

Trotter Review

Volume 11

Issue 1 *Diversity, Pedagogy and Higher Education:
Challenges, Lessons and Accomplishments*

Article 7

1-1-1998

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Recommended Citation

Wilson, Runae Edwards (1998) "African-American Female College Presidents and Leadership Styles," *Trotter Review*: Vol. 11: Iss. 1, Article 7.

Available at: http://scholarworks.umb.edu/trotter_review/vol11/iss1/7

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African-American Female College Presidents and Leadership Styles

by Runae Edwards Wilson

The leadership characteristics of African-American female college and university presidents have rarely been studied. The lack of research in this area is due, in part, to the absence of African-American females in leadership positions at four year higher education institutions. A contributing factor to the shortage of African-American female top level administrators is the “double whammy,” or belonging to two groups that are discriminated against, African-Americans and females.¹ The wage gap, institutional kinship, the old boy system, and role prejudice (a preconceived preference for specific behavior by the visibly identifiable group) are factors that have proved prohibitive to the ascension of African-American females to leadership positions in higher education. Furthermore, researchers that have studied the leadership characteristics of African-American female college and university presidents generally suggest that these women adopt the leadership characteristics of the culture at the institution where they serve.

In one study, Martha A. Alexander and Barbara M. Scott found that women in their study reported that the higher education system was both racist and sexist.² Regardless of this kind of social climate, however, African-American females have a history of endeavoring to succeed in higher education. This history dates back to the 1800s when the first African-American female completed a college degree in America and graduated from Oberlin college in 1862.³ Recently some African-American women have managed to climb to the top of the higher education academic ladder and become college presidents. These women have been described as nurturing productive attitudes, maintaining a circumspect image in both demeanor and dress, professionally displaying technical and interpersonal competence and effectively generating and using professional contacts.⁴ Many of the leadership characteristics that these women display correspond to the formal categories that researchers have identified in the field of leadership theory and education.

Leadership Theory and Higher Education Leadership Theory

There are several different leadership theories associated with organizations. In the early 1900s researchers studying organizations began to focus on the roles of individuals within the organization. Social scientists began to study the role of the manager or leader in organizations. These researchers developed categories

of behaviors for leadership. They used many terms identified by scientists studying organizational development to define leadership styles or behaviors, i.e., democratic or participative, human relations, authoritarian, and laissez-faire.⁵

In a study at the Ohio State University the researchers focused on consideration and initiation or structure. These terms were defined as follows: *Consideration* includes behavior indicating mutual trust, respect, and a certain warmth and rapport between the supervisor and his or her group. This dimension appears to emphasize a deeper concern for group members’ needs and includes such behavior as allowing subordinates more participation in decision-making and encouraging more two-way communication. *Structure (or initiation)* includes behavior in which the supervisor organizes and defines group activities and her or his relation to the group. Thus, the supervisor defines the role he or she expects each member to assume, assigns tasks, plans ahead established ways of getting things done, and pushes for production. This dimension seems to emphasize overt attempts to achieve organizational goals.⁶ These dimensions of leadership, as defined by Edwin Fleishman and the Ohio State University researchers, are germane to the analysis of leadership styles used in this paper.⁷ Leaders display the characteristics and behaviors of these dimensions to varying degrees, being high in consideration and low in structure or vice versa.

Other researchers such as Estelle Bensimon and Anna Neumann worked with college and university presidents. They found distinct differences between male and female leadership styles. Their Institutional Leadership Project related various theoretical models of leadership to higher education leaders.⁸ Although their work helped to further define and refine the characteristics of leaders, their research did not refute the findings of the Ohio State University research team. The democratic or participative, human relations, authoritarian and laissez faire leadership styles remain the basic models.

The Study of African-American Female College Presidents’ Leadership Styles

This study investigates the patterns of leadership displayed among African-American female college and university presidents and identifies their leadership styles. The methods used are qualitative and include interviews, document analysis, and a survey. In this research the specific leadership classifications established by the Ohio State research team and by Edwin Fleishman in his Leadership Opinion Questionnaire (LOQ) are used to identify the leadership patterns of the presidents.⁹ Fleishman’s classifications are augmented by the expanded theoretical models presented by Bensimon and Neumann.

