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Equity issues for women in higher education: The emergent complexities of Social identities, pay inequities and the power of women's groups

by

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The Current Era

The Obama Administration, numerous governors, and university presidents are quite concerned with increasing college access and graduation rates as reflected in presidential and gubernatorial platforms, speeches, and initiatives. For example, on July 14, 2009 President Barack Obama announced the American Graduation Initiative (AGI) from Macomb Community College, located near world-headquarters for General Motors, Ford and Chrysler – the "big three" of the automobile industry. AGI is a ten-year, $12 billion postsecondary education plan that emphasizes the role of community colleges in workforce development and training as well as avenues toward increasing college graduation rates. It is the largest federal investment in higher education second only to the Higher Education Act. AGI consists of five strategic goals: 1) increase the number of community college graduates by five million; 2) create a series of competitive community college tuition grants; 3) promote strategies to increase collegiate degree acquisition; 4) improve community college facilities; and 5) create a series of online courses distributed through community colleges that emphasize skills training and lifetime experience (The White House, 2009).

It is understandable why President Obama would focus on increasing the number of college graduates across the United States as one of his first initiatives in office and continue working on this initiative throughout his two terms. Research shows that college graduates receive higher wage rates and annual incomes which, in turn, increase contributions to the US Gross Domestic Product (GDP), state taxes and regional economic activity (Day & Newburger, 2002; DesJardins, 2003; Gottlieb & Fogarty, 2003). Specifically, Gottlieb and Fogarty (2003) found that education level is one of the strongest predictors of economic welfare for a city. In fact, if a person has a college degree then not only will that person make more in terms of annual income, but the income of the people who live in the local community around that person – no matter if they went to college or not – will also make more money. In economic terms, this is called "positive externalities" –

monetary or nonmonetary spillover benefits to people who didn't go to college – and are often experienced and not necessarily acknowledged by people who invest in education (McMahon, 2009).

The benefits of higher education should not be limited to economics alone as there are public and social benefits as well. For example, college graduates experience an increase in health and life expectancy, charitable giving and community service, quality of life for children, consumer decision making, ability to adapt to technology, and more hobbies or leisure activities (Institute for Higher Education Policy [IHEP] 1998; 2005). In addition, college graduates have a greater appreciation for diversity (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002), which has been argued as an important characteristic by Fortune 500 companies (over sixty leading companies including 3M, Coca-Cola, Nike, Johnson & Johnson), high-ranking officers in the US Military (Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps), and considered a compelling interest in college admissions by the US Supreme Court (*Gratz v. Bollinger,* 2003; *Grutter v. Bollinger,* 2003).

The public and private benefits of higher education seem irrefutable, yet educational inequities continue to persist across gender, race, and socio-economic status throughout the United States. As Elizabeth Allan (2011) points out in *Women's Status in Higher Education: Equity Matters*, many people are touting the end of gender inequity because there are now more women enrolled in college than men; however she shows that disparities continue for women across institution type (e.g. technical school, community college, regional institution, ivy league schools) and degree program (e.g. degree programs with lower vs. higher pay after graduation such as science and engineering). Anthony Carnevale and Jeff Strohl (2013) in *Separate and Unequal: How Higher Education Reinforces the Intergenerational Reproduction of White Racial Privilege* quantitatively dissect intergenerational mobility and immobility. For example, they found that while there has been a greater increase in percentage of African American and Latin@ students in college, there is a disparity in terms of which institutions people are attending (a similar finding for women in higher education). White

students have held on to their dominance of enrollment in the top four-year colleges and had no enrollment increases at open-access colleges while the growth of African American and Latin@ students was primarily at open-access institutions. Further, Rowan-Kenyon (2007) found that students from lower socio-economic status (SES or class) are less likely than higher SES peers to gain access to college at any time in their career. Alarmingly, access to college by people from middle- and lower-income families has been sharply reduced in recent years (McMahon, 2009).

In the field of education, the American Educational Research Association (www.aera.net) took on the topic "Education and poverty: Theory, research, policy and praxis" as the focus of the annual conference in April 2013, where the intersections of education and poverty were explored in relation to gender, race, violence, academic capitalism, in/equity, among other important areas. Scholars also furthered the ways in which financial, material (including technological), artistic, and intellectual poverty perpetuate unnecessary divides between people that reify educational inequities.

