Women in Leadership survey: what we found may not be what you think

By Deborah H. C. Gin

The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) recently held a 20th anniversary celebration of its work in the Women in Leadership (WIL) initiative, and ATS staff shared findings from a major

WIL research project, highlighting topics such as leadership pathways, networks of support, and harassment based on gender. Upcoming issues of Colloquy Online will feature discussion on these topics. This article focuses on program impact and suggests priorities for schools to consider. What kind of impact has the work of the ATS Women in Leadership program made over 20 years? Is the Association in a better place because of it?

Some things have changed over 20 years. Many have not.

The percentage of women chief executive officers and chief academic officers (CEOs and CAOs) in ATS schools has changed over 20 years. In 1996, women accounted for 3% of all CEOs. By 2016, women CEOs grew to 11% and this year, to 13%. For CAOs, women accounted for 9% of all CAOs in 1996, 23% in 2016, and 25% this year.

This reflects growth in representation, this year's 25%

	CEOs	CAOs
Evangelical schools	1% to 3%	10% to 11%
Mainline schools	24% to 30%	40% to 47%
Roman Catholic/ Orthodox schools	4% to 7%	12% to 19%

Figure 1: Change in Representation of Women Leaders in Ecclesial Family, 2009–2018

women CAOs mirroring the 24% women in full-time faculty positions. Representation falls short of this year's 35% women students, however.

The growth has not been uniform across the schools. Figure 1 shows growth in women leadership over the last ten years (2009 to 2018) for evangelical, mainline, and Roman Catholic/Orthodox schools. For evangelical

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schools, representation of women CEOs grew from 1% to 3% over the last ten years and from 10% to 11% for women CAOs. For mainline schools, growth was from 24% to 30% for women CEOs and from 40% to 47% for women CAOs. For Roman Catholic/Orthodox schools, women CEOs increased from 4% to 7%, and women CAOs grew by more than half (from 12% to 19%). (See the *Colloquy Online* article "Women in ATS Schools: 8 data points for conversation" for additional information.)

Over the 20 years of WIL programming, representation of women in ATS schools as a whole has not exceeded a 30% threshold, in terms of CEOs, CAOs, or full-time faculty. This threshold has been broken in certain
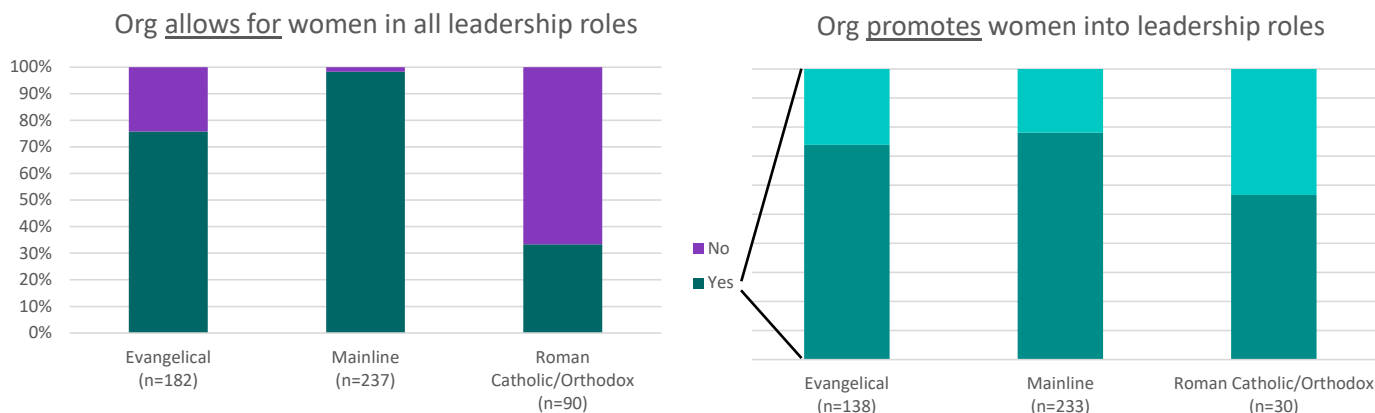
Figure 2: Organizational conditions for women in leadership

contexts—with women CAOs soon approaching 50% in mainline schools—but the threshold remains in other contexts. Why this threshold continues is not entirely clear. Existence of confessional constraints that prohibit women from occupying the top leadership role is a commonly referenced, and real, condition in some schools. However, there may be additional obstacles in place.

