

Baylor Conference Supports Grad Students As Leaders

Women are earning baccalaureate degrees in record numbers, said **Dr. T. Laine Scales**, but they encounter unique problems once they go on to graduate schools.

Fewer women in the graduate school pipeline means fewer women to fill future faculty and administrative leadership positions.

Baylor University in Texas is taking a proactive stance with its conference on Women in the Academy: Leadership in Graduate School and Beyond. Started in 2011 by graduate student Megan Oster, the annual conference aims to improve the retention and leadership skills of the private school's 2,500 graduate students, 45% of whom were women.

Scales, associate dean of the graduate school and professor of higher education, joined two master's candidates in higher education and student affairs, **Kaitlyn Rothaus** and **Christa Winkler** to discuss their annual conference at the NASPA conference held in Orlando FL in March 2013. Rothaus is chair of the conference steering committee; Winkler and Scales are members.

A look at the numbers shows the problem. The ACE publication *The American College President 2012* lists the percentage of women presidents at 26.4%, while the Association of American Colleges and Universities (2011) reports it to be just 23%.

Other numbers: ACE reports women comprise 41% of chief academic officers while AACU has it at 18%.

Both groups report that the percentage of women presidents or women in the pipeline leading toward the presidency remains woefully low. That's why it's critical to keep female grad students enrolled, and to prepare them to assume leadership roles once they enter the academy as professionals.

Changing the predictions

It's definitely not academic capability or an inability to do the work that's preventing graduate school women from succeeding. On average, women have higher GPAs and score higher on the GRE than male students.

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics in 2012, women U.S. residents earn 57% of bachelor's degrees, 63% of master's degrees, and 53% of doctorates.

Due to their many roles and lack of support on many fronts, women take longer to earn those degrees and are less likely than men to complete them once enrolled.

Causes for the dropouts and stop outs include identity struggles, fewer women mentors and the time and energy required to balance school, family and perhaps a job.

Women of color have a path that's even more challenging. They're underrepresented as graduate students, faculty and administrators. The limited number of mentors who do look like them is overworked and overwhelmed.

Women of color on the faculty also report being underemployed and overused, isolated and disrespected. They're torn between family, community and career. One black woman on the faculty reported serving on 52 committees,



Dr. T. Laine Scales

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leaving no time for her own research.

Student affairs is generally seen as a professional support system for undergraduates, not graduate students. Yet these professionals can take the lead in improving the retention of women in graduate school by providing early support to survive the unique problems women graduate students face.

Conference details

For a registration fee of only \$20, Baylor's Women in the Academy conference provides a one-day shot for grad students, faculty and staff to connect and network.

While the topics are directed at women, some males attend. This can help to educate future leaders who are males on the challenges that women colleagues face.

From 10 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. on a Saturday in April, students can listen to a keynote speaker, choose one of four concurrent breakout sessions, eat lunch while listening to a panel and choose a repeat of the four morning sessions.

This year's sessions focused on health and well-being, the special needs of women of color, gender issues surrounding leadership, and a primer on promotion and tenure issues. The lunch panel featured "herstories," personal stories of those who have trod the same path.

For 2013, the theme is Diverse Leadership. A woman college president gave the keynote, and women administrators led the sessions.

The conference fills a critical niche and shows great potential. In 2012, more than 100 people from 20 schools attended, double the number at the 2011 inaugural conference.

Attendance at the April 2013 session was lower due to problems with email publicity. But the Baylor chemistry department was well represented: It sponsored 11 women, eight grad students and three professors.

Helping with publicity were the Texas Women in Higher Education organization with its 1,000 members and the National Association of Graduate and Professional Students.

Funds also came from five university sponsors, including the school of education and the graduate school. The steering committee solicited door prizes.

Grad students are the academy's future leaders. Baylor's Women in the Academy conference offers a model to support women grad students, to keep them enrolled and in the pipeline as future leaders, bringing their values to campus. ■

—MLS

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