Career Mobility in Student Affairs: Recommendations for Career Advancement

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Learning Outcomes

- Identify the competencies needed for career advancement
- Take inventory of the challenges and opportunities involved in career advancement
- Reflect on the advice from dissertation participants who achieved CSAO/SSAO position
Introduction

- Career progression and advancement
  - Entry or new professionals
  - Midlevel managers
    - Number Two (AVP)
  - Senior student affairs officers (SSAO)
Issues in Career Advancement

- Pathway to the top (VP/DoS) is unclear
  - Common entry points are student activities and residence life

- Gender inequity to get to SSAO level
  - Women clustered at midlevel
  - Time-in-line for women’s career advancement

- Competencies vs. pathway and time-in-line
  - Increased possibilities for aspiring women SSAO from nontraditional career beginnings
To understand the significant events, experiences, competencies, and persons influencing the career pathways of women entering the student affairs field from nontraditional career beginnings.

Entered student affairs
- From specialized functional unit
- From external to higher education (e.g., corporate)
- As a result of a midcareer change
- At a nontraditional age
Research Questions

- **Primary**
  - How do women from nontraditional career beginnings describe their career development, advancement, and pathways?

- **Secondary**
  - What significant events, experiences, competencies, and/or persons supported or hindered their decisions to advance their careers?
  - What strategies do women from nontraditional career beginnings utilize to inform their career decision making?
Methodology

- **Design**
  - Basic qualitative research; interviews and résumé review; descriptive findings about real life events

- **Bias**
  - My background is nontraditional
Participant Profiles

- Nine women (2–25+ years as SSAO)
- Private, public/small, medium, large student populations
- At 4-year institutions
- Caucasian = 6; Hispanic, Asian American, African American = 1 each
- Four had short stints in student activities and/or residence life
- All had nontraditional career beginning
  - Business, accounting, midcareer entry, academic affairs, specialized functional unit
- All spent time in entry–, to midlevel to achieve SSAO
- Being drawn to higher education
Themes

- Career management for career advancement
- From departmental manager to institutional leader
- Readiness for the next position
Career Management for Career Advancement

- Obtain a *terminal* degree
  - (Ed.D., Ph.D., MBA, JD)

- Early career decisions
  - I have made a very purposeful decision with my partner to not have children. I do have a spouse, and a lot of women in my situation, especially women of color, talk about this. Many of us end up not getting married because we can’t find partners who can sort of work with what it is that we deal with. But we made a decision at one point that a family just didn’t make sense. It would split me in too many directions, and I just didn’t think I could give, give, give at work and then have to come home and do that; I would want to be the best mother that I could. (Naomi)

  - Others reported postponing their careers to have children

  - Geographic mobility; trailing partner
Career Management for Career Advancement

- Expand portfolios
  - [I needed to] get exposed to a variety of areas…(Bella)

- Mentors, advisors, supervisors, and friends
  - My mentors haven’t always been the most nurturing, but they have been very supportive…(Dee)
Demonstrate Readiness for the Position

- Establish a “dream team”
- Fine-tune your core competencies; expand your portfolio for next steps
- Apply to institutions that have a history of being open and innovative
- Seek professional development
  - I stayed at an institution longer than maybe I wanted to, and I did that because of family…I was ready to move earlier, but my kids were in high school and I wouldn’t. So I diversified myself professionally. I knew at the institution [that] I couldn’t move further, but I got real involved with…professional activities which truly helped a lot. (Dee)
From Departmental Manager to Institutional Leader

- Initial lessons; challenges
  - Autonomous vs. consultative, patience, relationships, become more analytical, regional and institutional politics, role of student affairs in the institution
  
  - Very few SSAOs have a boss who is/was an SSAO; most provosts and presidents in higher education come from an academic department or an administrative unit that does not oversee direct services for students. Furthermore, student affairs is so broad, it is difficult to know something about everything within the VP’s job responsibilities. For a provost, there is no expectation that s/he know the content area of all academic departments; [s/he] only needs to know administrative process from the larger perspective. Only another SSAO would understand this. (Naomi)

- Becoming a generalist in order to lead
  - A person who is multidimensional...[not] one-dimensional,...and I wanted to be more of [a] generalist rather than a specialist...because that’s what leaders are. (Dee)
From Departmental Manager to Institutional Leader

- Competencies
  - Fiscal acumen
  - Leadership versus management skills
  - Interpersonal relationship skills
  - Risk-taking
  - A big-picture lens
  - Being a visionary
  - Being inspirational
  - Being comfortable with conflict
  - Political savviness
  - Communication skills
  - Students’ needs vs. leaderships’ needs
Side note: Gender May Matter

- Celia:
  - There are moments where [sic] I think to myself, “so did I get this job because of my skill or because I am a woman?” I know that based on some conversations I have [had] with the provost or the chancellor, I don’t believe that in my heart of hearts…they weren’t going to hire someone just because [of gender],…but I have those moments…so that can be frustrating, internally.

- Kayla:
  - There weren’t always a lot of women in those leadership roles, and early in my career the women who were in leadership roles were women who weren’t willing to give a hand down to other women who were coming through. So I see that, and I make that a part of my goals, but I do believe I have always had to prove [myself] because of what I want to do and where I want to go. I have always had to prove my worth, my ability in different ways than the guy sitting next to me who might not have that same [abilities].
Gender May Matter

Kayla:
- At one institution, they said...”we would consider you, but you don’t have your doctorate.” Well, they ended up [hiring] a White male, who didn’t have a doctorate either, [so] I think I paid a price in higher ed for not pursuing my doctorate until recently.

Naomi:
- I hate to say it but it is 2013, and I still believe women have to do at least some multiple of work greater than men to be seen as half as competent and at the executive-level table; we are outnumbered...at most institutions where I have been, the women are greatly outnumbered, and it is harder for us to be taken seriously.
Take Away 1: Develop a Professional Plan

- Plan includes:
  - Expanding your portfolio
  - Time-in-line; entry to midlevel (to senior level) to SSAO
  - Obtaining a terminal degree
  - Moving from manager to leader (generalist)
  - Preparing for difficult decisions (family, geographical location)
  - Attaining competencies
Take Away 2: Develop a Support Network

- Mentors, colleagues, and advisors offer support and advice; identify and secure opportunities

- Personal and professional mentoring
  - When organizational structures are not equally permeable for all members within them, people and networks become the critical conduits for career mobility.... higher education leaders who were successful repeatedly point to the impact of a mentor who recognized their potential for leadership, encouraged them to develop that potential, and guided them toward achieving promotion. For women in academe, scholars and researchers consider mentoring a decided and perhaps critical advantage. (Dean, 2009, p. 131)
Take Away 3: Highways and Byways in Career Advancement

- Gender may matter; women in pipeline but numbers in leadership may not reflect this.

- Early studies revealed internal promotion vs. external hire (7 of 9 participants reported internal promotion).

- Majority of SSAOs come from residence life and student activities; up and coming are counseling, conduct, admissions, specialized functional units, academia, corporate sector.
  - All pathways can lead to senior leadership positions, traditional vs. nontraditional path/career beginnings should not matter.
Discussion and Questions