



“I am the Chair”: Women and Department Leadership in the Academy

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The paucity of women in leadership roles in the academy has been the focus of the literature in higher education for several decades. The discussion has lamented how few women attain presidencies, chancellorships, or vice chancellor roles, that women of color experience even greater barriers to leadership attainment, and that women are likely to experience both a “glass ceiling” and a “glass cliff”. As a result, women often find themselves trapped in low-level managerial roles, unsupported when they do attain leadership positions, and underrepresented on powerful committees and in meaningful decision-making bodies. Drawing on data from a large study of the department chair, this qualitative study explores the experiences of twenty women who hold the position. Findings suggest that women department chairs continue to face ongoing gendered challenges to their leadership and that barriers to their success are still very much present in the academy. Coping with these challenges requires a balancing act within oneself, with others, and within the institution. Each challenge is then reflected in tensions that must be negotiated rather than resolved. Recommendations for structural and cultural changes are offered.

Keywords: higher education, department chair, leadership, women, gender

INTRODUCTION

Research exploring the challenges department chairs¹ face has long suggested that the role is difficult and lacks tangible rewards (Buller, 2015; Gmelch et al., 2017). Success as a department chair is principally based on the chair’s ability to lead and manage departmental programs, faculty and staff, and assure the recruitment and retention of students within the department (Gunsalus, 2006; Bryman, 2007). Additionally, chairs are expected to promote the professional and personal development of departmental members (Bryman, 2007; Cipriano, 2011) and provide for departmental longevity and relevance within the larger college and university setting (Gunsalus, 2006; Gmelch and Buller, 2015).

Yet, as Gmelch et al. (2017) reported, department chair leadership is often assumed with limited prior experience, minimal formal training and preparation, and incomplete understanding of

¹Formal leadership of the academic department goes by many titles, including department (or division) head, chair, coordinator, or director. For purposes of clarity, the term chair is used here to include all who hold academic department leadership positions.

the complexity and ambiguity of the role. Additionally, the role requires a significant shift from professorial work, and the cost of the leadership work to chairs' careers as scholars, artists, and researchers is often under-estimated, as are costs to chairs' personal lives (Eddy and Ward, 2015; Creaton and Heard-Laureote, 2019). Recent research (Kruse, 2020; Kruse et al., 2020) suggests that all chairs, no matter their gender, face tensions—including those related to task, organization and role, and people and relationships. Furthermore, these tensions are largely wicked and unresolvable, and if chairs are to be successful, they must learn to negotiate and sacrifice for the short-term rather than focus on lasting solutions.

For women² these tensions are further exacerbated by a societal and organizational culture that is implicitly (and often explicitly) biased to “think manager, think male” (Dunn et al., 2014; Rhode, 2017). The title of this article is no polemic. Across the sample of twenty women in this study, eight stated (absent any prompting question) that they had faced persistent questioning by students, faculty in departments other than their own, and external community members (e.g., donors) as to the legitimacy of their claim of title. Another five, after an explicit question, shared, “Yeah, I’ve used the line ‘I am the chair,’ on more than one occasion.” Mistaken identity is but one burden women in the position experience. Additional research suggests that few women attain presidencies, chancellorships, or vice chancellor roles (Shepard, 2017), that women of color experience even greater barriers to leadership attainment (Davis and Maldonado, 2015), and that women are likely experience both a “glass ceiling” (Eddy and Ward, 2015; Wroblewski, 2019) and a “glass cliff” (Ryan and Haslam, 2005; Peterson, 2015; Glass and Cook, 2016). Consequently, women often find themselves trapped in low-level managerial roles (Airini et al., 2011), unsupported when they do attain leadership positions of White and Burkinshaw (2019), and underrepresented on powerful committees and in meaningful decision-making bodies (O’Connor, 2018). This article addresses how women chairs make sense of individual and organizational challenges they face and, in the end, whether they see their service as chair as irredeemably marked by organizational discrimination or as an opportunity to contribute and achieve.

LITERATURE

Popular mythology holds that there is an inadequate number of qualified women for leadership positions more generally and, specifically, in the field of higher education. Yet, research sponsored by the American Council on Education (Johnson, 2017) found that women in the United States have earned more

than 50% of all doctoral degrees since 2006, master’s degrees since 1987, bachelor’s degrees since 1982, and associate degrees since 1978. Simply put, over the past three decades, women have earned “half or more of all baccalaureate degrees and [nearly half] of all doctoral degrees for almost a decade” (Johnson, 2017, p. 2). However, as Rhode (2017) notes, women hold fewer than 20% of senior leadership positions in public and private sector industry and across political offices (e.g., congress persons, governors, and mayors) nationwide. Similarly, the academy remains largely dominated by men, and when hired, women are more likely to find themselves in a lower-ranking faculty position. As of 2015, all women held only 32% of full professorships at degree-granting postsecondary institutions (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). In short, an ample number of women are present to fill leadership roles within the workplace and in higher education.