To be sure, many women experience the intersection of gender and poverty quite intimately. For example, the number of single female households in "extreme poverty" (defined as making $2 or less, per person, per day) increased 190.6% from 1996 – 2011 to 738,000 households throughout the US (Shaefer & Edin, 2012). Notably, this figure is "households" and not individual women and children impacted. Women and girls are also disparagingly impacted by human trafficking where approximately 2.5 million people (of all genders) are in forced labor as a result of human trafficking and 43% of victims are used specifically for forced commercial sexual exploitation, of whom 98% are women and girls (International Labour Organization, 2007).

As Lin and Harris (2009) point out, poverty results "not from a single source but from a cumulative process: any type of disadvantage makes one vulnerable to other disadvantages" (p. 1-2). Pasque and Rex (2010) take this one step farther to address *cumulative oppression* and *cumulative privilege* to represent the cumulative oppression/privilege of multiple roles and social identities across the

generations. In this way, it reflects the structural inequalities that persist from generation to generation; mother to daughter – to mother to daughter.

So, what does this current status of inequity during the Obama Administration mean for women who are interested in college access for themselves, their children, and/or their children's children? What are the experiences of women who do make it to and through college and what might we do in order to help women persist in college environments that we know are beneficial yet continue to reify inequities?

In this article, I build on my earlier research and take an unabashed feminist perspective where the intersectionality of identities such as gender, race, class and sexual orientation are centered and where theory is directly linked to policy and practice (hooks, 1984). This includes the nexus between the individual / economic (e.g. increased pay, health) and public / social good (e.g. increased community service, appreciation for diversity) of higher education that we must explore in greater detail in order to address educational gender inequities (Pasque 2010a). To be sure, gender, race, class are inextricably linked to notions of poverty and wealth, health, appreciation for diversity, and college access. As such, when education is reduced to workforce development, as with AGI, it is women, people of color, and people from poor and working class backgrounds who are more readily ushered into community colleges and not the top tier institutions in fields with higher paying salaries, thereby perpetuating educational inequities. Kuntz, Gildersleeve and Pasque (2010) examine this closely and conclude that AGI perpetuates inequity as it "is not so much about education (in the progressive sense) and more about workforce development (education in an era of conservative modernization as the production of economic knowledges and activities)" (p. 500).

Specifically, gender intersects with race and class where women are more often in lower paying and lower ranking jobs than their men counterparts (Allan, 2011), still earning only 80 cents to every dollar a man earns (US Department of Labor, 2010) and 81 cents per dollar for faculty

salaries in the academy (Umbach, 2007) where equity is touted yet not achieved. The current workplace – including blue-collar, pink-collar, and even the elite setting of academia – is "remarkably intolerant of employment interruptions" (Hile, 2011, p. 408) and has maintained a "chilly climate" (Hall & Sandler, 1982) for women. Indeed, President Obama signed the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act in 2009, which extended the statute of limitations on cases where a worker found they were receiving discriminatory pay; however this policy has not abolished gender inequity in and beyond education, a goal to which we should continue to aspire.

In this article, I draw from the National Study on Women in Higher Education and Student Affairs to explore areas that may help influence the educational policy and programs as we make concerted change toward access and equity for women in education. I reflect on a collectively-written diary, archival data, focus groups and interviews with a diverse group of women leaders across the country in order to explore the intersectionality of identities, notions of pay and promotion inequity, and the power of women's groups in educational settings. The women have attended and/or work at community colleges, regional, and research institutions; public and private institutions; primarily white institutions (PWIs) and Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs). I focus on women leaders already in higher education as people often accept what leaders say as truth and look to leaders as harbingers for change (Johnstone, 2002). It also helps us to understand the contemporary complexities of experiences of women already in the system of higher education who contribute to – and are the direct recipients of – existing gender policies and programs. My hope is that this research will help increase awareness around issues of access and equity for women in higher education in order to work toward intentional policy and structural change.

