

Exploring the Role of Calling in the Professional Journeys of College Presidents

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This phenomenological study examined the lived experiences of 15 women college and university presidents in the United States. The purpose of this research was to gain a deeper understanding of the role of calling into the presidency. The results of this research suggest that women presidents do hear a calling of some sort. The findings include a process of identifying, interpreting and pursuing the call by these prospective presidents so that they can find their own respective leadership journeys. Implications for practice and future research are provided.

INTRODUCTION

The academic presidency in America has always carried with it great prestige and distinction (Bornstein, 2003). Rhodes (1998) called the academic presidency one of the most influential, most important, and most powerful of positions in American society. In 2011, 2,312 four-year institutions, 697 public and 1,615 private (Hennessy, 2013) comprised the collegiate arena. Each one has a president who leads the institution and has a critical role in successful implementation and execution of the organizational mission.

According to Ruben (2003), “Extraordinary challenges face higher education nationally, and leaders with exceptional capabilities are needed to help institutions meet these challenges” (p. 288). With the “graying of the academy,” King and Gomez (2008) noted that over half of all college presidents are aged 61 or older. The American Council of Education (ACE) Report on Presidents predicts that in the next 10 years, over half of these current college presidents will exit (2012), suggesting a “significant turnover in presidential leadership due to retirements in the near term [and] presenting an opportunity to further diversify the presidency” (American College President Survey, 2012). Therefore, identifying and preparing future leadership for colleges and universities is critical. As we predict more women presidential candidates to consider the role of the presidency in the next 10 years as “the graying of the academe” unfolds, understanding a calling may be critical to enticing the best talent possible to lead our students, faculty and staff in the institutions of higher education in our nation and world. This study investigates the journeys of female college presidents and the role calling had in leading these women to the office of the president.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In 2008, one of the authors of this study conducted a qualitative study on the exiting of college presidents. The sample consisted of 10 male ELCA Lutheran college presidents. The main findings of the study concluded that over 70% of the respondents heard or felt a calling to the presidency. This study called into question whether women college presidents heard or felt that same calling.

The term “calling” emerged in 1522 when Martin Luther, the German theologian from the University of Wittenburg, coined the term. His view, different from the Catholic Church at the time, declared that everyone has a calling from God – not just religious leaders (Kolden, 2008). Calling, often used interchangeably with the concept of “vocation,” given that the translation of the Latin word “vocare” is “to call” (Longman, et al, 2010), involves living a life of meaning and purpose (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), 2013). In addition, the Luther definition suggests that one’s calling seeks to equip people to serve their neighbor and the community in wholesome and effective ways (Christenson, 2004).

Hunter, Dik, and Banning (2010) suggested that definitions of calling vary considerably – from limiting calling to the work environment by some researchers to defining the concept broadly by others who consider it more a lifestyle (Longman et al, 2010).

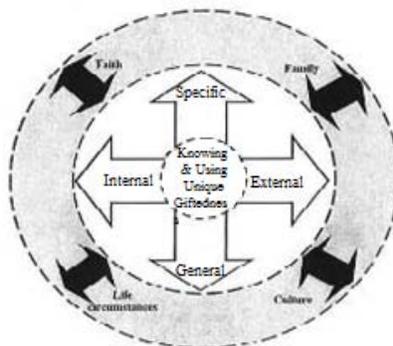
The Quaker tradition also discusses calling as “letting your life speak.” Frederick Buechner describes calling as all the places in daily life where one’s “deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” In this case, calling is to live out one’s distinctive gifts, passions, and senses of faith and meaning in ways that benefit the community (Johnson & Wanous, 2011).

According to Johnson (2010), vocation, or a calling from God for purpose in life, has the ability to change based on circumstances faced at various times. Unexpected experiences often lead to the discovery of vocation, and the way in which vocation is fulfilled depends on the individual and the call they feel. Johnson continues:

One’s life as a calling implies a source of the call...for some it’s God, the sacred, for others it might be nature, the community, or one’s deepest self. It also implies an ongoing dynamic of listening and discernment, seeking and discovery...it can be lived out through your work, but there’s more to it. It’s a thread that binds together the various pieces of the tapestry of your life (2010, p. 1).

