	1975	1978	1981	1984	1987
Private	132	146	159	182	184
4-year	98	114	135	134	156
2-year	34	32	24	48	28
Public	16	31	72	104	112
4-year	5	9	25	32	39
2-year	11	22	47	72	73
Total	148	177	231	286	296

Notes: Information on the presidents and their institutions not reflected in this table:

- 86 (29%) are members of religious orders
- 40 (14%) are members of a minority group
- 84 (28%) head women's colleges (enrollment 85% women)
- 220 (74%) have enrollments under 3,000
- 53 (18%) have enrollments between 3,000–10,000
- 23 (8%) have enrollments over 10,000

The total number of women chief executive officers reflects both new appointments and women presidents of newly accredited institutions.

For purposes of this table, women's institutions are those whose women undergraduates account for at least 85% of the student body.

Source: "Women Chief Executive Officers in U.S. Colleges and Universities, Table XI, December 31, 1987," compiled by the Office of Women in Higher Education, American Council on Education (Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education, 1987). Used by permission.

however, the net increase in women presidents of public two-year institutions was one.³ We are witnessing a troubling slowdown, which Table 1 illustrates.

I am pleased to point out, however, that in the last two years the Commonwealth of Massachusetts has strengthened its record of appointment of women to head public institutions. Three women, one representing a minority group, have been appointed to the community college presidencies of Berkshire, Bunker Hill, and Greenfield; a woman will assume the presidency of Bridgewater State College; and, of course, there is my own appointment at the University of Massachusetts at Boston. We join the president of North Adams State College, a female who has held the post since 1984, and the female CEO of Bristol Community College, who has been president since 1978. Thus, 7 of the commonwealth's 29 public institutions of higher education, 24 percent, are led by women. One need not look too far outside the region to see how impressive these numbers are by comparison. In New York, for example, the 64-campus State University of New York system, with over 370,000 students, has only 3 female presidents, one of whom is black. These modest numbers, however, exceed the present dearth of female CEOs in the University of North Carolina system of 16 campuses, none of which has a woman president. The numbers are a little stronger in the University of Wisconsin system, which has 2 female chancellors (one at the flagship campus of Madison) at its 13 four-year campuses.

Because of the long tradition of women's education in Massachusetts, the number of presidencies held by women at private institutions — particularly those with religious affiliations and those offering single-sex education — also has been impressive. Fifteen Massachusetts private or denominational colleges are currently headed by females. Indeed, the Northeast overall seems to offer a hospitable environment for women seeking

Table 2

Women College/University Presidents in New England

	2-Yr	4-Yr	Public	Private	Religious
Connecticut – 8	3	5	2	5	1
Maine – 3	0	3	3	0	0
Massachusetts – 21	5	16	7	11	3
New Hampshire – 6	1	5	1	3	2
Rhode Island – 2	0	2	1	0	1
Vermont – 2	0	2	1	1	1

Source: This table was compiled from 1988 statistics provided by the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, Winchester, Massachusetts.

top positions; statistics for 1988–1989 provided by the Commission on Higher Education of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges show that there are double the national average of women presidents in the six New England states; 21 percent (42) of the approximately 200 accredited colleges and universities in New England have female leadership; see Table 2.

Nevertheless, why, in a time when women earn one third of all doctoral degrees and are represented at nearly the same percentage (27.5%) in the faculty ranks,⁴ do we find fewer and fewer women as we ascend the rungs of the administrative ladder?

During the last fifteen years a large and impressive cadre of scholars (Bernice Sandler, Carol Shakeshaft, Donna Shavlik among them) has examined this question, and the body of knowledge available to help us arrive at some conclusions has grown at an impressive rate. Let us look at some of the obstructions that have limited the number of women in senior administrative positions and some of the steps we might take to remove those obstructions.