The Study

As Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber (2007) writes in "Feminist research: Exploring the interconnections of epistemology methodology and method" feminist perspectives,

> carry messages of empowerment that challenge the encircling of knowledge claims by those who occupy privileged positions. Feminist thinking and practice requires taking steps from the "margins to the center" while eliminating boundaries of division that privilege dominant forms of knowledge building boundaries that mark who can be a knower and what can be known. (p. 1)

This research focuses on centering the perspectives of women in higher education and "eliminating boundaries of division" that privilege patriarchal paradigms in the academy, including policies, procedures, and climate issues that perpetuate inequity and limited access for women, people of color, and people from various class backgrounds. This study is decidedly feminist, grounded in the theoretical standpoints from white feminists and feminists of color where the intersections of gender, race, socio-economic status, sexual orientation and other social identities are consistently centered when exploring the experiences of women. This intersectionality of identities, I argue, is one of the most important insights provided to us by feminist theory and is found across various feminist perspectives. In this way, I take cues from Black Feminist Thought, Chicana, Native American, Arab American, Asian American and radical feminism (Collins, 2000a, 2000b; Crenshaw, 1991; Darraj, 2003; hooks, 1984; Huhndorf, 2009; Nieto Gómez, 1976/1997; Pasque, 2011; Roth, 2004; Tong, 2009; Yang, 2003). Feminism inherently questions notions of power and, in this context, is useful to explore issues of gender inequity in an educational policy and practice.

In considering the experiences of women in higher education, I draw from the National Study on Women in Higher Education and Student Affairs which includes materials from the archives of a national educational association, a diary, focus groups, and individual interviews. More specifically, the diary was collectively kept over ten years by women who were elected to leadership positions in a national higher education association. The diary itself includes 108 entries from 41 different women who wrote in the diary between September, 2000 and April 2010. After reviewing

the diary and the national archives, I developed a focus group protocol and interviewed 20 women through three different face-to-face focus groups. After finishing the focus groups and learning from the women in this context, I developed the interview protocol and individually interviewed 17 women. After analyzing the archives, focus groups, and interviews, I interviewed six women in "member-checking" interviews where the women shared their perspectives and added complexities to my initial findings. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed and approximately 32 pages of field notes were written. (For more details on the methodology and methods, see Pasque, 2013). Taken together, the archives, collectively kept diary, small focus groups, and one-on-one interviews reflect a feminist approach of connecting different threads of understanding through listening to (or reading) the experiences of people and relating it to practice in an synergistic manner (Hesse-Biber, 2007).

Notably, the women are administrators within the academy who worked to get to and through college, are positioned to create policy and programs regarding access to or persistence through college, and also took a professional risk to run for a national position where they were voted on/in by all members of the organization (over 8,000 women, men, and transgender colleagues). The women hold various positions in colleges and universities across the US, represent different racial identities and class backgrounds, and are at different points in their professional and/or scholarly careers. The women have attended and/or work at community colleges, regional, and research institutions that are public and private institutions, including PWIs and MSIs. This includes "off the beaten path at little private schools" as articulated by one of the women. Some, but not all, identified themselves as mothers and/or grandmothers.

There are three different areas that emerged relevant to the exploration of gender inequity in higher education during the current era worthy of exploration here: the intersectionality of social identities, pay and promotion inequity, and the power of women's groups in educational settings.

Each is described by using representative examples from the voices and writing of women in higher education and is threaded with the existing literature to deepen the analysis. I conclude with a discussion of how this research may be useful in future federal and institutional policy and practice.

Intersection of Identities

That was a year where were had four Latina women, three or four African American women, no Native American women, some white women, and so it was this pretty diverse group [of twelve women], and we were all different ages, and we had this great, productive mid-year [conference]. I think it was in Florida. We all went out for a meal the last night and there was this open-air kind-of dancing – line dancing and a band – and so we all, so here were these twelve women –dancing and glowing – and everybody was just watching us like, "Woah, now here's this powerful group of women!" Francesca (individual interview)

The intersections of gender, race, class, sexual orientation and age have been at the center of a number of different feminist theories for decades, including but not limited to, Black Feminist Thought, Chicana Feminism, Native American Feminism, and radical feminism. Kimberly Crenshaw (1991) has been acknowledged for coining the actual term "intersectionality," which is "a critical analytic interdisciplinary tool to interrogate racial, ethnic, class, and gender disparities and to contest existing ways of looking at disparities" (Dill & Zambrana, 2009, p. 2). As Patricia Hill Collins (2009) reminds us "From its inception, intersectionality took up the social problems that most affected those harmed by inequalities – poverty, poor education, substandard healthcare, inadequate housing, and violence all became rethought through a lens of intersecting power relations of race, class, and gender" (p. viii).

Intersectionality is grounded in the intersecting systems of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, nationality and age at the individual level, while connecting it with the interlocking systems of privilege and oppression at the societal level (Davis, Brunn, & Olive, in press). In this way, intersectionality is not the layering of gender, race, class and sexual orientation, but the multi-dimensional intersections where identities are threaded through each other, as well as to individual, institutional and societal privilege and oppression. As such, it is important that we consider the

intersectional and holistic experiences of women in higher education as we work to reframe policies and programs that address inequity and foster educational change.

