

Women and Leadership – How Do We Get There?

One of my favorite quotes was by Yoda in The Empire Strikes Back of the Star Wars series. He said, “Do, or do not. There is no try.”¹ As I contemplate my life to this point, I realize it has been filled with “do’s”.

I am the first

...in my immediate family to graduate from college.

...African American female to earn a PhD in biochemistry from Purdue University.

...African American director of science education at the Howard Hughes Medical Institute.

...African American dean of the college of Lewis & Clark College in Portland, OR.

...African American president of St. Mary’s College of Maryland.

St. Mary’s College of Maryland is

...an institution that had its beginning as a female seminary (finishing school) 175 years ago

...an institution that is the only public honors college – meaning no remediation in any discipline at any level – in the state

...an institution that is ranked in the top 10 of all **public** liberal arts colleges in the nation

...an institution that is ranked in the top 100 of *all* liberal arts colleges in the country

...an institution whose first two presidents in the modern era were women with ties to Sotterly plantation – a place that had a key role in sorting slaves once they came ashore after their voyage through the Middle Passage

St. Mary's College is a premier institution with a rich history and I am the seventh president of this place, poised to take it into the future.

I believe that this country is poised for women from every walk of life to assume positions of power and to lead us to a better place.

What has been my career path? Am I unique? What should we be thinking about in developing women to assume positions of power and leadership?

My career path was almost traditional. Typically, college presidents come up through the ranks in the academy; garnering positions of greater authority along the way: tenured faculty, department chair, associate dean, dean, associate VPAA, VPAA/provost, president. I skipped one of these steps in that I was never a department chair.

Additionally, I mixed up a few of the “steps” in that I went from associate dean to associate VPAA. I then left the academy for a few years for a position that gave me a national perspective on the state of higher education in general, and science education in particular, in this country. I then returned to the academy as a dean at an elite liberal arts college for three years before becoming a college president. The lesson here is that there is more than one path to a college presidency. I have had several successes throughout my career but when I look back, I believe the greatest accomplishment to this point occurred while I was outside of the academy. Before I discuss that, it’s important to provide a glimpse into how I believe I have gotten to where I am.

Being a first-generation college student, I had no one in my family I could talk to about *going* to college. All I knew was that I was always being told that I *had to go* and, as my maternal grandmother put it, “be able to take care of myself and my responsibilities.” I primarily applied to colleges based on how well I liked their football teams – USC, Penn State, University of Michigan, UCLA. One day I saw a brochure describing a school that had been saved from closure by its students who traveled around the country and later abroad singing Negro spirituals. They sent every dime they earned back to the school and

saved it from extinction. There was no mention of a football team but I figured there must be something special about a place where the students would work so hard to keep its doors open. That place is Fisk University and it changed my life. As a brief aside, when I arrived on campus, I found that there was a football team but I quickly realized why they didn't talk about it!

It was at Fisk that I found myself and comfort in who I was: a person constantly asking questions and looking for solutions. In my sophomore year, my speech communications professor, Dr. Gladys I. Forde, told me I was smart and should apply to the Minority Access to Research Careers program. I didn't know what research was but if Dr. Forde told me to do something, I did it. As part of the application process, I had to go before a committee of professors for an interview. Towards the end of the interview they said that if I were to get the scholarship, I would have to keep my grades up, do research during both the academic year and the summer, and get a PhD in the sciences. In return I would get my education paid for and receive a stipend. I asked what would happen if I didn't get a PhD and they said I would have to pay back all of the money! Well, I didn't know what research was and I definitely didn't know anything about a PhD but I

figured if that's all I needed to do to get money and take the financial stress off my family, well, I could do that!