The first obstruction, or limitation, is perhaps the most self-evident: because there are so few presidents, vice presidents, and deans, other women, be they undergraduates, graduate students, assistant professors, or midlevel professionals, have few examples to emulate or to consult for pragmatic advice, encouragement, and sponsorship.⁵ As late as 1983, for example, among the member institutions of the American Conference of Academic Deans, there were no women deans at institutions with more than 15,000 students.⁶ According to Bernice Sandler of the Association of American Colleges, 85 percent to 90 percent of our students still attend institutions whose top three administrative officers are male — percentages that have not demonstrably improved in the last decade. These students also find that nearly 90 percent of the full professors at their institutions are male.⁷

It is also true that women are still concentrated in a small number of fields — English, foreign languages, nursing, home economics, fine arts, and library science,⁸ although recent statistics on women completing doctoral programs suggest that this demographic pattern is changing. According to the National Research Council's "Summary Report 1987: Doctorate Recipients from United States Universities," between 1982 and 1987 there was a 38 percent rise in the number of women awarded doctoral degrees in life and physical sciences and engineering.⁹ Despite this encouraging news, there are few other optimistic signs. Given what Mary Gray, past president of the Women's Action Equity League, has called the "tendency on the part of those who do the hiring to reproduce themselves," the lack of visible women in senior faculty and in policy and decision-making positions presents much more than a symbolic impediment for change.¹⁰

The paucity of women in such positions is also directly related to what I strongly believe is another tile in the glass ceiling — the exclusion of women, systematic or otherwise, from the informal networks that often provide the best leads: the express elevator, if you will — to the anticipated or available senior positions. Fortunately, several women's networks such as Massachusetts Women in Public Higher Education, New England Concerns, and statewide branches of the American Council on Education's National Identification Program (ACE/NIP) are beginning to provide important corrective measures. The idea of women networking to their mutual advantage is one that must be supported and strengthened. Over a decade ago Emily Taylor and Donna Shavlik began their plans for a national network for women in higher education, and ACE/NIP is now active nationwide. Its success has been demonstrable. Yet for the majority of women who may aspire to senior administrative appointments, informal sources of position vacancies and, equally as important, information about the best strategies to use to be considered for such positions are still insufficient. When the National Association for Women Deans, Administrators, and Counselors conducted a 1984 survey on what men and women administrators at all levels perceived as the "organizational barriers" that impeded them professionally, an overwhelming 87 percent of the female respondents reported that they believed they were excluded from the informal networks that helped advance their male colleagues' careers.¹¹

An expansion of groups such as those in Massachusetts and furthering the work of ACE/NIP will help to solidify and legitimate women's networks. Other steps, however, such as ensuring equitable representation of women on search committees and on boards of trustees and enlisting the support of men in policymaking positions are also necessary. Moreover, a strong affirmative action program is essential in an institution of higher education, and the affirmative action office should have the force of the president behind it. Support for the appointment of women to senior administrative positions must be a commitment that comes from the top. At UMass/Boston, where a commitment to affirmative action is integral to the mission of the campus, 30 percent of the tenured faculty are women. In addition to the female chancellor, we have one minority female dean of a professional school and one female vice chancellor; moreover, eleven of our thirty-seven department chairs are women.

Another area in which we can take positive action is helping women and minorities develop skills in activities such as budgeting and fund raising, skills that are increasingly deemed essential to those aspiring to key positions. We must assist individuals in developing such skills by encouraging them to participate in campus activities or committee work that will provide them with opportunities to learn and to use administrative skills. We should also encourage women and minorities in the early stages of their careers to attend one of the many administrative workshops or summer institutes established for this explicit purpose.

Another area that requires attention is that of breaking down myths — women do not like to travel, to attend sports events, to speak in public, and on it goes. We need to cite examples to show that this is not the case. When I serve as a reference for females seeking presidencies, for example, I am frequently asked by search committees, "How will she handle football on Saturday?" or "Can she speak to the Rotary Club?" My experience leads me to answer "Just fine" and "Of course," but we need to arrive at the point at which such questions do not occur.