Theoretically, the field of education knows about issues of intersectionality, yet when intersected with policy and practice at the federal and institutional levels, identity is often relegated to "boxes" and binaries. For example, when applying to college, students "check the box" for gender often reduced to a binary construct of "male" or "female". Students also "check the box" for race, where many higher education institutions limit to options to "White; African American or Black; Hispanic or Latino; American Indian or Alaskan Native; Asian American / Pacific Islander; Native Hawaiian; International student; or "other" where multiracial students, Arab American students, or students who do not identify with the few choices listed must choose one racial identity or identify as "other" – being relegated to the margins prior to college admission. The US Census Bureau has finally expanded racial and ethnic categories to provide 57 possible multiple combinations (Humes, Jones & Ramirez, 2011), yet like many datasets, categories often are combined when analyzing and reporting data in order to strengthen the study according to objectivist and positivist paradigms (Jones, Torres, Arminio, 2014), thereby ignoring lived racial and ethnic complexities.

The focus group participants in this study were not given boxes to check regarding demographics but, instead, were asked to fill out an open-ended form where each participant could see the various writings from the women who came before her. The form asked for gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, children (if any), age, years in the field, and "anything else you want to share." Categories within groups were not predetermined. For one-on-one interviewees, the women were asked to verbally self-identify in demographic categories and, again, were not given pre-determined categories. The intersectionality of the social identities came through in the stories of the

women as they talked with each other in the focus groups and with me as the researcher in the interviews.

When the women did not have predetermined social identity sub-categories (such as heterosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual; female, male, transgender; African American, White, Asian American, etc.), then they were more apt to create their own original categories or ways to identify themselves. All identified as a "woman" for gender. In the focus groups, for example, five women identified as "Black," twelve as "White," one as "White/Caucasian," and two as "multiracial". Of this same group, ethnicity was quite diverse. For example, one person identified as "Native American" as her ethnicity, not race. This was quite different than the woman who identified herself as Mohawk, a specific tribe, as her ethnicity. Details are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: *Ethnicity as handwritten by participants.*

Ethnicity	**Number of Women**
African	2
African American	1
African American + Native American	1
American	1
American, Italian + French	1
English + Other	1
German, Welsh + English	1
Indian (Asian) + White	1
Irish + German	2
Italian + Irish	2
Jamaican	1
Latina	1
Mohawk	1
Puerto Rican	1
White English	1
Did not identify	2

Clearly, ethnicity – as related to and independent from race – was quite complex as represented by the women. It was not that these women did not know the difference between race and ethnicity – the organization that they were involved with placed great emphasis on identity as

connected to the field of higher education – it was that the women wanted to represent their own conceptualization of race and ethnicity, not necessarily the categories typically found in federal or institutional forms. To be sure, even the given categories in the open-ended form was also limiting for the women but provided more open-ended possibilities.

In terms of the sexual orientation of focus group women, 10 identified as heterosexual, two as straight, five as bisexual, one as bi/pan affectionate, one as queer, and one did not identify. In terms of the 17 women who participated in interviews, the sexual orientation categories included those mentioned and expanded to include, "I am married to a man" and "I have had a partner for 14 years." This reflected the complex nature of sexual orientation and as readily intersected with gender and age. Stated another way, the categories of sexual orientation and gender were not mutually exclusive, but some women defined their own sexual orientation based on who they were with as a partner. As such, when decisions of social identity were left up to the participants to determine, they rejected binary categories that limited or boxed themselves into categories. In this way, it rendered the binary categories typically offered as, not just incomplete, but inaccurate.

When asked if there was "anything else you want to share?" the women talked or wrote about many things including being married, single, a graduate student, a mother, a grandmother, and having a puppy. These additional identities add to the intersectionality and complexities of the women and were salient to understanding the narratives shared in the focus group or interview. For example, from the above information a reader would not know that the 31 year old multiracial woman identified as both Indian (Asian) and white as her ethnicity, that she was a heterosexual with no children and had nine years in the field. Also, it was the 38 year old racially White + Caucasian woman who had one child, was married to a woman, and identified as bi/pan affectionate with 16 years in the field. Further, it was the 40 year-old heterosexual Black Jamaican woman, married with 2 children who had been in the field for 10 years and was finishing up a PhD in higher education.

