

**THE NEED TO PRACTICE WHAT WE TEACH:  
THE STICKY FLOOR EFFECT IN COLLEGES OF BUSINESS IN  
SOUTHERN U.S. UNIVERSITIES**

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**ABSTRACT**

*The Sticky Floor Effect, a relatively new career advancement barrier concept, theorizes there exist obstacles for women preventing them from advancing to first level management positions. Of significant importance to institutions of higher learning's colleges of business, the Sticky Floor Effect highlights issues of consistency, moral implications, and credibility, as it is in these establishments where workplace anti-discriminatory hiring and promotion practices are taught to future business professionals. This study aims to explore if the colleges of business, which are responsible for teaching equal opportunity employment practices, are following their own instructions through advancing women into first level management positions. Included in this study is an analysis of five states' colleges and universities in which gender ratios of department chairs and directors within colleges of business are examined. The results of the analyses show evidence of a sticky floor impacting career advancement opportunities for women.*

Discussions of equal opportunity employment are common in colleges of business, as the concept is both a demonstration of quality business practices and legally required for most organizations. Whether the discussion is in a management principles course, human resources course, or business law course, students are relentlessly lectured regarding the importance of implementing and following hiring and promotion practices that allow all employees to be evaluated and treated fairly and equally. While these discussions are commonplace in classrooms, the question remains if the practices of colleges of business' teachings are deficient in their own implementation. Should discrepancies exist, the obvious hypocritical practice may leave students and graduates of these institutions questioning the quality of their education, as it becomes a matter of faculty lectures presenting one theory while the implementation of the theory within the same function-

ing college of business remains lacking. This study aims to explore if the colleges of business, which are responsible for teaching equal opportunity employment practices, are following their own instructions through advancing women into first level management positions.

**THE STICKY FLOOR EFFECT**

Many theories examine the challenges presented in meeting equal employment practices, especially with regards to gender discrepancies, including wage gaps and glass ceilings. Another theory that assists in better understanding the employment practices with regards to gender equity, specifically promotions, is the sticky floor effect. As the theory explains, women experience great difficulty in entering first level management positions as a result of their qualifications being overlooked, and, therefore, their op-

portunities being limited. Given the challenges presented to women to gain first level management experience, the population of women in higher level management positions remains low. The fewer women in entry level management roles results in less women being considered for future career advancements, thus leading to the difficulty of organizations in diversifying their middle and upper level management positions.

Shadovitz (2011) reports that the issue of gender diversity in organizations supports the sticky floor effect more strongly than the glass ceiling effect in that managers in higher level positions are more likely to be diversified than entry level positions. This finding suggests the possibility of strategic and intentional promotions of women from entry level management positions to higher management positions, thus reducing the glass ceiling effect, as opposed to women in non-management positions as they seek to begin their management careers, which demonstrates the sticky floor effect in practice.

According to Levitan Spaid (1993) the sticky floor effect derived from Catherine White Berheide's 1992 study of women in low-paying government positions, in which it was found that women in entry level management positions was disproportionate to their male counterparts. Noble (1992) further concluded that over half of women working in country-wide government positions were categorized in the lowest paying roles. While these studies are limited to women's roles in government, Reichman and Sterling (2004) further found that women experienced great difficulty in entering management positions in other industries, especially those considered to be culturally male, such as business, academia, medicine, law, and sports.

Women's participation in organizational workforces has steadily increased from less than 25% in the early 20th century (Carnes & Kelley-Radojevich, 2011) to 47% in 2010 (Daughtery, 2012), however this increase is not reflected as significantly in management roles, meaning, many are unable to fulfill their greatest professional potential as a result of the challenges they face in entering management positions (Reichman & Sterling, 2004).

Disparities of women's experience, education, and work schedules do not fully account for the existing differences in women's workplace ranks and statuses (Reichman & Sterling, 2004). Discrimination and stereotyping of women in the workplace are the primary discussion points of the sticky floor effect literature. Intentional discrimination, referred to as disparate treatment, and unintentional discrimination, or disparate impact, are both strongly linked with the sticky floor effect. Each organization experiencing diversity issues in their management positions is different in their hiring and promotion processes, there-

fore each occurrence of the sticky floor effect with regards to disparate treatment or disparate impact are determined within the context of those specific situations.