Individual Barriers

It is well documented that women face gender bias in the workplace (Rhode, 2017; Shepard, 2017). Women are more likely to have their competence questioned (Acker, 2010) and their mistakes more closely scrutinized (Hoyt and Murphy, 2016), to be left out of mentoring and coaching opportunities (Ballenger, 2010) and paid less for their efforts (Johnson, 2017). For any individual woman, the challenges she faces to promotion, recognition, and advancement have the potential to decrease commitment to her work, compromise her morale and motivation, and undermine any valuable contribution she might make to her field (Rhode, 2017). Furthermore, when barriers are placed on any individual, fundamental societal values of equality, equity, and inclusion are compromised. The drumbeat of structural exclusion, no matter how faint, takes its toll on individuals and society alike (Rhode, 2017; Wroblewski, 2019).

Cultural Barriers

Additionally, women in leadership roles face two well-documented cultural phenomena—the glass ceiling and the less publicized but equally damaging glass cliff. Popularized in the 1980s (Glass and Cook, 2016), the metaphor of the glass ceiling has been used to describe the systemic barriers that limit the ability of women and other historically marginalized people to achieve positions of authority and power. Hitting the glass ceiling suggests that overwhelming obstacles to advancement are present, no matter one’s obvious and/or unambiguous qualifications for advancement. The glass ceiling is thought to be the result of persistent and pernicious organizational inequities.

Furthermore, as Ryan and Haslam (2005) suggest, women are more likely to be hired into organizations marked by turbulence, discord, and often insurmountable problems. Known as a glass cliff hire (Ryan and Haslam, 2005), these appointments come with an increased risk of failure and potential subsequent loss of personal and professional prestige (Glass and Cook, 2016). In sum, this research suggests that due to the glass ceiling, women are more likely to accept challenging positions rather than not be promoted at all. In higher education, glass cliff hires are often recruited to carry the burden of organizational change or during circumstances of increased risk and are faced with managing

²Throughout this article I have chosen to use the words “women” or “woman” to refer to the participants in the study. Similarly, where men are discussed, I use the words “men” or “man.” I have chosen to use the word “woman” over “female” and “man” over “male” because the words female and male refer to the sex of a species. Women (and men) refer to human beings. Female and male could refer to any species and reduces people to their reproductive organs and abilities. And although this study contains no openly gender non-conforming or trans members, the use of female or male would be exclusionary in those cases. The only exceptions to this decision are when participants chose the words female or male when speaking. In those cases, I have chosen to honor the original text of their comments.

and leading the organization through high-risk situations and increasingly troublesome decisions (Peterson, 2015).

Structural Barriers

Higher education is a hierarchical organization where the opportunity for voice increases the higher one climbs. Presidents speak more loudly than provosts, provosts than deans, deans than faculty, full professors than assistants, and tenure-line faculty than adjuncts. This is true at all levels of policy formation and decision making (Ballenger, 2010). Additionally, as Acker (2010) suggests, access to opportunities for voice are not sufficient; research indicates that even when provided the stage, women's voices are often taken less seriously than those of men (Hoyt and Murphy, 2016). In this way, barriers to women's advancement and success are baked into the structure of higher education. In other words, the individual and cultural barriers women face are further aggravated by the structure of the organizational system itself (Shepard, 2017).

As the literature presented suggests, the fact that women face challenges when they seek leadership roles in the academy and beyond has been well documented. Yet, most often, the literature is marked by studies that focus on a single facet of concern. Wroblewski's (2019) excellent work highlights how women may be agents for cultural and structural change ignoring challenges that have been emphasized by authors like Davis and Maldonado (2015) and Burton et al. (2020) who explore the role of gendered racism in women's leadership. Similarly, Airini et al. (2011) and Acker's (2014) well cited research has explored how the challenges that women face in middle management positions creates disinterest in further advancement but overlooks issues of stereotype threat such as those explored by Hoyt and Murphy (2016). Clearly, no single study can take on the full breath of challenges and the nuances of those challenges. However, this study attempts to address the lack of integration in prior work by seeking to understand a broad range of administrative, situational, and relational challenges faced by women in the position of department chair. It is hoped that by doing so the work contributes to the field in a synthetic way.

METHODS AND STUDY DESIGN

Employing qualitative interview methods, this study sought to explore the following research question:

1. What administrative, situational, and/or relational challenges and tensions are evidenced across the sample of women chairs?

Qualitative methods are designed to elicit multiple perspectives and worldviews regarding how events are experienced (Yilmaz, 2013; Creswell, 2014). When qualitative methods are employed in any study, it is assumed that there is a relationship between the researcher and what is being researched, subjectivity in creating a study and interpreting data, and that results are specific to the context studied (Rubin and Rubin, 2012; Merriam and Grenier, 2019). In this way, qualitative methods were best suited for a study that set out to explore, in

their own words, the experiences of women serving in the role of department chair.

