

the glass ceiling

by Susan Mittleman Photography by Gloria Haynes

in academia

How some women are shattering it

In our society, we tend to think of educators as women. Just look at teachers in elementary and secondary schools. Yet in higher education, in prestigious institutions, only recently have women become visible in positions of authority and leadership.

We can see them, but are they still beneath a glass ceiling?

"Yes," says Dr. Zenobia Hikes, vice president of student affairs at Spelman College. "It's one thing to have contact and communication. But to promote that person, that's another factor. There are some environments where it's very difficult to shatter the ceiling, especially the more elite, private institutions, traditionally run by men."

Hikes, a divorced mother of two, found herself facing sexism and bias during admission to her doctoral program. At least one faculty member said she wasn't qualified, that she didn't "belong" in the program, despite her experience and proven accomplishments. "I knew I was qualified," says Hikes. "I was livid. I knew I belonged in the program. I challenged it." Finally the committee "recanted" and Hikes then earned her doctorate in three years instead of four.

Despite Hikes' ultimate success, far fewer women than men end up in high-level positions. Women are promoted less quickly and typically earn less than their male counterparts, says Andrea Hershatter, assistant dean of Emory University's Goizueta Business School. "There is nothing close to gender equity in academia."

Hershatter adds, "It's only now that women are starting to break through." Nationwide, nearly 20 percent of all college presidents are women. That number is double what it was a decade ago, according to the American Council on Education.

When Betty Siegel took the helm at Kennesaw State University 20 years ago, she was the first woman president in Georgia's university system. Today, eight presidents in the university's 34-school system are female. There have been female presidents and provosts at many of the state's leading private institutions, including Emory University, Mercer University, Morris Brown College, and Oglethorpe University. Still, progress is slow. "Clearly something of a 'men's club' still exists," says Hershatter. "If you look at the infrastructure at powerful universities, it doesn't come close to representing the populations."

The number of women on governing boards is not too encouraging either. Out of 36 members on Emory's Board of Trustees, only five are women. Mercer has five out of 45. Oglethorpe has 11 out of 32, and Morris Brown has six women out of 25 board members. Only one woman currently serves among the 15 members on the University of Georgia's Board of Regents.

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Despite the numbers, Dr. Lisá Rossbacher, president of Southern Polytechnic University, a predominantly male institution, feels the system as a whole has begun eliminating the glass ceiling. She credits her predecessors, who she says “either shattered the ceiling or raised it so high I haven’t bumped up against it yet.”

That doesn’t mean there aren’t issues for women, she adds. “But it’s more like ceiling tiles, and questions such as, ‘How’s it going, little lady? Doesn’t your head hurt with all those big things you have to think about doing that job?’” But even getting to compete at the top requires overcoming a number of obstacles. “The mountain is much steeper for women than for men,” says Hershatter. “The tenure path is a little harder. Women role models are more scarce, and women are juggling more balls in the air.”

Faculty tenure, which brings a salary increase and job security, is the first rung on the academic career ladder. It’s about a seven-year clock, and usually falls in the middle of childbearing years. At most institutions, if you take a “leave,” that entire year of work does not count toward tenure.

Dr. Elizabeth Lopez, assistant professor in the English Department at Georgia State

University, had two children while working toward tenure. Without taking a break, she was able to work out “flextime,” taking a quarter off from teaching after giving birth. Her research and service obligations, however, never stopped. “Looking back, there has been extraordinary stress,” says Lopez. “A stop in the clock could have made things a little easier.”

In addition to their scholastic or administrative responsibilities, women tend to carry additional loads, such as listening to students’ problems, serving on under-represented committees, being resources on feminist perspectives, and serving as role models. Much of that responsibility, says Rossbacher, falls on the deans and department heads who care more about representation than protecting female faculty from overwork.

The level of responsibility is especially true for African-American women, says Hikes. “In traditionally white institutions, there’s that expectation you will be everything to everybody and everybody black — before you can even get to compete toward the glass ceiling.”

Although institutions increasingly have firm structures in place, women still battle salary inequities. For example, according to a recent survey by the American Association for the Advancement of Science, men earn almost one-third more than their female counterparts in academic life sciences. That figure mirrors discrepancies reported in other studies of science and engineering salaries. In Hershatter’s case, she discovered at least twice in her career that males doing the same job were paid more. “I asked for a salary review. I found there was indeed a gap of 20 to 30 percent.” To Emory’s credit, she was bumped up, but only because she spoke up.

Until the culture of the academic workplace changes to incorporate both male and female leadership roles, academia will remain a male-dominated landscape. But change is occurring. Good mentors help navigate around the landscape. Rossbacher, for example, credits Chancellor Emeritus Stephen Portch for actively seeking out and supporting highly qualified women for presidential roles.

And today almost two-thirds of all college students in America are women. Those numbers are rising, as more women earn their Ph.D. Though the pool of qualified female candidates for top-level positions is growing, it will take more than a degree to break through what’s left of the glass ceiling. Women must actively engage in forming well-connected networks, finding and becoming good mentors, and preparing themselves for challenges, both socially and professionally. Most importantly, it will take the courage to speak up and the recognition of what Hikes refers to as duality: “You have to know discrimination exists, but you also have to operate as if nothing can hold you down.” ♦