Gender differences appear to influence calling (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011; Dik & Duffy, 2009; Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007; Longman et al, 2010; Philips, 2009). These researchers suggest that more males tend to view their job as a calling while females rely more on relationships and caring for others. Longman et al (2010) suggest a theoretical model for women and calling:

FIGURE 1
CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF WOMEN’S CALLING



This model describes how participants in the study on women's calling conceptualized the phenomenon. In this model, the strength of a calling relies on four factors and lies along two continuums. The continuums, internal-external and specific-general refer to sources of validation and the manifestation of calling in a specific way or a general way. An internal validation could be "a strong sense of self-awareness and self-efficacy" while an external validation would be of the form of encouragement from mentors or other important figures. The manifestation of a calling can occur in a specific way, as in a vision or hearing the voice of God or answer to prayer, or in a general way, as in a pull towards an area that the person feels she should look into. When there is a strong effect on any aspect of the two continuums, the circle expands in that direction, often creating an amoeba shaped model, which demonstrates a strengthened sense of calling in that area. When there are strong senses of calling, the indication to pursue that calling is clear and encouraged.

Next, four factors that the participants of this particular study identified include theological influences, family realities, cultural expectations, and life circumstances:

[These] represent potential for movement or development inherent in a woman's sense of calling...that could propel women further into pursuing their giftedness and talents, which may result in greater clarity about their calling, or could act as limitations to an exploration of calling.

This model provides a base for the current study, but is limited and affected by its limited scope of subjects, many of whom did not participate in a presidential role or who were interviewed at a Christian conference on the role of calling in leadership. Those participants who were presidents were of small community colleges, which are of a much different culture and comprise a different role than the four-year institutional field. This study strives to expand into the field of female presidents in colleges and universities to determine the role of calling in the pinnacle role of higher education leadership.

Women Presidents and Their Calling

The number of women at every level of academia has been rising for decades. Within the U.S., a recent Department of Education (2010) report identified that in 2007-2008 women earned 57.3% of bachelor's degrees, 60.6% of master's degrees, and 51% of doctoral degrees. Yet the percentage of college and university leadership positions held by women remains low (Moore Brown, 2005). According to The American College President (2012), 26 percent of the presidents of doctorate-granting institutions are now women, as compared with 14 percent in 2006.

Little has been written about women presidents and their calling. Madsen's (2008) research does not mention it. A few women presidents, former presidents and authors refer to it (Bornstein, (2003), Wolverton, et al (2009), but none directly explain the process or journey to the role through the lens of calling.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework for this study draws from the Transformative Learning Theory, which explains that individuals cannot develop leadership unless they are receptive to learning, which is the basis of effective development. Kolb (1984) defined learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience (p. 38)," and emphasized that learning takes place through reflection on experience. Since developing leadership is a transforming process, transformational learning theory provides a valuable theoretical lens to guide this study. Merriam and Caffarella (1995) suggested that "transformational learning theory is about change – dramatic, fundamental change in the way we see ourselves and the world in which we live" (p. 318). Both Meizrow (1991) and Merriam and Caffarella (1995) explained that this theory focuses on three core components: 1. Mental construction of experience: engaging with each life experience to make meaning contains an opportunity for a change in perspective and behavior; 2. Critical reflection: effective learning follows effective reflection, not the

experience itself; individuals must not only think about their experiences, but also examine the underlying beliefs and assumptions that influence how they make sense of their experiences; and 3. Development and action: to truly transform, individuals need to try out their new knowledge, skills, or roles and then build new competence and self-confidence. Critical reflection is one of the main components of this theory and a crucial part of the journey to a college presidency. The authors of this paper argue that effective critical reflection is necessary when leaders are hearing a calling or interpreting data that suggests they move in one direction or another. Effective leaders, including women college presidents, experience the three components of the Transformative Learning Theory while they are discerning a potential calling, as will be discussed in the findings of this study.

PURPOSE, NEED AND JUSTIFICATION OF THE STUDY

In 2008, one of the authors researched the exiting of college presidents in her doctoral dissertation. The author interviewed ten ELCA Lutheran college presidents to learn about their exiting process. In that study, themes that emerged included that 70% of the male presidents described a “calling” to the role of president. This result grew into a need to discover whether women college presidents heard or felt the same call.