The interview data included in this article were taken from a larger data set that included both men and women (Kruse, 2020). While both men and women experienced challenges related to their work as department chair, the women expressed specific challenges they attributed to the role their gender played in their leadership efforts. This article takes on the analysis of those data.

Participant Recruitment

The initial study (Kruse, 2020) included 45 sitting department chairs. Chairs were selected with the intent to collect data about their experiences from a breadth of colleges and universities across North America and in Europe. Efforts were made to gain a representative sample across the varied types of institutions present in higher education (i.e., doctorate and Masters-granting institutions and schools that offered associate/technical degrees). This study employs a sub-set of the initial interview pool, including 20 women from institutions in the United States.

It is important to note that initial study data were collected pre-COVID-19, from July 2019 to March 2020. To deepen the data set, five follow-up interviews ($N = 20\%$) were completed during the spring of 2021 with participants from the initial study. Thus, this study draws on a total of 25 interviews—20 from the initial data set and five follow-up interviews collected approximately 1 year later.

Table 1 provides an accounting of the participants, their institution type, and the departments represented by college.

Description of Participants

Of the 20 women, six served as chairs in colleges of education, 12 from departments in colleges of arts and sciences, and two from the arts; they served as little as 1 year and as many as fifteen, with an average length of service of 3.7 years. In keeping with demographics within the academy, the sample skews white. Only four respondents identified as a person of color. Two self-disclosed as lesbian or queer.

Most chairs reported that they held a 4-year term with the opportunity to be reelected or reappointed ($N = 17$); however, three indicated that their terms were indefinite, and they served at the pleasure of the dean. Across the sample, all held 9-month appointments and received some form of summer support (e.g., a stipend or a month of summer salary). Fourteen received one or more course releases, and 11 received an additional academic-year stipend. Of the sample of women in this study, five were full professors, ten were associate professors, two were assistant professors, and three were adjuncts or instructors. Interestingly, of the initial sample that included both men and women, 21 were full professors, 19 were associate professors, two were assistant professors, and three were adjuncts or instructors; this suggests that women took on the chair's role earlier in their careers than the men in the initial study because of that sample all the assistant professors, adjuncts, or instructors were women.

TABLE 1 | Participants.

Institutional classification	Total interviews				Public		Private		Arts and Sciences		Education		Arts	
	N (Initial)	N (Added)	% (Initial)	% (Added)	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Doctoral very high	4	1	20	20	4	20%			2	10%	2	10%		
Doctoral high	5	2	25	28	2	10%	3	15%	3	15%	1	5%	1	5%
Doctoral professional	4	1	20	20	2	10%	2	10%	1	5%	3	15%		
Masters	3	1	15	16	2	10%	1	5%	2	10%			1	5%
Baccalaureate	2		10	8			2	10%	2	10%				
Associate	2		10	8	2	10%			2	10%				
Cumulative total—initial study/Added interviews	20	25	100	100	12	60%	8	40%	12	60%	6	30%	2	10%

TABLE 2 | Challenges and tensions within women chairs' work.

Challenges	Tensions	
	Balancing...	With...
Within oneself	Ambition	Burnout
	Self-awareness	Self-doubt
	Authenticity	Performativity
With others	Being of service	Being a servant
	Extending compassion	Fueling entitlement
	Maintaining distance and detachment	Remaining approachable and connected
Within the institution	Organizational agendas and institutional indifference	Personal responsibilities and interests
	Recognition	Exploitation
	Inadequate mentorship	Seeking help and support

Interviews

Interviews were conducted either over the phone or by Zoom and lasted between 60 and 90 min. Interview questions and prompts were structured to allow participants to tell significant personal stories regarding their experiences as chair. Close listening (Kvale and Brinkman, 2009; Rubin and Rubin, 2012) enhanced data-collection efforts so that understanding could be developed. Initial interviews focused on learning the chairs' perceptions of their role, contextualizing the chairs' professional experiences, and understanding how chairs' orientations toward faculty, staff, and students influenced their work. The second round of follow-up interviews with five previous participants focused on participants' experiences of the role during the initial outbreak of COVID-19 (March, 2020) and the following academic year (2020–2021).

Coding and Analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed inductively (Merriam and Grenier, 2019), including rounds of open coding and *in vivo* coding. Codes included descriptions of leadership practice (e.g., key decision areas), climate and culture of the department, college, and university (e.g., supportive/undermining), and approach to challenges and demands (e.g., deliberate/*ad hoc*). Codes for mentoring and coaching, professional learning,

and interpersonal relationship supports and challenges were identified, as were codes for instances where participants labeled their experiences as gendered (e.g., comparisons to men). Initially, challenges related to COVID-19 were coded separately. Ultimately, it was determined that COVID-19 challenges were not exceptional. Rather, they were examples of persistent, albeit situationally distinct, challenges. In the final stages of the coding process, codes were combined to create categories, and categories were collapsed into three themes of challenge. Within each theme, tensions were identified.