Furthermore, the sticky floor effect literature also links the practice in organizations to descriptive stereotyping, such as physical traits, and prescriptive stereotyping, such as behavioral traits. More specifically, these stereotyping practices mean women are judged not on their qualifications and abilities to do a job, but on the perceived physical and behavioral characteristics of their gender resulting in a discrediting of them being successful in management positions (Pichler, Simpson, & Stroh, 2008). Additionally, assumptions of women being passive, fragile, more manipulative, and more emotional than men lead to destructive stereotyping that prevent them from entering management positions (Carnes & Kelley-Radojevich, 2011).

Society's assumptions of gender roles throughout history create barriers to women as they seek to advance professionally. Once people establish perceptions regarding women's roles in society they transfer those beliefs to the workplace, causing obstacles in fair consideration for women in roles they may be suited to hold. These obstacles, including the sticky floor effect, result in a lack of diversity throughout organizations. For example, higher level managers might experience coercion when making promotional and hiring decisions. Workplace social groups can also have a negative impact on career advancement opportunities for women, as who one interacts with can stifle potential opportunities (Harlan & White Berheide, 1994).

Further still to be considered are the challenges women present themselves that hinder their ability to experience upward mobility with regards to their careers (Seligson, 2008). More specifically, some experts hold that women often create internal barriers, such as their unwillingness to invest the necessary time and effort into building professional relationships, also known as playing the political games, in order to establish themselves as a serious contender for promotion (Leber, 2008). Women are often overlooked for advancement opportunities for which they are qualified due to their resistance to verbalize their goals and desires to be considered (Seligson, 2008).

Women in academics, specifically higher education, traditionally experience fewer advancement opportunities than men, as they are viewed as being both inflexible and unqualified with regards to their abilities to perform at higher levels. Higher education professionals are often expected to conduct research as a condition of promotions, an activity in which collaboration is common practice. Women's opportunities to conduct research are often more limited than men as they experience difficulties related to poor workload decisions and women commonly

obtain their Ph.D.'s later than men. Additionally, men often seek research opportunities whereas women are more passive in their research goals. Given that most universities consider research agendas to be a primary factor in promotions, women are at a disadvantage, thus less enter the ranks of management (Barrett & Barrett, 2010).

### ARE COLLEGES OF BUSINESS STICKY IN THEIR EMPLOYMENT PRACTICES?

In general, the existence of the sticky floor effect has been proven, however knowledge of the practice in academia is questionable. Specifically, this study examines if the sticky floor effect is prevalent in colleges of business, where students learn fair employment practices. In a study of 44 colleges of business from institutions of higher learning in five southern states (Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee), the genders of first level management positions, specifically, department/division chairs and program directors (or the equivalent) were collected. The data were analyzed to determine the composition of the managers who serve in these positions.

With an 80.3% of men and 19.7% of women serving in first level management positions in the researched institutions, a clear discrepancy exists (See Figure 1).

When viewed by state, it becomes clear that the lack of women in first level management roles is an issue that is concerning, as equal representation of both genders is not evident in public institutions throughout the five states. In the five states there exists a significant disparity between the number of men and women in chair and director positions with women being significantly underrepresented. The state with the least representation of women in chair and director positions is Tennessee, which reported 11.4%. By comparison, Alabama, the state with the most

representation of women in first level management positions, reported 30.6% (See Table 1 and Figure 2).

State	Male	Female
Alabama	69.4%	30.6%
Arkansas	81.8%	18.2%
Louisiana	83.7%	16.3%
Mississippi	76.2%	23.8%
Tennessee	88.6%	11.4%

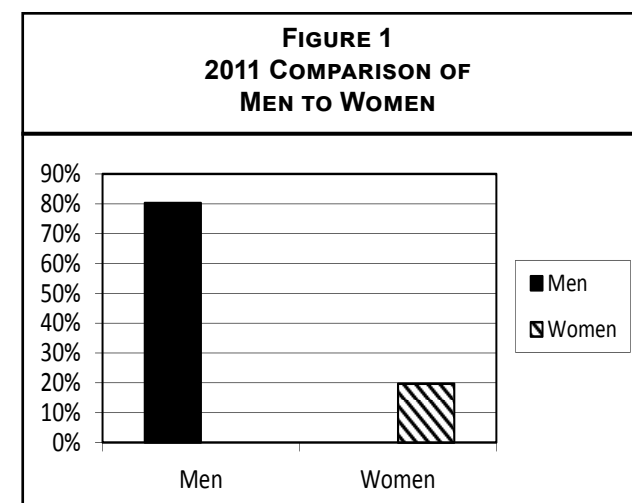
Furthermore, data were collected of the gender composition of deans, provost/vice presidents for academic affairs, and presidents/chancellors (or the equivalent positions) to determine the gender of the middle and upper level managers making hiring and promotion decisions for the chair and director positions.