Madsen (2008) has written extensively on the experiences of female university presidents. She thoroughly documented personal information, childhood background, youth activities, young adulthood and college years, professional positions and experiences, non-work roles, leadership philosophy, and leadership advice from the ten current female university presidents she interviewed at the time. But the concept of being called to the role of presidency was not specifically researched in Madsen’s study of female university presidents. There is a gap in the literature relative to women presidents and calling.

With the significant turnover of current presidents that will occur in the next decade come new doors of opportunity opening for those who sense a gifting and calling to presidential leadership. Of particular note are new leadership possibilities for women.

The purpose of this paper is to determine if current female college presidents sensed a gifting and calling to the presidency. This could help future female leaders in higher education who are either getting tapped to consider being a president or who are potentially hearing a call and wondering what to do with the calling.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study employed qualitative methodology with a phenomenological approach. This methodology describes the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or the phenomenon (Van Manen, 2001). The researchers utilized qualitative methods, in particular in-depth interviews. Collected data included: Significant statements, meanings of statements, themes or meanings, and an exhaustive description of the phenomenon of the journey to the presidency (Creswell, 2007).

Research Participants

Women comprise 26% of all current college presidents. The authors obtained a list of every current female college president and mailed each of the female presidents a letter inviting them to participate in the study. Sixteen responded initially. One canceled due to lack of time as the interview got closer. With regard to the demographics of the respondents, the ages of the presidents ranged from 50 to 76. Of the 15 women interviewed, 13 identified as Caucasian, one as black and the other as Hispanic. These women have spent an average of 8.7 years of tenure in the role. Nine of them held the office as academic vice-presidents or provosts prior to becoming a president. Six of the presidents came from public institutions. Of the remaining colleges or universities, five of the nine had a religious affiliation. Two of these private colleges were also schools for women only.

Interviews

All 15 participants gave an interview via the telephone. The authors obtained permission to audiotape the interviews, which one author conducted and the other transcribed. The interviews averaged 30 minutes in length. The co-authors' Institutional Review Board approved the study.

Data Collection

After contacting every current female president in the U.S. and receiving confirmation from fifteen of them, the researchers moved forward in conducting interviews. The interviewing author would ask questions and allow the conversation to flow from there, occasionally adding questions or comments to enrich the data received. Each interview began with asking the subjects, "How did you first get interested in being a president?" and "Did someone mentor or sponsor you to the role?" After defining "calling" using the two separate definitions (Luther and Beuchner), the research question asked, "Were you called to the role of college president?" Other questions asked included, "What advice would you give to women who may hear a 'calling' toward a presidency but are still unsure about moving forward?" and "What should interested female presidential candidates be doing now to get prepared?"