Commitment to a variety of strategies is necessary if we are to bring about and maintain change. Without it we will see more of the same. Margaret Holt, in "Strategies for the 'Ascent of Women' in Higher Education Administration in the '80's," states:

Unless criteria currently used to select individuals for positions in higher education administration are drastically altered in the near future, participation by women at the top levels of college and university management will not be notable. Since much evidence demonstrates that the organization and management of most higher education institutions is traditional, there is little chance that administrators will be selected according to new criteria. Women who desire administrative positions will generally have to follow the old paths to such careers for at least a decade. . . . At present most institutions are male dominated, and the patterns of operation often emulate athletic and military models. Women will gradually infiltrate the management of colleges and universities, but the transition will be subtle, not revolutionary.¹²

Responsible institutions will look for many ways of ensuring that women receive equitable consideration. Familial responsibilities, however, are also often cited as significant reasons for the lack of women in the senior administrative ranks. It is curious to note the remarkable differences between the marital status of men and women holding senior administrative positions: a 1981 American Council on Education survey of 3,000 college and university administrators found that 88 percent of the male administrators were married, but that only half that percentage, 44 percent, of the women were. Whereas 24 percent of the women had never been married, only 4 percent of the men never had.¹³ It would appear that this trend is becoming even more pronounced: a 1986 national survey of administrators at the level of dean and above found that 33 percent of the female administrators had never married as compared to 3 percent of the males.¹⁴ These figures reflect some of the societal attitudes that find concrete expression in the recruitment, hiring, and promotion of senior administrators and hence make it difficult for women to assume leadership positions. Indeed, study after study shows that the typical woman administrator has no children, or grown children, or full-time child care — most often her own mother.¹⁵ Does this mean that a woman with children cannot aspire to an administrative position? Surely we hope not.

Responsibility to family, especially to children but also, increasingly, to aging parents, is an issue with which many of us have had to struggle. My prediction — and it certainly involves no particular prescience — is that this trend will continue to affect a growing percentage of the work force as we enter the twenty-first century. While the need to care for parents may impose certain geographic limits on one's career, giving birth and caring for children set not only those limits, but many others as well.

Colleges and universities need to do more to deal with what Derek Bok has called "obstacles [of] seriousness to women, such as having to bear a disproportionate burden of family and child-rearing duties during the years more crucial to academic advancement and tenure."¹⁶ No, we do not need a "mommy-tenure track," but we most certainly need to look closely and carefully at institutional policies with an eye to determining which among them hinder women's progress. Establishing and maintaining a workplace hospitable to women faculty and administrators, however, is one step.

We must also look beyond the immediate environment to some of the underlying reasons for the obstructions. I would like us to consider two extremely important areas in which women presidents can help bring about change: curriculum and pedagogy.

When I began to think about the ways in which a postsecondary curriculum could, first of all, enhance women's aspirations to the most senior positions and also help foster the hospitable environment I mentioned a moment ago, I thought back to a letter Abigail Adams wrote to her husband, John, in 1776. "Education [was never] in a worse state . . . If we mean to have heroes, statesmen, and philosophers, we should have learned women.

. . . If much depends . . . on the education of youth . . . great benefits must arise from [the scholastic] accomplishments of women.”¹⁷ Though I might quibble with Adams’s assessment of when, and where, education has been in a worse state, I think that her simple and elegant plea for an educational system founded on mutual respect for the intellectual life of men and women is advice that colleges and universities would do well to heed even today.

