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## Exhaustion's Toll on the Next Generation of Female Academic Leaders

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I'm sure you have seen the articles describing the decrease in women's submissions to top research journals since the pandemic began in the spring (e.g., Flaherty, 2020, Viglione, 2020). The media has also been full of stories about the toll that working from home is taking on those who have family responsibilities (e.g., Masich et al., 2020; Supiano, 2020). And the justifiable protests over the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Daniel Prude, and too many others have created another layer of anxiety on US college campuses (Ellis, 2020). Additionally, as the fall progresses, the fires in the west and tropical storms in the south and east, and the apprehension surrounding the upcoming presidential election, are combining to create a unique set of stresses facing all of us in higher education.

As an academic dean in these complicated times, it is my responsibility to try to keep my college and my faculty moving forward, ensuring that our students receive the best education possible and that our faculty receive the support they need. I am trying, as all administrators are, to address our short-term challenges while still maintaining the long view. I want to encourage our faculty to maintain the long view as well. But it isn't easy—especially for women.

An example: recently I issued a call for faculty volunteers to serve as inaugural members of a dean's budget advisory committee. This committee will be a response to faculty calls for greater transparency and increased faculty involvement in budget decisions at the college and school level. These seem like reasonable concerns, and since my college doesn't have a history of having such a committee, I am happy to start one. The more information faculty have that demystifies the budget the better (see Vaillancourt, 2020). So I called for volunteers. I said that the committee would meet only two or three times per semester and that its function would be to advise the dean in light of information presented by our financial officer. In other words, this would not be a committee that required lots of meetings and lots of work between meetings.

Almost immediately after I sent out the request for volunteers, six faculty members (of about 70 total faculty, 55 percent of whom identify as female) volunteered. Five of the six were male.

Now, a budget committee is going to strike many individuals as not being terribly interesting, but the budget is key. If you want to be in the room where it happens <sup>[1]</sup> on a university campus, you want to be at the budget meetings. If you want to move into positions of leadership in higher education, you need to have some experience with budgets—at least enough so that you can speak to financial folks and not be intimidated by them. Becoming a member of the dean's budget advisory committee would, in other words, help to set faculty up for professional advancement.

Even if faculty members don't want to take on full-time administrative roles, the more they understand, the better able they will be to advocate for their programs. (I should note that we are a teaching unit; generally speaking, my faculty don't do funded research.)

I sent out a reminder about the budget committee, pointing out that having familiarity with how academic budgets work and with the language that surrounds them is advantageous for anyone who might be thinking about future leadership roles.

This second call resulted in seven additional volunteers: three men and four women. The women in this group expressed more hesitation than any of the individuals within the first group. One woman wasn't sure she had been at VCU long enough to serve on the committee. Another woman wasn't sure whether she would be considered since she was also on the college's strategic planning committee.

In other words, significantly fewer women were willing to volunteer, they did so only after a nudge, and they did so with more hesitation than the men. The women found reasons to not have the time for what would be a low-stress way to improve their professional versatility. Their specific reasons were undoubtedly varied, but I feel pretty certain that the stresses of the current moment account for the absence of some names I might otherwise have seen on the list.

That speculation is supported by a meeting I had recently with one of my administrative team members. (Like most deans, I have weekly individual Zoom check-ins with members of my leadership group). At the start of our meeting, I asked her how she was doing, and she gave a deep sigh. She said she was tired, that it had been a long week. I asked why, and we talked a bit. It turned out that she was working with her neighborhood community to have serious discussions about racial justice, using Latasha Morrison's book, *Be the Bridge*, as a guide. She is also the mother of an adorable, young African American son (he has snuck into a couple of our Zoom meetings during the past several months), and she is living with a level of worry about his future that I cannot imagine. She's doing a heck of a job as a professional all the while.

Women have no more bandwidth.

So many of us are completely used up at the moment. The weights that are pulling us down are many, and while they aren't the same for all of us, they are all real. And these weights are keeping many women from being able to act in their own long-term professional best interests.

My job, as a dean, is to help. My job, as a parent whose children are adults, is to make space for the needs of those with children under foot. My job, as a straight, white, cis woman endowed with great amounts of academic and institutional privilege, is to support my Black, Brown, and queer colleagues whose struggles within the academy are complex, enduring, and painfully real. It is my job, as an older, experienced female leader who has learned to negotiate university administrative culture, to do what I can to nurture the professional development of my junior colleagues.

It is your job too, regardless of the nature and extent of your privilege.

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[1] the room where it happens: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MswwLs1e2qc>

[2] <https://www.chronicle.com/article/for-colleges-protests-over-racism-may-put-everything-on-the-line>: <https://www.chronicle.com/article/for-colleges-protests-over-racism-may-put-everything-on-the-line>

[3] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/08/20/womens-journal-submission-rates-continue-fall>: <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/08/20/womens-journal-submission-rates-continue-fall>

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