Data analysis strategies, including credibility, transferability, and dependability, were employed to ensure trustworthiness (Creswell, 2014). The development of a large and diverse data set, including post-COVID interviews, helped to establish credibility. Trust (an essential factor in credibility) was established by the study author through self-disclosure of professional experiences including those as chair. Multiple interviews across a variety of institutional types increased triangulation.

Direct quotes from interviews with women in the chair's role are used as the primary data source for this article. The quotes provided are representative of the larger whole. Quotes were chosen because they illustrated a general theme, offered a clear example of a common finding, or highlighted areas of success and struggle.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

As prior work (Gmelch et al., 2017; Kruse, 2020) suggests, being a chair is stressful. The role is marked by numerous challenges (e.g., inadequate budgets and endless paperwork) and obstacles (e.g., unresponsive colleagues and unresolvable conflict). This is true of all chairs—men and women alike—and this study does not suggest otherwise. However, this study does assert that as well as the challenges all chairs face, women face additional challenges and tensions because they are women.

Clearly, men who are chairs may struggle with many of these challenges. However, the men who participated in this study did not report their struggles with the same descriptions, regularity, or feeling tone that the women did. Of the 50 initial interviews, no man ever used the phrases, "it just felt really gendered," "to my knowledge that never happens to a [wo]man," or "and

then I got called 'honey.'" Similarly, none of the men reported instances of explicit sexual harassment, being offered less money and time to handle the responsibilities of the position, or being repeatedly passed over for promotion. Is it possible that men have experienced these barriers? Certainly. However, prior research (Acker, 2010; Dunn et al., 2014; Shepard, 2017) suggests that women in leadership roles in higher education experience their roles differently than men in the same roles. This study confirms those findings and extends prior research by suggesting women face clear challenges and tensions that men simply do not.

For purposes of the discussion here, challenges and tensions are portrayed as separate themes and ideas. Whereas the challenges experienced are larger and more universal (e.g., within oneself, with others, and within the institution), the tensions described here are purposely distinctive and specific (e.g., balancing ambition with burnout). Each tension represents participants' descriptions of stresses and strains and reported senses of "imbalance" or "uneasiness." It is important to note that the discussion of research findings is not the same as lived experience. Women did not experience these challenges and tensions as separately as this discussion suggests. Rather, participants reported that these challenges and tensions felt "stacked" and "layered," suggesting that they were cumulative, and ultimately, that their overall impact was "burdensome" and "discouraging." As a computer science chair stated, "It just all adds up, you know? It's never just one thing, there's always this choice I have to make. It's discouraging." Echoing her thoughts, a chair in educational leadership shared, "Frankly, it's a burden, it's never one thing I asked to deal with, they just stack up, it's exhausting."

Nor did all the women studied report experiencing all the tensions described here. Yet, the identified tensions were expressed in more than half of participant interviews, suggesting they were commonly experienced and impactful when experienced. Additionally, participants described these tensions as "unresolvable." Chairs suggested that each tension needed to be regularly negotiated and "lived with," which contributed to the stress of their position. **Table 2** provides a summary of key challenges and the tensions to be balanced within each.

Challenges Within Oneself

Self-reflection, the habit of paying attention to one's own thoughts and emotions, reactions and responses, is considered an important attribute of strong leadership (Branson, 2007). Self-reflection provides leaders an opportunity to examine their knowledge and skill sets, interrogate their values and beliefs, and create and increase awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of one's practice. As a tool for increasing leadership practice, self-reflection is suggested to aid in building emotional intelligence, strengthening integrity, and building confidence in one's decisions and actions (Branson, 2007; Yeung, 2009). Self-reflection asks that leaders turn inward and examine their motivations, yet this does not always provide clear, unambiguous direction. Nor does it always result in positive outcomes. Several chairs noted that the act of self-reflection was "a double-edged sword" one in which they could see both the positive and negative sides of their work and that they focused on the negative. Women

chairs suggested they experienced the following tensions as key personal challenges.

Balancing Ambition With Burnout

For a significant number of chairs, ambition "felt natural." As an educational leadership chair put it, "If I do things, I do them well, my research, my teaching, I've always done well. . . I took that attitude into the chair's role." A biology chair stated, "I've always wanted to be a good, well-respected scientist. Leadership not so much, but then again I don't do life half-assed." Still others, spoke about the ambition to "be good at whatever I do" and that the work of being chair "gave me a new stage to show that I could." Every woman in this study aspired to be an effective chair and wanted to be recognized and rewarded for their good work. Yet, openly stating their ambition to a leadership position with other faculty or the dean was not as comfortable. An education chair shared, "I'm held to account for my ambition. Like I'm showing off. When I took this job, I felt like I had to prove myself. When I did, I got told to slow it down, to stop being 'so much.'" A computer science chair said it this way,

I feel like I have a really narrow margin. If I screw this up there will be consequences. I feel like they'll be more, harder, because I'm the first [woman chair]. . . I wanted this role but. . . it's also, "See we really shouldn't have done those things [she] wanted. It was [her] trying to make a name for herself."