Letters were sent to each president to solicit her participation. Prospective participants were asked to offer biographical statements or vitae, to complete a leadership opinion questionnaire and to be interviewed by telephone for thirty-five to forty-five minutes. Additional written information about the presidents was gathered from books

written by the presidents, newspaper articles written about the presidents and/or their institutions, and correspondence between the presidents and the researcher. Background information on the institutions in which the presidents served was also collected from the institutions and sources such as the State Education Department Reports, institutional reports and newspaper articles. College catalogs and college guides were the major sources for this information.

The Fleishman questionnaire was used to assess self-reported leadership beliefs. This instrument yields additional data about the president's leadership concerning two major factors: structure and consideration. The LOQ is a forty-item questionnaire. There are twenty items in each scale; therefore, the maximum possible score is 80 (20x4) on each scale. The questionnaire was administered to the participants by mail.

Findings

Age. Data collected about age helped to relate this research to other studies about American college presidents. The participants' average age was over fifty-seven years old, with twelve, the largest number of presidents, being fifty-nine. An age of fifty-nine years is consistent with the respondents' years of experience in higher education before becoming president. Prior experience usually included faculty positions in departments and administrative positions in academia. According to these findings, the average age of respondents in this study was three to five years older than the fifty-four year average age of their white male counterparts.¹⁰ The difference between the average age of African-American female college presidents and white male college presidents suggests that it might take longer for women to climb the professional ranks to a college presidency. This finding is consistent with the result of the 1985 study conducted by Judith Touchton and Donna Shavlick. In their study of female college presidents, they found that 38% of their sample was between fifty and fifty-nine years old.¹¹

Economic Status. The findings regarding economic status indicate that adverse financial circumstances during the participants' childhoods had not deterred these presidents from achieving success in their careers. Motivation and assistance from benevolent groups or individuals were significant factors in the success of these women. Additionally, several presidents are described as being a part of the African-American middle class. A biography noted that one president's family were friends with African-American scholars like Mary McLeod Bethune.¹²

Campus Settings. A startling finding is that many of the African-American female presidents studied are or have been presidents in the southern region of the country. This is a larger number of presidents than in any other single region of the country. Twenty women were also born in the south; this fact is consistent with population data which show 56% of African-Americans live in the south.¹³ Over 70% of the presidents were located on

campuses in urban settings. This figure is above the national average of campuses located in urban settings—28.4% according to *Peterson's Register of Higher Education*.¹⁴ In this instance most of the African-American college and university presidents are located in areas where the largest numbers of minority students are located as well. Several other factors at the institutions were similar to national norms reflected in *Peterson's Register* or *The African-American Education Data Book*. Most of the institutions (81%) had a semester calendar system. The enrollment for 56% of the institutions were predominantly co-educational, and at 93% of the institutions—both single-sex and co-educational—the majority of the students enrolled were female.¹⁵

Leadership Orientation. The terms that the presidents used to describe what leaders do included: create, plan, motivate, and empower. Success as a leader often depends on how well an individual can judge and balance these varied characteristics. These presidents saw their own roles as leaders to include these characteristics and to include work on conflict resolution, governance, public relations, and race and gender issues as well. These findings were in keeping with the research of Bensimon and Neumann, and of Alexander and Scott.¹⁶

In comparing this kind of leadership orientation, the Fleishman survey was utilized, although this instrument does not offer normative tables for college or university presidents. Consequently, the normative tables for CEO's or "presidents and vice-presidents" presented in the examiner's manual were used for comparison. The comparison revealed that this study's sample of college and university presidents had similar scores to Fleishman's sample. The college and university presidents average score for structure was 49.83. Fleishman's average score for presidents and vice-presidents was 49.05. For the variable consideration the scores were also similar. Fleishman's average score was 53.78, and the average score in this study was 56.83. This finding would suggest that the African-American female college and university presidents who completed the LOQ were not oriented more toward consideration or toward structure than are men or women at comparable administrative levels. The results of the LOQ indicate that the women who completed the instrument were highly similar to Fleishman's normative samples. These women did not have higher scores in the area of consideration, although most describe themselves as consideration-oriented leaders.

