

The need to practice what we teach: Sticky floor effect in 11 states' universities

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ABSTRACT

Universities, specifically their colleges of business, stress within courses, through events, and across their public persona the significance of gender diversity practices as a means to treat women fairly, provide them with equal opportunities, and to create an even playing field. The emphasis of this topic stresses that gender diversity is of great importance to universities' leaderships. However, this study seeks to explore if the practices within universities match their outward appearances. Within this study the public universities from 11 southern U.S. states during the academic year (AY) 2022-2023 administrative positions from their colleges of business to their upper administrative officers are analyzed regarding their gender compositions of those holding these positions and how their employment practices reflect their true gender diversity, equal opportunity, and fair employment practices. Of particular interest is the sticky floor effect, in which administrative opportunities given to women are explored.

Keywords: diversity, gender, equal opportunity, sticky floor effect, university

INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions broadcast their commitment to fair treatment of women by way of equal employment opportunities, gender diversity, fair employment practices, and equity and inclusion through their published mission statements, vision statements, strategic plans, and websites where they declare their intent to provide opportunities for their employees through specific policies, procedures, guidelines, and actions. Within these institutions, employment practices can be investigated to determine if they adhere to those concepts on a practitioner level and as a role model for their impressionable students.

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 functioning college of business remains lacking. (Johnson et al., 2014, p. 27)

The leaders within universities are tasked with hiring, promoting, and appropriately applying fair opportunities to qualified females through career advancements. The sticky floor effect theorizes that females struggle to gain traction to progress to higher levels of management (administration) from first level administrative positions, such as department chairs, as they are often not provided opportunities to enter administration at the lowest level. This practice of selecting males for entry level administrative roles, limits the available females with experience for middle and upper-level administrative positions, thus creating a lack of females throughout all levels of administration (Johnson et al., 2014).

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Higher education institutions and their colleges of business advocate equal opportunities and representation of women in organizations. This study investigates the gender of public universities administrators during AY 2022-2023 in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. This study seeks to determine if universities' administrators, from their department chairs in their colleges of business through their institutions' presidents, reflect their commitment to and declaration of fair employment practices. Furthermore, results offer insight into a comparison of the employment practices of the institutions with the theoretical concepts emphasized in business classes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

“A new report from the World Economic Forum estimates that women won't attain parity with men for another 131 years. In other words, not until 2154” (Wallace, 2023, para.1). The U.S. ranks 43, a decline from 27 in 2022, out of 146 countries included in the 2023 World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index, which measures gender gaps that have been closed in these countries (Wallace). The report generated from the Global Gender Gap Index indicates that women's careers are suffering more in 2023 than previously (Duke, 2023). Women holding and being hired into leadership roles in the first quarter of 2023 declined to 32%, which is similar to the worst of the 2020 pandemic levels (Duke, 2023; Laker, 2023).

Theories such as the glass ceiling, wage gap, and sticky floor effect provide a basis for understanding the lack of qualified female leadership in middle and upper-level administrative positions. The general consensus has been that there are barriers to women that prevent and discourage them from these positions that men do not face (Rauhaus & Carr, 2020). The glass ceiling has been heavily researched and is accepted as a realistic occurrence in which women find career advancement challenging. This same obstacle is not readily found for men in advancing in their careers. For wage gap in higher education, women and men in the same academic positions are paid disproportionately, with men receiving more pay than women (Arnett, 2021; Seltzer, 2017). As such, women are more likely to be discouraged from pursuing higher roles. For the sticky floor effect, that frustration derives from the lack of opportunities given to women to enter management ranks (Johnson et al., 2014). Equally qualified, experienced, and educated, women are often bypassed in favor of men when selections are made for opportunities in management (Rauhaus & Carr, 2020). As such, the glass ceiling, wage gap, and sticky floor effect collectively yield an environment in which women are seen as less capable, less valuable, and less desired.

University researchers teach that these theories are not just possibilities, but are real problems that continue throughout organizations. Johnson et al. (2014) researched university employment practices within five states' public universities with regards to career advancement opportunities for men and women into administrative positions from college of business chairs up, following the chain of command. Their findings revealed,

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. (p. 31)

This idea that males tasked with the responsibility of hiring for administrative positions purposely hire males is supported by Rauhaus and Carr (2020) who state, "higher education has traditionally been dominated by men, which has created an institutional climate of masculinity and further led to the emergence of barriers for...female faculty" (p. 31). Furthermore, Johnson et al. (2014) suggested that the "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" (p. 31). Bartel (2018) takes that idea further stating that given the present structure of higher education, true change that would bring about a diverse and inclusive administrative environment is doubtful.

Johnson et al. (2014) examined the balance of scales between classroom teachings and administrative employment practices at universities. Their findings showed that females were not employed as administrators to the same degree as men and the differences in the discrepancy of the genders was vast, which conflicts with the concepts of fair employment opportunities taught in business classes. "A business school cannot expect its graduates to one day employ practices of equality and diversity if it is not demonstrating the practice" (Johnson et al, 2014, p. 31). The disconnect of gender composition of administrators at the very universities issuing degrees to students for having mastered classroom theories aimed at fair employment practices and fair treatment between the genders is concerning. Institutions that claim they are unaware of such

practices expose additional worries, as “the primary concern resulting from this realization is that ignorance to an issue leads to the continuance of that issue” (Johnson, et al, 2014, p. 31).