Furthermore, chairs shared that they knew, "ambition comes at a price." Burnout and exhaustion were common themes among chairs across the full study. Both men and women admitted to the pressures of balancing administrative and faculty roles. What differed for the women, however, was best summed up by this chair, an associate professor in mathematics,

I know no one in this role is working up to their old research levels. I get that. But I'd like to be full 1 day. . . this work, it keeps me from those goals. I also feel a responsibility, there are so few women full in my field, and here I am doing this work and it's holding me back. If I quit, I lose. If I stay, I lose.

Balancing Self-Awareness With Self-Doubt

Self-awareness, like self-reflectivity, is suggested to be consistent with strong leadership (Branson, 2007). Knowing oneself is thought to enhance a leader's ability to connect with others, demonstrate more self-control in difficult situations, and enhance work environments through more effective communication (Yeung, 2009). However, self-awareness "cuts both ways." As a chemistry chair noted, "I know myself too well; I know my weaknesses, and that holds me back." Her words were echoed by an educational policy chair, "I know I'm good at this job, but mostly, I just see all the ways I could do it better." She went on to note, "It's all interconnected for me. . . the skill building, the skills-use piece has come from years of working in the field. I'm trained to see both sides—the positive and the negative. I can't help myself." A teaching and learning chair shared, "I think I doubt myself too much. I know I make solid, good decisions, but I still, always, think maybe it could have been better. Sometimes,

I think that gets in my way. I get in my own way.” Simply put, balancing self-awareness with self-doubt and using self-doubt as a growth tool rather than as self-sabotage, contributed to these chairs’ persistence and success.

Balancing Authenticity With Performativity

Unquestionably, becoming a chair requires that one look at their work and working relationships in new and different ways. Yet, remaining “true to who I am” and not “becoming a suit” were common themes. A history department chair stated it bluntly, “You don’t want to become someone else just because you have this job.”

Nevertheless, chairs felt some pressure to perform the role in traditional and, at times, stereotypical (i.e., male) ways. As a teaching and learning chair stated, “[It’s like] there’s a way to be chair. Performative. A script. Chairs do it this way. . . super autocratic, dictatorial almost, no discussions, certainly no feedback. Get a thick skin, I was told.” Still another history chair stated,

My dean was really clear. He said, I’d need to learn to tell people [what was expected] and expect them to do it. He also wanted changes in the culture of the unit, make it more collegial. . . I think that would be great. How I’m to do that when I’m also supposed to be the heavy all the time?

In some cases, this tension was a result of a lack of training and skills especially in the areas of leading groups and negotiation in decision-making. This was true across all chairs—men and women alike. However, women chairs reported feeling more bothered by organizational constraints that prohibited them from acting authentically and in ways they believed had the potential to be more effective. For many, this enduring tension came to a head when COVID-19 hit. A sociology chair asserted,

What COVID-19 required was for me to show up every day and be the voice of compassion and calm. Even when I didn’t have all the answers, I needed to have something. Absent a clear, “Yes, we’re doing this that way,” I needed to fall back on assurances of grace, flexibility, and empathy. Strangely, I felt more like I was leading as me than I ever had before. Like it was real. I was really me. Being really who I was paid off big time—people responded to my authenticity, they trusted me. I was exhausted, but it felt good.

Challenges With Others

When leading and managing people, conflict is unavoidable. Chairs find themselves in disagreements over the philosophy of how decisions are made, the strategy behind what will be accomplished and how, as well as what comprises an acceptable outcome (Kruse, 2020). Additionally, conflict can constrain progress toward important goals (Buller, 2015). Ultimately, conflict has the potential to compromise a chair’s credibility and authority. The chair of an English department summed it up in this way, “There’s nothing I do that makes everyone happy. It doesn’t matter how much input I seek, or how many times or

ways I compromise, someone is always unhappy. . . They take that out on me. Undermining me. It costs me.”

It is important to note that chairs were aware that creating conflict was “simply a way of being for some folks,” and because of that, addressing conflict well was “an integral and important part of the job.” As a sociology chair stated, “they display bullying behaviors because that’s how they get their way. . . [they’re] trying to make my life miserable on purpose, and I need to see that for what it is.” Alongside addressing conflict, chairs suggested that they felt they needed to balance three key tensions of work with others.

Balancing Being of Service With Being a Servant

Being a chair is a service role as much as it is a leadership role. As an educational leadership chair stated, “Chairing. . . It’s scut work. I’ve always said, leadership is a sacrifice, not a perk.” She went on to note, “I’m at the point of my career where I can make that sacrifice, but I know that’s what it is.” Similarly, an arts chair suggested,

I’ve had it pretty good. . . [the university] made it so that I didn’t have to be a starving artist, so now. . . it’s my turn to contribute. . . accepting the chair’s role, it means you’re doing service more than anything else. Scheduling, budgets, meetings, student issues—all of it—that’s service.

