

Getting there: seven practices to support successful women in theological education

BY DEBORAH H. C. GIN

At an ATS Women in Leadership (WIL) mentoring conference last year, I shared findings from a recent WIL research project. Conducted incident to WIL's 20th anniversary, the research included a survey of 573 past WIL participants and a random sample of ATS women who have not participated in the initiative. More than half of the respondents were faculty, and 28% were women in senior-level positions. Selected findings from the project had been reported earlier (see [Women in Leadership Survey: What We Found May Not Be What You Think](#)). For this article, the data were analyzed through the lens of leadership experience. We compared the perspectives of current women presidents as well as those who are seriously considering senior-level leadership with the perspectives of women who have never held senior-level positions. Interesting differences emerged, all of which might serve as a roadmap to “getting there.”

We recognize that not everyone (man or woman) is called to the presidency. But when women do feel called or institutions recognize women who are gifted for senior-level roles, how might they advance women into those roles? Looking at how the responses of current presidents and non-presidents differ may shed light on how individuals and the industry might get them(selves) there.



Here are seven practices that emerge as possible strategies for supporting women who aspire to positions of leadership.

Personal habits

What are good habits that presidents are more likely to report? Women were asked survey questions about their activity related to leadership development. Items included whether they had a mentor or an advocate in a position of power, the gender of the mentor or advocate, frequency of meeting with mentors, number of connections made with organizations that promote women into leadership positions, types of leadership programs they have participated in, and many others. Presidents and non-presidents responded differently on only three of these items—habits that differentiate women in senior leadership.

1 They meet regularly with leadership support groups. Of current women presidents, 42% said they have been part of a group that meets regularly to support women in leadership, while only 11% of women non-presidents said they have. Most of the presidents who meet regularly with a group do so once or twice a year.

2 They attend leadership development programs. Three-quarters (75%) of current women presidents said they pursued leadership education beyond the ATS WIL program, while only one-third (36%) of women non-presidents said they did. Some of this difference may be related to an increase in participation in leadership development once they became president, but the difference is significant.

3 They engage in personal study on leadership. Among the presidents, 88% said they regularly (42% frequently) did their own personal study on leadership, whereas among those who have never held a senior-level role, 66% said they regularly (23% frequently) did so. (See Figure 1.)

Of course, it is difficult to tease out the habits of presidents before and after moving into the role—and causation can't be inferred—but among all the possible practices to consider, these particular habits may be worth forming now, if you have not already developed them and are considering senior-level leadership.

Enterprise-level shifts

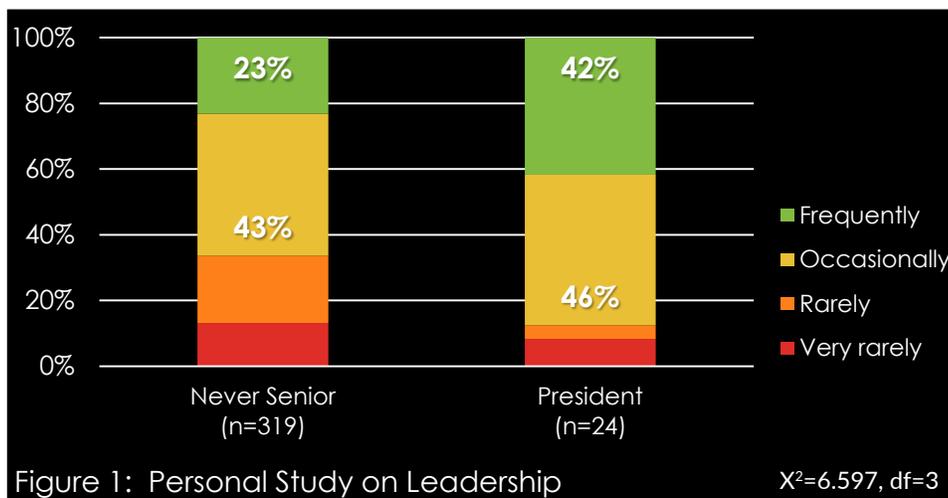
Changes in personal habits are important for developing leadership qualities—skills, networks, knowledge, etc. However, “getting there” is not just about individuals changing their habits. Most schools—including those whose confessional constraints would limit leading in the top administrative role—have room for women leaders to advance in leadership. But not all schools are

aware of how to promote women toward those positions. If getting more women into upper-level leadership is a goal, schools need to play a role as well.

4 Women in positions of influence or power need to advocate for other women. About half of both presidents and non-presidents reported that other women in positions of influence or power had strongly advocated for their leadership. But a look at the broader pool of women who aspired to move to higher levels of leadership at their current organizations revealed that those who already had senior-level experience were more likely (77%) to report having had a woman advocate than those who had never held a senior-level position (50%).

