

Part I

Youth

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Introduction

Blessed is the leader who seeks the best for those he serves.

Unknown

This book is about the lifetime development of ten strong, interesting, and competent women leaders. It shares experiences, stories, and insights into how they developed the knowledge, skills, and abilities throughout their lives to become the university presidents they are today. It describes commonalities and differences among these women. It is intended to help you (the reader) reflect upon your own life and consider possible meanings and implications.

I have shared the results of this research with many audiences, old and young, women and men, in higher education and in business. The interest of so many individuals with such varied backgrounds, positions, and current responsibilities reflects the broad application of this research. These have included

- College students
- Community members
- Corporate leaders and employees
- Family members (aunts, uncles, siblings, grandparents)

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- Government leaders and employees
- High school and college/university counselors
- Human resource leaders and staff (business, government, nonprofit, and education)
- Junior high and high school students
- K–12 leaders and educators
- Nonprofit leaders and employees
- Parents
- Postsecondary leaders and educators

Not only has each group acknowledged these leadership attributes across organizational boundaries, but each has contributed important insights.

Leadership is no longer simple. It is a “partnership between the leader and his or her followers where together you discover the best of all of you” (university president participant). As one of the ten presidents in this study explained, “Leadership today must address greater complexities at multiple levels than in past generations.” Leaders must listen more than ever before. One woman stated, “You have to hear the people, and you can only do that if you are quiet enough to listen to what they are saying.” Leadership challenges now, as one participant explained, “intertwine and reach beyond a single community to touch communities across the entire planet.” Preparing for this type of leadership is a critical endeavor for all who are up to the challenge. In today’s society, we cannot be comfortable with preparing only a selected few for leadership. We need individuals who can lead in every facet of life (home, church, schools, nonprofits, government, business, and community). We should encourage all individuals to develop effective leadership skills.

Reading leadership books and attending leadership seminars and conferences has become a favorite pastime for millions of students, parents, workers, entrepreneurs, supervisors, managers, executives, administrators, board members, and academics throughout the world. In fact, there are now thousands of books available on the topic of leadership. Yet only a small percentage of *these* contributions are based on scholarly research. Of *these* books, a lesser portion focuses on the development of leadership. And among *these* books, a much smaller segment actually centers on the development of leaders in higher education, and only a few are written about women. This book is one of a kind. It not only shares exciting and intriguing information (based on a scholarly research study), but it also is about the lifetime development of leadership knowledge, skills, and competencies in women university presidents. It shares the commonalities and perspectives of ten women on their own personal journeys in developing leadership throughout childhood, youth, young adulthood, and adulthood. These ten women reflect a journey shared, in part, by all leaders.

Your Interest

Many readers care deeply about their own lifelong learning, development, and growth. If this is you, this book will help you reframe—in more detail and depth than you may have done before—influential individuals, activities, and experiences in your own lives that have helped you develop leadership. Warren Bennis (1989) once said that leadership is a function of knowing yourself, that “becoming a leader is synonymous with becoming yourself” (p. 9). My hope is that the journeys of these university presidents will be helpful for your own personal exploration and understanding.

Many readers will also care about assisting others in their personal and professional development. Again, if this is you, you will identify with some of the presidents in this book in finding great satisfaction in providing and facilitating opportunities and experiences

for others. You most certainly have the desire to help others in becoming “all that they can become,” and this is probably very rewarding for you. You may also have a deep passion for supporting and assisting girls and young women in a variety of ways. You may desire to help them develop the knowledge and skills to eventually become the strong, capable leaders we need throughout the world in higher education, government, business, communities, and homes. If this is you, then I applaud you. I encourage you to ponder on your selfless desires when reading this book. As you reflect, you will have ideas that will help you know how to make the difference you seek for others. This research will provide you with ideas about how to guide girls and women toward beneficial leadership experiences, some of which may actually be momentary interventions.

My Interest

People have asked me why I am interested and willing to commit so much time and energy to this research project. I have thought about this question for many years and have determined that there are two primary reasons. First, the topic of developing leaders has been a passion and near obsession with me for many years. And second, this study really matters. It matters to me personally as I continue to learn and reflect upon my own life. I have always yearned for continuous development and growth and love leading efforts, projects, organizations, and causes. I also have a teenage daughter and three teenage sons. I want to help them develop into the most conscientious, competent, and confident beings they can become. I yearn to help instill in them (in some small way) the desire to work hard and make a difference in whatever realm they choose.