That the position required considerable service for and to the department and college was unsurprising. The surprise was the “level to which folks thought they could treat me like a servant.” An English department chair continued, “It’s like I owe them, like everything and anything they want I should grant, and when I don’t—I can’t—it’s on me. I know they’re not yelling at me; they’re yelling at the chair. Still, it hurts.”

Certainly, faculty are demanding no matter who holds the position of chair. Yet, as an arts and sciences chair shared, “[faculty] didn’t treat the men like this.” Repeatedly, participants suggested, “it’s as if, my research could be put on hold—they’d never ask that of a man.” And as an economics chair shared, “it’s misogynist really, how I and the other women get treated. We’re always supposed to step up and do the extra. The men can’t be spared for this work—it’s beneath them. Ask a woman? No problem.” These words and ideas echoed throughout the study. A teaching and learning chair summed it up this way, “my college still acts as if men do the real research, like my scholarship is worth less and I can do more, if I miss out on a few publications who cares, it’s not like it’s valued.” Whether these were simple tasks such as taking meeting minutes or taking on extra committee assignments, or more complex issues such as the degree of support afforded to the position, it was recognized that women in the chair’s role were more likely to be treated as “the help” rather than as an equal who was performing an important leadership role.

Balancing Extending Compassion With Fueling Entitlement

Human resource management is a key part of chairs’ work. Building strong departmental cultures and creating workplaces where faculty and staff feel valued matters. Yet, chairs struggled

with how to create positive workplace cultures they were “proud to lead” with faculty and staff who would then “mistake kindness for entitlement.”

A history chair shared,

My leadership is based in treating others as I want to be treated. The prior [male] chair didn't worry so much about that. When I came in, I worked to repair our culture. People say it's better. But now... it's like I owe them because I'm “nice.”

An English department chair spoke to a similar concern related to leading during COVID-19. She said,

It was natural for me to step up with compassion. Then, it was like the wave of, “I should get what I want, because I want it,” well beyond anything that was really COVID-19 related. I think they saw my caring as weakness they could manipulate. Like it was their due. It just felt really gendered.

In sum, chairs suggested that “leading from a caring lens” was “expected” because they were women. They then felt “taken advantage of” because they exercised caring leadership.

Balancing Maintaining Distance and Detachment With Remaining Approachable and Connected

Strong departmental leadership requires that chairs be approachable and connected to faculty, staff, and students. Moreover, creating an environment where “people feel like they can come to me” mattered to the women in this study. Yet, they were also aware that “getting too close has consequences.” As a sociology chair stated, “It's a catch-22: I like connection, but I know if I get too close it can be mistaken as friendship rather than advocacy. I think that's something that troubles women more in this role.” An educational policy chair stated, “I need to be clear that I'm not their mother, therapist, or friend; I'm talking to them as the chair.” However, “being [perceived as] too cold” was also a dilemma several chairs suggested was “uniquely gendered” because, “It's an expectation that I'm warm because I'm a woman. It's not expected from men—people like when they are, sure—but no one calls them on it when they're not.”

Challenges Within the Institution

Universities rely on chairs to be middle managers so that the day-to-day work of the department gets accomplished and departmental work is connected to that of the college and university (Acker, 2010; Gmelch et al., 2017). However, chairs find themselves faced with challenges from the institution itself. As a modern languages chair noted,

It's hard enough to get clear what the department wants, then I take that up the ladder, and I'm beat up for representing the faculty and staff I was hired to represent. It's like, people, can't you make it even a little bit easier?

Although frustrations with upper administration were widespread across the larger data set, it is notable that women chairs perceived additional barriers in working with their deans,

provosts, and other university administrators. A biology chair stated,

As I get into rooms with folks higher up the food chain, the room gets more male. So, I feel like not only am I battling really different ways of looking at issues, I'm also battling really different ways of talking about and thinking about what the issue is.

Or as a teaching and learning chair suggested, “I got flat-out told I'd see this differently if I looked at it more objectively, like I was letting my feelings take over my reasoning and then what I said didn't count.”

Women chairs expressed the following tensions concerning “leading while female.” Directly related to the institution, each highlighted how organizational and systemic challenges made leading their departments harder for these women chairs.

Balancing Organizational Agendas and Institutional Indifference With Personal Responsibilities and Interests

Colleges and universities exist for numerous reasons. Primarily, their role is to educate. Additionally, most embrace important research and service missions. Generally, it falls to chairs to support institutional activities designed to achieve valued outcomes. Yet, chairs suggested they wrestled with how to do so while “having a life.” As an anthropology chair said, “Organizations don't care. That's clear. My job is to do what they need done. Work/life balance, that's a joke.” If fact, chairs challenged the notion that work/life balance was even possible. One called it a “cruel hoax” while others suggested that the expression needed to be recast as “work/life integration” or as “whole/life strategy.” No matter the label, chairs found the academy to be an “indifferent” place where persistence toward individual goals and interests needed to be “fiercely protected” lest they find themselves “without a research agenda and without a life.”