The pair of charts in Figure 2 above illustrates this possibility. The WIL survey found that, even in contexts where the organization *allows* for women in all leadership roles, women are not uniformly being *supported, promoted, or funneled* into leadership roles.

It is important, also, to highlight what has changed or not changed with respect to racial/ethnic women in upper-level leadership positions. Figure 3 below shows these changes. Because of the low percentages, representation is reported in counts.

From 2009 to 2018, the number of women of African descent serving as CEOs increased from 2 to 5, and the number of CAOs increased from 4 to 6. The number of women of Asian descent serving as CEOs stayed the same at 1, and the number of CAOs grew from 1 to 6.

	CEOs	CAOs
African descent	2 to 5	4 to 6
Asian descent	No change, at 1	1 to 6
Latin descent	0 to 1	0 to 1

Figure 3: Change in Numbers of Racial/Ethnic Women Leaders, 2009–2018

The number of women of Latin descent serving as CEOs went from 0 to 1, and the number of CAOs increased from 0 to 1. Nearly all the leaders of Asian descent were in evangelical schools; whereas, all but one of the leaders of African or Latin descent were in mainline schools.

A comparison of mid-level and operational administrators between 2009 and 2018 also shows some change, in both directions. For example, representation of women among financial aid officers went from 90% to 73% and, among recruitment officers, from 48% to 60%. However, representation of women continues to be highest among mid- and operational levels and not among upper-level positions.

WIL participation makes a difference. Except when it doesn't.

WIL participation makes a difference in women's self-perception for leadership. *How* this happens is unclear, but those who attended WIL events were more likely to agree and strongly agree to each of the following statements than those who had not attended WIL events:

- I am a leader.
- I have confidence to lead.
- I can see myself as a director/senior director at ATS.
- I can see myself as an executive director of ATS.

The Association of Theological Schools
The Commission on Accrediting

10 Summit Park Drive, Pittsburgh, PA 15275-1110
T: 412-788-6505 • F: 412-788-6510 • www.ats.edu

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In Figure 4, for example, note how many more WIL participants strongly agreed with the statements "I am a leader" than those who did not participate in WIL programs.

WIL Participant

Non-Participant

- Strongly agree
- Agree
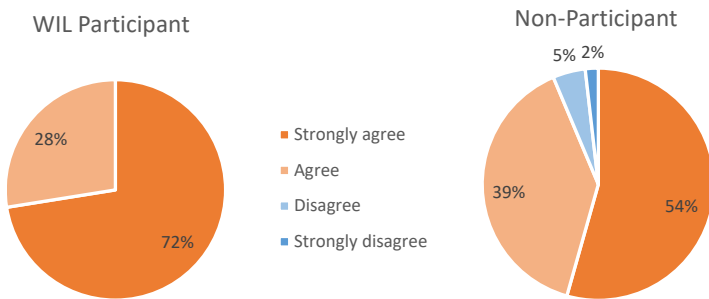- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

28%

72%

5% 2%

39%

54%

Figure 4: Responses to "I am a Leader"

WIL participation also matters in terms of personal habits related to leadership development. Again, those who participated in WIL answered more positively (e.g., greater number or regularity) to the following than those who had not participated:

- How many connections have you made with organizations that support . . . or funnel women into leadership positions . . . ?
- How regularly do you engage in your own personal study on leadership?
- How regularly do you utilize gender-specific leadership development programs?
- Have you seriously considered taking on a (higher-level) leadership role . . . ?

