

THE CALL OF HIGHER ADMINISTRATION: OPPORTUNITIES FOR PROGRAM DIRECTORS TO “MOVE UP” OR “FIVE MINUTE PEARLS OF WISDOM”

The Lines At The Ladies Room Are Short

Danielle N. Ripich, Ph.D.

Medical University of South Carolina

One thing that struck me as I attended my first University President’s Council retreat after becoming Dean was that, aside from the Dean of Nursing, I was the only woman at the table. In contrast to ASHA conventions, the line at the ladies room at our breaks was very short. There have been numerous studies of women in corporate and academic leadership. Interestingly, law and academics lag behind the business world in advancing women in administrative roles. It may be that business rewards performance more directly or it may be that the women who choose business for a career are more directed toward administrative goals. Certainly, you have a better chance of reaching goals if you set them.

Leadership styles between men and women differ and our ideal of a good leader appears to have shifted over the past decade. A study of middle managers in the early 1990s listed important descriptors of leaders to be authoritative, decisive, and take charge. A follow up to that study recently showed the most used descriptors to include effective, consensus builder, and good communicator. The change seems to be in direction of attributes that are more gender specific to females than males. Perhaps more importantly for our field, they are qualities that are widespread in our CSD chairs. This may be one reason our disciplines appear in disproportionate numbers in academic administration.

I think there are some strategies that can help us, male or female, move into academic leadership. First, take a research approach to leadership. Do some self analysis to understand your own strengths and weaknesses. Understand and test out

hypotheses about how you impact situations and those around you. The Harvard Summer Programs in Higher Education Administration and the Bryn Mawr Program in Leadership are good places to do some self assessment. Look for mentors both outside and inside the university. Read and gather data that are qualitative and quantitative so that you understand as much as possible about academic leadership.

Having done the leadership “literature review,” it is necessary to determine your specific aims. Identify clearly what your goals are and begin to decide what steps you need to take to develop the skills and experience needed to accomplish these. Early in my career Julia Davis advised me that, while men can jump over steps in a career ladder, women generally need to fill in all the spaces. This may mean being an Associate Dean for three to five years to show that you understand how a Dean’s Office operates, if a Deanship is your goal. Being in a support role for too long, however, can be a career ender, so you need to set some limits on these sorts of experiences.

I believe that our training as clinicians, learning how to move clients from A to B, is the best sort of approach to academic leadership. Administration requires that we take the role of the other person, that we have realistic expectations, that we reward performance and effort, and that we always reach for the best possible outcome. With this approach I have a distinct impression that the lines at the ladies room will be getting longer.