

Modeling Women's Transition into Academic Leadership

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Research Domains

Management, leadership, governance and quality (MLGQ)

Abstract

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are mostly led by professors drawn from within the ranks who are not specifically trained for leadership. Moving into top leadership positions requires a change of perspective, moving away from an individual focus into an outward-oriented approach (Ruben et al, 2017: 86), which is important for academic and administrative effectiveness (Gigliotti & Ruben, 2017: 96). To date little research has explored the experiences of HE leadership transitions. This study focuses on recently-elected women HEI leaders in Germany and the US. Adapting a model of transition put forward by Manderscheid & Ardichvili, 2008, our findings from 10 interviews indicate the value in creating formal support structures and programming opportunities for new women leaders. The comparative consideration of leadership trajectory structures in both countries indicates that there are particular considerations related to age that hold real-life implications for those with families and young children.

Full paper

Introduction and Literature Review

Across the world, women remain in the significant minority as leaders of higher education institutions (Read & Kehm, 2016). In the United States (US) and Germany, only 30% of university presidents or rectors are women (Roessler, CHECK 2023; Johnson, 2022; American Association of University Women, 2020). While much of the literature concerning leadership in higher education involves presidents (Gaval, 2009; Kolomitz, 2016; Lohse, 2008; Martin & Samuels, 2004; Sanaghan, 2008; Smerek, 2013), studies tend to focus on presidential career paths, or personal characteristics (see for example, Scott, 2011; Kim, 2013). Far less literature focuses on leadership transitions (Gmelch, 2000), particularly those for women (Cook & Glass, 2014), although the need for research in this area has been clearly identified (Manderscheid

& Ardichvili, 2008). Our study contributes to the literature by focusing on how women experience their path into top positions. To accomplish this, we draw on exploratory interviews with 10 recently-elected female leaders in the US and Germany.

Methodology

The identification of our participants was conducted through purposeful selection of five university leaders in each country. For US participants, selection criteria included: 1) president or chancellor at a public college or university, 2) participants in the American Association of State Colleges and Universities New Presidents Academy during the 2021-2022 or 2022-2023 cohort, and 3) identify as a woman. For German participants, selection criteria included: 1) public announcements of new rectors, presidents and chancellors from the monthly academic journal *Forschung & Lehre*, 2) named to post between 2021-2023, and 3) identify as a woman. Table 1 describes participant demographics. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Boards at each participating researcher's institution, and all interviews were conducted virtually in English, recorded and transcribed. Data analysis was conducted with the use of MAXQDA using an iterative method drawing from grounded theory and constant comparative analysis (Creswell, 1998) to reflectively refine ideas and concepts.

Results and Analysis

Results revealed three overarching categories that were critical to the transition process for leaders: 1) Institutional Support, 2) Career Path and Support Networks, and 3) Gender-Specific Challenges. Ruben et al., 2017 likens the transition into top academic leadership to changing roles from a pilot to an air traffic controller. Our research suggests that the transition process to becoming the air traffic controller starts early with the identification of leadership suitability either personally, or as suggested by others. In our adapted model of Manderscheid and Ardichvili (2008) on the basis of our data, we therefore introduce further elements that we suggest are part of the transition, and which may be helpful to those aiming to become a top academic leader, men and women alike. These include the importance of personal coaching as well as institutional support early in the post. The transition process can be regarded as successful if teams are working productively, relationships are healthy, and the new leader is accepted by the institution (see Fig.1).

This first round of exploratory interviews has provided useful data to serve as the basis for further research. By employing Manderscheid and Ardichvili's (2008) model of transition,

we have been able to expand their research and develop a new model of transition according to the empirical data that can continue to be tested and expanded. Results of this study are also important for institutional leaders, policy makers, and to those aspiring to positions of leadership in higher education.