FINDINGS

The administrative positions included in this study are the college of business department/division chairs/heads (chairs), college of business deans (deans), university provosts/vice presidents/vice chancellors of academic affairs (provosts), and university presidents/chancellors (presidents). The employment of males in all positions far eclipses females with 72% males to 28% females. Specifically, chairs were found to be 73% males and 27% females, deans 73% males and 27% females, provosts 68% males and 32% females, and presidents 71% males and 29% females.

When considering the states’ public universities, Mississippi employees the most female administrators in the studied positions with 39%, followed by Georgia (37%), and North Carolina (35%). The states’ universities employing the fewest female administrators being considered were Kentucky (19%), South Carolina (20%), Virginia (21%), and Alabama (22%).

Topping the list of the state employing the most female business chairs is Mississippi with 50%. No other state came close to competing with Mississippi. The state having the greatest number of female business deans is Louisiana with 60%. All other states’ number of female business deans were significantly lower. Kentucky’s public universities boasted 0% female deans within their colleges of business. With regards to the female provosts, Louisiana takes the lead with 50%, followed by Georgia (46%), Arkansas (44%), and Tennessee (44%). Bringing up the rear is South Carolina, whose female provosts account for 0% total for all public universities in the state. The top-level administrative position of president is held by 53% of females in the state of North Carolina. The other states cannot compete with the number of females in the role. The states of Alabama and Louisiana employed 0% females as public university presidents during AY 2022-2023.

A total of 131 universities were studied. Some universities were notable in their employment results. The list below provides the institutions employing 100% females in the administrative positions studied.

1. New College Florida
2. University of North Carolina at Asheville

This equates to 1.5% of all studied universities.

The following universities employed 0% females in their administrative positions studied.

1. Alabama A&M University
2. Alabama State University
3. Auburn University at Montgomery
4. University of Alabama – Huntsville
5. University of North Alabama
6. Arkansas State University – Jonesboro
7. University of Arkansas at Fayetteville
8. University of Florida
9. Georgia Southern University
10. Augusta University
11. Atlanta Metropolitan State Colleges

12. University of Kentucky
13. Moorehead State University
14. Kentucky State University
15. Louisiana State University and A&M
16. Southern University – New Orleans
17. North Carolina State University
18. Lander University
19. University of South Carolina – Aiken
20. University of South Carolina – Beauford
21. University of Tennessee at Martin
22. University of Virginia, Virginia Tech
23. University of Mary Washington
24. Radford University
25. Virginia State University

This list reflects 19.1% universities studied having no females in their business chairs, business deans, university provosts, and university president positions.

The following list contains the universities employing 50% or greater females in their administrative positions.

1. University of Arkansas at Fort Smith, 67%
2. University of Arkansas at Little Rock, 60%
3. Florida Gulf Coast University, 50%
4. New College Florida, 100%
5. Georgia Southwestern State University, 75%
6. Georgia Gwinnett College, 50%
7. Clayton State University, 60%
8. Dalton State College, 67%
9. Fort Valley State University, 75%
10. Valdosta State University, 60%
11. Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College, 67%
12. College of Coastal Georgia, 67%
13. Georgia Highlands College, 75%
14. Columbus State University, 50%
15. University of North Georgia, 71%
16. Albany State University, 80%
17. Savannah State University, 67%
18. Eastern Kentucky University, 67%
19. Louisiana State University – Shreveport, 50%
20. Nicholls State University, 50%
21. University of Louisiana – Lafayette, 50%
22. Mississippi State University, 57%
23. Mississippi University for Women, 75%
24. Mississippi Valley State University, 50%
25. East Carolina University, 50%
26. Elizabeth City State University, 75%
27. North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, 50%
28. University of North Carolina at Asheville, 100%

29. University of Tennessee – Southern, 67%
30. James Madison University, 63%
31. Norfolk State University, 50%

Females were found to hold at least an equal number of administrative positions to men in 23.7% of the included universities.

DISCUSSION

Male administrators during AY 2022-2023 dominated from first level to top-level positions. Occasionally, a state successfully employed an equal or majority of females in a role (once for chairs, once for deans, once for provosts, and once for presidents). Out of a total of 826 administrators, 231 were female. Fifty-three percent of administrative positions studied were chairs of which 73% were males in that position, meaning a majority of the positions studied were first level administrators and those were almost 3 times as many males as females. Male deans exceeded female deans by close to 3 times. In the provost position, males outnumbered females by over 2 times as many in the role. Male presidents had a showing of just under 2.5 times as many females.

Georgia earned bragging rights in having the most public universities employing 50% or more female administrators in the roles being studied with 52.0% followed by Mississippi at 37.5% and Louisiana at 30.0%. Alabama and South Carolina were on the opposite end of the spectrum with 0% female administrators in those positions.

CONCLUSION

The underemployment of females in the chair position lends credibility and validity to the sticky floor effect and concerns about fair employment practices, such as career advancement opportunities, gender diversity, and equity and inclusion. Additionally, the prevalence of males in administrative roles serves as a message institutions send their students of a “do what we say, not what we do” mentality, which “subconsciously teach[es] students it is appropriate to discriminate given they acknowledge it is unacceptable” (Johnson et al., 2014). As educators and leaders, university administrators should hold themselves to a higher standard in demonstrating fair and equitable treatment of females, including employing them in their administrative ranks as qualified individuals rather than token placeholders that meet minimum criteria to be able to claim a diversified administrative team. Those institutions employing an equal or greater number of females in the studied administrative positions are to be commended, however it remains that they are in the minority in trusting, believing in, recognizing, and accepting females into their universities’ leadership.

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