

LYNN PASQUERELLA AND CAROLINE S. CLAUSS-EHLERS

Glass Cliffs, Queen Bees, and

Persistent Barriers to Women's Leadership in the Academy

FEATURED TOPIC

THE DAY OF THE 2016 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION, *Slate* magazine published an article by Laura Wagner titled “How Do You Shatter a Glass Ceiling? With a Steel Spike or Diamond Drill.”¹ The article was reminiscent of an episode of the television show *MythBusters*, going into the physics of breaking through the Viracon triple-layer insulated glass ceiling of the Javits Center in Manhattan, where Hillary Clinton was widely expected to deliver a victory speech after shattering the “highest, hardest glass ceiling.” Even with a steel-tipped LifeHammer or a diamond drill, Wagner suggested, it would take long and require determination. But our thought was, “We have already been working at it for 240 years.”

The hardening of the glass ceiling and the solidifying of the frames holding it up, coinciding with the nomination of the first woman candidate for president by a major

US political party, parallel the hardening of the white racial frame during Barack Obama's candidacy. As hip-hop scholar Jeff Chang demonstrates in his recent book, *We Gon' Be Alright: Notes on Race and Resegregation*, the dominant culture presents images of racial progress even as there is a burgeoning movement toward resegregation and inequality. Asserting that there has never truly been a “post-racial moment” in our nation's history, Chang explores how the culture wars “continue through justificatory innocence and willed inaction” to “allow the structures that produce inequality and segregation to persist.”²

The result is a cycle of crises: an emergent crisis is followed by a reaction to trauma that, in turn, catalyzes a backlash

of outrage, justification, and denial that leads, ultimately, to a level of exhaustion, complacency, and paralysis that spawns further crises.

Given the pervasiveness of misogynistic rhetoric in the 2016 presidential campaign, it is nearly impossible to resist drawing comparisons between the ways in which implicit bias, stereotype threat, and the empathy gap undermine equity for communities of color, despite legislative reform, and how they manifest themselves and act as generative forces in shaping and reshaping the narrative around the role of women in the public sphere. In case anyone doubted it, the election made it clear that, in the United States, we are not in a post-feminist era any more than we are in a post-racial era. The political landscape for women has been discouraging this past year, to say the least—and not simply because of the gendered media reporting throughout the presidential campaign and the egregious surge of sexual intimidation that followed the election. The fact that, although more than half of the US population is female, the representation

We will never make real progress in advancing women's leadership in higher education until we address the macro issues in our society that keep us from shattering the increasingly thick glass ceiling

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the Snow-Woman Effect



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of women in Congress has stalled at 20–25 percent reflects a persistent lack of progress.

And despite conservative critics charging that colleges and universities are bastions of liberal progressivism, progress for women in the upper administrative ranks of academia has been just as stagnant. The proportion of women serving as college and university presidents is at odds with student demographics. According to research conducted by the American Council on Education, women have earned more than half of all baccalaureate degrees awarded since 1981 and half of all doctorates awarded since 2006.³ While the percentage of female college presidents more than doubled between 1986 and 2006, increasing from 9.5 percent to 23 percent, it increased to just 26.4 percent by 2011. During the most recent five-year period, the proportion has remained essentially unchanged: just one in four presidents are women.⁴

Moreover, a narrow focus on the overall percentage obscures that fact that many of the gains have been at community colleges, where 33.6 percent of the presidents are women, as compared to 22.6 percent at baccalaureate colleges, 23.7 percent at master's colleges and universities, and 21.6 percent at doctoral universities.⁵ Insofar as these variations among institutional types are perceived as correlating with power, money, and status, they are a reminder that cultural equity is not reducible solely to representation and that organizational and institutional cultures often destabilize policies and programs designed to foster diversity.

