Backgrounds and Perceptions of Women Arts Administrators

Debbie Rohwer
University of North Texas

Background

Education organizations have noted a gender disparity in administrative leadership. In colleges, the American Council on Education urged leaders to move the needle from having 30% to 50% of U.S. college presidents be women by 2030 (ACE, 2017). A gender inequity has also been documented in school district populations (PBS, 2016), with a majority of teachers being women, but less than a quarter serving as superintendents. Because of this historical inequity being in contrast with a call for gender equity, it is important to understand and nurture the characteristics, skills, perceptions, and practices of successful women administrators in both K–12 and collegiate settings.

And yet, relatively few research studies have been completed that have described women leader characteristics and skills. Ramirez (2012) found that parent's education (i.e., both earning a 4-year degree) was associated with women becoming administrators. In terms of characteristics, Kersh (2014) found that women administrators tended to have effective short-term strategies to avoid stress, but ineffective long-term strategies, and Adusah-Karikari (2008) and Byington (2010) noted that perseverance, planning, prioritization, and determination were characteristics/skills that helped women leaders advance. Byington (2010) recommended that women administrators work at improving their life role balance by addressing such things as self-care, flexibility, and stress-guilt reflection.

Having a family can add a new balance to the administrative success equation for women. In Edwards (2002), both male and female respondents perceived a role conflict associated with having a career and a family that served as a barrier to women's advancement in higher education. Cosimini (2011), Freeman (1992), and Monroe, Ozyurt, Wrigley, and Alexander (2008) found that a common career barrier was balancing work and family needs, and Jo (2008) documented that one of the main reasons for voluntary turnover of women

administrators was due to incompatible work schedules. In contrast, Fiske (1997) found the majority of women music educators in higher education were married with children and that family did not interfere with their careers, although the participants noted that time was their greatest perceived stressor. Marshall (2002) and Gates-Black (2002) documented women's perceptions of positive feelings of work satisfaction and home happiness, but also the feelings of guilt, marital strain, and personal sacrifices that were a natural part of having a career and children. Balance between family and work (Garcia, 2015; Wootton, 2006) and support from family members (Byington, 2010; Neal, 1991; Shrader, 2004) were documented as necessary in order to enjoy advancement in careers.

One component that has been documented as an important part of advancing in administration is mentoring. Neal (1991) noted that networking with other women was a necessary part of women's advancement and Carbonell (2014) and Jarmon (2014) found that mentors contributed to the career advancement of the participants. Specifically, both Reeves (2015) and House (2001) noted that without mentors, even highly skilled women might be overlooked, suggesting that programs add a systematic coaching program for mentors of aspiring women so that these relationships can be strategic. Adusah-Karikari (2008) added that participants felt frustrated by not having mentors, being outside of the old-boy network. Singh, Robinson, and Williams-Green (1995) and Washington (1988) found that burnout was less common for those women administrators who had similar leadership styles to their supervisors; the researchers proposed mentoring that aligned styles to help communication and lower stress.

There is a need for additional research on women arts administrators in K–12 and college settings. Studies investigating women collegiate administrators have shown that parental background, perseverance, planning, having a supportive spouse that helps with career balance, and a supportive mentor are all aspects that may help women be successful administrators. While descriptive studies have investigated collegiate administrators, Earnhart (2015) is the only example that addresses K–12 arts administrators. While this study described Texas music administrators' perceptions of the competencies needed for successful music teacher attributes,

it did not address the administrators' own backgrounds or leadership perceptions.

The field of music education may benefit from the results of this study through an understanding of the variables that women arts leaders perceive as having a positive impact on leadership success. The purpose of the study was to describe the backgrounds and perceptions of women arts administrators in K–12 and higher education settings who were married and had children.

Method

Participants (N = 14) were purposefully sampled based on the known characteristics of (a) being in arts administrative positions, (b) having children, (c) being married, and (d) being female. Sampling resources were Facebook, institution web pages, organization list-serves, and personal reference. Fifteen people with these known characteristics were contacted and one person out of the 15 declined participation.

Each participant was emailed the informed consent notice as part of the recruitment email for the study. The semi-structured interview guide contained questions that were content validated based on importance from past literature; topics included background and demographic variables and perceptions on career and life balance, mentoring, and success characteristics. Because of the semi-structured nature of the interview, the number of follow-up questions varied across the participants, with the total number of content questions asked ranging from 18 to 29.

Interviews were recorded for transcription purposes using Uberconference.com. Each interview was recorded and transcribed and lasted between 28 and 46 minutes (M = 37.49, SD = 5.73). All original names were replaced with pseudonyms in compliance with IRB processes. An external evaluator reviewed the transcriptions and the synthesized concepts to confirm the authenticity of the results. All participants were provided the final report as a member check.

