Historical Perspective on the Disparities in the Proportion of Women in Higher-Education Leadership

Laura Risler

Ohio University Athens
Abstract
The number of women ascending to senior administrative positions in American higher education has grown over the past decades. Yet these overall percentages mask a substantial variation in the representation of women by institution type. A notable inverse relationship also exists between the proportion of women administrators and the prestige of the institution. It is the position of this paper that it is equally important to consider how American higher education has evolved over the nation’s history and became the diverse array of institutions that it is today. An understanding of this history can illuminate the gendered origins of four-year and graduate institutions versus two-year colleges. In general, the former inherited a centuries-old legacy of male privilege that eroded gradually (in the face of considerable resistance) in the unique cultural context and pragmatic realities of the New World. The latter inherits a hybrid of culture from secondary and post-secondary institutions that was coeducational from the beginning, and pragmatic concerns drove the sector’s hiring of large numbers of women. The history of higher education is a story that continues to unfold. American higher-education institutions face a host of challenges that, while not obviously gender-related, may nonetheless open more opportunities for women in academic leadership.

*Keywords*: leadership, higher education, women, critical mass, gender parity
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The number of women ascending to senior administrative positions in American higher education has grown over the past decades. In 2011, 26 percent of all college and university presidents were women, a substantial increase from 9.5 percent in 1986 (Kim & Cook, 2012). By 2007 nearly half (45 percent) of all senior campus administrators were women (King & Gomez, 2008, in Touchton, Musil, & Campbell, 2008, p. 23).

Yet these overall percentages mask a substantial variation in the representation of women by institution type. A notable inverse relationship also exists between the proportion of women administrators and the prestige of the institution (Bornstein, 2008; Glazer-Raymo, 1999, in Madden, M. E., 2005). Among associate-degree-granting institutions, women actually occupy more than half (52 percent) of the senior administrative positions (King & Gomez, 2008, in Touchton et al., 2008, p. 23). But they hold only 42 percent of senior administrative jobs at baccalaureate-granting institutions, 38 percent at comprehensive (master’s-granting) institutions, and a mere 34 percent in research (doctorate-granting) institutions (King & Gomez, 2008, in Touchton et al., 2008, p. 23).

As many scholars have pointed out, the overrepresentation of women on the lower rungs of institutional hierarchies is a common pattern in higher education (DiCroce, 1995; Kanter, 1977; Kay & Shipman, 2014; Lapovsky & Larkin, D. S., 2009; Shaw, Callahan, & Lechasseur, 2008). Their discussions often focus on the influence of gendered stereotypes, bias avoidance, or structural barriers related to academic advancement. These are all essential perspectives in understanding the complex causes of the variation in the representation of women in leadership at different institutional types. They also offer vital insights into potential solutions to this
problem—and indeed, to making the case that the situation is a real problem deserving of a solution and not merely a natural phenomenon born of innate female preferences or ability.

It is the position of this paper that it is equally important to consider how American higher education has evolved over the nation’s history and became the diverse array of institutions that it is today. An understanding of this history can illuminate the characteristics of each type of institution and how circumstances have shaped them into the environments they are.

A Word About Institutional Prestige

This paper focuses upon the variation in the proportion of women in leadership as being inversely related to institutional prestige or status. As Shaw et al. (2008) acknowledge, the term “status” has a subjective component; an institution can be perceived differently by people in different socioeconomic groups or geographical areas, for example. Nevertheless, they note,

…in general, the status of an institution or educational is determined by: (a) the selectivity of the institution; (b) the “quality” of the student population as measured by such factors as high school GPA or graduation rates; and (c) the endowment or available level of resources. (p. 212)

This list of criteria may immediately bring to mind the controversial annual college rankings published by U.S. News and World Report. The three main categories on which institutions are ranked include fame (derived largely from peer rankings), wealth (derived from such data points as campus facilities, faculty/student ratios, and average faculty salary), and exclusivity (derived from such data as acceptance rates and incoming students’ SAT scores) (Shaw et al., 2008, p. 212).

In general, the institutions that tend to score the lowest in such measures of prestige are two-year colleges, which usually have little name recognition beyond their state borders, have
open-admissions policies, and have comparatively few resources. The institutions that tend to score the highest are doctorate-granting institutions, especially major research universities, as well as some highly selective liberal-arts colleges. Though this pattern is by no means a 1:1 correlation, there is a clear relationship between the prestige of an institution and the highest degree it grants.

