

The Need to Practice What We Teach: Revisiting the Sticky Floor Effect in Five Southern U.S. States' Public Universities

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Administrative appointments throughout higher education are sought after, highly coveted positions that exhibit power and authority for many as they become leaders. Historically, males have held a majority of these positions. Johnson, Long, and Faught (2014) found “a clear discrepancy exists” (p. 29). This study revisits the research of Johnson, Long, and Faught in examining the gender composition of public university administrators, following the chain of command from the colleges of business upwards, in five southern U.S. states. As in the original research, this study investigates the presence and prevalence of the sticky floor effect and the perceived fair employment practices of universities in applying diversity concepts within their institutions 11 years after the initial study.

Keywords: sticky floor effect, diversity, gender, higher education

INTRODUCTION

Eleven years prior to this study, Johnson, Long, and Faught (2014) researched the gender composition of administrative positions in five southern U.S. states' public universities to understand if these universities, specifically their colleges of business, practice fairness in representation between the genders in these roles. Of particular interest was the theory the sticky floor effect, a concept theorized by Catherine White Berheide (Noble, 1992), which proposes that females are often overlooked for first level management (administrative) positions, which limits their career advancement opportunities. This study revisits the original work to determine changes within the gender composition of administrators, including evidence of female opportunities for career advancement.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to compare the genders of administrators at the public universities in Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee from academic year (AY) 2011-2012 to AY

2022-2023. Of particular interest is the upward mobility of females to administrative ranks with the first level administrative position being explored in relation to the sticky floor effect and middle and top-level administrative positions being investigated as evidence of female career progression. The positions contained within this study follow the chain of command for the colleges of business initiating with the department/division chair/head, as the study seeks to determine if the concepts taught and stressed within business courses, such as gender equality, diversity, and equal employment opportunities, are implemented by the colleges' and universities' appropriate administrative ranks.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Historically, females have been outnumbered in management ranks in organizations and there are several theories that explore the cause, seek to understand the ongoing issues, and propose solutions that will create a more balanced gender representation throughout all levels of management. Universities are not immune to such gender issues. Johnson, Long, and Faught (2014) researched the sticky floor effect in higher education institutions in the southern U.S. Their findings concluded that gender inequality was prevalent in five states' public universities.

Females seeking to advance their careers in higher education continue to struggle in finding opportunities. According to Seltzer (2017), "Higher education administration is still a man's world if you are measuring pay and position title" (para.1). Seltzer continues by explaining that throughout the U.S. females account for roughly 50% of administrators with some regional differences. While this appears to be supportive of gender equality and female career opportunities in administrative roles, closer examination reveals the number of females holding higher level, more respected administrative positions is significantly less compared to their male counterparts (Seltzer, 2017). "For example, more than 50 percent of department heads are women. But less than 30 percent of top executives are women" (Seltzer, 2017, para. 10). Arnett (2021) reports that universities employ 2% of women in their top-earning positions.

It appears regardless of how educated or skilled women are, they still face discrimination and bias when considered for advancements. "About three in 10 female faculty and staff members say they've been passed over for a promotion or other opportunity for advancement at work because of their gender. That's compared to 11 percent of male workers, according to a new Gallup survey of some 10,500 U.S. academics at a [sic] two- and four-year institutions" Flaherty, 2022, para. 1). Furthermore, Flaherty (2022) states "In the most recent survey, female faculty and staff members were also less likely than their male counterparts to strongly agree they have the same opportunities for advancement at their institution as do other employees..." (para. 4).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Three research questions were investigated in this study.

Research Question 1: *Since AY 2011-2012, which of the positions and states showcased notable changes in gender compositions?*

Research Question 2: *What is the status of the sticky floor effect theory within the states' public universities?*

Research Question 3: *Have the colleges of business and states through their public universities demonstrated practical application of their classroom topics with regards to female staffing within administrative ranks?*

FINDINGS

Academic Year 2022-2023

The findings from this study show the gender compositions of identified administrative positions within the states' public universities for AY 2022-2023. Collectively, the five states employed more males in all positions than females (see Table 1).

**TABLE 1
GENDER COMPOSITIONS OF ADMINISTRATIVE POSITIONS FOR
AY 2022-2023 IN FIVE STATES**

Administrative Positions	% Females	% Males
Business department/division chair/head	24.3%	75.7%
College of business dean	29.8%	70.2%
Provosts/vice president/vice chancellor of academic affairs	39.6%	60.4%
President/chancellor	16.7%	83.3%
Chair/head + dean + provost/vp/vc + president/chancellor	26.4%	73.6%

Mississippi's business department/division chairs/heads (chairs) were equally distributed between females and males, while the remaining states had males outnumber females in this role. Louisiana employed more female college of business deans (deans) (60.0%) than males (40.0%) with the remaining states employing more male deans than females. Louisiana's provost/vice president/vice chancellor of academic affairs (provosts) were equally distributed between females and males, while the remaining states had males outnumber females in this role. All five states employed more male presidents/chancellors (presidents) than females.

In Alabama and Tennessee, the summation of all administrative positions studied in each state resulted in more males than females. In Louisiana and Mississippi, females holding administrative roles equaled males at Louisiana State University – Shreveport, Nicholls State University, University of Louisiana – Lafayette, and Mississippi Valley State University. Table 2 shows the universities employing more females than males in the chair, dean, provost, and president positions.

