Leadership and the Educational Background of SAIS Heads
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In this FastStats, an overview of the educational background of 264 of the current 360 SAIS heads is presented. In addition, how the educational background of SAIS heads has evolved in the past four decades and what impact that has had on leadership in SAIS schools is explored.

**Years of Administrative Experience for SAIS Heads**

Figure 1 at left displays the percentage of current SAIS heads by years of administrative experience. You can deduce, for example, that about 20 years of experience is the median for SAIS heads and that 15% of SAIS heads have 10 years or less experience as an administrator and 21% have over 30 years of experience.

It would seem that there is a healthy balance of experience among the current SAIS heads.

Figure 2 below shows that 80% of SAIS heads had some previous administrative experience prior to their first headship and 20% did not. Deeper analysis revealed that it was far more likely for heads to be appointed without previous administrative experience 20 or more years ago than it has been in the past 20 years. This might be due, at least in part, to the implementation of simple basic requirements like previous experience as an administrator before being a head.

**Percentage of Heads With and Without Prior Administrative Experience**

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Figure 3 parses the first degree obtained into general degree categories: education, humanities, science, and business. For SAIS heads, the most common degree category is humanities, followed by education, and then science, and business. Humanities degrees include English, foreign language, history, political science, etc. Education degrees include any degree in which a teaching certification was obtained directly. The science category includes degrees in biology, physics, mathematics, etc. The business category includes degrees in business, accounting, finance, and economics.

Figure 4 cross tabulates general degree categories and years of experience to assess whether heads educated in different eras sought different educational experiences. Analysis of Figure 5 suggests some interesting variability. First, the percentage of new (0-10 years experience) SAIS heads whose first degree is an education degree is substantially higher than any other category. Speaking from personal experience only, this might be due to a more general trend over the past couple of decades in which having a teaching certificate is much less negotiable. The leadership impact this may or may not have on the system as a whole would make for an interesting discussion when you consider the benefits of more heads with formal teacher training versus more heads with an eclectic background. As any head can attest, your job goes far beyond a command of the pedagogical.
Second, the percentage of pure science degrees for new heads is substantially lower than the other experience level categories. Again this could be a manifestation of the times. Those who have a science degree, even if they have potential to be a great administrator, are being excluded early because they may not have their teaching certification.

Third, the percentage of heads with humanities degrees has stayed relatively consistent over the past 40 years. When the data from Figure 3 and Figure 4 are looked at together, it is clear that the largest number of SAIS heads have, both now and in the past, first received a degree in the humanities. The first, and most likely, contributor to this finding is sheer numbers. There are simply a lot of people who wind up teaching who first get a BA with a humanities focus. Thus the pool of prospective administrators is large. A contributing factor might be that a good number of the humanities majors might have exceptional communication skills, i.e. high verbal intelligence, a skill set that many would agree is disproportionately important for success as a school administrator.

Fourth, a greater percentage of 20+ year heads have a business-related degree. This too may be an artifact of more stringent recent requirements for becoming an administrator e.g., needing teaching certification. It also may reflect a shift in thinking about leadership in independent schools. Perhaps it is the case that 20 or more years ago, management elements of the head's job were emphasized more. Elements such as business and financial acumen, more likely present in those with a business-related background, were emphasized more by Boards, perhaps as a reflection of the prevailing theories of management.

In summary, there seems to be a modest swing in who becomes an independent school head as reflected by educational background. In short, it seems more people with education degrees are becoming heads of school. Is this a good thing? That's tough to answer. It's good in the sense that we likely have more domain-specific experts who become heads of school and it is more likely they have taught and administered on their way to the headship. It is also more likely they do not have the breadth of experience that heads from 20 plus years ago have in areas such as business, which can be very important for a head's success. Ultimately, the needs of independent schools change. A school trying to recover from a fiscal nightmare might pursue a head with formal and extensive business training, whereas, a school whose academic program has been in the doldrums for a span, might want a head with a stellar pedagogical track record. Either way, schools do well when they hire heads with the leadership needs of the time in mind and they do even better if they nurture the head's potential to deal with inevitable changes that schools go through over time.