**Women in Academe, By the Numbers**

A discussion of gender parity in administration must begin with a consideration of the educational and early-career trajectories of women, because in higher education the career path to the presidency most commonly starts with a faculty position (which in turn usually requires a terminal degree). After advancing from the junior faculty to a more senior rank, an individual often serves as a department chair and dean, then into a provost or vice-presidential role before becoming a president (Tatum, 2008; Touchton et al., 2008). Therefore, it is instructive to look at the progress women have made toward achieving parity at various points along this path.

**Women and Educational Attainment**

Higher education has seen a steady and remarkable increase in the number and proportion of women students. According to national data on the number of degrees conferred, women surpassed men in the earning of associate’s degrees in 1978 and in the earning of baccalaureate and master’s degrees in 1982, though they only reached this milestone for doctorate degrees in 2005 (U. S. Department of Education, 2012). At the discipline level, however, the gains have been uneven. Data from the Survey of Earned Doctorates (SED) indicate that in 2012, women earned more than half of all doctorates in the life sciences, social sciences, education, and humanities, but less than 30 percent of all doctorates in the physical sciences and even fewer (22 percent) in engineering (National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics (NCSES),
2012). Yet even in the latter two disciplines, the proportion of women earning doctorates has increased substantially since 1992, when women earned only 19.8 percent of physical science doctorates and 9.4 percent of engineering doctorates (NCSES 2012).

**Women in the Faculty**

Having earned their academic credentials, women are more likely to work in academia than men. According to the 2012 SED, women who reported definite postgraduation employment plans were more likely than men to anticipate being employed by an educational institution (59 percent of women versus 46 percent of men), while men were much more likely to find employment in the industrial or business sectors (37 percent of men versus 18 percent of women (NCSES 2012, Table 55). The mix of primary activities reported by these new doctorate holders also varied by gender, with men much more likely to be involved in research and development (50 percent of men versus only 30 percent of women), and women being much more likely to teach (43 percent of women versus 30 percent of men) or work in administration (14 percent of women versus 10 percent of men) (NCSES 2012, Table 55).

The numbers of women in faculty positions have increased, but their progress into the higher ranks has lagged behind their male counterparts, particularly at research universities and the more elite liberal-arts colleges (Córdova, D. I., 2011; Glazer-Raymo, 1999, p. 50; Lapovsky & Larkin, D. S., 2009; Mason, 2011; Touchton et al., 2008). According to 2007 data collected by the American Council on Education, women constituted 47 percent of assistant professors, 40 percent of associate professors, and a mere 26 percent of full professors (Córdova, 2011, para. 5). Córdova (2011) notes that “This drop-off has significant consequences, as many senior administrators are chosen from the higher ranks of tenured faculty” (para. 5). Some scholars assert that the common metaphor of a pipeline to describe the career progression of women is
inadequate, suggesting at the very least that it is “leaking” (Mason & Goulden, 2002) or obstructed by “stubbornly durable blockages” (Keohane, 2003, p. 6) caused by institutional factors (Touchton et al., 2008, p. 19). Touchton et al. (2008) go even further, suggesting that a more appropriate model is that of a “reservoir that hold[s] new college faculty, particularly women, in place” (p. 22). Adding to the backlog of undertapped talent, the trend in faculty hiring has increasingly turned toward part-time and non-tenure-track positions, the ranks of which are disproportionately women (Schuster & Finkelstein, 2006) and which are far less likely to lead to a presidency.

**Women in Administration**

For those women who do move from the faculty into administrative roles, their presence in positions that commonly serve as “springboards” to the presidency varies by institution type, generally in inverse relation to the degree level awarded by the institution (Lapovsky & Larkin, 2009, p. 19). In 2007, the proportion of executive vice presidencies held by women was 38 percent in two-year institutions, 32 percent in master’s-granting institutions, 22 percent in baccalaureate colleges, and only 16 percent in doctorate-granting universities (King and Gomez, 2008, in Touchton et al., 2008, p. 24). Very similar patterns held for the roles of chief academic officers and academic deanships. In an international study of women in higher-education leadership, Morley (2013) observed this phenomenon in many countries and described it as the “feminisation of penultimate leadership positions” (p. 5).

**Historical Context**

We now turn to a review of the historical origins of the institutional types that make up the diverse landscape of American higher-education. The following summaries view the
historical record through a gendered lens to consider how past events have shaped the different sectors of higher education and the opportunities for women to advance within them.