While, for both WIL participants and WIL non-participants, the number of connections that women have made with organizations that support, promote, or funnel women into leadership positions is not overwhelming, Figure 5 shows how many more non-participants have made *no such* connections.
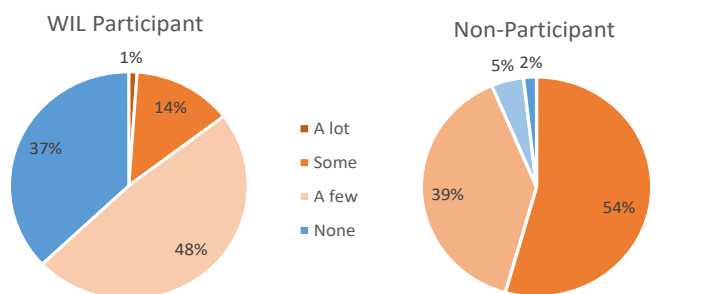
WIL Participant

Non-Participant

1%

37%

14%

48%

- A lot
- Some
- A few
- None

5% 2%

39%

54%

Figure 5: Responses to "How many connections have you made with organizations that support . . . or funnel women into leadership positions . . . ?"

Survey results in Figure 6 show that participation in WIL programming matters in terms of whether a woman has considered pursuing higher leadership. On average, those who attended a WIL event answered more positively than those who hadn't attended an event.

WIL Participant

Non-Participant
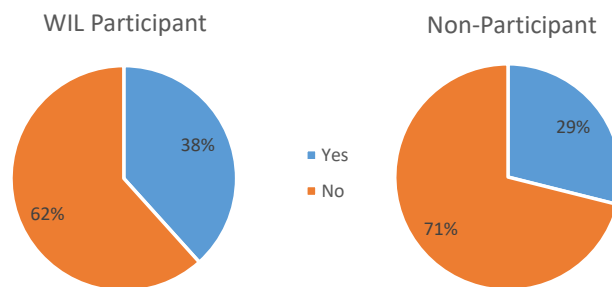
38%

62%

- Yes
- No

29%

71%

Figure 6: Responses to "Have you seriously considered taking on a (higher-level) leadership role . . . ?"

But, when asked whether they'd had ample opportunity to use the leadership education they'd received, WIL participation did not matter. Participants and non-participants answered alike.

Desire to lead and the opportunity to do so reside in different realms. The work of the Association's Women in Leadership program appears to have had impact in expanding the *vision* of the individual participant;

> *Desire to lead and the opportunity to do so reside in different realms.*

whereas, expanding participants' *opportunities to lead* falls within the work of the schools. If more women are going to move into leadership roles in theological education, ATS schools and ATS programs must work together. (See upcoming WIL research *Colloquy Online* issue on pathways to leadership and shoulder-tapping.)

This is what schools can do. Or something like this.

If providing women with ample opportunity to lead (or to use the leadership education they've received) is a goal for your school, consider the following two survey results.

First, the survey found that women in schools that were perceived as having an organizational climate favorable to developing women into leadership roles were

significantly more likely to have ample opportunities to lead. Figure 7 shows the pattern of leadership opportunities, based on type of organizational climate. For each organizational climate type, the 3-D curve represents the percentage of agreement with "I have had ample opportunity to use the leadership education I've received." Yellow curves are organizations perceived to be favorable; green curves are organizations perceived to be unfavorable. Note where the highpoints occur for each type of organization. Opportunities to lead are more ample in organizations with favorable climates. While this may not seem like new news, discovering that climates are related to opportunities for leadership cements our understanding about the importance of organizational climates.