Conclusions

This overview and accompanying study shows that African-American women have, and do successfully hold leadership positions in American colleges and universities. Their backgrounds are highly varied, and collectively they represent years of experience in higher education. The presidents' self-reported leadership style is participatory and team-oriented, in keeping with previously reported research; the results of the LOQ do not refute that finding. Furthermore, the results of the LOQ do support the normative scores reported by

Fleishman for administrators at similar levels of responsibility. Several findings also support previously reported nationwide norms regarding higher education. The replication of findings from other studies which measured the same qualitative traits measured in this study suggests the techniques used in this study are valid and reliable for collecting data about leadership characteristics.

The number of references to minority concerns in the written works of the presidents implies a knowledge of and consideration for minority issues. The institutional concentration of African-American female presidents at historically Black colleges and universities or urban environments where there are large concentrations of minority groups is something that should be investigated further, especially if it might be related to past or present discrimination.

Final conclusions demonstrate that the presidents in this study were met daily with unpredictable situations: earthquakes, fires, student protests, and strikes. They work in urban, suburban, and rural environments, in historically Black, traditionally white, and predominantly white institutions. A general approach or personal orientation is apparent in all the women of the study; however, no single leadership style could be said to characterize this entire group of women. But the findings also support the assumption that African-American women have a self-reported participative leadership style. A further assumption can be made that their leadership style is also different from the leadership style of men whose self-reported leadership style tends to be directive.

Notes

¹Martha Alexander and Barbara Scott, *The AICC Perspective of Career Management: A Strategy for Personal and Positional Power for Black Women in Higher Education Administration* (Houston, TX: Annual Conference of the National Association for Women Deans, Administrators and Counselors, 1993).

²Ibid.

³Elizabeth Ihle, *Black Women in Higher Education* (New York: Garland, 1992).

⁴Alexander and Scott, *The AICC Perspective of Career Management*, 1993.

⁵Ethan Lawler, *Motivation in Work Organizations* (Monterey, California: Brooks/Cole Publishing, 1973).

⁶Ibid.

⁷Edwin Fleishman, ed., *Studies in Personnel and Industrial Psychology* (Homewood, IL: Dorsey Press, 1967).

⁸Estelle Bensimon and Anna Neumann, "Higher Education and Leadership Theory," in M. Peterson, Ed., *Organization and Governance in Higher Education, 4th Edition* (Needham Heights, MA: Ginn Press, 1991), 388-89.

⁹Fleishman, 1967.

¹⁰*The American College President*, 1993.

¹¹See Judith Touchton and Donna Shavlik, "Women as Leaders," in Donna Shavlik and Judith Touchton eds., *Leaders for a New Era: Strategies for Higher Education* (Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education, 1988), 118-136 and "Leadership at the Top: Women Presidents in Public Four Year Institution," in J. Sturnick and J. Milley eds., *Women at the Helm: Pathfinding Presidents at State Colleges and Universities* (Washington, D.C.: AASCU Press, 1991), 5-15.

¹²Maxine Seller, *Women Educators in the United States 1820-1993, A Bio-Bibliographical Source Book* (Westport Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1994).

¹³Michael Nettles, *The African-American Education Data Book* (Fairfax: Frederick D. Patterson Research Institute of the College Fund/UNCF, 1997).

¹⁴*Peterson's Register of Higher Education* (Princeton: Peterson's Guides, 1997).

¹⁵See *Peterson's Register of Higher Education*, 1997, and Nettles, *The African-American Education Data Book*, 1997.

¹⁶Bensimon and Neumann, "Higher Education and Leadership Theory," 1991, and Alexander and Scott, *The AICC Perspective of Career Management*, 1993.

Runae Edwards Wilson is a former doctoral student in higher education at the State University of New York (SUNY) in Buffalo, New York.