**Four-year colleges and universities**

The first colleges in colonial America were modeled upon the higher-education institutions of Europe, many of which had their origins in the Middle Ages. These institutions were created to preserve and transmit the intellectual and cultural aspects of Western civilization to the American wilderness (Brubacher & Rudy, 2011, pp. 5–6). The impetus for establishing the colonial colleges came largely from religious denominations seeking to develop a pool of well-educated, orthodox clergy, with a secondary purpose of educating professionals and civic leaders (Brubacher & Rudy, 2011). These fledgling institutions, consistent with the pioneering nature and evolving democratic ideals of the New World, did not restrict college attendance to the offspring of the social elite; though rising expenses at institutions such as Harvard and Yale largely limited access to those whose families could afford it, opportunities were created to give access to promising students from poorer families (Brubacher & Rudy, 2011, pp. 39–40). They did, however, take after their European counterparts by limiting access to men only. The administration and faculty were also exclusively male.

In the early nineteenth century, reformers including Mary Wollstonecraft and others publicly challenged the conventional wisdom that women were inherently intellectually inferior to men and thus incapable of higher learning. They argued instead that the differences in intellectual ability between men and women was entirely a product of the social environment, and that when given the same educational opportunities as men, women could perform at the same intellectual level (Brubacher & Rudy, 2011, p. 64). A few female academies and “seminaries” had been established in the early 1800s to provide greater educational opportunities
for young women, though rather than offering the classic liberal curriculum leading to a baccalaureate degree they tended to provide specialized instruction in skills more related to home-making (Brubacher & Rudy, 2011; Frye, 1995). The first coeducational college was established in Oberlin, Ohio in 1833, and in 1841 Oberlin awarded three of that year’s 12 bachelor of arts degrees to women, marking them the first American women to complete an undergraduate curriculum identical to that required of male students for the same degree (Oberlin College Archives, n.d.).

While some advocates of women’s education pushed for coeducation, others pursued the creation of separate women’s colleges. The latter approach was favored in the northeastern states, as the existing colleges still refused, even in the second half of the nineteenth century, to accept women. As a compromise, several colleges for women were created as affiliates of existing institutions, such as Radcliffe with Harvard, Barnard College with Columbia University (Brubacher & Rudy, 2011, p. 66). These followed several standalone, intellectually rigorous women’s colleges established in the post-Civil War years, such as Vassar, Wellesley, and Bryn Mawr.

Coeducation took root further west, where, as Brubacher and Rudy (2011) note, “academic traditions were less hidebound and the social influence of women was greater than in the East” (p. 67). They also observe that coeducation was a more cost-effective approach than maintaining separate institutions, as the frontier populations were sparser and generally less wealthy than eastern states. Furthermore, coeducation was already the rule in Western secondary schools, in contrast to their Eastern counterparts. With the passage of the Morrill Act, the newly established land-grant institutions opened their doors to both men and women, and by 1900
72 percent of American higher-education institutions were coeducational (Brubacher & Rudy, 2011, p. 68).

**Two-year colleges**

American two-year colleges appeared on the higher-education landscape at the beginning of the 20th century. They evolved to address the need for improved articulation between secondary and higher education. As American secondary education became more rigorous, students were studying more content that used to be taught at the college level. Meanwhile, professions such as medicine and law had advanced far beyond the level that could be mastered through mere apprenticeship and now required four years of college as a prerequisite for their professional education programs (Brubacher & Rudy, 2011, p. 252). In the absence of a centrally planned national system of education, various segments of both the secondary and higher-education communities began experimenting with ways to realign the progression from secondary to higher education.

Some high schools began developing postgraduate education offerings and pursuing articulation agreements with universities to secure advanced standing for graduates of these programs. Many of these extension programs eventually became standalone “junior colleges” (Brubacher & Rudy, 2011, p. 256) As such opportunities gained popularity they put competitive pressure on many weak four-year institutions, some of which survived by reinventing themselves as junior colleges (Brubacher & Rudy, 2011, p. 255). The popularity of junior colleges increased during the Depression and even more with the passage of the post-World-War-II GI Bill, spurring the establishment of hundreds of brand-new public and private junior colleges well into the 1960s. As they grew in numbers and social influence, they resisted the “junior college” label as pejorative. The term “community college” gained favor, as a more-accurate reflection of their
mission (and perhaps a tactic to solidify political support in their communities, whose tax bases partially supported them).

From the beginning, as Frye (1995) notes, several characteristics of these two-year colleges presented unique opportunities for women students. First, the absence of a clear consensus about the mission of the two-year college (terminal program versus transfer, vocational versus civic) fostered “an ambivalent environment in which student motives could be highly influential” (p. 6). Second, given their close cultural ties with the public high schools, two-year colleges were coeducational from their inception (a plus for women students), local, and nonresidential (a plus in the eyes of many parents, for both fiscal and social reasons) (p. 6). Finally, because growth—in enrollment and programs—was the mantra of these institutions, “Such characteristics militated against gender-based policies that would limit program enrollment based on gender and other such criteria. The result was a relatively welcoming atmosphere for women students even if the male-dominated culture burdened women enrollees with limited visibility” (p. 6).