When I left Fisk, a small historically black university in Nashville, TN, with a BS in chemistry, I went directly into the PhD program in biochemistry at Purdue. Purdue was a totally different world. I went from a place of 1,500 students to one with 30,000. I was the only African American in my cohort. I was the only African American and only female in my lab of six white males. And, to make matters worse, my professors didn't know how to teach! At Fisk, I was considered very bright. At Purdue, I felt like I was the most ill-prepared student in Biochemistry. At the end of that first semester, I was crest-fallen and determined not to go back. I drove directly from Indiana to Virginia to tell my maternal grandmother how hard it was and that I wasn't going back. It was this woman, a woman who had only a third-grade education and who worked as a live-in maid for a Dutch family in Charlottesville, VA, who told me that if anyone could do it, I could. She told me that I wasn't doing this for me but for others; that I had been given a gift and that I couldn't walk away from it; that she knew what I was made of and I need to rely on all of that to get me through. Then she told me to get myself back to school and take care of business! And so, after a dismal start to my graduate career, I got my act

together. The result was research that resulted in two back-to-back papers appearing in the top biochemistry journal (a rare and major accomplishment back then). My basic research eventually led to pharmaceutical companies creating more specific cholesterol-lowering drugs.

After Purdue, I did a post doc in Cincinnati that led to my being hired at Xavier. I believed I would remain at Xavier my entire career but Katrina happened and it changed the course of my life. When Katrina hit, I was the associate Vice President for Academic Affairs and a single parent of 15-year-old twins. All of New Orleans was scattered to the wind after that storm. My twins and I ended up in Maryland, where my family lived. By the time we got to my parents' home, there was an email from a director at the Howard Hughes Medical Institute offering me an office and support to help Xavier re-open. Why would this national philanthropy contact me? Xavier University was very important to Howard Hughes being that Xavier was one of only two HBCUs HHMI supported. HHMI leadership had heard me speak on a few occasions and knew of my work. Also, they remembered that I was from Maryland and assumed that I would come home after the storm. With the resources they provided, I was able to work with my colleagues at Xavier to support our science faculty while the university

was closed. This helped us retain them. It also helped us become the first university in New Orleans to reopen after the storm.

During the course of this work, I realized that I could not take my twins back to New Orleans – the city was just not ready. When I told the leadership at HHMI that I was not planning to return to Xavier, they offered me a job that day. The opportunity they presented was to do something that they had never done before and so they considered it to be a risk. Rather than develop another program where they gave money to institutions to advance science education, they wanted to develop a program where **they** would take the lead. I jumped at the opportunity and from that was borne the Science Education Alliance, an initiative that brought scientists and science educators together to actively engage college students in science. The program my team and I developed targeted college freshmen and engaged them in genomics and bioinformatics research as part of their normal science curriculum rather than as an extra-curricular activity. The program started with 12 schools and 280 students. By the time I left after its third year, the program had been implemented in 60 schools, engaged over 1,700 students, and generated over 100 submissions to the national GenBank database, two scientific and three science education publications, and numerous presentations by students and faculty. Today, the program

is in its 8th year and still going strong. Beyond the publications and presentations, the results have demonstrated increased engagement in science and college retention of all groups of students, regardless of their gender, race/ethnicity, or academic qualification. I believe this has been my most impactful and far-ranging work in preparing future scientists and science educators.

I left Howard Hughes for purely selfish reasons – I missed both the academy and being around students. I went to Lewis & Clark as Dean of the College and enjoyed my work there but I felt that I could be doing more. The opportunity to lead St. Mary's College was brought to my attention. Now, I believe I will be doing more as I assemble my team and we build on the College's solid foundation of excellent faculty, staff, and committed stakeholders to take the institution to the next level.

Is my career path much different from other female college presidents and CEOs? I don't think so. When you look at us, we all have achieved a degree of success in our respective fields. We have all done something impactful that demonstrates leadership ability; we are intelligent, demonstrate integrity, innovation, and decisiveness that is thoughtful, compassionate yet firm. But, if you look at our

percentages in top positions across the nation, only 26% of all college presidents are women² and only 9% are African American. According to a report released by CNN-Money in March of this year³, only 14.2% of the CEOs at the Fortune 500 companies are women. How can this be when women represent the majority of our society and are outpacing men in the acquisition of college and graduate-level degrees? Why, then, are there not more female presidents and CEOs?