I am encouraged to report that many do appear to be heeding the plea, not only on individual campuses, where we see, for example, the growth of women’s studies programs, but also on national levels, where policy recommendations concerning curricula are made. Women’s studies programs are gaining in strength and number throughout the country. Donna Shavlik and Judith Touchton reported a gratifying growth in women’s studies courses; fifteen years ago, they write, such courses were “few in number and found on few campuses . . . [but they] have multiplied to thousands of courses on hundreds of campuses today.”¹⁸

We also are beginning to see certain broad-based national recognition of the need to bring gender balance to the total curriculum. In the spring of 1989, the Bradley Commission on History in Schools issued its report, “The Future of the Past: The Plight of History in American Education”; among its central recommendations concerning history’s most vital themes is that teachers of history address “the changing patterns of class, ethnic, racial, and gender structures and relations [and] the new prominence of women, minorities, and the common people in the study of history, and their relations to political power and influential elites.”¹⁹

How else can we bring gender balance to the curriculum? One of the most eloquent statements that I have read on the subject is part of a commencement address delivered by the poet and critic Adrienne Rich, in which Rich calls for “coalition building” and “collective participation.” “If,” she states, “women are to be learning physics and biochemistry, let them also have critical seminars on scientific revolutions, the connections between science and industry and government, and what admission to that world means to the ‘girls’ who are ‘let in.’” Rich goes on to cite examples such as the “history of science taught from a gendered perspective, [and] of economics taught from the perspective of women’s work.” She goes on to speculate that “a study of decision making and group process under different conditions and traditions might be as important for a young woman as a creative-writing workshop.”²⁰

However we infuse the curriculum with new values and new perspectives, we will not be doing enough unless we also review and revise teaching styles. Numerous studies have documented that in the classroom girls and women are treated differently from boys and men. Among the most distressing findings are those reported by Roberta Hall and Bernice Sandler: faculty members tend to make more eye contact with men than with women; faculty tend to interrupt women students more frequently than they do men; faculty tend to ask women factual questions and men analytical questions.²¹ What are the remedies? Certainly dissemination of research results is important, as is increased awareness on the part of the individual faculty member of his or her teaching techniques. But I also believe that we can improve the learning environment by increasing our sensitivity and by changing our approach. One highly successful model is collaborative learning. Collaborative learning means that the learning experience is shared by both the students and the faculty; it is a mode of learning that encourages interplay between students and faculty. It also calls for reciprocity and cooperation among students.²² I am pleased to note that one of the leaders of this movement is on the faculty of the University of Massachu-

setts at Boston. If we think about ways to implement such a model, I believe that both male and female students will benefit.

Changes in the classroom — in curriculum and in teaching styles — are necessary if we are to have institutions that are responsive to the needs of all students. This fundamental change can help provide a hospitable climate for women students, majority and minority, and inspire them to leadership roles in the academy and elsewhere.

We should carefully consider the agenda for women in higher education proposed by the Commission on Women of the American Council on Education. The agenda calls for us to:

- recognize women's full worth;
- stop assuming that the male model for career patterns applies to women, and
- educate women for leadership.²³

About 150 years ago Alexis de Tocqueville observed that Americans generally acknowledged women were “intellectually [at] the level of man,” but nevertheless “do not think that man and woman have the duty or the right to do the same things.”²⁴ Although Americans and American higher education have come a long way in discarding nineteenth-century attitudes, there is still much progress to be made.²⁵

Is it too much to ask that we aim, on entering the twenty-first century, for half the presidencies to be held by females? Why does it sound radical to say that we want institutions to reflect the composition of the student body — one half the tenured faculty female, one half the college presidencies, in all sectors, held by women, and one half the members on boards of trustees to be female. To reach our goal will require us to reverse the recent slowdown and accelerate, at a rapid pace, the current progress in hiring females. There *are* hopeful signs, such as the respectable number of women presidents of the commonwealth's institutions of higher learning and the steadily increasing number of women who are completing doctoral degrees in a steadily diversifying range of fields. It remains for some time to come, however, incumbent on those of us who have reached the apex of the pyramid to find and put into place changes in curriculum, in teaching styles, in career models, in mentoring, and in networking to make our institutions more responsive to the needs of women and minorities. We must erect new structures that will have ample room for women not only at the base but also at the summit. 🍌

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