Some attitudes about the proper curriculum for women students persisted in the two-year realm, however. As with the earlier women’s academies and “seminaries,” some administrators and scholars of the two-year institutions advocated terminal programs for women focusing on such studies as home economics, marriage education, and family relations—training that would prepare women for their traditional societal roles as homemakers and pillars of the community (Frye, 1995, pp. 8–9). The women students themselves, however, had their own educational objectives, and they expressed them through their enrollment patterns. As Frye puts it, “Women ignored the traditional vision of their role and sought college programs that would enhance their economic and professional opportunities rather than limit them. In other words, women students
appear to have killed through benign neglect the college programs that exemplified the traditional role of women” (pp. 9–10). In order to survive and grow, colleges had to adapt to meet the demands of students, and over time those programs evolved to emphasize scholarly approaches, transferability, and global social issues (p. 9).

In addition to swelling the ranks of the student population, women also filled a large proportion of the faculty ranks in two-year colleges. Baldridge, Curtis, Ecker, and Riley (1978) and Dziech (1983) suggest that the high percentage of women faculty in two-year institutions owed resulted from the explosion of that sector and the huge demand it created for faculty. From their assessment, Townsend (1995) infers, “The implication is that women owe their presence in the two-year college to sector expansion, not to any commitment on the part of community colleges to hire women,” and that “So many faculty had to be hired that even women were able to get faculty positions” (p. 40, emphasis added).

DiCroce (1995) takes a similarly cynical view of what might otherwise be regarded as another “win” for gender parity: the higher proportion of women in academic leadership at two-year institutions. She speculates,

On the one hand, one might expect the community college to be the pacesetter in hiring women presidents…. With women over half its student body, it demonstrates a strong commitment to the values of open access, diversity, and inclusiveness. On the other hand, the steadily rising number of women presidents in the community college may simply be a result of the institution’s lower hierarchical status in academe. Put less diplomatically, the community college is at the bottom of the power run anyway; why not leave the messy business of women CEOs to it? (p. 80)
Critical Mass

The above survey of the history of American higher education illuminates the gendered origins of four-year and graduate institutions versus two-year colleges. In general, the former inherited a centuries-old legacy of male privilege that eroded gradually (in the face of considerable resistance) in the unique cultural context and pragmatic realities of the New World. The latter inherits a hybrid of culture from secondary and post-secondary institutions that was coeducational from the beginning, and pragmatic concerns drove the sector’s hiring of large numbers of women rather than any commitment to gender-equity principles (Frye, 1995; Townsend, 1995).

The historical perspective suggests some factors that likely contribute to the disparity in the representation of women in leadership between institutional types. Relatively few four-year colleges and universities in America have direct roots in the colonial era, when higher education was exclusively a male domain. Those that do, however, include some of the most prestigious and admired higher-education institutions in the nation; and their cultures and ingrained practices trickle down to influence many other institutions that strive to emulate them (Gardner, 2013). In contrast, the two-year colleges have been open to women from the very start, and women have attended them in large numbers. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that women also occupy an increasing proportion of both faculty and administrative positions in these institutions.

“Critical mass” is a term borrowed from nuclear physics that refers to the minimum quantity of a fissionable material necessary to start a self-sustaining chain reaction. In popular usage, it has been adapted to refer to an amount of something that is necessary to have a significant effect or achieve a particular result in a given situation. The concept of critical mass was first applied to organizations by Harvard scholar Rosabeth Moss Kanter in her seminal 1997
book *Men and Women of the Corporation*. She argued that once the number of women reached a critical mass in an organization, they would no longer be seen merely as “tokens” or symbols but would be seen as individuals (Kanter, 1977). The concept of critical mass can help explain the greater representation of women in leadership at institutions in which women have been present for a longer time (as a percentage of the institution’s life span) and in greater numbers, such as two-year colleges.

The critical mass concept has its limitations as an explanation, however. As White (2005) points out,

…getting more women into college, encouraging them to pursue graduate and professional education, and recruiting them into the academy was supposed to create a growing “pool” from which search committees would select ever larger numbers of women assistant professors. These women, in turn, would earn tenured positions…. The end result would be many women flowing out of the “pipeline” to swell the most senior ranks of the faculty and administrative leadership positions. But that has not happened. (p. 22)

Instead, as the previously cited data on women in higher education show, women’s representation declines with increased faculty rank and leadership levels. If critical mass is simply about numbers of individuals, the metaphorical chain reaction should be self-sustaining; instead, it seems to be running out of momentum.