I am interested in this research because it matters to everyone interested in having strong, ethical, effective, and competent leaders today and tomorrow. I have seen this in the faces of so many with this deep-rooted passion and desire. For you, this information can be helpful in counseling and designing efforts to assist those

who are interested in developing the knowledge and competencies necessary for effective leadership throughout their lives. For these reasons and countless others this research really matters.

The Study

With a fascination regarding the development of prominent women leaders, I was curious about how specific high-level women leaders arrived where they are today. How did they develop what they needed to become leaders of reputable universities? For years I have been reading and reviewing related books, scholarly articles, and magazine and newspaper articles looking for specific information about the development of high-level women leaders. There is little written when it comes to scholarly research reports or application-centered writings. I discussed this lack of available information and research with a number of leadership scholars and scholar-practitioners and mentioned that I was considering embarking on a research study adventure that would not only fill the research gap but, because of the journey, also possibly change my life in some way. These scholars strongly encouraged me forward; however, they cautioned me about the credibility challenges of such an endeavor.

After pondering this project and its challenges for months, I designed a research study that would use a rigorous qualitative research methodology called “phenomenology.” This method would help me

- Explore each of these president’s “lived experiences”
- Gain a deeper understanding of their lives, experiences, and perceptions
- Get beyond just what they “did” or currently “do”
- Investigate the underlying meanings and influences of their experiences

My desire was to *hear* the women's own voices as they described their journeys and reflected upon their own beliefs and interpretations. I wanted them to tell stories (which ended up being essential in gathering information that was relevant and meaningful). Edgar H. Schein (2004) said that stories can assist in providing an understanding of culture, and that culture defines leadership. My hope was that the emerging data could provide insights into the development of the leadership competencies that are essential for effective leadership in higher education today. It did.

In spring 2005 I traveled to the campuses of ten women university presidents for two- to three-hour in-depth interviews (see Appendix A for more detail regarding the research methods). I asked these women a detailed set of open-ended, probing questions to explore their past experiences and perceptions (see Appendix B for the question categories). Analyses first included creating transcriptions of all the interviews. The transcripts were then reviewed by the presidents for accuracy and completeness. Other steps included a preliminary analysis, combined categorization, in-depth analysis, and finally theme generation. I maintained a continuous relationship with the presidents so that they could review the analysis, manuscripts, and chapters for accuracy. Accuracy was attested. Throughout the process many presidents shared additional insights, which is important in this type of research methodology. It is essential that the analysis and writing accurately represent the presidents' true perceptions and experiences. Because of the interactive relationship I maintained with the presidents, this book reflects their experiences. In fact, one president wrote the following:

When I read the chapter on our leadership styles and philosophies, I was surprised. Every quotation could have been mine. They all sound like something I would say and believe. Your analysis makes sense and seems

accurate from my perspective. Your findings and discussion represent what I have believed for years.

Another president stated:

I just finished the chapter on childhoods and was deeply touched. It is amazing to see my experiences and insights alongside nine other presidents. It is so interesting to see the commonalities and to read the other women's stories. You are doing important work that will benefit many to come.

The Presidents

I interviewed ten impressive, energetic, and distinguished women university presidents or chancellors. At the request of some of the presidents, they will not be identified in this book. However, here is a summary of some basic collective demographic information about these women and their institutions:

- Nine were or are presidents of public universities, and one led a private postsecondary institution.
- Eight served as presidents or chancellors of reputable research focused institutions or university systems; two were presidents of highly regarded teaching-focused comprehensive institutions with strong scholarship expectations.
- One teaching institution was what is termed “a historically black institution.”
- Nine were the first women presidents at their current institutions.

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- Eight were institutional presidents (overseeing between one and eight campuses) with student populations ranging from 2,000 to nearly 60,000 students.
- Two were higher education system-wide presidents or chancellors (overseeing six to sixteen campuses) with over 150,000 students attending the largest of the two.
- Eight of the universities were established in the 1800s and two in the early 1900s.
- Eight of the women were Caucasian, and two were African American.
- Four presidents were in their fifties and six were in their sixties, with the ages ranging from fifty-three to sixty-seven at the time of the interviews (two mid-fifties, two late fifties, two early sixties, and four mid-sixties).
- The presidents had been at their current institutions from three to fourteen years (with a mean of 6.7) at the time of the interviews.
- The presidents were raised in a variety of places: Northeast, Southeast, Midwest, South, and Mountain West.