By outlining some of the familiar and persistent barriers to women's leadership at the highest administrative levels within colleges and universities, we want to open a conversation about how to accelerate the type of change embodied by Ronald Takaki's notion of a "different mirror." Developing this notion, Takaki asks, "What happens, to borrow the words of Adrienne Rich, 'when someone with the authority of a teacher' describes our society, and 'you are not in it'? Such an experience can be disorientating—'a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing.'"⁶

Leaky pipelines, sticky floors, and hidden biases

We all know that within the academy there has been a leaky pipeline. Women are less likely than men to attain the rank of full professor, which is often a requirement for service as department

chair. The significance of the absence of ladders for women within higher education administration is revealed by the statistic that approximately 70 percent of college presidents have been faculty members.⁷ Although 44 percent of all full-time faculty are women, only one-third are in tenured or tenure-line positions; a mere quarter of all full professors are women.⁸ The absence of leadership opportunities for women at the earliest stages of their careers contributes to what Kate Berheide has called the "sticky floor," miring women in low-paying jobs with limited opportunities for moving sideways or for upward mobility.⁹ The dearth of female role models in leadership positions at all levels and the adjunctification of the faculty further exacerbate the problem of "the sticky floor," at times preventing women from embarking on pathways to the presidency.

One especially well-documented factor that limits leadership opportunities for women is hidden bias. In 2012, McKinsey reported on research conducted for the *Wall Street Journal* Executive Task Force for Women in the Economy.¹⁰ Demonstrating how hidden bias inhibits women's advancement in the workplace, the report found that while men are judged on their potential, women are evaluated based on past performance. Hidden bias was also cited as a factor in a Yale study of science professors at American universities.¹¹ The researchers invited professors from the biology, chemistry, and physics departments at three private and three public research universities to evaluate applications from a recent graduate seeking a position as a lab manager. Each of the professors received the same single-page summary, but in half of the cases, the applicant was identified as "John," while in the other half, the applicant was identified as "Jennifer." The study revealed that science professors, male and female alike, are less likely to offer mentoring or employment to women candidates. Indeed, there was no significant difference in the bias exhibited by male and female professors. Further, when female candidates *were* offered positions, it was at a lower salary. This study underscores the complex ways in which women are often denied access to informal networking that can help advance career opportunities.

The relationship between hidden bias and women's leadership opportunities was also revealed in a study that applied gender mapping to approximately 14 million reviews from



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RateMyProfessors.com.¹² The study showed that gender is repeatedly constructed through the use of language and, because the authority and historical contributions of men are normalized, women are more likely to be judged on their personality traits and appearance. Unless identified, these types of biases can have a disparately negative impact on rates of tenure and promotion for women, undermining women's confidence, despite a demonstrated record of excellence.

Nearly a decade ago, Mary Ann Mason highlighted the many maneuvers in which women, but not men, must engage to secure and retain leadership roles.¹³ Women aspiring to leadership positions in academia “must adhere to a narrow band of behavior in order to be effective in mostly male settings.” Women must be careful not to speak too quickly, too assertively, or in too shrill a manner, while being friendly but not sexual. The stylishness of one's hair, makeup, nails, and dress, along

with weight and body type, all appear to be fair game when it comes to assessing women's leadership potential. According to Mason, “It is usually an accumulation of small and large incidents that marginalize female administrators.” She calls this phenomenon the “snow-woman effect,” observing that “the layers of missed opportunity, family obligations, and small and large slights build up over the years, slowing their career progress compared with men.”

Still other forms of bias in the academy prevent women from competing with men on an even playing field. A recent study of gender distribution across a range of academic disciplines—from science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields to philosophy—found that women are most likely to be underrepresented in those fields in which “sheer brilliance” and a spark of intellect, rather than perseverance and hard work, are regarded as the key to success.¹⁴ The researchers attribute this particular

gender bias to a reflection of stereotypes based on the sexist presumption that women lack innate genius.