Class experiences were not asked for in the demographic information, yet were represented by many of the women in their written and verbal narratives.

Ropers-Huilman (2008) writes about this as the "dance of identities" where "women negotiate their identities as leaders, family members, ethnic community members, members of various disciplines, and academic citizens. These multiple identities both facilitate and impede the 'productivity' that is typically associated with faculty roles and also affect one's affiliation with feminism in the academy" (p. 35). As such, one is a "multifaceted self" that reflects the intersectionality of her being and, when faced with a socio-cultural context that is different from her own, such as in heterosexual, Christian, white, patriarchal space, women will tend to "mask" a part of themselves rather than perform or reveal a sense of self that may be marginalized or silenced in the space (Ropers-Huilman, 2008; also see Montoya, 2003). Masking is understandable as women have been found to experience more hostile environments as they advance in their profession, where they have to prove legitimacy and competency in a way that men do not (Hewlett et al., 2008; Rosser, 2004; Settles et al., 2007).

It is the intersectionality of this demographic information – coupled with the life-experiences and textured stories from the women as contextualized within a system of education that reflects structural privilege and oppression – that adds to the richness and complexities of our understanding. When education institutions and policies presume binary categories then it can be harmful, reductive, and lessen contributions by women. It is the intersectionality of the "real lives" of women coming to and moving through higher education, including and beyond workforce development, that we need to pay attention to as we create policies and procedures that impact access and equity in higher education. Further, when intersectionality is not considered, we ignore the complexities of the self that may perpetuate inequities in higher education.

Pay and Promotion Inequity

"I finally did go to my boss and say 'This will not continue. Either I will get more help in the next fiscal year, or you're going to need to replace me 'cause I'm not going to keep doing this.'" Maria (individual interview)

"The higher the fewer" continues to be a fitting description for women and girls who progress through the educational system (Allan, 2011). While there are more women throughout the system of higher education today, disparities continue to exist across degree program and institutional type (Allan, 2011; Pasque & Errington Nicholson, 2011). Even when women earn a bachelor's degree as a young person, their earnings over time (on average) continue to be less than their men counterparts (Allan, 2011). This disparity may be exacerbated each year as pay increases are often a percentage of base pay and further magnified for graduates carrying significant student loans (Webster & Bishaw, 2007).

There are many places on the pathway to and through college where women are "peeled off" from men to perpetuate "the higher the fewer". The women in this study were no different than most fields and described this phenomenon in their own lives. Their discourse focused on the pain of being under-paid for their efforts and passed over for promotion.

For example, Maria[1] described a new initiative to support undergraduate students that her department colleagues discussed in a staff meeting. Her supervisor asked if the department should take on the initiative "and nobody would respond". She finally spoke up to say that the department should it. After no word on the initiative in the weeks to come, she went to her supervisor and asked about the progress and nothing had transpired. Her supervisor asked, "Do you want it?" Maria described,

> And I, being young and dumb, I said "sure." I didn't say, "Well, maybe. What kind of staff am I going to have? What kind resources am I going to have? What kind of compensation are we talking about for taking on a second job on top of the one I've already got?" I just said "sure." And I – I got no support, no raise for almost a year, and then a very minimal raise, and not nearly enough help. I think – I don't – I don't know that anybody sat back and

> calculated, you know, some kind of evil calculation about "here's a way to screw over Maria." … It took me a long time to dig out of that hole and, when I tried, I didn't get an especially good response from the vice president in my area. It was a real learning experience and it was really nice to have somebody [women's group]. I had a brand-new boss who was kind of caught in the middle between his boss and me and wasn't willing to go to bat for me right off the bat. I kind-of had to prove myself to him. So, it was really affirming to have somebody [women in group] outside the situation hear my description of it and say, "that's not right"… it [women's group] kept me sane and kept me from just throwing in the towel and going and crying in a corner somewhere … I finally did go to my boss and say "This will not continue. Either I will get more help in the next fiscal year, or you're going to need to replace me 'cause I'm not going to keep doing this." And I never would have had the guts to do that. And they did give me help. They hired me an assistant director, but you know I never would've had the guts to do that without the support of the folks on [the women's group].

Maria described a situation where she was a young professional who did not know what to ask for or how to ask for it as she started a new initiative without the support of additional staff or adequate pay. In this instance, she was expected to take on these new responsibilities and "prove herself." She was not provided with additional salary or support prior to directly asking for it.