What are these organizations like, where women have ample leadership opportunities? What do schools with favorable climates do specifically? The survey also asked respondents to indicate whether their organizations (favorable or not) prioritized or had a policy on 13 different issues, ranging from having a parental-leave policy, to providing childcare, to having inclusive-language policies, to mandating gender balance. Only three of the

13 priorities were shown to be related to having ample leadership opportunities:

- Gender balance/parity is mandated in my current organization.
- My current organizational colleagues are composed of more than one-third women.
- My current organization intentionally recruits diverse employees.

More women in organizations that had these priorities agreed that they'd had ample leadership opportunities. While the other priorities and policies are important for other reasons, they did not make a difference statistically for leadership opportunities.

If your school wants to strengthen its climate for women and facilitate the development of women into leadership roles, find ways to provide women colleagues with leadership opportunities and consider focusing on these three priorities if you are not already addressing them. This might take the form of gender balance on boards or other decision-making committees. It might also mean making sure search committees for new faculty hires have gender balance or expanding your school's rating
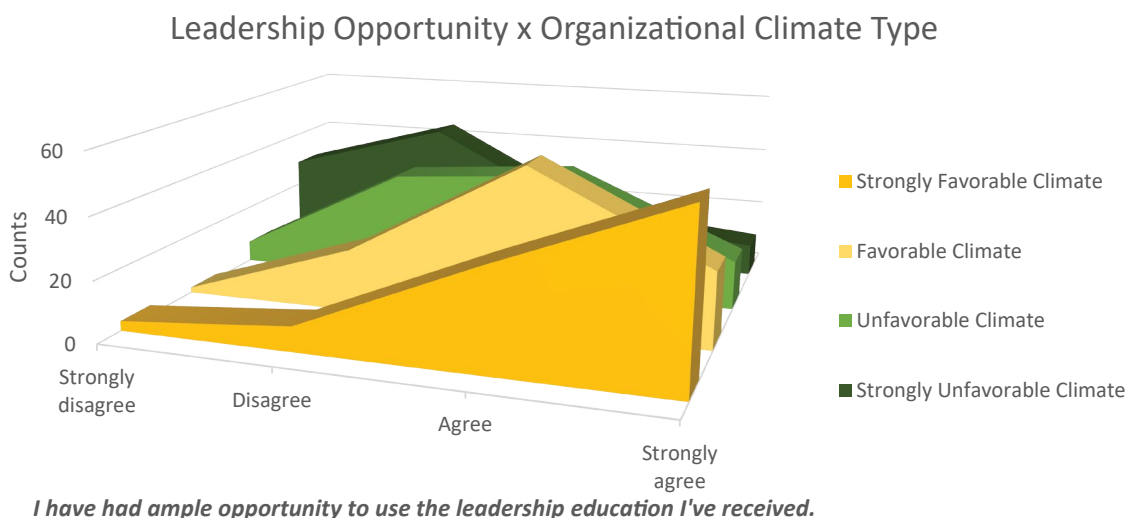
Leadership Opportunity x Organizational Climate Type

I have had ample opportunity to use the leadership education I've received.

Figure 7: Leadership Opportunity, by Organizational Climate Type

systems for screening candidates to include a *variety* of qualities (beyond "Is she a woman?") that signal the value diverse employees would bring.

Whether or not your school's confessional constraints limit women leading in the top administrative role, focusing on gender balance, having a plan to intentionally recruit diverse employees, and hiring so that women represent at least one-third of your colleague workforce is a good place to start.

Deborah H. C. Gin *is Director, Research and Faculty Development at The Association of Theological Schools in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.*

RESEARCH TIP

Researchers normally avoid claiming causality: it's difficult to nail down the direction of the cause, much like the proverbial chicken or egg. It may be that those who have confidence to lead are particularly attracted to WIL events, for example. Or it may be that topics that are covered or connections participants make at WIL events provide the right conditions under which women see a vision of themselves in higher leadership roles. Whichever the direction, research does help us say with greater confidence whether something is related or whether something makes a difference—even when the differences appear insignificant at first glance.