

Overcome challenges to cultivate female leaders on your campus

By Halley Sutton, Assistant Editor

SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS — In a packed session sponsored by the American Association for Women in Community Colleges at the recent American Association of Community Colleges annual convention, a group of female leaders in higher education spoke to the challenges of cultivating female leadership within higher education. The panel consisted of Allatia Harris, vice chancellor for the San Jacinto College District; Marie Gnage, campus president at Florida State College at Jacksonville; Maria Harper-Marinick, executive vice chancellor and provost at Maricopa Community Colleges; and Dawn DeWolf, vice president of academic and student affairs at Lane Community College.

The panelists addressed many of the potential setbacks women in particular face when trying to ascend into leadership roles, as well as potential solutions.

Challenges women face in the transition to leadership

> **Role expectations.** “One of the questions young women come to me with is, how do I enjoy my many roles?” said Gnage. “There is a greater pressure to achieve work-life balance for women than for men, at least in the home.” One suggestion Gnage made was to reconcile yourself to the idea that there is no such thing as work-life balance. Instead, prioritize the non-negotiables that matter most to you and stick to them. For example, Harper-Marinick noted that while she could never attend all of her children’s events, she promised her daughter that no matter what, she would always attend her music recitals. “I might get there just as it started and stand in the back, but I would always be there and she knew that,” said Harper-Marinick. Give yourself permission to pick the most important events in each sector and clarify expectations in both the home and the office.

> **Oppression.** Harper-Marinick noted that women face oppressive forces from many different realms, including cultural perceptions. That’s especially true, she added, for herself as a woman of color. Women also face peers’ judgment of them as assertive women in power. And finally, they battle internalized oppression. Managing negative thoughts and judgments made by others saps time and energy that would be better spent improving efficiency and performance. Hosting seminars on microaggressions in the office, which include verbal or nonverbal slights and snubs directed at marginalized groups,

can help to educate employees on the impact of even unperceived insults.

> **Isolation.** Harris noted a recent statistic that although college degrees are awarded at a higher rate to women, only 26 percent of institutional leaders are female. Because of this, it can be hard for women to find female mentors for leadership positions or connect with other females within a leadership office. Harris suggested creating networking and social opportunities for women on campus and for those women looking to become more involved in leadership. “We need to increase the sisterhood,” Harris said. Create opportunities for women to support each other to allow for the human connection essential to encouraging a more female-leadership-friendly culture.

> **Pay gap.** Although recent cases such as McMaster University upping female employees’ salaries have worked to rectify the pay gap within certain institutions, there still remains a large divide between what men and women can expect to be paid for similar leadership positions. Studies have also shown that women are less comfortable with negotiating salaries than men in similar positions. Harris mentioned that having a network of female mentors to share stories or providing access to trainings or webinars on negotiation can create positive forward movement in addressing the pay gap.

> **Safety.** The panelists noted that on-campus safety presents problems for female employees and faculty. “Make sure that your university creates a safe environment for women,” DeWolf said. For example, officials should make sure parking structures are adequately lit and that there are sufficient call boxes with direct lines to campus security visible outside all buildings.

> **Women supporting other women.** An audience member cited a personal experience that showed that many women on campus are less supportive of a woman in power than they are of a man in the same position. Harper-Marinick shared an anecdote of her own experience, when a close professional relationship with her boss following a promotion led to rumors on campus of an affair. “I was devastated,” Harper-Marinick remembered. “I brought it up with my boss, who laughed and said, ‘Where do they think we’d have the time?’ That taught me a lot about how I should handle it.” Focus on your own success and find chances to cultivate supportive relationships with other women to “increase the sisterhood.” ■