A Few Highlights

The findings in this study support the seminal works of Bennis (1989) and Drucker (2001). Importantly, their past research and writings were primarily based on male leaders or mixed gender samples. Although many of the emerging themes in their work are similar to mine, I would argue that certain findings are even more pronounced in my all-female group of prominent leaders. I will introduce four such examples so that you can look for these themes

throughout the book.

- First, the women in my study paid almost meticulous attention to the task of knowing and understanding themselves. There are examples throughout this book of experiences where these women discovered something new about themselves that helped them change their behaviors and choices appropriately. For example, one president said, “Through participation in a number of efforts during my secondary education years, I learned that I needed to either be in charge or else be working with certain people to accomplish things.” She made future choices based on this information.
- Second, they were particularly self-reflective. For example, one woman explained, “Reflection has been an absolute lifesaver.” Another stated, “Reflection can be the most enriching experience if you are willing to deeply acknowledge your own frailties . . .” Chapters Two, Three, and Four will provide detailed examples of how they began to develop this skill early in life.
- Third, they became passionate about learning from failures and mistakes. For example, one president explained, “I learned that if you are not failing, you are not learning. I didn’t realize how important that was until later. It was amazing how much I learn from difficult things.” Struggles and difficulties provide a rich resource for personal growth.
- Fourth, they loved learning and developed the ability and desire to learn from everything. For example, one president spoke of the intense learning experience that difficulties had provided her: “I have had some terribly difficult moments in my life that have been among the most important growth experiences that I have had.”

Another spoke of accepting challenging assignments as a means to learn: “You can obtain challenging tasks, assignments, or positions by developing your own unique talents so that you can become the very best that you can be.” Others spoke of learning from individuals and training opportunities. They looked for learning in everything they experienced.

The Higher Education Need

I have already spoken to the need of this type of book in general terms. However, it is important to say a few words about why it is important for higher education. According to Brent D. Ruben (2003), author of the book *Pursuing Excellence in Higher Education: Eight Fundamental Challenges*, “Extraordinary challenges face higher education nationally, and leaders with exceptional capabilities are needed to help institutions meet these challenges” (p. 288). In fact, leadership development has now become a critical topic in higher education. Diane Chapman Walsh (2006), in *Trustworthy Leadership*, discussed the “urgency of our need for better leadership” (p. 4). She wrote of what it was in leaders that allows them to address some of the most pressing problems in higher education and beyond:

It is our ability as leaders to discover our solid ground, to truly hear the quiet prayers that are building to war cries, to sense that time is short, and to trust that our lives can matter. It is summoning the discipline to focus attention in directions that cause discomfort, facing moral dilemmas in all their complexity. It is seeing past the self-interest of short-term electoral and business cycles and cultivating the imagination and the generosity of spirit—in ourselves and those we touch—to focus on wrenching problems and yet not to lose heart, to open

our hearts to sorrow without being paralyzed, to find in the world's suffering our bonds of humanity. (p. 3)

In today's constantly changing environment, higher educational institutions must have leaders who are capable, strong, smart, strategic, ethical, honest, motivating, inspirational, competent, innovative, creative, networked, organized, empowering, perceptive, reflective, collaborative, and insightful. Discovering such leaders is no small task, and developing such leaders is no small challenge. Yet developing yourself and others for leadership responsibilities and positions is a fascinating and rewarding opportunity and experience. It happens, and it happens successfully.

The Book

Instead of highlighting each of the presidents in different chapters and asking readers to attempt to draw their own comparisons and conclusions, the analysis of all of the data creates chapters that summarize findings on that topic across all of the interviews. It is important to note that both similarities and differences are interesting. Often what is *not* found can be as enlightening as what *is* found. The chapters are organized (generally) in chronological order in three parts. Part One: Youth deals with family background and childhood, adolescence, and college years. Part Two: Adulthood focuses on themes: career paths and issues, influential individuals, developmental activities and other life roles. Part Three: Leadership discusses leadership motivation, styles, and philosophies, as well as advice and implications.

This book is dedicated to teaching you what I've learned from this research. And yet, it is also dedicated to providing thought-provoking information so you can reflect on the things "in the margins" (things not said) and teach yourselves. In my experience, this can be the most powerful type of learning there is. Enjoy.