Results

The women leader respondents were seven higher education administrators from six Midwestern/Eastern states and seven Fine Arts Directors from Texas. The participants' ages ranged from 34 to 58 (M = 47.00, SD = 7.10), and they had been married from 3 to 43 years (M = 21.14, SD = 9.99). The women had from one to three children (M = 2.21, SD = .70) and those children ranged in age from 4 to 38 (M = 16.37, SD = 9.11). Half of the women had a parent with a college degree and five had both parents with college degrees. The Fine Arts Chairs all had completed master's degrees and the faculty members had completed doctorates, with the participants being in the field for an average of 14.29 years since their degrees (ranging from 2 to 30 years, SD = 8.51).

Across the participants, the requirements for daily job hours varied; the normal day was 8 to 5 with evening and weekend events for fine arts chairs, and less-defined hour requirements were described by collegiate music administrators. The job duties also varied across participants, with some fine arts chairs describing regular visits to campuses for relationship building, others listing visioning and programming, and yet others describing a combination of micro and macro leadership activities. The higher education administrative positions also varied greatly, with some leaders supervising 10 or more faculty, and some being the only full-time members of their division. Some of the administrators were inward facing, primarily addressing student-related tasks and their own teaching and research, and others spending a majority of their time working with administrators across campus and the community for such tasks as outreach and fund raising.

While the participants' position responsibilities varied greatly, their perceptions of leadership tended to converge. Across the board, the leaders described personal characteristics of perseverance and resilience. Three quarters of the women specifically linked the value of hard work and organization to their parents who modeled these traits during their upbringing. Most of the participants (n = 10) also stated that they tried to be organized, while also being able to be flexible to the needs of those around them. As one leader said: "I'm a planner but I try to be open,

both short-term and long-term…not static. If we adhere too strongly to a set plan it can be a hindrance; then we can't be useful change agents."

When asked what traits they would like to improve in their leadership, the responses varied across the participants; the only answers that were said by more than one person were setting boundaries (n = 2), improving organization skills (n = 2), and not being so hard on themselves (n = 2). In describing the path to their administrative positions, almost all (n = 12) noted that their position opportunities happened serendipitously instead of being a goal or planned path. Most commonly, friends or mentors encouraged them to take the position (n = 8) and some (n = 3) described that there was no one else who could or would do the duties if they hadn't taken the job.

Current spouses were described as supportive, which allowed the women to meet their work requirements. The husbands would commonly take on house duties that might be considered non-traditional, such as laundry, doing the dishes, or cooking. Participants described negotiations that happened weekly or even daily to address scheduling conflicts across the family members. A majority (n = 9) of the participants stated that being able to keep their work and their family priorities front-and-center in their discussions helped their families to negotiate. Ten of the women specifically stated that their family was always a higher priority than work. As one participant stated:

> "I walk my son to school every morning. I love that, because it's my little bit of time with him before I drop him off, so I try not to have any meetings before 8 am. I really try to hold true to this priority. I've found that when we are just walking side by side to school during this 15 minutes he will casually mention things that I can't pull out of him at other times. It's a really special time. It's frustrating thinking I've got to hurry, but I try to say, ok, this is important."

While the women leaders commonly stated that their children were proud and supportive of their paths, the women often stated feelings of guilt when they couldn't be in multiple places at the same time. As one participant stated:

"My family is fine with the balance, knowing that my husband or I will always be there but maybe not both. It's my issue to overcome… my belief that a mom should always be there no matter what."

This perspective of family value mixed with some feelings of guilt was clear in the participants' statements and was in alignment with study findings of both Marshall (2002) and Gates-Black (2002). Some of the older women leaders (n = 5) specifically highlighted that they had learned to say no across their careers, which helped them achieve and feel balanced.

Participants (n = 10) commonly worked over email whenever it fit, including before children awoke or after they went to bed. Two participants stated that they did not email after work hours, wanting to keep family time strategically for the family. When scheduling conflicts did arise, family or friends could assist in most cases, but a majority of the women (n = 8) also noted that their children often attended work events with them, and that training their children to be mature members of society was an important goal.

Scheduling challenges and time constraints often led to documented deficiencies in managing stress and addressing self-care. As one participant stated:

"My priorities are to keep the boat afloat for my family and my colleagues. My needs are always the first to go out the window. I should live more by the 'put your oxygen mask on first before helping others' model, but I don't."

Most women (n = 12) openly acknowledged their stress and lack of self-care. While all of the women could describe things that could help them with stress and self-care, such as exercise, family time, sacred reflection, and bonding with friends and family, only two of the participants strategically made time for activity and reflection on their own health and well-being.