It is people within the educational system [not the system itself] who do not automatically and regularly assess pay or workload equity for women. Merely "leaning in" (Sandberg, 2013) to traditional male systems fails to question the assumptions behind a culture of overwork and lack of monetary recognition for additional work, as well as the inequitable work and pay distribution across gender, race, and class. For Maria, it was the women's group who listened to the situation and

provided advice that helped her develop "the guts" to ask for the support needed, which was then – and only then – provided. To my knowledge, the department did not prorate Maria's salary.

In another instance, a Diane described being passed over for a promotion by a younger male colleague who she liked, but she had been at the institution longer and her supervisor had discussed grooming her for a higher-level position. However, her promotion is not what happened. She recalled,

> It was the good old boys – who I liked very much but he was just kind-of shoed right in to the Chief Student Affairs Officer [position]… it was all a club… I was very angry, then depressed, then I said "if I am going to move up then I'm going to have to leave" [after she sought advice from women's group].

In this instance, Diane's supervisor had spoken about her moving up within the department, however Diane was outside of the "good old boys" club and witnessed a younger, less established man get promoted to the position that she was led to think would be offered to her. After talking with the women from this women's organization Diane, like Maria, decided that she would leave the institution. While Maria stayed at the institution and received the support she needed, Diane applied for and received a position in different state. Diane described how it actually turned out well for her professionally; however the forced choice and lack of promotion would not have been her choice at the time.

Diane's experience is consistent with the finding from Ropers-Huilman (2008) where men are often hired for signs of leadership <u>potential</u> whereas women are hired for <u>productivity and proven worth</u>. In Diane's experience, it was the younger man with less experience who was ushered into the position based on his potential rather than his productivity and proven worth. The inconsistencies in promotion and pay add to the cycle of oppression for women in the workplace and are compounded across generations or cumulative oppression.

Maria and Diane each mentioned the benefits of participation in a national women's group and how helpful it was in sense-making of situations and considering various options. Leah echoed these sentiments,

> I mean it's kind-of the, it's kind of one of those things where, you know, you talk about pay inequities, or you talk about women's voices not being heard, or women might be invisible at the top, and you can sort-of feel isolated on your own campus thinking that and saying that but then when it's happening in multiple places [around the US], then you start to go "okay wait a minute, there is something more" – your argument starts to become stronger.

Leah knew about gender pay inequities or women being silenced in the workplace, yet her connections on the national level helped increase her information regarding what was happening across the country. In this way, the organization helped her to build a stronger argument to bring back to her own campus regarding pay inequity, silencing of women, or the isolation as one of the few women at the top of the institution.

It is important to note that perceptions of a hostile climate for women negatively affects an employee's psychological well-being and job satisfaction, which – in turn – leads to increased burnout, lower organizational commitment, and increased desire to leave regardless of whether she was the target of hostile acts (Fouad & Singh, 2011; Miner-Rubino & Cortina, 2007; Settles et al., 2007). Many women described the women's group as an important element in helping understand the complexity of a situation and determining strategies to make change in the workplace. This rationale for participation in the women's group and as a leader in this national association extended beyond discussions of pay and promotion inequities; it was the most prevalent theme throughout the focus groups, interviews and diary. This concept is explored further in the next section.

The Power of Women's Groups

Despite the numerous visible and invisible differences we each carry, we share one common goal and purpose. As a result, our different personalities and vantage points provide opportunities to reach our amplified goal in a myriad of

ways – together! No other place have I found a coalition of women who so willingly congregate for four-five days as strangers and come out friends, partners, colleagues, on a mission. Because of this – the past three years have been filled with constant acts of kindness, encouragement, accountability, love, grace and strength. Samantha (Diary Entry)

Women activists and their allies have transformed some aspects of higher education and now there are more women in academia than ever before (Allan, 2011; Marine, 2011). Yet, the "glass ceiling" and the "chilly climate" still exist on college campuses and in various workplace settings across the country (Allan, 2011; Eliasson, Berggren, & Bondestam, 2000; Hall & Sandler, 1982; Calizo, 2011; Sandler & Hall, 1986). Women report a "toxic atmosphere" and experience more stress than their men colleagues (Allan, 2011). The women in this national study reflect this previous research on stressful and stratified environments identifying climates of isolation, anxiety and burnout (Pasque, 2010b). However, the overwhelming majority of the experiences in this women's group – as described throughout the diary, focus groups, and interviews – were that of "rejuvenation," where it refreshed and centered them in a meaningful manner so they could return to their home campus and make a difference in terms of policy, programs, and practice (Pasque, 2010b). The women also described receiving invaluable career advice, personal support, and leadership experience grounded in new paradigms. The power of this all-women space cannot be overstated.

