

Invest in Yourself: Women in Higher Education Leadership Roles

By Danielle N. Ripich



Women make up the majority of undergraduate students in America today. But women don't even approach that proportion when it comes to top leadership positions in higher education. So it's vital that women step up to leadership roles—whether as part of a grand career strategy or as a result of being thrust into the position.

In order to do this, women must be prepared. I believe women invest in their work, communities, and families, but not always in themselves. I see this self-investment as critical.

I'm now in my sixth year as president of the University of New England (ME). During my time here, we've added buildings, online programs, and a College of Pharmacy (we'll soon have a College of Dental Medicine as well). We've doubled our enrollment, kept tuition increases below the national average, and maintained annual faculty salary increases above the national average. I am very proud of what we've done under my leadership.

However, my path to leadership was not part of a grand design. I grew up in the 1950s and early 1960s, and my parents were teachers who believed in the saying that "to whom much is given, much is required."

I married after my freshman year in college, dropped out of school, and did what was expected of women in that time—I had three children by the time I was 23.

I returned to college at 27, getting by on little sleep and lots of motivation. I tried to be "Supermom" but also invested in myself.

While I was a junior professor, my department chair didn't return from his sabbatical, and my colleagues

suggested I become chair. I was flabbergasted, but I stepped up, honed my skills, and positioned myself for other opportunities. I believe good leaders adapt and anticipate. They navigate unexpected courses and excel at handling detours; I believe women can be very good at this.

As a leader, I've learned that I'm most comfortable holding the center, helping people come together to create something good. I learned from my grandmother how to stitch together fabric to make a beautiful quilt. All the pieces have a place in the pattern. I see my university as a quilt that must be stitched together to show all the wonderful pieces to their best advantage. It's a female view of leadership; of this I am certain.

I often see women taking on service roles in universities but not always reaching for the more visible leadership roles of directing and chairing programs and committees. My advice would be to stretch for these experiences and invest in yourself—create the pattern of the quilt.

I was able to move ahead absent a grand career strategy and in the face of some personal limitations. I accepted leadership opportunities as they presented themselves. I gained expertise in budget and personnel management. I moved to accept new positions and challenges. I remained focused on my role as a citizen leader committed not only to my discipline but to the common good of the universities I served. I remained open to the moments when I could make a difference through my commitment as a leader. I know that, despite the obstacles, if you trust and invest in yourself, your investment can yield remarkable dividends.

Ripich is president of the University of New England.