In January of this year, the Pew Research Center conducted a survey examining women and leadership. Part of the survey was focused on addressing the questions what makes a good leader and does gender matter? When I read you what they came up with, you'll see that I am not too far off in my assessment of what it takes to be a good leader. A question they posed is, what traits are absolutely essential for a leader? In rank order, the respondents indicated that a leader must be honest (84%), intelligent (80%), decisive (80%), organized (67%), compassionate (57%), innovative (56%), and ambitious (53%). In the areas of intelligence and innovation the respondents made little distinction between the abilities of women versus men. Solid majorities of respondents see no gender difference in the areas of ambition, honesty, and decisiveness.⁴

So, if the public believes women are as qualified to lead as men, why is it that our percentage in leadership positions does not mirror our percentage in the US population? The Pew Research Center's survey⁴ identified the top barriers to women in executive positions.

1. 43% of respondents indicated that a major reason women are not in top executive positions is because women are held to higher standards than men
2. 43% stated that organizations are not ready to hire women into top leadership positions
3. 23% said that because of family responsibilities, women don't have enough time for these all-consuming positions
4. 20% indicated that women don't have sufficient connections to help them get to the top
5. 18% stated that a major reason is because women are less likely to ask for promotions and raises

Assuming these are the top barriers, what can be done to help women achieve parity? We always talk about the importance of having role models, advisors, and mentors. Mentors and advisors can help point the way for us. Mentors can help us develop and enhance our strengths and mitigate our weaknesses. They can also help us identify

appropriate professional development activities that will hone our skills and provide invaluable networking. They can empower us.

Role models can provide us with a real picture of what it looks like to be in a position of power. They provide a model for us to emulate. Role models also help society see what women can do in positions of power and leadership and, at the same time, dispel the myths that we “are not ready” for these positions.

Although having role models and a multitude of stage-appropriate mentors are keys to success, they are not enough. Having the traits and characteristics of leadership are not enough to get us into the door and “close the deal”. We need champions who will root for us and fight for us to move into positions of leadership. We need people who are on boards to appreciate the value and importance of having diverse perspectives in leadership positions. The data indicate that the more diverse an organization’s leadership, the more successful it can be. Boards, regardless of their composition, must remain cognizant of the need to diversify if women are going to make inroads into achieving professional parity.

I also believe that we, as women, should be more willing to just take the risk. It has been my observation over the years that many of us see the need for leadership, we see persistent problems that require a different approach to the solution and, in our minds or when doodling, we identify a myriad of ways to address the problem. But, for whatever the reason, we don't speak up, we don't take action, or we pass our ideas off to others. I say it is time for us to take the risk associated with potential failure and put ourselves out there. You just might be surprised that you were not only right but about also by the tremendous support you will receive from those who knew you had it in you all along!

As a nation, we have been working to achieve parity. Over the course of the last 30 years we have made substantial progress. I believe we must move beyond trying and just get it done if we are to achieve parity in our daughters' lifetimes. When that happens, Yoda will be pleased. And, our daughters, when standing before audiences to tell the story of their career path, will begin with something other than "I am the first..."

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¹ The Empire Strikes Back

² Lucie Lapovsky, "Why So Few Women College Presidents" in Forbes/ Investing, April 13, 2014, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/lucielapovsky/2014/04/13/why-so-few-women-college-presidents/>

³ Matt Egan, "Still Missing: Female Business Leaders" in CNN-Money, March 24, 2015, <http://money.cnn.com/2015/03/24/investing/female-ceo-pipeline-leadership/>

⁴ "Women and Leadership", January 14, 2015, <http://pewsocialtrends.org/2015/01/14/women-and-leadership/>