The Slow Climb up the Higher Ed Ladder

BY SARA KAPLANIAK

Peggy Ryan Williams (center) at the 2006 Ithaca College commencement. IMAGE COURTESY OF GARY GOLD AND ITHACA COLLEGE

Over the years, women have made great strides in gaining access to higher education. We've come a long way since AAUW member Florence Bascom (1862–1945) sat behind a screen so as not to disrupt male students during her graduate studies in geology at Johns Hopkins University. Also gone are the days of being relegated to separate campuses to study limited offerings like education or fine arts.

Today, women can set their sights on attending almost any college or university to pursue a field of study that suits their interests. In fact, women now outnumber men in undergraduate enrollment and are more likely than men to pursue an advanced degree.

And yet the very institutions that are educating more women than ever before still lack female leadership. According to Catalyst, women hold 57 percent of lower-ranking positions in higher education, such as nontenured professors. But women make up only 38 percent of full professors and 26 percent of college presidents, even though more women than men pursue doctorates in the United States.

"That isn't ideal, because along with leadership comes power, privilege, opportunity, and higher pay," says Peggy Ryan Williams, president emerita of Ithaca College and a former member of the AAUW Board of Directors. "When women aren't represented in such positions, they are denied that level of compensation and equal opportunity to make a difference in the world."

The Path to Presidency

According to Williams, college and university presidents usually follow a specific career path that begins with teaching. From there, the rungs on the higher education ladder include securing tenure, chairing a department, and eventually moving into administration as a chief academic or financial officer.

After beginning her career in social work, Williams followed a similar path, holding various faculty and administrative positions within the Vermont State College system and at Trinity College before serving as president of Lyndon State College for eight years. In 1997, she became the seventh—and first woman—president of Ithaca College, where she served for 11 years. But Williams remains more the exception than the rule. As the American Council on Education reports, a college or university president today still tends to be a "white male in his 50s or 60s, married with children, Protestant, holding a doctorate in education with experience in his current position for six years."

That poses a problem for women, who are underrepresented among tenured faculty, full professors, provosts, deans, and administrators and on boards of trustees.

"The further you go along the pipeline, the leakier it gets," says Williams, who notes that the best route to a presidency is already being a president. "It is not surprising that men outnumber women as college and university presidents since that is the case at every step along the way."

When women are hired as a college or university president, it is almost always via the traditional path. They likely hold a doctorate in an academic discipline and spend more years in the classroom than their male peers before rising through the ranks. Along the way, they gather honors that might include endowed professorships, experience as deans and department directors, and published work.

Although most men follow a similar path, they may also come from law or medical school as well as politics, the military, business, or another nonacademic position, implying that search committees and boards of trustees are willing to take more risks with a man. A frustrating exam-

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ple recently emerged when the University of Iowa's board of regents selected—from a pool of white male finalists—a business leader as the school's new president and offered him $65,000 more annually than his female predecessor. Far from an isolated occurrence, the Iowa case follows a precedent of colleges and universities appointing nontraditional candidates—all men—as president.

Motherhood Penalties

While most college and university presidents are in their 50s and 60s, the path to getting there happens at a time when many academics are raising a family. According to the AAUW report *Barriers and Bias: The Status of Women in Leadership*, women tend to be the primary caretaker of children and others during their peak years in the workforce. They are also more likely than men to work part time and take time off for family commitments. As a result, balancing work and home responsibilities represents one of the most challenging obstacles for women leaders in higher education.

Jennifer Nash, an assistant professor and director of the Women's Studies Program at George Washington University, says that while good parental leave policies exist, "It's impossible to think about parental leave apart from gender equity at home." Nash says that if women typically parent on leave but men are using leave to produce academic work, that imbalance reproduces inequality.

Men outnumber women at every rung on the ladder.

Academia is clearly not immune to what is known in the professional world as the "motherhood penalty." In fact, *U.S. News and World Report* recently reported that, in higher education, men with children and child-free women are 35 percent more likely to get tenure than other candidates. And when women do achieve these positions, they often find themselves in supporting rather than leading roles. "All too often women, especially at the associate level, are pushed into far too much service work like advising" instead of being able to research, write, and lead, says Nash. "Which means at the rank of full professor, you still see far too few women."

Price of Perception

But it's not all about the pipeline. According to Williams, it is also about perception. "Women studying on college campuses, seeking involvement in student government, and even considering jobs in higher education lack role models who can illustrate what is possible and influence how we develop and assess our own leadership abilities," she says.

The effects of that deficit are pervasive. A 2012 study co-authored by Massachusetts Institute of Technology economist Esther Duflo surveyed families in India to compare attitudes about education and achievement in regions with and without female political leadership.

"In areas with long-serving female leaders, the gender gap all but vanished," says Duflo. "Parents were 25 percent more likely to have ambitious education goals for their daughters, and the girls set higher goals for them-

selves." The researchers found the opposite with regard to expectations for girls versus boys in villages led by only men.

With an increase in women leaders comes a new generation of ambitious girls who want to be leaders. Yet, as the supply of women leaders grows, women's representation hasn't caught up. "We talk about this pipeline as a well-oiled mechanism—that if women get a certain suite of experience, then they will move into particular positions," says Lynn Gangone, vice president for leadership programs at the American Council on Education. "But we have plenty of well-qualified women, and yet women are sorely underrepresented in senior leadership roles."

Colleges and universities serve as our national think tanks, advancing learning across the country. The leadership of those institutions should better reflect our nation's cultural and gender diversity.

"Until we make a cultural change about who is qualified and prepared to be a leader, we will continue to lack the unique perspective, talent, experience, and problem-solving approaches that well-educated women and other underrepresented groups have to offer," adds Gangone.

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AAUW HISTORY

AAUW MEMBERS LED THE WAY IN HIGHER ED

"The number of women in positions of leadership in this country, either appointed or elected, is ridiculously low. And that goes for the government, the universities, business, and just about every other organization."

Former AAUW president Anna Rose Hawkes made those remarks at AAUW's 75th anniversary celebration in 1957. Unfortunately, they're as true today as they were then, but AAUW leaders like Hawkes, who was a dean of women at George Washington University and other schools, helped dramatically improve women's access to higher education by pursuing leadership at colleges and universities.

Women students saw huge shifts in accommodations when AAUW leaders in the late 19th and early 20th centuries took the helm. When Ada Comstock Notestein, the first full-time president of Radcliffe College, was dean of women at the University of Minnesota starting in 1907, she advocated for housing for women students and started an all-female student government. Laura Drake Gill, dean of Barnard College, also advocated for women's dorms and helped found the country's first job-placement bureau for women in the early 1900s. Alice Freeman Palmer was a president of Wellesley College and was the first dean of women at the University of Chicago starting in 1892; women's representation among students went from 24 percent to nearly 50 percent during her tenure. May Lansfield Keller was the founding dean at Westhampton College and helped institute standards for women's education in the South at the turn of the 20th century.

The days of women being relegated to satellite campuses, forbidden to attend labs, and denied degrees after years of study may be over, but it's only because women like these AAUW leaders were there to fight for future alumnae. Learn more about AAUW's historical leaders at www.aauw.org/blog.