The women (n = 10) most commonly had mentors related to work, with almost all of these participants (n = 8) describing access to a mix of men and women mentors; two of the women stated that they specifically liked having only women mentors. Most of the mentors the participants described were faculty from their prior degree programs (n = 7). Few (n = 2) also had strategic mentors for work-life balance issues, with friends and family most commonly tending to

serve that function. Four of the women stated that they were fairly independent and didn't really have mentors they went to for feedback on work or family.

While some of the participants (n = 5) had sought out their own professional development programs and found them valuable, only one of the 14 participants had systematic leadership development provided by their institution that helped them transition to their new administrative duties.

Conclusion

The women in the current study represented a spread of ages, years being married, ages of children, and work schedules. One consistency across the respondents was their dedication, which aligned with Adusah-Karikari (2008) and Byington (2010)'s finding that women who model perseverance, planning, prioritization, and determination tend to excel as leaders. The women in the current study universally modelled the positive characteristics from these studies, which is logical given their selection and continued success as leaders. It may be valuable to find women in arts teaching settings who model these types of positive characteristics to encourage them to consider leadership opportunities.

In contrast with the findings of Ramirez (2012), a majority of the parents of the women leaders did not tend to have both parents who had college degrees. Inspirational parents and mentors were both noted as guiding, positive forces for many of this study's leaders. It may be that having parents who model work ethic may be just as important as having parents with college degrees. Future research investigating the ways that perseverance and work ethic are modeled during upbringing and schooling would add depth to this descriptive finding.

Results from the current study tended to align with Fiske's (1997) finding that nurturing both work and family can be navigated successfully; the current study's participants did not tend to describe role conflicts and barriers as has been documented in past studies (Cosimini, 2011; Edwards, 2002; Freeman, 1992; Jo, 2008; Monroe, Ozyyurt, Wrigley, & Alexander, 2008). It should be noted that navigation may vary across families, with some women possibly needing to silo their work time from their family time and others wishing to meld work and family tasks across

each 24-hour time period. It may be that each family needs to find the balance that works for them instead of looking at families as the traditional scales of justice model that should look uniformly balanced to all outside observers.

Findings from the current study did align with Byington's (2010) recommendation that women administrators work at improving their work life balance by addressing such things as self-care, flexibility, and stress/guilt reflection. Some of the older women leaders stated they were at peace with their balance because of their ability to say *no*. Helping women feel that it is safe to say no can and should be a viable discussion in any healthy work environment, and women leaders who can model a family-supportive setting may be helping the next generation of leaders excel and flourish. It may be useful for women to see successful female role models in order to envision how nurturing, balanced environments can be navigated.

Programs that can help women feel comfortable with their own balance early in their career may be ideal models. Women leaders can be encouraged to create a culture that is accepting of flexibility and compassion. Embodying self-care and resilience strategies and encouraging a family-friendly work environment can indeed be a priority in educational environments. Avoiding calls and emails in the evenings or on the weekends can be negotiated if that is what works best for a given family or educational setting. In addition, having a work environment where faculty and staff have the opportunity to call or Skype into meetings or move meetings when family conflicts occur may lead to empathy and bonding across group members.

Mentoring was not a universal need among the women in this study. It would be ideal for women leaders to have the option to have a mentor, but also the safety in knowing that there would be no stigma associated with not needing or wanting a mentor. Due to the lack of an extensive number of women leaders in the uppermost levels of arts education, it would be ideal for current women leaders to provide encouragement to all women who show leadership potential so that they feel like it is a viable path. Because many of the women in the current study had mentors from their time as graduate students, it may be important for women leaders to specifically seek out female graduate students to encourage, as this timeframe may be pivotal for leadership

development. It should be noted that men can also provide valuable mentorship to women, and many women in the current study were fine with men guiding them toward leadership positions. It may be important for some women to have a woman mentor, as the picture of how leadership may work may be clearer when gender doesn't vary.

Settings that can provide leadership coaches for women may be providing a wonderful growth opportunity. A coach chosen from a pool of viable coaches (including women coaches), can meet the personality and skillset needs of the person being coached. Because of the individual nature of coaching, issues such as work life balance can be addressed, or not, as desired by the woman seeking input. Coaches can also assist women leaders with job-specific growth opportunities such as ways to improve self-evaluation and global visioning, as well as possibilities for innovation in their positions.

Workplaces that provide women with the option of engaging in group coaching and mentorship development programs as they transition into a leadership positions may be assisting with the leadership pipeline that is needed to encourage gender equity in the workplace. The current study found that those women who specifically desired the path of administration were outliers, and so priming women's thoughts toward leadership may need to happen more systematically and earlier in their career. Exposure programs such as ACE's or Harvard's women leadership programs provide opportunities where women can see other women who are strong models of demonstrated leadership success.