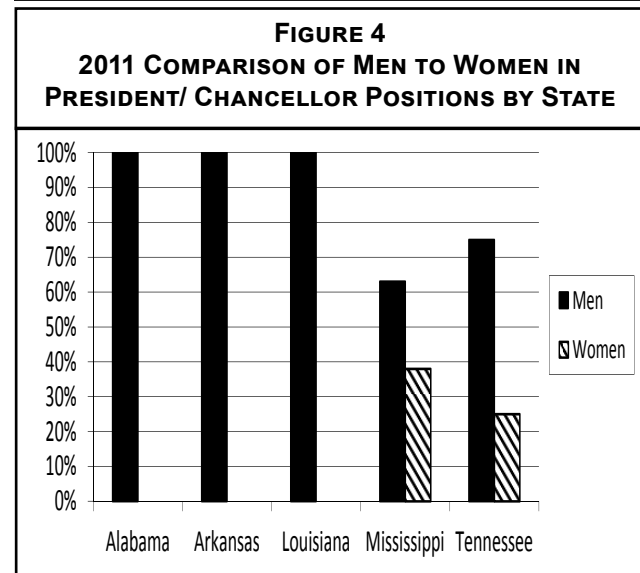
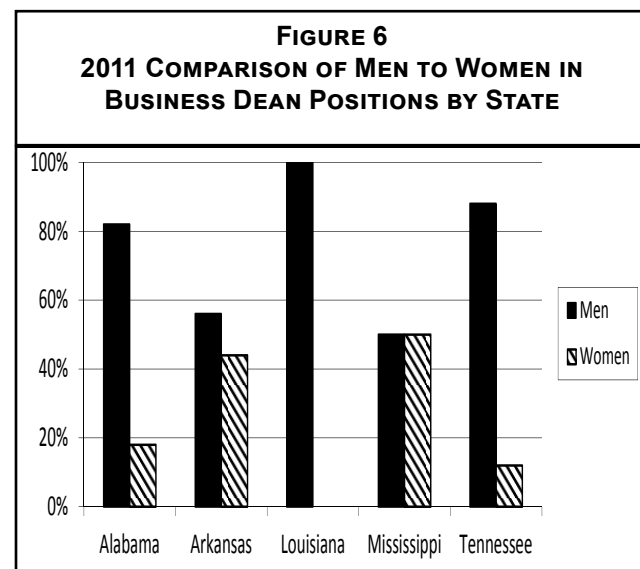
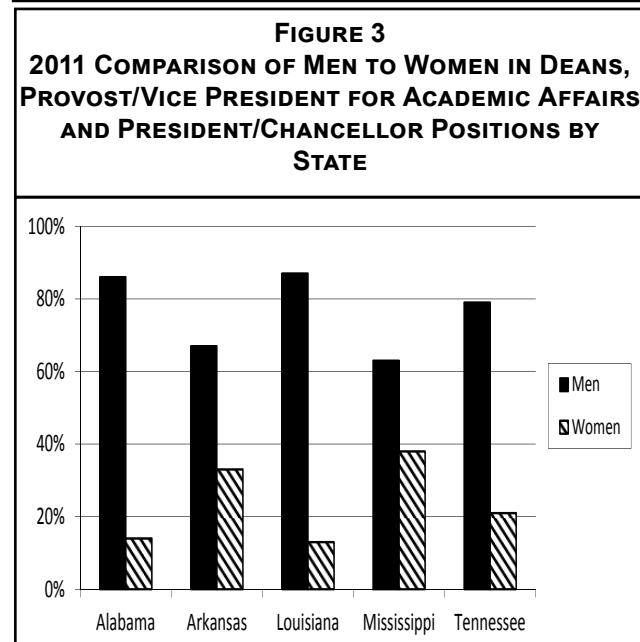
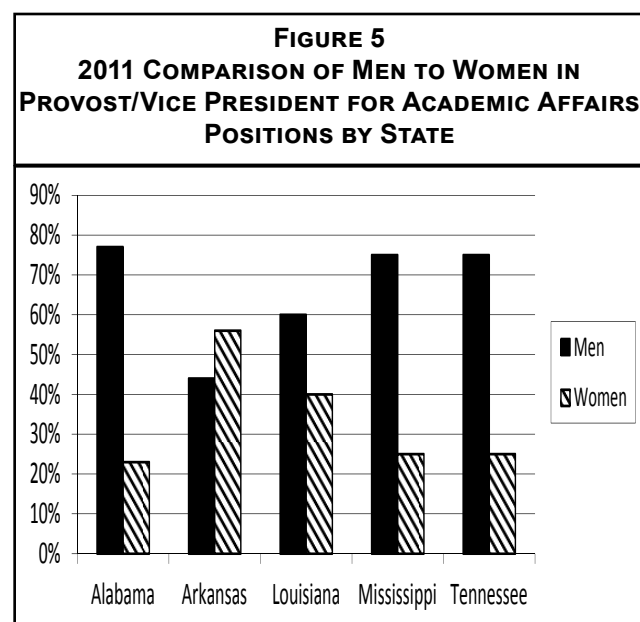
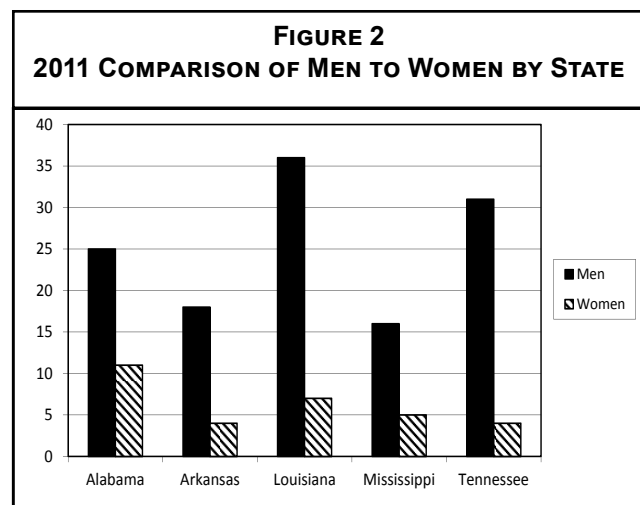
Overall, men accounted for 77% of the employees holding deans, provost/vice presidents for academic affairs, and presidents/chancellors (or the equivalent) positions and women accounted for 23% of the employees in these positions. On the state level, the discrepancy is more evident (See Figure 3).