Providing women advocates is a solution, but it does

present larger challenges. Having a woman of influence to advocate for your leadership assumes that there are enough women of influence available. One possible reason why presidents

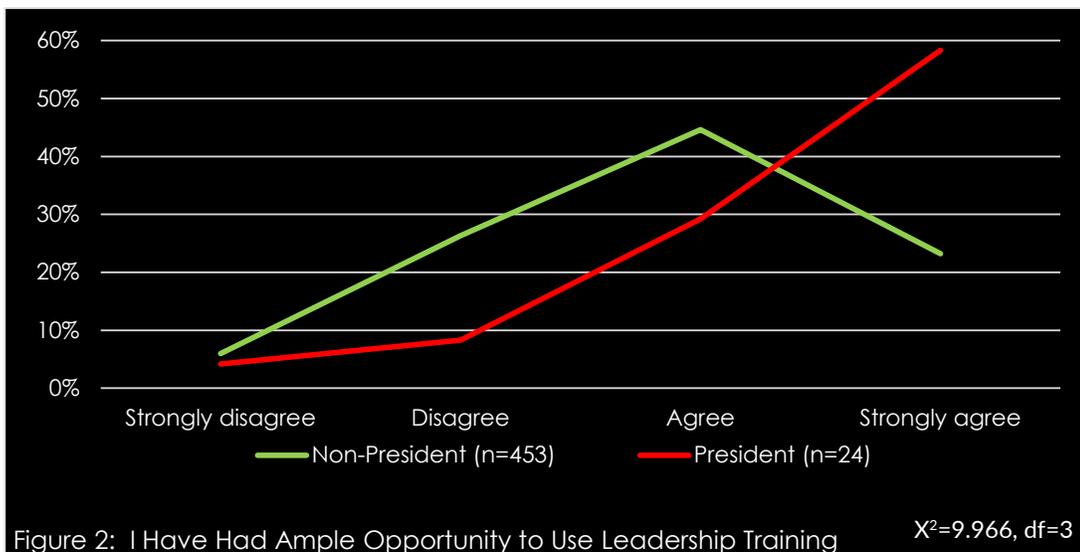


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did not report greater levels of advocacy than non-presidents is simply the scarcity of women in influential positions who might act as advocates. Among the 278 ATS member schools, there are currently 35 women CEOs (mainline schools 26, Roman Catholic schools 4, evangelical schools 4, Jewish school 1) and 65 women CAOs (mainline 41, evangelical 15, Roman Catholic 9). It may be that, among those who were considering higher-level leadership, those with senior-level leadership experience had greater and more effective access to this limited pool of women advocates.

An example of what women advocates can do comes from a focus group of women presidents in the larger research project. One president at an evangelical school shared about intentional efforts she and the school made in partnering with denominational groups to fill the leadership pipeline with women. The efforts yielded good fruit in just a few years.

5 Women need to be given ample opportunity to lead. About 90% of the presidents (60% strongly) agreed that they had had ample opportunities to lead, while approximately 65% of non-presidents (just over 20% strongly) agreed they had had such opportunities. (See Figure 2.)



It is perhaps not revelatory that presidents would indicate they have had ample opportunity to lead, but what about the rest? Having opportunities to lead means you have opportunities to practice learned skills; it also means others see you in action, which can lead to additional leadership roles. In addition, gender studies literature suggests a “prove it again” bias in leadership, where men’s leadership opportunities are premised on their potential, but women must demonstrate their leadership ability through achievements, again and again.¹ If opportunities for women’s leadership is predicated on proof that you

¹ “Prove it again” bias, addressed by legal scholar Joan C. Williams, in *What Works for Women at Work* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

can lead, then when do women get the opportunity to prove themselves?

6 Everyone needs to understand how sexism operates. A survey item asked respondents to indicate, from a list of obstacles, the top factors preventing women from advancing in theological education. The list of fourteen options included obstacles ranging from prioritizing a partner’s professional advancement and work-life balance to a lack of critical mass of women in organizations and a lack of women role models, to a lack of confidence or starting late professionally. Participants responded similarly to all of them except for one: lack of critical awareness of how sexism operates. Half of

the women who have advanced to senior positions recognized this lack of awareness as one of the top obstacles, along with the impenetrable “Boy’s Club” of upper-level leadership. Among those who have never held a senior role, the two top obstacles were the “Boy’s Club” and work-life balance. Both groups perceive the impenetrable boy’s club

as an obstacle, and it may be that presidents believe that understanding how sexism operates is what can break through this barrier.

Obstacles preventing promotion or professional advancement, including sexism, can be addressed in a number of ways. Shelley Correll, professor of sociology at Stanford University, suggests several, including the following:

- Educate employees about how stereotypes work, such as in decision-making.
- Establish clear criteria for evaluation and decisions, including for promotion to leadership.

- Scrutinize the criteria used in evaluation and decisions, to include what predicts success in the leadership role, and remove factors that do not actually affect success but that disproportionately eliminate women from the pool of candidates.
- Vouch for the competence of women leaders in the organization, endorsing them in public arenas.

7 Women need to be encouraged through professional development in particular leadership skills. The survey listed 19 leadership skills (a list developed from membership surveys during the search for the ATS executive director) and asked respondents to evaluate their level of preparedness for each. Presidents reported significantly higher preparation ratings for five of the skills:

- Budgeting/financial management
- Change management
- Conflict management
- Facilitating uncomfortable conversations
- Strategic planning

Coincidentally, while discussing another issue, a focus group of men deans suggested carving out space in ATS programming—a season of time, for example—to prioritize the leadership development of women. During such a season, programming could focus on developing these five skills.

How will we get there?

The challenges are more complicated than one individual can solve. For example, how might a mid-level administrator or faculty member convene a regular meeting with upper-level administrators? Would she hold enough sway or have enough social capital to get this group to meet regularly? Institutions could intervene in such situations, such as by sending potential leaders to leadership development programs or forming leadership support groups of senior- and mid-level women leaders on behalf of those considering upper-level leadership. When it comes to promoting women to leadership positions in theological education, the challenges—and the solutions—are a blend of both personal habits and enterprise shifts.



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