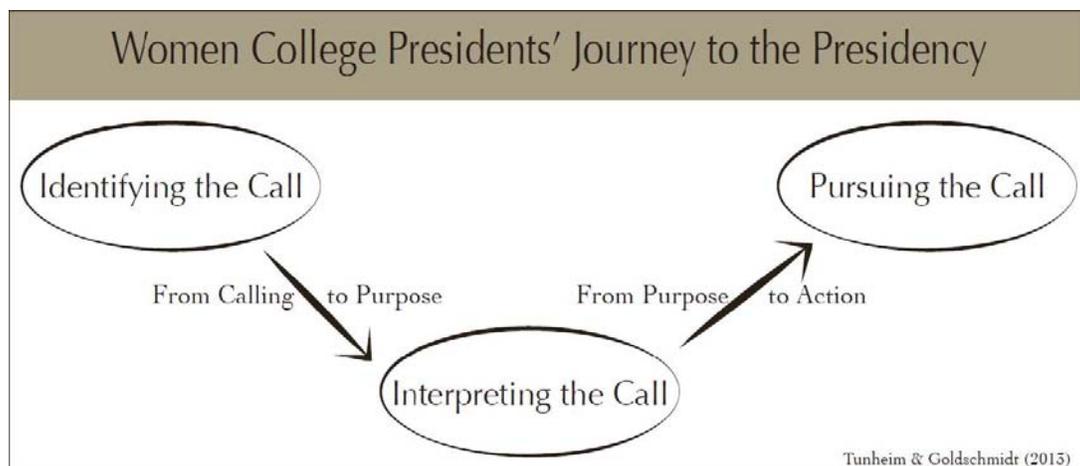
Data Analysis

The interviews were subjected to qualitative analysis to allow themes to emerge. The authors analyzed the interviews as a multi-step process where each interview was read and re-read in order to capture both content and context. The first two times, the authors sought to understand the data. Giorgi (1997) called this step critical in assisting the researcher in understanding the constitution of the data. The third time the authors read the texts very slowly, highlighting important lines. Tesch (1987) described this step as one where the reader looks for the material that at the center of the experience. Barritt, Beekman, Bleeker, and Mulderj (1984) described it as looking for the "moments which fly up like sparks from the description" (p. 6). The fourth time the second author documented the highlighted lines from the texts and later categorized them by theme and participant. Both authors continued to examine the data during the writing process.

FINDINGS

The 15 women college presidents' interviews resulted in the following results. Three main themes emerged from the data: Identifying the Call; Interpreting the Call; and Pursuing the Call, as shown in Figure 2.

FIGURE 2
WOMEN'S COLLEGE PRESIDENTS' JOURNEY TO THE PRESIDENCY



Identifying the Call

Calling can come from a variety of avenues. As stated, the authors used specific definitions of calling with the women presidents interviewed for this study from two authors, Martin Luther and Frederick Beuchner.

Eighty percent of respondents for this study claimed a calling to the role of a presidency. Three described a spiritual calling to the role, one of which replied, "The Lord opened this door for me. I could not have done this without [Him]." Nine of the remaining subjects said they felt a calling but it was more of a match between their gifts and skills and the needs of the institution after they had been approached, which fit with Beuchner's definition. One of these women responded,

I am not an evangelical Christian by any means and so I didn't have a calling like a burning bush or anything like that. But I certainly felt as though my strengths and what I loved to do, I felt called in that way.

The final three respondents denied the existence of a calling to the role, rather stating that their position came as the next logical step and that there was no religious aspect at all. Said one subject,

I would say that I felt like I was ready, that it was something that I really wanted to do, that I had the talent and the skill to do it. But I didn't think that anyone was calling me...it's really the first time in my career that I set out specifically to get a particular job...the first one where I really decided that this was something that I wanted to do.

The variety of responses to this item begs the question of how one identifies whether or not they feel a calling based on the encouragement they receive from others, their gifts and talents, and the satisfaction they have with their current place in life.

All respondents were asked how they got into the role of the presidency. Several respondents were approached by search firms or by mentors or co-workers who encouraged them to look into the possibility. One president described the frustration she felt from experiencing bad presidencies or feeling discouraged at the stunting of the potential she felt lied untapped in the institution due to swampy procedures and the bogging down of ideas from herself and other faculty members as inspiration to the role. Another spoke of the idea growing throughout her continuing experience in higher education and finally thinking that the role was something she could do. After receiving these signals, those who felt as though they had a calling or knew that they should move forward with that inclination spent time looking into what that calling or inclination pulled them toward. The first step of the Transformational Learning Theory is seen at work here; engaging with life experience opened up an opportunity for a change in the lives of these women. The next thing they needed was to understand this change and what it meant.

Interpreting the Call

Women who feel that they have a calling explore that feeling in a variety of ways. After being approached by search firms or encouraged by mentors, the seed had been planted. The next step consisted of interpreting that encouragement and determining what purpose it led to. The participants advised women who may feel a calling to the role in a variety of ways. One respondent who felt a spiritual calling recommended examining the desires of the heart:

If you're not sure about moving forward but...if you ask God to guide you and you really mean that with all of your heart, if the desire gets stronger and stronger...I'd say 'Lord, I see that you're calling me this way, but if I'm making a mistake, I trust you to then shut doors, close windows if I'm not supposed to be there'...just give it up to the Lord and then you have that strong feeling.

