

## **Women in Higher Education Student Affairs: The View From Inside**

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I am a female who works in the field of higher education. Student affairs to be exact. I have recently begun exploring women in student affairs as a possible research interest for my upcoming dissertation. I would love to share the stories and advice of a few women in student affairs whom I admire. These are all women I have interacted with in my career in a variety of different capacities: my sorority's national president, my current faculty advisor in my Ph.D. program, the former leader of my division at Cornell University, and a past volunteer leader in our professional association, AFA, which has been an important part of my development. I hope you value their insights as much as I do.

**Describe how you have seen the role of women in higher education evolve during your tenure:**

*Laura Sweet, Senior Associate Dean of Students at East Carolina University and NPC Delegate and past National President, Sigma Sigma Sigma (LS):* I began work in higher education in 1973 at a time when we utilized the titles Dean of Men and Dean of Women. As administrators, we were caretakers of the women/students on the campus. Co-ed residence halls, the size of the institutions, and athletic programs all played roles in the transition of the student experience.

*Dr. Linda Kuk, Associate Professor in the School of Education, and Chair of the Higher Education Leadership Specialization at Colorado State University (LK):* I have been in higher education for a relatively long time, well over forty years. I have seen considerable change and unfortunately, not much has changed at all. It depends on your perspective. When I started in higher education in the early 1970s the leadership was predominately men, except at women's colleges, and there were still a significant number of women's colleges at that time. I started in student affairs in housing, and there were quite a few women in entry-level positions. But over the years, as I moved higher in the administrative ranks, there were fewer and fewer women.

When I became a Vice President for Student Affairs in the SUNY system in the mid 1980s, I was the only woman VP within all of the SUNY institutions, and it stayed that way for most of my tenure there. At the national level, there were starting to be more women in leadership roles, especially in student affairs, but there were very few role models and mentors for those of us who were relatively new senior leaders. As a result, we had to mentor each other and over time we developed very strong friendships that have lasted. Things are better for women in many respects, but there are still many subtle areas that have not changed very much.

*Jennifer Jones, Executive Director of Student Life at Southern Methodist University and President of the National Pan-Hellenic Council (JJ):* I have seen more woman in more senior level positions. There are more university presidents that are women.

*Dr. Susan Murphy, Vice President Student and Academic Services Emeritus at Cornell University (SM):* There are many more senior women leaders in university administration than when I began, nationally and at Cornell. I was the first female Dean of Admissions and Financial

Aid (and I think the first one in the Ivy League) and the second female vice president at Cornell. Since that time, there have been times when there were more women in the senior administration at Cornell than men. Also, the range of positions they serve is broader: finance, budget, human resources, alumni affairs and development, information technology, student life, admissions and financial aid, provost and now president, all have been led by women since I was appointed VP in 1994.

**What advice would you give to other women in higher education?**

*LS:* Find an area of student affairs or higher education you love. Locate a mentor within higher education and one in another field. Find an outside activity that gives you as much satisfaction as your employment. Pay attention to your family/friends/outside of the job life. Each day we get so focused on the job, work long hours, and are on call. It is hard to get away; make sure you do. Spend an hour a day for yourself; a day a month. If you want your students to value themselves, let them see you value you. Respect decisions made; learn as much as you can about the scope of the issue and the process for the decision making.

*LK:* I would advise women to follow your dreams and your passions. Higher education needs your skills and your wisdom. Develop a tough skin and realize you need to be well prepared and experienced. Seek out experiences that stretch you, and be very conscious of the fact that you never know what to expect until you are in a role. There will always be challenges and the unexpected, but try to always see these situations as opportunities. Be willing to take risks, get to know yourself, your limitations, and your strengths, and most of all be authentic in your interactions with others.

Find others you can trust and be yourself with. Most likely they will not be at your own institution, especially if you are an administrator. This is where membership in professional associations is very helpful. Work hard, but always remember there is life beyond work and your profession. Extend your passion and interests beyond work, and develop a sense of humor and be able to laugh at yourself. Seek out the wisdom of others. None of us can go it alone and success is built on how we work in teams.

*JJ:* There are many roads to take in student affairs. Always make sure the road you take is your road and you are comfortable with that direction.

*SM:* Pursue an advanced degree, if at all possible. Think of yourself as a professional first; that you are a woman is a fact, but I would not have that dominate one's thinking. Find ways to learn about other parts of the university beyond the one in which you directly service. Get engaged with your professional association, if at all possible. Find opportunities to be a public speaker and develop a comfort in doing that.

**What resources/tools/professional development experiences have been particularly helpful to you as a woman in higher education?**

*LS:* Reading everything from state and local papers, professional journals, and books on student development keeps us current. Presenting at regional and national meetings pushes us to learn

more and helps other professionals. Visiting other institutions and meeting other professionals brings new ideas to the campus.

**LK:** As a woman, connection to others has been very important to me in terms of my professional growth. My most treasured resources are my professional colleagues and friends. They have been great sounding boards, and also keep me honest and focused. I think it is important to stay current, to read, to reflect, to engage in scholarship, and continue to learn something new every day. I very much like to do my research and writing with others, and to use our collective insights and discussions to refine our insights and thinking about issues and topics. Needs and interests change and it is important, in my view, to be open to change and to continue to expand one's horizons. Professional associations are very engaged in providing professional development and they also are sources of knowledge about where to get it.

**JJ:** I receive my greatest learning from observing others. Sometimes what people say they are is in conflict to their actions. I am involved in a very diverse collection of organizations. Because of this, I am exposed to so many different perspectives and people.

**SM:** Having mentors has been invaluable for me, and they don't have to be women only. Having someone with whom you can discuss your career path and also use as a sounding board for your current position can make all the difference. I also found having close connections with my professional colleagues (in similar positions but at different institutions) has been very helpful as they have helped me gain a broader perspective on the issues I was facing and how to deal with them. I also think being an avid reader about higher education, in general, and your own specific area within it in particular, is key.

### **What is your future hope for women in higher education?**

**LS:** I hope bright women who care about students and take care of themselves are attracted and retained.

**LK:** The future for women in higher education has extraordinary possibilities and potential. I think there are many very capable women in higher education today, and higher education needs their talents as both faculty and administrators. Leadership in higher education in the next several decades is going to be challenging, and is likely to require significant changes in the way it operates in order to remain viable and accessible to future generations. This is going to require considerable creativity, flexibility, teamwork, and dedication throughout higher education organizations. As effective leadership becomes shared across the organization, less hierarchical, and more responsive to the needs of all students, faculty and other constituent groups, the talents and skills women possess will become more essential to higher education organizations. I also believe women will face the current environmental challenges that still exist in higher education and begin to change them to be more inclusive of all participants and enable women, and others who have been marginalized in the past, to be able to fully access all of the opportunities that present themselves. Women cannot wait for others to act; they have to collectively face these challenges together.

**JJ:** I would like to see not only more women in higher education, but minority women in particular in upper administration.

**SM:** I hope women continue to pursue careers in higher education and are able to do so across the disciplines and fields. I also hope as they reach their successes people will not think of them as the “female” president but rather the president.