Each state's institutions' gender composition for their president/chancellor position demonstrates the vast majority of the top academic leaders in the states are predominately men with three states employing no women in the role (See Figure 4).

Each state's institutions' gender composition for their provost/vice president for academic affairs position demonstrates the vast majority of the top academic leaders in the states are predominately men (See Figure 5). One state, Arkansas is an exception as it employs more women (56%) than men (44%).

Each state's institutions' gender composition for their business dean position demonstrates the vast majority of the top academic leaders in the states are predominately men (See Figure 6). Mississippi's gender breakdown, however, provides a counter to the other states as it had a 50-50 split, thus resulting in equal representation of both genders in the role.





**DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

Analysis of the collected data revealed the colleges of business in the five states of this study do not appear to adhere to fair hiring and promotion practices of women into entry level management positions, thus supporting the notion of the existence of a sticky floor effect. The consistency of the disparity between the genders in chair and director positions in all five states indicates a trend in preventing women from holding those positions. Although each of the states yield varying results, none of them exhibit gender equality.

These results open up discussion of the possibility of the practice of disparate impact, as women appear to be in-

advertently disproportionately excluded from many promotional opportunities. Colleges of business may not be intentionally discriminating against women through apparent practices, but the results of the study indicate the practices they do employ favor the promotions and hiring of men over women to entry level management positions.

The results of this study indicate colleges of business may not be cognizant of their discriminatory practices towards women. The primary concern resulting from this realization is that ignorance to an issue leads to the continuance of that issue. While other industries and academic environments may not be scrutinized as thoroughly, colleges of business are one of the main proponents of diversity and equality in the workforce. A business school cannot expect its graduates to one day employ practices of equality and diversity if it is not demonstrating the practice. Having a “Do as I say and not as I do” environment can subconsciously teach students it is appropriate to discriminate given they acknowledge it is unacceptable.

Further scrutiny of the data reveals that the hiring and promotion practices may not be as unintentional as theorized, but rather a practice of disparate treatment. The gender composition of those in middle and upper level administrative positions, specifically the business deans, provosts/vice presidents for academic affairs, and presidents/chancellors (or equivalent positions), are overwhelmingly held by men. This revelation indicates that the decision makers may selectively choose men to hire or promote into chairs and directors positions, resulting in a “boy’s club” of sorts.