Another suggested looking into attending workshops to explore the possibility and “test to see whether or not this sounded like something I wanted to do...that was very helpful, not only to prepare me but to solidify for me that that was something I wanted to do.”

One president replied that it “would be wise to talk to quite a few people who are in higher education about the distinctive culture and values of higher education” if the calling came to someone outside of academe. If the calling came to someone inside higher education, she continued,

I would encourage them to use some of the programs that the national organizations have...for people considering a presidency and...to talk to their own presidents or to talk to other presidents.

Additionally, she advises potential candidates to research current female presidents and not to hesitate contacting them for help.

Finally, two presidents stressed the importance of self-evaluation, and to “analyze whether it’s in your own being to take risks, make tough decisions, take criticism if things go wrong,” and to be aware that “it’s not just about wearing nice suits and going to great parties.” Moreover, it is imperative to “think about what you can get and what you can give...trust your own instinct.”

In essence, understanding the role and understanding the self is imperative in interpreting whether or not one has felt a calling to pursue this position. The second part of the Transformative Learning Theory appears here with reflection not only on the experiences these women felt but also in the examination of their underlying gifts and purpose in life. Critical reflection is imperative to this step in understanding a calling to any role, including the role of the presidency. Prospective presidential candidates should examine how the role would fit into their lives, discuss the possibilities and implications with the important people in their lives, research the requirements and skills needed for the job, and think deeply about this opportunity.

Pursuing the Call

Once one has determined that she feels a calling to the role and to accept that calling, the next step is to pursue the calling. Women in academic leadership position seek out opportunities and fits with organizations in order to advance their careers. Several things contribute to this step. The first is preparation for the role. Academic literature has the female “confidence” issue well documented. Men are typically under-prepared and over-confident for these roles while women are often over-prepared and under-confident for leadership roles (Kinicki & Kreitner, 2009). In order to have success in these roles, candidates for the position must have confidence in both their skills and ability. One respondent emphasized the importance of balance in confidence:

If you go into a position [and] you think you know everything, you can almost guarantee it’s not going to work, and if you go in without the confidence that can even get you there, it’s obviously not going to work.

First, confidence in one’s skills comes only with practice, training, and exposure to fully understand the requirements of the presidency itself and its role in all areas of the institution. As described in the Transformative Learning Theory, trying out new knowledge, skills, or roles and building new competence and self-confidence truly transforms individuals and will prepare them for their calling. One current president said women trying to get into the presidency “should be working in the academic arena as much as they can, in whatever position they’re in, [and] they should be getting special training from the AGB (Association of Governing Boards) or other sources that they know about.” Additionally, “they should step out of their comfort zone and be sitting in on some classes that are in areas that they’re unfamiliar with so that they at least know the language of that area,” such as budgets, investment, CFO duties, student life, and more. Delegation is also key. Several presidents spoke about the importance of having

the ability to recognize their skills and then supplement their weaknesses by having people who are strong in those areas consult in their meetings. One woman advised,

Know where your strongest areas are. Focus more on sharpening the areas you're naturally good at than focusing on areas that you're not too good at. You can always bring people onto your team with those complimentary skill sets. Understand your own strengths and learn how to use those strengths in the role.

In understanding women's natural ability to the role, that same president gave encouraging advice:

We have a lot, if not all, of the major qualities needed that have been attributed to men—hard work, commitment, we're analytical, we're both right brained and left brained, and here's the thing—women intuitively have the emotional intelligence down...in this diverse world, emotional intelligence, almost innately, should bolster up our confidence.

Resume and performance make up the next part of preparing for the role. Nine of the fifteen interviewees for this study had been provosts before their appointment to the presidency, and all of them had served in higher administration as vice presidents, deans, or assistant provosts. Along with experience, applicants need to have outstanding performance in whatever role they serve in throughout their career. Several presidents said that interested candidates for the presidency need to give 100% in every position and become the go-to person in the office. Prospective presidents should volunteer for committees not only to get to know all institutional areas but also to gain experience and show their skills, work ethic and enthusiasm for the role. Said one president:

Everything in my life has prepared me for this role—my role as a soccer mom and busy mother, as a department chair and as VP of Academic Affairs—every role was important in giving me skills. My work outside the office was as important as in.