In conclusion, programs that can prioritize the development of their future leaders may be investing in the education system at large. Having leaders who can master the management and visioning tasks for the future would be worth the investment of time and resources. Developing a work culture where all women feel compelled to mentor and support each other can and should be encouraged.

Keywords

Administrator, fine arts, music education, perceptions, women

Address for correspondence

Dr. Debbie Rohwer, College of Music, University of North Texas, 1155 Union Circle #311367, Denton, TX 76203; *Email:* debbie.rohwer@unt.edu

References

ACE (2017, December 1). Moving the needle: Advancing women in higher education leadership. *American Council on Educati on*. Retrieved from http://www.acenet.edu/leadership/programs/Pages/Moving-the-Needle.aspx

Adusah-Karikari, A. (2008). *Experiences of women in higher education: A study of women faculty and administrators in selected public universities in Ghana* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertation and Theses database. (UMI No. 3351084)

Byington, M. K. (2010). *Principal balance: Life role balance among women in secondary school administration* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertation and Theses database. (UMI No. 3428254)

Carbonell, J. W., IV. (2014). *An examination of women administrators who have overcome the gender gap in Christian higher education* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertation and Theses database. (UMI No. 3690884)

Cosimini, S. H. (2011). *Female administrators in higher education: Victories, broken barriers, and persisting obstacles* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertation and Theses database. (UMI No. 3456113)

Earnhart, J. L. (2015). *Competencies of the public school music administrator: Texas music administrator perspectives* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertation and Theses database. (UMI No. 10076042)

Edwards, N. R. (2002). *Barriers to women's advancement in higher education as perceived by faculty and administrators* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertation and Theses database. (UMI No. 3067221)

Fiske, J. A. (1997). *A profile of women music educators in higher education* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertation and Theses database. (UMI No. 9802239)

Freeman, G. P. (1992). *The career advancement of women administrators in higher education: Trends, barriers, and progress* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertation and Theses database. (UMI No. 9232260)

Garcia, B. E. (2015). *Work-life balance: A phenomenological study on how female principals balance their professional and personal lives* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertation and Theses database. (UMI No. 3708541)

Gates-Black, L. J. (2002). *Personal and professional challenges faced by women who are administrators in higher education* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertation and Theses database. (UMI No. 3053295)

House, P. B. (2001). Women in higher education administration: A synthesis of the literature, 1970 to 1999 (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertation and Theses database. (UMI No. 3003980)

Jarmon, L. (2014). *Cracking the glass ceiling: A phenomenological study of women administrators in higher education* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertation and Theses database. (UMI No. 3627407)

Jo, V. H. (2008). Voluntary turnover and women administrators in higher education. *Higher Education, 56*, 565–582.

Kersh, R. (2014). *Understanding the relationship between stress and health risk for women administrators in higher education* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertation and Theses database. (UMI No. 3673763)

Marshall, S. M. (2002). *Women higher education administrators with children: Negotiating personal and professional lives* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertation and Theses database. (UMI No. 3073936)

Monroe, K., Ozyurt, S., Wrigley, T., & Alexander, A. (2008). Gender equality in academia: Bad news from the trenches, and some possible solutions. *Perspective on Politics, 6*, 215–233.

Neal, N. J. R. (1991). *Factors identified to balance positions of leadership and personal life-style satisfaction among southwestern women administrators in higher education* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertation and Theses database. (UMI No. 9203017)

PBS (2016, 2016, December 30). Few women run the nation's school districts. Why? *Education*. Retrieved from http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/women-run-nations-school-districts/

Ramirez, D. M. (2012). *Women in leadership: Factors that affect the achievement of women in higher education administration at four-year public and private universities in Texas* (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertation and Theses database. (UMI No. 3525005)

Reeves, M. K. (2015). *Glass ceiling effect: A qualitative study of higher education administrators and mentorship* (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertation and Theses database. (UMI No. 3728497)

Shrader, A. (2004). *Creativity and leadership: The higher education music administrator* (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertation and Theses database. (UMI No. 3162701)

Singh, K., Robinson, A., & Williams-Green, J. (1995). Differences in perceptions of African American women and men faculty and administrators. *The Journal of Negro Education, 64,* 401–408.

Washington, Y. K. (1988). *Perceived leadership styles of supervisors and the relationship to burnout in female middle-administrators in higher education* (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (UMI No. 8900420)

Wootton, P. A. D. (2006). *The few who succeed: Women administrators in higher education* (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertation and Theses database. (UMI No. 3220367)