

The Impact of Gender-Specific Organizations on Community College Campuses

Introduction

In recent years, women's gender roles in society are being reconsidered, both domestically and internationally. From the success of *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* by Facebook COO, Sheryl Sandberg, to First Lady Michelle Obama's political platform on female empowerment, to Oprah Winfrey's Leadership Academy for Girls in South Africa, to the potential nomination and election of our first female president in the upcoming 2016 presidential election, it is clear that despite the persistence of gender inequality, women are asserting themselves in the public sphere as never before. These events have generated a widespread national and international discourse on the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles and the necessity of developing female leadership institutionally. Women constitute the world's global majority and have demonstrated their capacity for leadership; yet they continue to be excluded from spaces of political, economic, and social power. This should compel us as educators to devise strategies for deliberately targeting women to prepare them for community service and global leadership.

Most people would agree that our current historical moment is often characterized by an aversion to the concept of exclusivity, which is often considered politically incorrect. In this article, I argue that there are exceptions that justify such actions, particularly as it relates to the need for gender-specific student organizations on community college campuses. The following data caused me to consider the potential benefits of such exclusivity for cultivating the leadership capacity of female community college students.

Women comprise the vast majority of enrollment for two- and four-year colleges. At McLennan Community College (TX), women currently make up more than 65 percent of the student body. This statistic has always fascinated me for several reasons. First, this demographic is representative of the larger national and international population. Second, students of color, including minority women, are demographically concentrated at the community college level. This concentration provides two-year colleges with the opportunity to prepare a more diverse female population for leadership roles in the marketplace and society. Third, women have historically played a significant role in contributing to

the advancement of families, communities, and country. Fourth, we are witnessing an increase in the number of female entrepreneurs and small business owners nationally. Fifth, more women are projected to enroll in institutions of higher learning in the coming years, which suggests that their overwhelming presence is not likely to diminish or revert back to a minority status. Finally, as an African American female associate professor of psychology, I am deeply invested in providing mentorship to this growing population of female students and teaching them how to engage in campus and community service as a leadership practice. It is my desire that other community colleges will consider this concept and initiate such organizations on their campuses that will help bridge this gap between two and four year colleges.

McLennan Community College Women's Leadership Association (MCCWLA)

In 2010, I created the McLennan Community College Women's Leadership Association (MCCWLA). While most four-year schools have women's organizations such as the historic American Association of University Women (AAUW), to date there are few two-year colleges who offer such an extra-curricular program. This compelled me to establish the MCCWLA, which focuses primarily on women's issues—personal, professional, psychological, and political—and works to cultivate women's success and leadership. The organization recently decided to include women from the college's University Center, a consortium of four-year institutions located on the MCC campus. This allows for collaboration and mentoring between lower- and upper-division female students.

The MCCWLA members come from diverse racial backgrounds and disciplines. The MCC female student population has been very responsive to and interested in the organization and its mission and activities. Recruitment is conducted via social media, word of mouth, and through the organization's campus and community events. This association provides MCC female students with the opportunity to develop and maximize their individual talents and professional readiness, as well as improve their academic performance in order to serve the college and their community. This is accomplished through a variety of organizational activities outlined below.

Community and Campus Presentations

MCCWLA members are expected to plan, coordinate, and execute the logistics of the organization's events

for the academic year with the oversight of faculty and staff sponsors. They are charged with developing compelling and relevant topics of discussion that impact women and will encourage their individual and collective development. In addition, they are expected to participate in these events, which are primarily individual presentations. Members also collaborate and present with college faculty and staff on panel discussions, which are presented to the college and community at large. The purpose of these presentations are to (1) develop students' written, research, and oral communication skills; (2) cultivate a deeper and ongoing relationship between the MCCWLA members and college faculty and staff; and (3) increase and improve students' self-esteem, self-concept, self-confidence, and self-efficacy in their leadership role and organizational tasks.

Fundraising

The MCCWLA women are also educated on the importance of fundraising. The association conducts numerous small fundraisers throughout the academic year. However, once a year, during Women's History month, members plan, coordinate, and execute a major fundraiser. The proceeds of this event are deposited into an endowed scholarship fund used to assist female students in defraying the cost of higher education.

Current trends reveal that regardless of their career choices, the vast majority of female students will be expected to engage in some aspect of fundraising during their professional career. MCCWLA's fundraising opportunities provide members with a head start and the necessary experience and confidence to adequately function in that capacity. In addition, it makes them a more integral part of assisting their fellow female students in realizing their personal and academic goals, thereby allowing them to expand and build on the ideal of "sisterhood" for collective as well as individual development and advancement.

Public Service

In the upcoming academic year, the MCCWLA will be extending its services to visiting local school districts to meet with elementary, middle, and high school girls to (1) discuss the importance of education, (2) serve as models for these young girls, and (3) establish connections between these girls and our college while strengthening the relationship between the college and community. In addition, MCCWLA members will attend leadership conferences, visit women studies departments at nearby college and universities, and network with female chief executive officers of non-profit and for-profit organizations.

Discussion and Future Implications

With all the advancements women have made, why should we develop organizations at the community college level that focus on women's issues and development?

- First, because gender inequality and barriers to women's leadership still exist. The barriers are evident in the pay inequalities and disparities in the marketplace; their underrepresentation in high-level administrative, executive, and political positions; and the ongoing stereotypical depictions of women and gender in the mass media.
- Second, because it is our responsibility as educators and educational institutions to do so. It is our moral and professional obligation to ensure that we prepare women for the personal and professional challenges that lie ahead. These advancements can be accomplished through the overt (i.e., extracurricular student organizations) and covert curriculums (i.e., reading, writing, arithmetic). The MCCWLA has received the ongoing support of faculty and administration. A number of the organization's members have graduated from MCC and have transferred to senior institutions of higher learning to pursue advance degrees. In addition, they have become more aggressive in seeking out leadership roles and opportunities on campus and in the community at large.
- Finally, because this is not a self-serving endeavor. Many people think that women's issues are only about women and have no real bearing on them personally and professionally. The ongoing common misconception held by some is that promoting women's rights and development infers that one is anti-male. We fail to understand that we are interconnected as a society. The development of women through female-based associations elevates our individual and collective humanity and social consciousness. It is not just about what we do to help women, but rather how what we do for female students ultimately benefits everyone.

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