Subsequent research has found a corollary to the critical mass concept that sheds light on White’s observation. A Harvard colleague of Kanter, Robin J. Ely, found that numbers alone will not bring about change in the way women are perceived and promoted if the women are only at entry- or mid-level positions; the critical mass must be reached at the *senior levels* of an
organization (Nichols, 1994, p. 11, emphasis added). Furthermore, Ely found that when a critical mass is achieved at the top levels, not only do men’s perceptions of women in the organization change, but women’s own perception of themselves changes, resulting in greater engagement, job satisfaction, and self-confidence (p. 11)

**Self-Selection**

While the gendered origins of higher-education institutions likely set the stage for the current disparities in female leadership among institutional types, it is also reasonable to ask whether women self-select into or out of institutions based on personal affinity for institutional types, work environment, or certain kinds of work.

For instance, some evidence indicates that women tend to gravitate toward institutions that prioritize teaching over research (Townsend, 1998). Additional evidence suggests that women who work at community colleges choose to do so because they believe they will be better able to achieving a better balance between work and their personal lives. (Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Twombly, 2006). After living with the results of such choices, many women indicate that they have found the teaching load and pressures for virtually 24/7 availability to students at be least as challenging as they anticipated for a career in a research-intensive institution. However, they still expressed a relatively high level of satisfaction with the community-college environment (Shaw et al., 2008; Townsend, 1998).

If the disparity in women’s representation at various types of institutions is interpreted merely as the result of individuals sorting themselves based on their personal preferences, then it might not be perceived as a cause for concern. If women are exercising full agency over their career decisions, then shouldn’t those preferences be respected?
Bias Avoidance

Not all observers agree that these women’s career decisions are motivated by positive preferences, however. They point to many environmental characteristics of institutions that may exert negative motivations as well, such as isolation in male-dominated disciplines, tokenism, biases toward masculine leadership styles, stresses associated with balancing work and personal life, self-doubt, and inflexible workplace expectations that disadvantage women with childcare or elder-care responsibilities (Glazer-Raymo, 1999; Madden, 2005). The expectation of research productivity at universities, for instance, may present a negative motivation that contributes as much to women’s reported preference for teaching as any inherent affinity for the latter activity. Women who have gone through doctoral programs often relate that they did not aspire to tenure-track jobs at research institutions because they saw women in such jobs sacrifice either their personal lives for their careers or vice versa, and they did not want to have to make such choices.

Other negative motivations such as the anticipated stress of being measured against gender stereotypes and the all-consuming demands and pressures of senior administrative positions can also cause women to act on “bias avoidance,” the disinclination to seek highly visible senior administrative roles (Morley, 2013, p. 9). As Touchton et al. (2008) note, “Bias alone is adequate to forestall even the most tenacious women’s progress. But when women foresee trouble ahead (such as the fact that only 68 percent of women presidents have children, compared to 91 percent of men) (American Council on Education, 2007), they are less likely to step on the difficult path toward traditional leadership roles” (p. 26).

Never Let a Good Crisis Go to Waste

Much like the geological forces that have shaped and continue to shape our planet, the history of higher education is a story that continues to unfold. American higher-education
institutions face a host of challenges that, while not obviously gender-related, may nonetheless open more opportunities for women in academic leadership. One such impending crisis/opportunity is an anticipated wave of presidential vacancies as more and more Baby Boomers move into retirement. In 2006, 92 percent of university and college presidents were over 51 years old, and 49 percent were 61 years or older (Lapovsky & Larkin, 2009, p. 21).

The anticipated scale of the turnover in positions as these individuals retire is, understandably, cause for great concern. On the other hand, a crisis of this magnitude also creates a tremendous opportunity to upend the status quo. The pressure to fill these positions will create more demand for leadership talent—and more opportunities for women to move into leadership roles (Córdova, D. I., 2011). In such a “seller’s market,” institutions that hope to attract talent will have a strong incentive to address barriers that have historically deterred many talented women from seeking leadership roles. Those unwilling to adapt their mindset will find themselves losing out in the competition for leadership talent.

**Conclusion**

The historical perspective on American higher education presented in this paper offers hope that, just as they have evolved to their current forms, higher-education institutions can continue to evolve in ways that not only better reflect our cultural values of fairness but also expand and develop an even stronger pool of leadership talent to propel American higher education into the future.
References