In addition to the examples above where women received career advice that made a difference as they returned to their home campus, there were a number of examples where women reflected on this rare experience and the importance of connecting with other women in the field from across the country. Deborah described,

> Because we were the only female administrators on our campus, [we would] really be dealing with these issues. You know, we would say something in a meeting and it would seem like no one heard it and then 5 minutes later a male would say the very same thing everybody would go "Oh, yes". [Laughter]. And, you know, by the time we got to the conference or

> midyear, I would just feeling exhausted from dealing with those issues and just feeling the loneliness of being a women in that level and dealing with the issues and so it was always a breath of fresh air – and rejuvenation – and reaffirmation. I think that it was, "Yeah, I'm not crazy, this is actually going on. It's true." As well as getting some real practical ways of dealing with the situation … [And if it had not been for the women's group I would have thought], "oh my gosh, I must be terrible. I must not have been working hard enough or been good enough." You know? You know, I am pretty sure that's what would have happened; where really I should have seen it as sexist.

For Deborah, her home campus was isolating as there were not many women in high-level professional positions. She named a sexist work environment where she felt exhausted from dealing with gender issues and being silenced in meetings. The women's group was rejuvenating and a reaffirming. It was participation in this women's group that helped her to not blame herself, but instead, to brainstorm with other women to figure out what was happening and work to make change in tangible ways.

Jennifer provided an alternative to the gendered and raced culture of the workplace and how it was different in the all-women's group.

> I think we're socialized that a leader, or being a leader, is a very traditional, very power-oriented concept. So, I think, trying to change that more to a feminist model or a Native model, where it's more of the collective – it's about understanding people not just for their leadership role, but the entire person. That self-exploration makes us stronger and who we are, and who we can help, and I think that's, I think there is a paradigm shift that's happening, but I think it's slow.

Jennifer's description of a leader rejected the patriarchal model to which we are so often socialized, and connected the intersections of gender, race, and post-colonial theory and practice. For Jennifer,

the women's group was a paradigm shift to a more collective model and – while society in general may not completely embody a collective model – she recognized a slow shift toward a more feminist or Native model of leadership. She went on to describe how this all women's work space helped her with leadership capabilities and to shift, herself, to a new leadership paradigm. She reflected,

> [The women's group] experience was really challenging for me. That experience, it was very powerful, it was really wonderful, it was also very challenging for me 'cause the reality of the fact is – I think, in part, the reason why leadership is so hierarchical is that in some ways it's easier. People who are leaders are, they're sometimes the people who are drawn to leadership. They use that term "leadership" as a way to protect themselves, to be more distant, to be on the edge, in a way. And, in the extreme, that's very problematic and it does create an oppressive kind of style of leadership but, even not in the extreme, sort of more towards the center it can be sort-of safe, you know? People don't ask you personal questions, people don't expect you to invest in work in the same kind of way – you kind of get a free pass from that. You know? … My experience [in the women's group] really invited me out of that and really helped me think sort of differently about that and I do think I'm more accessible as a leader and as an owner in the company that I have than I was before my experience … People drew me out of that [old paradigm] and invited me into that [new paradigm] because they all share that kind of different paradigm as well … It's easy for me to fall back into that old paradigm in an environment where other people are not as supportive, not as committed to a new paradigm.

Jennifer explained a patriarchal form of leadership that insulated and protected a leader from the group that s/he worked with. It was a familiar and "easier" form of leadership that kept a leader safe. It was the all-women's group that challenged Jennifer to be a different kind of leader and to reject that safe form of leadership. In this way, she depicted herself as more of an accessible leader

with her own company where she employs a number of people (outside of higher education). She illustrated the challenge of sticking to a more inclusive style of leadership when the environment is not as supportive. With this case in point, it is up to education leaders to challenge themselves – and others – to identify the familiar, easy, and safe paradigms that reify educational and workplace inequities, and to create supportive environments for people to challenge the status quo with leadership styles, policies and procedures.

Overall, the written and verbal descriptions of the strength of the women's organization provide a solid goal for leaders throughout the field of education – in administration, classrooms, and work spaces. A few additional representative examples of the power of women's groups include,

> Words do not seem to do justice to describe the laughter, tears, challenge, support, and incredible work we have done here.