Given that early leadership experience, encouragement, and support are factors that reduce barriers for women, these studies raise serious cause for concern. Hidden biases that result in a lack of opportunity for women to move up the ladder into leadership roles, the active discouragement of women, and differing expectations imposed on men and women within academia take a toll on efforts to increase the number of women presidents.

Even when women do break free from the sticky floor and break through the glass ceiling, the barriers to success may become even more substantial than those they had faced in the climb up the ladder

Of course, these hidden biases are not exclusive to academics. In a study of gender bias in performance reviews, Kieran Snyder examined whether “review tone or content differed based on the employee’s gender” and how the “perception of female abrasiveness under-

mines women’s careers in technology.”¹⁵ Snyder found that, while negative feedback was provided in 71 percent of all performance reviews, women were more likely than men to get negative comments (87.9 percent as compared to 58.9 percent) and that the tone of the reviews differed significantly with respect to gender.

Snyder also found that “negative personality

criticism—watch your tone! step back! stop being so judgmental!—shows up twice in the 83 critical reviews received by men. It shows up in 71 of the 94 critical reviews received by women.” Inappropriate personal interaction, shaming, and overreactive criticism can be more difficult for women due to social conditioning around being likeable and pleasing others.

Societal norms also include the expectation that women leaders will build consensus and focus on both interpersonal relations and work satisfaction. By contrast, the expectation of male leaders is that they will focus on task achievement and performance outcomes.¹⁶

When individuals act counter to these stereotypical expectations, they are deemed to be less effective leaders. The masculine ideal of the good leader as a competitive agent—an ideal that reinforces sexism—creates a double bind for women. As Crystal Hoyt and Jim Blascovich have illustrated, the agentic qualities of confidence, control, assertiveness, emotional toughness, and achievement-oriented aggressiveness posited as necessary for effective leadership are considered incompatible with the communal characteristics associated with women and women’s leadership.¹⁷ Here, too, hidden bias comes into play as a factor in gender-based leadership evaluations. Applying the theory of role congruity with respect to the appropriateness of male and female behavior, researchers have demonstrated a disparately negative impact on assessments of women in leadership roles when there is incongruity between group stereotypes and the social role in which members of the group are engaged.¹⁸

Hence, the myth of “queen bee syndrome.” The antithesis of those women like Madeline Albright who understand that “there’s a special place in hell for women who don’t help each other,”¹⁹ the queen bee pushes the ladder away just as other women are getting to the top. The notion that powerful women are the biggest enemy of other women seeking advancement has been debunked by a number of studies demonstrating that women in leadership roles engage in lower levels of discriminatory and harassing behavior, offer more personal support to female employees, and oversee offices with smaller pay gaps between men and women than those run by male bosses.²⁰ These findings bolster Sheryl Sandberg’s assertion that “women aren’t any meaner to women than men are to one another. Women are just expected to be nicer.”²¹

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Every one of these biases contributes to demand-side and institutional barriers in the form of sticky floors and glass ceilings that block women's access to high-level male-dominated networks and to women mentors in administrative positions that facilitate advancement to higher education leadership. Yet, even when women do break free from the sticky floor and break through the glass ceiling, the barriers to success may become even more substantial than those they had faced in the climb up the ladder. When an organization with a history of male leadership brings in a woman to manage a crisis, the woman often finds herself on the "glass cliff." Research on this phenomenon indicates that leaders with male agentic properties are most likely to be chosen to run successful organizations, while leaders with stereotypically female interpersonal attributes are most likely to be selected to lead an organization in crisis.²² Not only are women more likely than men to accept and occupy positions that have a higher risk of failure, they are less likely to be given second chances after a failure.

A new approach

In her article "Two Steps Forward, One Step Back? Strengthening the Foundations of Women's Leadership in Higher Education," Lynne Ford discusses the impact of replacing overt biases—frequently addressed by policy or law, such as Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Title IX of the Education Amendments Act of 1972—with subtler biases embedded in normative institutional rules and practices. Ford details the extent to which ostensibly gender-neutral, universally applicable rules regarding hiring, tenure, promotion, salary negotiation, and leadership opportunity are expressions of the gendered university, grounded in the anachronistic model of the male as the primary breadwinner supported by a full-time caregiver at home.

