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Mary-Elaine Perry

Melissa Collins DeLeonardo

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## A SPECIAL REPORT

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*Circumstances have improved, however ...*

# Rising Voices: Women's Leadership in Jesuit Higher Education

By Mary-Elaine Perry and Melissa Collins DeLeonardo

**T**he role of women in leadership in Jesuit higher education in the United States has been studied for nearly 20 years. In 1993, Alice Hayes did the first study and concluded that more women need to be encouraged to pursue and prepare for leadership positions in Jesuit institutions. This was followed by a work done by Sr. Maureen Fay O.P. in 1999. She reported that there was a higher percentage of women in mid-level administrative positions and that the lower the positions on the hierarchy, the higher the percentage of women who occupy them. In 2003, Mary Beadle did an analysis of the women in leadership positions as listed in the 2002-2003 AJCU Directory. She concluded that there was an increase of women in higher-level administrative positions, but that the vice presidential level continued to have fewer women than the lower level administrative positions. Each of these studies has shown an increase of women in administrative positions with the exception of vice presidential positions in academic affairs and finance.

### *How the study was done*

The current study was initiated in the fall of 2008 and set out to determine what progress women have made in achieving higher-level positions, and identify what makes a difference to women in their quest for leadership opportunities.

**The study began** with a review of the AJCU Directory and confirmation on titles and gender of administrators listed in each. According to the data, women held 39 percent of the administrative positions (assistant dean through the president) in 2008-09 compared to 32 percent in 2002-03 and 22 percent in 1992-93. When the study group added women administrators in the following areas – mission and identity, campus ministry, library, registrar, enrollment management, admissions, financial aid, athletics, and human resources – the percentage of women administrators increased to 40 percent. These categories were added to have baseline information for future studies.

Although the number of women in administration is greater compared to

earlier years, there were no women presidents at AJCU institutions in 2008-09, and there was still a lag in the number of vice presidents in the areas of academics (18 percent) and finance (seven percent).

**In the second phase** of the study, the Human Resources (HR) Director on each campus was asked questions about development programs for faculty and staff, the existence (or not) of a Women's Center on campus and the names of two or three prominent women on their campus who could be interviewed for this study. (The HR Directors were chosen as the point persons for this information based on their objectivity and their knowledge of key leaders in all areas on campus.) Five HR Directors indicated programs and/or formal mentoring for women administrators. Four indicated programs and/or formal mentoring of women faculty. Eight schools indicated they have Women's Centers. Often these centers are focused around student issues and support for education.

The names of at least two women were gathered from each of the 28 schools; in some cases, more than two names were suggested. From the seventy-four names that were collected, the study team reviewed each of the names and departments to ensure there was a cross-section of women being represented. At least 56 (two from each U.S. Jesuit institution) were invited to participate in the study, and the final list turned out to be 49, with at least one female interviewee from each AJCU institution. Ten volunteers conducted interviews with the women leaders, who were asked a series of eight questions. Through the interviews, several themes emerged.

Considering both the number of women in leadership roles and the

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*Mary-Elaine Perry is assistant vice president for student development, Saint Joseph's University, and Melissa Collins Di Leonardo is director of communications, Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities (AJCU). The authors thank the generous volunteers who helped with the interviews.*

climate for women, the study pointed out that circumstances for women have improved over time; however, it is also clear that women sometimes feel that they are not held in the same regard as men. What emerged from the interviews were stories of women who were the first female members of their department, first chair, dean or vice president or who were the only women currently in particular roles.

In the last 20 years, there has been a shift from departments or programs that are male-dominated and inhospitable to women to more departments where women are seen as contributing members and often serve as department chairs. While some faculty members felt embraced by their departments, others discussed the slow nature of change and how some older male faculty had been reluctant to welcome women.

### ***The Importance of Mentoring***

Women in the study indicated the importance of supervisors, Jesuits and other mentors in supporting women's development and advocating for their promotion within their institutions. Supervisors, in many cases, can either support women or hold them back. Several women praised the support and encouragement of supervisors, some of whom were Jesuits. Other women had a different experience with people in the same roles. Some women saw men who were less experienced and less qualified advance over themselves or other women. Still others felt excluded from conversations and were therefore denied access to information that could influence their work.

