

Women shattering b-schools' glass ceiling

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Once almost solely the province of men, the offices of business school dean are increasingly held by women.

Patricia Flynn went from being a bookish economics professor to an overnight sensation when she was named dean of Bentley University's Graduate School of Business in the early 1990s. As the sixth woman to take up a business school deanship in the U.S., she found herself in the center of a media maelstrom. The spotlight was so intense that even her son took notice, proudly inviting his mother to his kindergarten classroom for show-and-tell day.

"I couldn't believe how much publicity and attention there was," said Flynn, who stepped down from the deanship in 2002 and now serves as the school's trustee professor of economics and management. "It was sort of mind-blowing."

Today, female business school deans are unlikely to receive such celebrity status. One reason? There are more of them than ever before, according to new data from the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), one of the leading business school accreditation agencies. Of the 668 deans at AACSB-member schools in the U.S., nearly 17% are women. Meanwhile, women deans at the 460 AACSB-accredited schools in the U.S. now make up 15.5% of the dean pool, a 35% increase from the start of the decade, according to AACSB. (See our slide show featuring female deans of top U.S. business schools.)

Permanent trend

"You're seeing more and more women who take on the role of associate dean or interim dean and say: 'Not only can I do this, but I kind of like it,'" says AACSB President John Fernandes. "This is a permanent upward trend."

Driving the change is a renewed effort by search committees, administrators, and B-school associations to encourage women to take on these roles. One of the more active groups, AACSB's Women Administrators in Management Education, has 225 members and provides women with mentoring programs, and specialized outreach. Meanwhile, there has been a surge in the number of women getting PhDs in business, with female faculty members at business schools making up 27.6% of the faculty pool in the 2008-09 academic year, up from 21% a decade ago.

As a result, some are predicting that business schools will become places more sensitive to the scheduling and work family issues faced by women deans, many of whom are working mothers. There is also hope that the demographic shift will have a trickle-down effect on the entire business school community, leading to more women attending MBA programs and more women faculty taking on administrative posts. Even recruiters and corporate boards are likely to take notice, as women deans start playing more of a role in networking with the larger business community.

"People can look at these schools and say: 'Wow, in this particular institution, women can rise through the faculty, do research, publish, and eventually become dean,'" says Bentley's Flynn. "It's a message about the culture of the whole institution."

Promoted from within

Meanwhile, a separate survey, "Characteristics and Career Paths of Male and Female Business School Deans," offers some insight into why the landscape is changing. It is one of the first published surveys that compares the different career paths of B-school deans by gender, say

co-authors Flynn and Susan McTiernan, a visiting associate professor of management at the University of New Haven. There were 350 deans who responded to the survey, 18% of whom were female.

The career paths of women deans tend to differ sharply from those of their male counterparts, the study shows. More women were likely to take on the role of dean after having served as interim dean, and most rose into the position from within their respective schools, according to the study. For men, 20% served as deans at other schools prior to taking their current jobs, compared with only 16% of women.

Many of the women who rose to the deanship have held a variety of those roles prior to becoming dean.

Take Allison Davis-Blake, who has served as dean of the University of Minnesota's Carlson School of Management since 2006. Prior to her appointment at the school, she was the chair of the management department and a senior associate dean at the University of Texas at Austin's McCombs School of Business. Despite all that administrative experience, "being dean never crossed my mind," she said. It wasn't until she started being contacted by academic search firms that she started to consider the possibility, she said, eventually deciding to take on the role at Carlson. She is the school's 11th dean, and, as with many of her counterparts, the first woman to ever lead the school.

"I don't worry about people actually saying to my face: 'I won't deal with you because you are a woman,' that has never indeed happened," Davis-Blake says. "But there is always that moment, when people say, 'Oh, this person is different from the past five people I've dealt with. I wonder what this will be like.'"

Wives and mothers, too

Yet another challenge facing women deans is balancing family life with the demands of a high-stress job. Women deans are more likely to be single than male deans, with 9% of women deans single, compared with just 1% of men, according to the study. Of the woman deans who were married, 75% had children, but only 25% of them had three or more. That stands in sharp contrast to the 88% of married male deans who are fathers, nearly three-quarters of whom have three or more children.

Lynne Richardson, dean of Mississippi State University's College of Business, said she has occasionally encountered subtle prejudice from her male colleagues about her dual role as dean and mother. During her first deanship at the Miller College of Business at Ball State University in Muncie, Ind., a faculty member made an offhand comment to her that she was carrying "a lot of baggage," an allusion to the fact that she had three young children.

"I responded: 'You know what, that baggage is the best part of my life,'" says Richardson. "I thought later, he never would have said that if I had been a man. It's little comments like that along the way where they test you to see if you fold or if you're going to cry."

For the record, Richardson says she has never cried. But she said she realizes the importance of women deans having a network they can turn to for advice, support and mentorship. The AACSB group she chairs, Women Administrators in Management Education, provides fellow deans with a space where they can meet like-minded women, receive professional development help, and learn how to become better leaders. It meets four times a year at various AACSB conventions, and many of the women lean on each other for support, she said.

Madam boss

"We're a minority still, and coming in as a woman dean with a primarily male faculty can be hard," Richardson says. "Some of them aren't quite sure we should be there. Having us in academia was one thing, but having us as boss is totally different."

As the landscape shifts, members of the first generation of women deans are trying to nurture a new generation of leaders. Linda Livingstone, dean of Pepperdine University's Grazadio School of Business & Management since 2002, said she is making a concerted effort to support and nurture female faculty members who have expressed an interest in taking on administrative roles. She's also makes a point of meeting with the school's female MBA students several times a year, she says.

"Hopefully, I'm helping them think a little bit differently about the role and how they can be successful in either the business or academic world," she says.

Meanwhile, women advocacy groups are hoping that larger cultural shifts within universities will provide more welcoming environments for women business school deans in years to come. This is already happening at schools where women have risen to the position of university or college president, said Elissa Ellis-Sangster, president of the Forte Foundation, a consortium of schools working to increase the number of women in business school. In addition, high-profile women business deans like Laura Tyson, the former dean of London Business School who served as President Bill Clinton's top economic adviser, are helping to change mind-sets, she says.

More women in high places

"There are probably more women now in other disciplines within universities, and that has made it easier for them to reach the college presidency," Ellis-Sangster says. "It has had a trickle-down effect into business schools."

One place where this has occurred is the University of Miami, where University President Donna Shalala has brought in two new female deans since taking on her role in 2001. One of these is Barbara Kahn, who joined the university's School of Business Administration as dean in 2007. Kahn, who previously served as vice dean of the Wharton School's undergraduate division, was attracted to Miami partly because of Shalala's vision for the school. It also didn't hurt that she was going to be one of three female deans at the University of Miami. "It wasn't an all-male fraternity," she said.

Shalala convinced Kahn that she could take the school in a new direction, an opportunity she found too tempting to turn down.

"It was a chance to jump on an easy, flat slope and take on a really brand new challenge," she said. "It was something I had never done before."

More women will probably be following Kahn's path in the next decade, as the number of women entering the ranks of business schools balloons. In 2004-05, women accounted for 40% of all new business doctorates, up from 26% in 1990-91. That stands in sharp contrast to the percentage of men awarded doctorates, which declined by two percentage points during that same period.

"This is the pipeline," said Bentley's Flynn. "It speaks really well to the future for women at business schools."

BusinessWeek, New York, 20 fev. 2009, B-Schools, online. Disponível em <www.businessweek.com>. Acesso em: 16 mar. 2009.

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