An arts chair indicated,

There's an expectation that you're there for them and the rest of your life needs to happen magically. I can't say, “No, can't do that 4:30 meeting that's gonna run till 6:00 because I need to be home at 5:00.” I can't say, “I have kids, and I need time to paint.” Half my annual review is based on my creative productivity... I feel like I need to say “yes” to it all or face consequences at work and at home.

Balancing Recognition With Exploitation

In each interview, chairs were asked to offer advice for a hypothetical incoming chair. A history chair put her advice this way, “Do not sell yourself short, and make them pay for it.” When pressed, she added, “Know your worth and your boundaries, and make sure others do too.” She was not alone in her insistence that being recognized and rewarded for doing the job and doing it well was an important coping skill for women chairs. A communications chair described the problem like this, “It's become a joke, right? A woman sits in a meeting, shares an

idea, and some guy takes credit for it like 10 min later. And he gets away with it. They don't even see that they're doing it."

Indeed, being recognized for one's work matters. However, recognition can also come at a cost as evidenced in comments by a mathematics chair,

[The dean] has figured out that I'm good at working with donors. A female mathematician and all that. So, I get taken on all these lunch meetings. It's not that I dislike these folks, it's just that I get taken advantage of, exploited really. I'm the default.

Women chairs also suggested that as compared to men chairs, they did more overall service. They believed they were tapped to chair more committees, be present at more events, and simply "show up" when asked. One communications chair suggested, "It's recognition of a sort, I mean [they] know I exist, so I guess that's good. It just feels really burdensome." Furthermore, women chairs reported that when they were productive in areas other than service, that productivity was likely to be overlooked. She added, "I know I get more research published than many of the other chairs—I've seen the data—yet this one guy always gets trotted out as the productive one." As a result of these pressures, women chairs suggested that they believed it was important to aggressively advocate for themselves when the recognition they valued was due.

Balancing Inadequate Mentorship With Seeking Help and Support

Chairs receive limited training prior to assuming the role (Gmelch et al., 2017). Data from this study suggests that what little training and support does exist is marked with a clear bias toward how men have traditionally handled the role and the ways in which a "predominantly male upper administration" expect the role to be enacted. This was best expressed by the chair of a communications department,

They gave me a mentor. . . when I asked him about handling all the intimate details of everyone's lives. . . I've learned about people's medical issues, divorces, DUIs, you name it. . . he said, I don't. My admin assistant, she does all that."

She went on to say, "If it wasn't for a back-channel group of women department chairs, I'm not sure I would have made it a year."

Similarly, other chairs suggested, "being in the room with the good old boys," and "entrenched networks" hindered their ability to feel welcomed and valued as part of college and university leadership. Moreover, these hindrances curtailed learning opportunities and, ultimately, sent "the not-so-subtle message that maybe I didn't belong." Likewise, asking for help was seen as a potentially "weak" action. A computer science chair explained, "I should know how to figure this out [on my own]. Even asking. . . that's not good. Like, I'm saying I can't do this when all I'm trying to find out is how they did it." Repeatedly, women chairs suggested that there are simply not enough avenues for them to sort out the complexities of "leading while female."

CONCLUSION

Presently, institutions of higher education are in transition, struggling to find ways to include previously marginalized voices and viewpoints in the curriculum, in discussions about values and goals, and in strategic decision making. Certainly, any discussion should include broad representation and close listening to concerns raised within the institutional community. Yet, even within an inclusive discussion, this research suggests that women's experiences of challenges and barriers to their leadership should be acknowledged.

As prior research (Acker, 2010; White and Burkinshaw, 2019) has suggested, women's voices matter. They matter not only because they should but because what they have to say matters if we are to promote fundamental values of equity and inclusion within the academy. Recognizing they matter brings the institution closer to promoting excellence and justice in public and communal ways. They matter because to ignore them compromises an institution's ability to be led as effectively as it might. How can we assure that women's voices are heard and leadership opportunities equitably supported? This research suggests that institutions would be best served by adopting a two-fold approach, one that focuses on increasing individual and institutional supports.

Individual Supports and Foci

Focusing on increasing support for women in the chair's role requires that institutions of higher education begin by acknowledging why women choose to lead. The women in this study suggested that they took on the chair's role to provide much-needed departmental leadership. Universally, they expressed a commitment to "doing good," "leading well," and "making a difference" with their work. Becoming a successful leader requires that one does not lose sight of intrinsic goals like these. Yet, persistence in the face of challenge is best sustained when access to support is readily available.