This is consistent with the findings presented in the American Council on Education's 2012 report, *The American College President*.²³ The typical college or university president is a sixty-one-year-old, married, white male with a doctorate in education. Unlike their male counterparts, 89 percent of whom are married, only 63 percent of women presidents are married; 24 percent, excluding those in religious orders, are either divorced or have never married. In 2006, this was true of only 7 percent of similarly situated male leaders. Though the percentage of women

college presidents who are married has increased to 72 percent, and while the percentage who are divorced, widowed, or separated dropped from 19 percent in 2006 to 16 percent in 2011, women college presidents are much less likely than male college presidents to have children (72 percent versus 90 percent). Nonetheless, 10 percent of women presidents reported stepping back from their careers to provide caregiving, as compared to 3 percent of male presidents; 21 percent of women, but only 9.5 percent of men, reported adapting their career plans to accommodate a partner or spouse. These data confirm what we already know: "In the university world as well as other professions, marriage and children appear to boost the careers of men and slow or stop those of women."²⁴

Interestingly, among women who indicate that they are not interested in a leadership role because it exacts too high a price, many either fail to identify the gender discrimination in their own experiences or consider acts of discrimination to be individual events, rather than a function of institutional structures of gender discrimination.²⁵ We need to consider these findings in the context of Ford's contention that we will not make real progress until we embark on structural changes that align the academy with the lived experience of a diversified faculty, as opposed to reward systems that privilege masculine behavior and reify the separation of the public and private

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spheres in which women continue to do the majority of unpaid domestic work. Ford points to Making Excellence Inclusive, the initiative of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), as a model.²⁶ Beyond institutional change, she also encourages women to actively pursue social efficacy, social modeling, and mentoring in order to attain leadership positions and serve as change agents.²⁷

As a means of confronting hidden biases, we also need to validate authentic forms of leadership that involve self-awareness, balanced processing, internalized moral perspective, and relational transparency. Rather than personalizing environmental assumptions, we must understand structural limitations that reflect hidden biases and promote organizational understanding from the viewpoint of structural, rather than internal, dynamics.

If we hope to make meaningful strides in promoting women's leadership in higher education, we must be prepared for a shift that reflects a valuing of authentic leadership—including a reassessment of what is rewarded in the tenure and promotion process. But, this brand of leadership cannot make a difference unless structural change is coupled with cultural change. Social justice champion, author, and television host Wes Moore reveals the inextricable link between the two in his commentary on Freddie

Gray's death. In April 2015, Gray, a twenty-five-year-old black man, was arrested in Baltimore, Maryland, and died a week later from injuries sustained while being transported in a police van. As a Baltimore native, Moore was deeply affected by the tragedy. After talking about the injustice he saw embedded in the case, a friend made him watch the tape of the incident leading to Gray's death through a different lens—without looking at the officers or Gray. What Moore saw for the first time was the number of people on the street in the middle of the morning with no jobs, nowhere to go, no way out. He realized that Gray's whole life in that neighborhood had been leading to that moment, and that his fate could have been that of any one of the people there. Without looking at the macro issues, protesting the injustice of Gray's death is futile. In the same way, we will never make real progress in advancing women's leadership in higher education until we address the macro issues in our society that keep us from shattering the increasingly thick glass ceiling or, in the case of women of color, breaking through what was referred to in the *Wall Street Journal* recently as the "concrete ceiling."²⁸

One of the most gratifying aspects of participating in the women's marches on January 20, 2017, was the sense of optimism and empowerment that comes from joining together in

community with those who have shared objectives and values. We have that same sense of optimism and empowerment in working with the AAC&U community in leading the way for transformative change. □

To respond to this article, e-mail liberaled@aacu.org, with the authors' names on the subject line.

NOTES

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