> Somehow, even with all it takes to get out the door and come to [conference], it's always worth it! I drove away from [hometown] both physically and emotionally exhausted, but now I'm only physically tired after being here for a few days, away from campus, work, home, and class. Working with [women's group], being around these women has an inspirational effect. It gives me new energy to set goals, figure out what I might want to do from here for myself, for the group, and for the profession.

> Women like [names a few women] and different people who I think accomplished so much professionally and personally has inspired me to be able to do those kind of things.

Women continue to feel isolated and oppressed on their home campuses and women's groups offer a rejuvenating space that provides professional and personal support. It also provides a

different paradigm for leadership that is useful throughout the system of higher education and beyond. The power of women's groups and women mentoring programs has been written about before (Allan, 2011; Calizo, 2011; Marine, 2011), yet lessons from all-women's spaces need to be more readily implemented into our home campuses, institutional culture, and federal policy in order to alter the current paradigms as we work toward educational equity.

This is a time in education where there has been, and continues to be, a reduction in federal and state dollars and increased levels of accountability (Tierney, 2006; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Women's program are often seen as superfluous and without tangible merit. To the contrary. The women in this organization, and many like it, have experienced "positive externalities" in very tangible and intangible ways; the women – and the people around the women – receive benefits from this group in terms of career advice, feminist and collectivist leadership styles, a supportive environment to bring intersections of social identity, and the list goes on.

As is reflected in the narratives, women's groups and programs are not limited to gender alone but are an entry point for including the "whole" person – the intersectionality of our multiple social identities. It is the inclusion of the whole person that helps women (or people of any marginalized identity/identities) come together for sense-making, leadership, and strategies for change. Programs, policies, procedures, and practices need to reflect what we know – that women's groups can tangibly help women in their academic and professional careers, as well as their personal lives. The experiences of these women is quite instructive as we – women, men, and transgender colleagues – work to make change in policy, programs and procedures on college campuses and at the federal level with regard to gender access and equity that goes beyond a re-training of basic workforce development skills.

It is important to note that not all comments from the women were positive; there were stories of conflict within the group and these should be explored in more detail in the future. These

comments were not the overwhelming majority of experiences by the women in this group, however they should be explored in order to center all perspectives from the women and learn from this group as we look the future.

Final Thoughts

Each of the sub-sections above is not mutually exclusive. When reflecting on the power of the women's group, the women simultaneously talked about social identities, inequities of pay and promotion, leadership paradigms, or additional important topics. The sections should not be viewed in isolation but as interconnected. Further, if these examples come from women leaders from across the US, women who have made it to and through higher education no matter what their various class, racial, ethnic or sexual orientation backgrounds, then what does that insinuate about the experiences of women and girls throughout the system of education who are not in leadership positions – or who remain outside of the education system?

Higher education is more than a commodity that will help the economic engine of the nation, as is reflected in AGI. As Metcalf and Slaughter (2008) argue this economic model of "academic capitalism creates conditions within colleges and universities that allow men to recapture some of the historic privilege they have derived from higher education…recasting the value of higher education in the process" (p. 81). The recasting of higher education as an individual good alone ignores the public and social benefits of an education, including the intersectional benefits for women, people of color, people with various sexual orientations, and people from all class backgrounds. It also relegates women, people of color, and/or people from poor and working class families to community colleges, technical colleges, and low-paying professions. It perpetuates cumulative oppression across the generations.

Women need to be visible and engaged at every institution type, degree program, and level of leadership. Women need to be included into the academy and, once included, embraced, not

silenced. Gender (including our transgender students and colleagues) should be reflected in policy, programs and practice – not avoided as though we are in a gender-free, post-racial, or flat society in terms of class stratification – we are not. Gender equity in education is an "unfinished agenda" (Glazer-Raymo, 2008) and we are in need of an array of solutions that address inequities that permeate the system.

To be clear, I do not hold President Obama personally responsible for the current era of gender inequity in education; it is mired with historical and contemporary complexities. However, I do look to the entire Obama administration as implicated in perpetuating historic and contemporary gender, race, sexual orientation and class inequities. It is up to the current administration (and future administrations) to utilize their power to make change throughout the system of education by including the well-researched intersectionality of social identities of all our community members; addressing pay and promotion inequities in and beyond education; and providing supportive spaces that address hegemonic norms and engage inclusive leadership styles. In this way, we may work toward a future of access and equity for all people in our communities.

Footnotes

[1] Pseudonyms are used.

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