In a recent quantitative study, involving 484 men and women from AJCU institutions, ("Women's Career Advancement in Jesuit Higher Education Institutions," Ran, Zimmerman-Oster, Zarkowski, 2011) women with a mentor who functions as an information source are seen as more likely to advance in their careers than those without mentors or with mentors who perform other functions. However, a higher frequency of men than women in this study felt their mentor was an information source for them. Similarly, Ran, Zimmerman-Oster, Zarkowski found that significantly fewer women than men felt that their skills and abilities were appreciated at their institution, that they were delegated an appropriate amount of responsibilities and that they were offered leadership development opportunities. In addition, signif-

icantly more women than men believed that if they applied for a higher-level position at their institution, they would not be selected due to their gender.

### ***Support from the President***

The theme from the 2008 study that appears to have a strong impact on the advancement of women and the potential for women in leadership in the future is the relationship that presidents have with women on their campus and the atmosphere that a president creates on a campus.

Women spoke of presidents who took them under their wing, recognized their skills and talents and opened doors for individual women that would not have otherwise happened. Others indicated that their president looked for the right person for a job, whether that person was a man or a woman. One interviewee was clear in her message about the president's impact on women's advancement, "If the president wants women's equity to be a priority, it will be."

### ***Raising awareness***

While there have been positive changes in the climate for women on Jesuit campuses, the question has been asked, "Why so slow?" How do we move toward being more inclusive and more supportive of women's advancement? The Ran, Zimmerman-Oster, Zarkowski study indicates that a good place to start is raising awareness about some of the existing barriers to women's career progression, particularly among male leaders.

Another consideration is that as Jesuit institutions attract more lay leaders, they need to do a better job of considering strong women candidates for key leadership positions, including the presidency. Further, support structures for women (i.e. mentoring, extended tenure clocks, child care) are lacking in many institutions, and finding the resources to put these programs and policies in place can help.

There is a need to abolish what has been described by some women as a "culture of fear" that keeps the status quo in place, and work towards understanding the needs of women in the workplace. If women are not encouraged or supported on the road to leadership, they may choose to stay on the sidelines not because of their lack of talent and ambition, but because the path is not as obvious or welcoming to them.

### ***Starting the dialogue***

As mentioned earlier, Jesuit institutions have seen increases in the number of women in key leadership roles, and the Ran, Zimmerman-Oster, Zarkowski study indicates that men and women survey respondents had an overall positive impression of career opportunities at work. But if Jesuit institutions are striving for *cura personalis* for all members of the campus community (and not just students), how can we address some of the challenges to women's advancement in Jesuit higher education?

It starts with a conversation or dialogue on the subject.

The AJCU study team points out that no solution or set of solutions will work for everyone since institutional cultures vary across the 28 Jesuit campuses, but each institution can encourage discussions among their faculty and staff about what women see as the support systems and obstacles in place that affect their performance and their careers.

Department and division heads, deans, vice presidents, and even presidents, all have opportunities on a daily basis to advise, mentor and encourage women in their professional development. Including women on search committees, being open to considering family needs, and mentoring women through all phases of their career can have a major impact on women's advancement.

While Jesuit colleges and universities can provide support, women must be their own advocates and play an active role in promoting themselves and asking for support. They must look for mentors who can both encourage them and assist with their advancement. Furthermore, they must demonstrate their leadership by initiating conversations about women's issues on their campuses.

### ***Moving forward***

If we use the increase in the number of women administrators since 1992 as a barometer, women's advancement on Jesuit campuses is moving in a positive direction. However, it becomes clear when women share their experiences that there is still more work to do. Several women in the study cited that one of the main reasons they were attracted to working at a Jesuit institution was its mission and its commitment to social justice. As Jesuit institutions move forward, that commitment can serve as a guiding force in addressing the concerns surrounding women's leadership. ■