

# 184 Female academic leaders in processes of transition: results from a small study from Germany and the USA

Susan Harris-Huemmert<sup>1</sup>, Leslie Zenk<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Ludwigsburg University of Education, Ludwigsburg, Germany. <sup>2</sup>University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Charlotte, USA

## Research Domains

Management, leadership, governance and quality (MLGQ)

## Abstract

Processes of transition into top academic leadership positions are not well researched, and even less is known about how female leaders move into top academic roles. In our qualitative study, in which interviews were conducted with recently elected female presidents/rectors, and chancellors in Germany and the USA, we explore how females experience these transitions. Transitions usually involve a change in assumption about oneself and the world, which therefore leads to a corresponding change in behaviour (Schlossberg, 1984). Accordingly, we can identify predictable, linear stages accompanied by more fragmented, personally complex assumptions and issues. Processes of transition have already been reviewed in the literature, more recently by Manderscheid & Ardichvili (2008). In our study we take Manderscheid & Ardichvili's transition model as a starting point for developing further our understanding of how female academic leaders experience such transitions, looking in particular and comparatively at support structures and their overall navigation of change.

## Full paper

Higher education institutions are large, complex, diverse and involve a wide range of stakeholders. Those who decide to take up a top leadership position in higher education therefore need to have some, if not a deep understanding of the complexity of this very particular environment as the academic leadership role "is a highly social endeavor" (Gallos & Bolman; 2021: xi). When new top leadership roles are occupied the institution will be watching the new leader very carefully to determine the extent to which existing traditions, cultures or processes are continued, adapted or replaced. This may involve some degree of turbulence within the institution. Ideally, leadership transitions should run smoothly and without greater periods of instability, thereby maintaining continuity with the institution's mission (Van Maanen and Schein, 1977). Much of the literature concerning leadership transitions in higher education involves presidents (Gaval, 2009; Kolomitz, 2016; Lohse, 2008; Sanaghan, 2008; Smerek, 2013). Studies also tend to focus on presidential career paths, or their personal characteristics (Scott, 2011; Kim, 2013), which is unsurprising as changes in presidencies are not only highly visible, but are by their very nature fundamentally important to the institution and the wider community. Far less literature focuses, however, on other leadership transitions within higher education institutions (HEIs) including, for example, those of new chancellors, provosts or deans (Gmelch, 2000). Even less research examines the impact of new leaders, be these at whichever level within an institution, although some exceptions exist (Mallard, 2015; Riggs, 2012; Smith et al., 2012).

To date little literature examines the female perspective on transitions into leadership roles (Cook & Glass, 2014), although the need for research this area has been clearly identified (Manderscheid & Ardichvili, 2008). Our study aims to start closing part of this perceived research gap by undertaking exploratory qualitative research into a defined number of recently-elected female leaders in American and German universities (presidents and chancellors), to understand more about the processes involved, the support (if any) experienced and the pre-service training that may or not have been used. Our research asks the following questions:

- How have female leaders experienced the process of transition into a new role?
- What difficulties have female leaders experienced during their role transition?

- What support structures have helped female leaders during their role transition?

According to Brammer (1992: 239) life transitions “are sharp discontinuities with previous life events”, which implies that there are specific and clearly delineated moments in time along a trajectory marked by a particular start or end. These specific moments are usually dates in the calendar when a person takes up or takes leave office. Transition is, however, not simply determined by a date in the calendar. It usually also involves a change in assumption about oneself and the world, which therefore leads to a corresponding change in behaviour (Schlossberg, 1984). Accordingly, we can identify both predictable, linear stages accompanied by more fragmented, personally complex assumptions and issues. Processes of transition have already been reviewed in the literature, more recently by Manderscheid & Ardichvilli (2008). In our study we take their transition model (ibid: 125) as a starting point for developing further our understanding of how female academic leaders experience their transitions.

We have already conducted eight semi-structured qualitative interviews with female leaders, four from Germany and four from the United States (including presidents/chancellors). At time of interview (May-June 2023) these leaders were in post within an 18 month period. Interviews were conducted virtually in English, transcribed and is presently being coded in MaxQDa. As the number of interviewees is small at this stage, we can make no claims of generalisability. However, as this research is the first part of an intended larger study, we will hopefully be able to include our data into a wider body of research.

Some aspects of transition are beginning to emerge. In the US new female leaders are being prepared for their role by attending an obligatory training programme, which is not the case in Germany. Individual, self-organised coaches are also important preparing the future top position. Female leaders of child-bearing age in Germany are still being subjected to questions about their family-planning.

We hope that these exploratory interviews will help us formulate more specific research questions for a larger research study. By employing Manderscheid & Ardichvilli’s model of transition, we aim to develop research according to the empirical data. Our results, especially those associated with support structures, may be of political relevance to higher education governance, allowing HEIs to improve transition processes overall, and new female academic leaders in particular.

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