Chapter 4

Women in Higher Education Leadership:
Exploring the Intersections of Race and Gender

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ABSTRACT

Women face many challenges when it comes to leadership in higher education. The experiences of women in leadership are not monolithic, particularly in terms of race. This chapter seeks to illuminate the realities of five women of a variety of races/ethnicities who self-identify as leaders in higher education. Five cisgender women of varying races/ethnicities were interviewed to share specific challenges, issues, strategies, and solutions associated with being a woman in higher education leadership. Specifically, the races/ethnicities of the women who were interviewed include Native American, Black, Chinese, Korean, and White. This chapter will focus on their experiences through the intersectional lens of race and gender.

INTRODUCTION

Women in higher education leadership face systematic and personal oppression in the 21st century. In terms of race, the experiences of women are not monolithic. Hence, we must examine these issues through the intersections of identity. What specific issues or obstacles are women facing in the 21st century in the context of higher education? How are the issues similar or different across different races or ethnicities? Are the voices of women in higher education being heard? This chapter seeks to reveal the experiences of five women of different races/ethnicities who self-identify as leaders and examine the issues they face in higher education.

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BACKGROUND

When imagining the typical college president, an older White man most likely comes to mind. While the percentage of women college presidents has increased over the years, women are still largely underrepresented in terms of college presidencies. Specifically, women of color are the most underrepresented. In 2016, 70% of college presidents were men and 83% of college presidents were White (American Council on Education, 2018). It is not surprising White men dominate the field in terms of college presidencies given the limited representation of women in leadership positions outside of higher education. In 2017, 32 women chief executives made the Fortune 500 list (Fortune Editors, 2017). While this may be a record number of women on the Fortune 500 list, women still only comprise 6.4% of the list.

Looking at the top, representation for women in leadership positions is relatively small. Ideally, representation of women in leadership positions is more than symbolic. Researchers have examined how the diversity of a population influences policy. The representative bureaucracy theory, coined by Kingsley (1944), argues that diversity in the public sector workforce leads to policy outcomes that reflect the interests of the represented groups. For instance, Lee and Won (2016) use this theory to indicate that the representation of women in pre-tenure faculty positions has a positive association with Title IX compliance. This study also found the representation of women in state legislatures was positively associated with Title IX compliance of public institutions. Thus, increasing representation of women may be a crucial step to ensuring that policy outcomes are more inclusive of women. This highlights the importance of increasing the diversity of work environments.

Intersectionality

Historically, the feminist suffrage movements have been focused on benefiting White women. Intersectional feminism looks at the interconnected nature of identity, rather than looking at identity through a single lens. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) coined the term “intersectionality” in her essay, Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics.

Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in the intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination (1989, p. 149).

Often, Black women are discriminated against because of racism and sexism, and their realities can be erased when ignoring the interactions of multiple identities. This can be seen in the title of the John Lennon song, Woman is the N****r of the World. Composed by a White man (John Lennon) and a Japanese woman (Yoko Ono), this song puts Black women at a crossroads of identity. Sojourner Truth, an African-American abolitionist and women’s rights activist, talked about the crossroads of identity in her 1851 commonly titled speech, Ain’t I a Woman? Truth describes the juxtaposition of men insisting that women be treated with chivalry, yet she was not treated like a woman. “That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere.
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