First, support for individuals in the chair's role must become institutionally transparent. Women chairs cannot be expected to serve with fewer supports for their work than their counterparts, nor should they be presumed to be of service in ways that men are not. Deans and provosts must clearly evidence what stipends, course releases, summer support, and other assistance (e.g., administrative and/or program coordination) are available for chairs, and then offer that support equitably. In turn, advocacy for individual support and reward becomes a matter of institutional commitment to the values of equity and fairness rather than one of self-interest. This finding echoes Wroblewski's (2019) call for increased awareness to the ways in which women serve as agents of and for institutional change.

Second, access to high-quality, gender-aware mentoring and coaching must be available to women chairs. Gender-aware mentoring requires that the social and cultural influences of "leading while female" be articulated and addressed. Clearly, women chairs should receive the same kinds of training for the role that men do. However, they should also be provided the opportunity to regularly meet with other women

leaders and in turn, support each other in this work. Simply put, significant progress on women's leadership in the academy will advance only when those who attain leadership positions use their time and power to support leadership opportunities for other women. As Eddy and Ward (2015) suggest, when women lean out of leadership roles due to inadequate support both the women themselves and the institution suffers.

However, we should be careful not to create a situation where women are compelled to do double duty by first providing positional mentorship and then additional gender-aware coaching. Yet, if we are to realize the potential of women within the academy, it is counter-productive to suggest that advocating for and supporting each other should not be part of our role. Women chairs have a tremendous opportunity to support each other and gender equity in the academy.

Institutional Supports and Foci

At the institutional level, commitment to gender equity would be an important first step. Institutions must embrace the understanding that focusing on individuals is not enough to combat systemic inequities (Johnson, 2017; Rhode, 2017). Certainly, structured programs matter if individuals are to be supported in the attainment and execution of leadership roles. However, the role of the institution in promoting gender equity is clear. Gender equity starts when it is institutionally understood that gender is a social, rather than biological, construct and that institutional norms and values are similarly socially constructed. As a result of those long-standing social constructions, current systems of recognition and reward confer power to and influence on some individuals while excluding others. Systemic change is possible only when these social constructions are surfaced, examined, and systemically eliminated in favor of more equitable and inclusive practices.

Colleges and universities must broaden opportunities for leadership development and selection. Aggressive programs designed to tap women leaders (and leaders from other marginalized populations) should be created. Multi-year programs should be designed to offer sustained support, including the development of readiness knowledge and skills, initial on-boarding, and on-going education for leadership efforts. Annual review, tenure, and promotion policies should recognize that there are multiple ways to advance within the academy, including those that privilege leadership service (Peterson, 2015). Such efforts have the benefit of creating a deep bench of skilled leaders, enhancing succession planning, and providing multi-layered career options for faculty.

Finally, institutions must explicitly focus on how gender differences are evidenced within the institution and how those differences play out in practice. Assuming that institutions are honest in their equity and inclusion statements and do seek to enhance opportunities for women in the academy, change is necessary. Change cannot occur if women find themselves frustrated and unhappy when they take on leadership roles (Glass and Cook, 2016; Rhode, 2017). Nor will change occur if women find themselves unsupported when conflict

arises, resources are limited, and/or the role requires more emotional labor of them than their counterparts. For real and lasting change to happen, institutions must look inward. This requires more than one-off initiatives and reports. Regular inquiry into how leadership is experienced by women within the academy is needed and must be followed by explicit changes to policy and programs with clear evaluation of those efforts.

Future Research

Studying women in the role of chair deepens existing research on women leaders in higher education (Acker, 2010; Airini et al., 2011; Dunn et al., 2014; Burkinshaw and White, 2017; O'Connor, 2018). Future research should focus on the ways women in the academy experience their work and on how universities and colleges might counter entrenched systemic barriers. Researchers might consider questions such as: What training and professional leadership experiences might be best employed for institutions of higher education to more fully prepare women chairs for the role? How might those experiences be offered to educate all members of the university community about issues of equity and inclusion? How might a broader equity agenda be advanced through such efforts? In what ways does an equity and inclusion-focused approach to departmental, college, and university leadership result in creating a system of higher education that better serves students and faculty alike? What role does intersectionality play in the development of equitable and inclusive leadership in higher education? Finally, and perhaps most importantly, what can institutions of higher education learn about institutional and systemic reform from those efforts?

Final Comments

Each of these chairs evidenced a strong commitment to service and promoting the common good. When that commitment is compromised by implicitly and explicitly limiting institutional practices, both individuals and institutions lose. Unquestionably, women in leadership roles, like that of the chair, can benefit from building their own skill set and support structures. Yet, focusing on individuals is not enough. Institutions must address the cultural and structural barriers, challenges, and tensions that hold women back. Doing so will evidence their commitment to gender equity and inclusion.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because the data includes participant quotes, affiliations, and other identifying information. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to SK, sharon.kruse@wsu.edu.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the Washington State University. The

patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

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