A working environment lacking diversity can prevent growth opportunities. Placing the correct person in the correct position will allow the overall organization to benefit from that individual’s leadership skills. Through eliminating preconceived beliefs of what type of managers are needed in positions and focusing on matching the organization’s needs with the applicant qualifications, diversity is likely to occur. Any organization that does not effectively embrace and initiate diversity is shortchanging itself.

**CONCLUSION**

Colleges of business especially have a considerable impact on setting workplace trends as a significant amount of time is spent educating future business professionals on the best equal opportunity and diversity practices to utilize. It is the colleges of business that essentially establish hiring standards in industry as a result of what they emphasize regarding acceptable and unacceptable employment practices. It is for this critical reason students need to observe the application of their classroom experiences

in practice. Hiring managers within the colleges of business should ensure women are provided equal opportunities to their male counterparts.

Beyond academia, women remain considerably underrepresented in entry level management positions in the workplace, a factor of which is likely due to the sticky floor effect. Although current hiring and promotional practices may not be as obvious and directly discriminatory as in the past, the consequences nevertheless lead to the same effect. Colleges of business have the power to implement changes in the business environment.

Opportunities for the further advancement of women do appear to be hopeful as changes and shifts in the workforce take place. Continuous changes in workforce demographics means generational, cultural, and gender differences will need to be further embraced in an effort to encourage these changes throughout the organization. More women than ever possess the skills and talents needed to advance up the career ladder (Shambaugh, 2006).

As promising as the opportunities may look for women, many companies have yet to take initiatives to address the issue as over 71% have failed to implement women leadership programs (Evans, 2011). As Yap and Konrad (2009) found it is to an organization’s advantage to address discriminatory barriers against women. Diverse work environments have been linked to higher levels of innovation, better problem solving, and higher levels of organizational performance. Thus, organizations seeking to advance often take the necessary steps to diversify their workforces.

**LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

All research has limitations, which affect the outcomes and conclusions of the study. Through examining these limitations, future researchers can be better equipped to understand the challenges associated with the study, as well as the differences that can occur and improve upon the existing research.

Although the findings of the research reveal evidence of a sticky floor effect in colleges of business, the study was limited to one year of data. Therefore, any conclusions derived from the results of this study should be interpreted with caution. This could be used as an avenue for longitudinal research, which would provide a clearer picture of possible discriminatory trends. The study was also limited to public institutions in five states in the southern region of the United States. Furthermore, this study provided data specifically for colleges of business, thus limiting knowledge of discrepancies in other areas of the institutions.

Another limitation of this study involves the generalizability of the results of this particular research. As previously noted, the data collected was limited to a specific region of the country and only included one component of institutions in five states. Therefore, it is not certain that the findings will yield similar results across other regions, private institutions, and beyond the college of business. Finally, this study is exploratory in nature and has provided some promising results.

### FUTURE RESEARCH

While the findings of this study provide some promising results, there are several areas that need to be addressed in future research. One could explore other regions of the country to determine if there are discrepancies in those areas, and, if so, the extent to which the sticky floor effect exists across the country. Such data would identify trends across the nation and determine what regions are more likely to discriminate against women.

Also, continued research could be conducted using private institutions to determine if their hiring and promotion practices mirror that of the public institutions. Should it be determined that private institutions do not experience similar difficulties, then a study of their practices and policies could benefit the public institutions experiencing gender discrepancies.

Additional research would allow for the exploration of gender composition of faculty and staff for each school beyond the college of business. For example, a comparison of the college of business gender makeup of chairs and directors to the other campus entities and the entire university to determine if there exists a correlation. The results would determine if colleges of business hold the same, higher, or lower standards to those other units and the overall university.

Future research could also focus on colleges of business at institutions beyond the United States of America. This would provide a larger understanding of the role of women worldwide in higher education. Also, expanding to global research would provide a better understanding of if the sticky floor effect exists internationally and, if so, to what extent.

Finally, the sticky floor effect provides insight into gender differences in employment practices. However, through expanding this research to study the impact ethnicities, nationalities, and races of women have on their opportunities to advance to first level management positions would provide greater insight and understanding. Being able to identify specific groups of women who experience greater challenges in career advancement would allow organizations to implement appropriate programs.

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