

# THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

## Commentary

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### Women and Academic Leadership: Leaning Out

By Kelly Ward and Pamela L. Eddy

The recently published best seller *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*, by Sheryl Sandberg, has sparked lively exchanges online, in personal conversations, and on college campuses. Sandberg, the chief operating officer of Facebook, argues that in many cases professional women hold themselves back in their careers by failing to "lean in" to opportunities, and that they hold back because of concerns about how professional positions might affect future life choices.

As women who study leadership and gender in higher education, we were interested in what insights Sandberg's book would bring to issues on campus. We found that many of the findings in the book resonated with what we knew about women in academe from our own research and other studies, that many midcareer women opt to forgo promotion and leadership positions in anticipation of messy politics, sexist cultures, or irreconcilable challenges between work life and family life. The result is that women get stuck in midlevel positions, and fewer women than men occupy the corner offices on campuses. Is this because academic women don't lean in?

For the past 35 years, women have represented the majority of undergraduate students. Yet they fill only one in four college presidencies and represent a mere 29 percent of full professors—with women still overrepresented in the feminized disciplines of education and nursing and underrepresented in engineering and the sciences. Obtaining the rank of full professor affords opportunities for leadership in faculty governance, extends national influence in the disciplines, and is a traditional prerequisite for climbing the leadership ladder.

At the start of the faculty pipeline, women represent half of beginning faculty members, but the pipeline begins to leak as the number of female associate professors dips to 42 percent. Half of the chief academic officers at community colleges are women, and approximately one-third of four-year colleges have women in that position. But 65 percent of them do not want or are not sure about seeking a presidency, and the predominant reason they give is that the nature of the work is unappealing, according to the American Council on Education.

Women actually *lean back* from the ladder of academic progress, promotion, and leadership because of a perception that advanced positions in academe are not open to women, and particularly women who hope to make time for a family or life beyond work.

Anticipating the challenges they may face in leadership positions or the promotion process (challenges they have often been warned about, personally experienced, or witnessed since graduate school), some women choose to remain associate professors or as faculty members not interested in formal leadership or administrative roles. Others choose part-time or non-tenure-track positions as a way to avoid potential conflicts between academic work and parenthood. Likewise, midlevel administrators decide to stay put because of a lack of internal opportunities for advancement, or in a desire to avoid the spotlight and constant public scrutiny placed on top campus leaders.

Who wants a job that requires one to be "on" at all times, to be the target of unsubstantiated potshots from all corners, and to work 24/7? It's hard to encourage a woman (or anyone) to lean in when institutions lack supportive infrastructure, and when taking the position comes at such a high personal cost.

Academe values and rewards an "ideal worker" norm, where long hours and complete dedication to the position and the organization are expected. Such work norms don't lend themselves to well-rounded careers and are often viewed as incompatible with a healthy and full lifestyle, particularly one that includes children and parenting.

Yet the choice to lean back is only part of the reason there aren't more women in academic leadership. Institutional structures and cultures too often exclude women or create unnecessary boundaries that they perceive as insurmountable and unattractive.

Increasing the number of women in leadership positions means not only looking at the individual women, as Sandberg does in her book, but also looking to institutions to create environments that encourage and support women who want to integrate family life and personal goals with their career aspirations for leadership and advancement. It is possible more women in academe would seek advanced positions if they saw models and norms of a balanced lifestyle, work-family integration, and institutional recognition of the intersection of gender and work.

If campuses are serious about seeing more women in leadership and as full professors, they need to do more than simply encourage women to lean in to their careers. Institutions need to lean forward also. Here are some steps to consider:

- The gateway to academic leadership and to administration is promotion to full professor, so policies related to that process need to be more detailed regarding teaching, research, and service requirements. Career development does not end with getting tenure; programs should include development for midcareer faculty members and entry-level leaders. Policies and practices need to engage women in all levels of the promotion process.
- Colleges should create leadership-development programs that include discussions about gender, work, and family. Selection for these programs must be inclusive, because it places the participants on the first rung of the leadership ladder.
- Faculty members see how leaders work, how they treat others, and what they expect of subordinates, so those in leadership positions need to be mindful of the examples they set. Merely leaning in to traditional male systems fails to question the assumptions behind a culture of overwork and lack of work-family integration.
- Current leaders serving as mentors can promote the accomplishments of women on campus and provide career guidance and tips for advancing women into positions of leadership. Mentors can also provide encouragement to young faculty members and show them that there is no single path to or model for successful leadership.
- It is important to include both men and women in discussions about mentorship, gender, leadership, and development. It is crucial to

promote awareness on the part of all colleagues about how they spend their time at work and how they conduct themselves with women.

- Individuals need to be aware of available resources and programs as they seek advancement. It is important for women to know more about campus policies, and, when necessary, to push for changes in inequitable policies and practices. Working with others, both on campus and elsewhere, can help women as they seek promotion.

Sandberg's *Lean In*, and much of the discussion around the concept, emphasizes the role of individual outlook and initiative in professional women's advancement through institutional roadblocks and traditional mind-sets. But if colleges want to further the advancement of women as full professors and leaders, it is necessary to foster not only the development of individual women, but to create healthy workplaces to lean into.

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