All of these requirements add up to the next part of pursuing the calling to the role of presidency: opportunity.

Subjects of the study came to the role of the presidency through a variety of pipelines. Some were contacted by search firms, some nominated, and some encouraged to the role by mentors who were previous presidents. Regardless of how the opportunity was presented, it only happened because that woman had been recognized for her outstanding skills and dedication. Women who feel a calling and want to pursue that calling should be constantly on the lookout for more opportunities to be involved, to learn more, to strengthen their skills, and should apply themselves to every aspect of their life. When the opportunity does come, several women stressed the importance of fit to the institution. One even interviewed for over ten positions and waited until she found the right fit. Above all, the cultivation of skills and the preparation for the role needs to culminate in the perfect fit between the woman and the institution in order to garner a successful presidency.

Implications for Research and Practice

More women need to be encouraged to attend ACE, Bryn Mahr, CCCU, and similar types of women-only leadership development programs. The research suggests that this is helpful for women leaders in higher education (Madsen, 2008). The more women that are exposed to the idea of thinking about a presidency, the more they can identify, interpret and pursue the call.

Current male and female college presidents need to continue and increase their mentoring of high potential women leaders inside their institutions. Research suggests that mentoring and sponsorship of women leaders works (Moore Brown, 2005). Current presidents of both genders should consider taking on mentees for the role, even if that guidance does not result in a presidency. With the imbalance of women in higher executive roles, women need to be encouraged to pursue those higher roles earlier in their careers.

More needs to be written and published about college and university women presidents. Besides Bornstein (2003), Longman et al (2010), Wolverson et al (2009), few authors have written on the topic of women and calling. More research is emerging on this topic as more women are progressing up the ladder in higher education. Since more women are pursuing higher degrees and becoming more prevalent in higher roles, we can expect a growing percentage of female presidents as the role turns over.

More needs to be written specifically on women college presidents in four-year institutions. Many of the journal articles focus on women presidents of community colleges, since that is where the majority of the 26% of women college presidents reside.

Limitations

A number of limitations influenced this study. First, the 16 presidents who responded to the invitation chose to participate on their own volition. Therefore, the presidents may not be representative of the 70 women college presidents in the role today. These presidents could be the only ones interested or familiar with calling as a construct, in which case the study gives a higher representation of women presidents who feel the calling than actually exists.

Second, the authors researched the topic of calling looking through a Lutheran lens. Using this term with presidents not looking through the same religiously influenced lens may cause confusion or distortion of the term. This distortion may influence the results or the analysis of the results.

Third, during one of the telephone interviews, the recording device stopped working at the beginning of the telephone call. The first author wrote diligently to write down the data but may not have documented every single word as accurately as the recording device would have done.

Finally, the phenomenological findings are not meant to be generalized. Van Manen (2001) explains that lived experiences are stories of individuals that are meaningful.

CONCLUSION

After discovering the role of calling into the journeys of male college presidents, the question occurred to the authors of whether or not women feel that same calling. 70% of men responded that they felt a calling in the previous study. This study concludes that women also feel some extent of a calling in their journey to the presidency. This calling manifested itself in a variety of ways with little regard to religious affiliation and occurred through personal, spiritual and vocational connection.

With the number of women advancing through all ranks of the educational system, we hope to see a more equal representation of women at the heads of colleges and universities across the nation. These women, who will be leading a new generation of women in the leadership of higher educational institutions, will need encouragement to consider such a lofty role. They will also need to understand their purpose and calling to the role. This is done through thorough identification and interpretation of the calling as well as a deep introspection and pursuance of confidence, capability, and efficacy. However, there comes a time when the only step remaining in the journey to the presidency is into the ring. As one respondent stated, "If you feel you are ready for the job and that you have the calling, pursue that calling. We need outstanding leaders in higher [education]. If you are gifted for the role, step up." Another participant applied for the role because she felt she had the calling but doubted that she would receive the job—since the calling was true and the fit was right, she was offered the position and accepted it. According to Luther in 1521, regardless of how much preparation one has, there comes a time when one just has to take a leap of faith—if the calling is true, the role will be there.

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