**TABLE 2
UNIVERSITIES WITH FEMALE ADMINISTRATORS OUTNUMBERING MALES**

University	State	% Females	% Males
University of Arkansas at Fort Smith	Arkansas	67%	33%
University of Arkansas at Little Rock	Arkansas	60%	40%
Mississippi State University	Mississippi	57%	43%
Mississippi University for Women	Mississippi	75%	25%

The universities employing 100% males in all the administrative positions studied were:

1. Alabama A&M University
2. Alabama State University
3. Auburn University at Montgomery
4. University of Alabama – Huntsville
5. University of North Alabama
6. Arkansas State University – Jonesboro
7. University of Arkansas at Fayetteville
8. Louisiana State University and A&M
9. Southern University – New Orleans

10. University of Tennessee at Martin

Changes From Academic Year 2011-2012 to Academic Year 2022-2023

The data show the gender compositions of the positions studied from AY 2011-2012 to AY 2022-2023. Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee increased the total number of females in the collective positions by 0.4%, 11.1%, 7.5%, and 10.1%, respectively. Arkansas increased male administrators by 1.5%.

Female chairs increased overall by 4.6% with Louisiana (0.9%), Mississippi (26.2%), and Tennessee (10.2%) adding more females in the role. Male chairs expanded by 2.6% in Alabama and 12.3% in Arkansas. Female deans grew by 8.0% collectively, with 60.0% in Louisiana. Male deans outpaced females by 0.8% in Alabama, 11.1% in Arkansas, and 12.5% in Mississippi. No change was found in Tennessee. For provosts, females surpassed males by 6.3%. Breaking it down by state, female provosts increased by 10.3% in Alabama, 10.0% in Louisiana, and 19.4% in Tennessee. Males expanded at a quicker rate than females in Arkansas (11.1%), and in Mississippi no change occurred. Female presidents marked an increase of 5.8% overall. Arkansas and Tennessee experienced a 33.3% and 8.3% increase in female presidents, respectively. Male presidents in Mississippi eclipsed females by 12.5%. No change took place in Alabama and Louisiana.

DISCUSSION

Gender compositions of administrators studied allow for an understanding of the statuses relating to the sticky floor effect and implementation of classroom concepts into practice with regards to positions and states via their universities eleven years later. The research questions can be answered more clearly by presenting each individually with results.

***Research Question 1:** Since AY 2011-2012, which of the positions and states showcased notable changes in gender compositions?*

Every position, when considering a coalition of the states, showed more female administrators. As for the individual positions, female chairs accounted for an increase with Mississippi demonstrating the greatest advancement. Female deans improved, due to the 60% increase from Louisiana. The female provosts grew with Tennessee showing the greatest improvement. In the chancellor position, Arkansas took the lead, assisting in the overall improvement for the states. A combination of all the positions in all the states had 5.6% more females in AY 2022-2023 than in AY 2011-2012.

***Research Question 2:** What is the status of the sticky floor effect within the states' public universities?*

Within the states studied, three (Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee) demonstrated improvement of varying degrees and two (Alabama and Arkansas) demonstrated regressions. The three states' addition of more females as chairs appears promising, however the number of females in the chair role within four of the five states remains significantly less than males. As a result, the status of the sticky floor effect within these positions and states is that it continues to be an issue.

***Research Question 3:** Have the colleges of business and states through their public universities demonstrated practical application of their classroom topics with regards to female staffing within administrative ranks?*

From a macro perspective, progress has been made in state universities increasing the number of female administrators. When considering specific states and positions, some realized greater improvement than others. The improvement of females holding chair positions increased the most in Mississippi, deans in Louisiana, provosts in Tennessee, and presidents in Arkansas. In considering all states and all positions, the greatest improvement was made by Louisiana, followed by Tennessee, then Mississippi. The only state to

experience a decrease in overall female administrators was Arkansas, which was trailed by Alabama whose female administrators increased incrementally. In a comparison of the positions, deans gained momentum and took the lead with the most increase in females holding the position. However, upon closer inspection, that title can be deceiving. While the dean numbers show an impressive increase of 8.0% more females from AY 2011-2012 to AY 2022-2023, the only state that had improvement was Louisiana. Tennessee had no change, and the other three states reduced the number of female deans. This demonstrates that the sticky floor effect remains and the application of gender fairness in career advancements is lacking and one state's universities' sizable increase in females in an administrative position can be enough to imply progress overall, while the truth is four of the five states have not advanced in 11 years. The notion that male administrators continue to be employed at greater numbers than females is supported by the data. Males outnumber females in four of five states for chairs, deans, and provosts, and five out of five states for presidents. The most consistently improving states were Louisiana, which increased the number of female chairs, deans, and presidents by 70.9%, and Tennessee, which increased the number of female chairs, provosts, and presidents by 37.9%. Alabama improved female provosts with 10.3% gained, Arkansas expanded female presidents by 33.3%, and Mississippi advanced female chairs by 26.2%. Students attending classes at public universities within these states are witnessing an increase in female administrators, which indicates incremental progress is being made, however true application of gender equality and fair employment practices have not been realized.

CONCLUSION

In revisiting the sticky floor effect and classroom concepts in action at the public universities from the colleges of business' administrators to top university administrators in five states eleven years later, the realization is that men continue to dominate these administrative roles. This translates to concerns about female career advancement opportunities, fair employment practices, gender equality practices, and the messages being sent within these universities from their administration to their students. None of the five states improved in all four of the studied positions. None of the five states had equal or greater females in all positions. In fact, Alabama employs over 3.5 times the number of male administrators than females, Arkansas and Tennessee employ over 3 times the number of males than female administrators, Louisiana employs over 2.5 times as many males as females in administrative positions, and Mississippi employs 0.6 times more males than females as administrators. The truth of the matter is that females continue to be outnumbered by males significantly. With an eleven-year period having passed, the progression of females into upper administrative ranks should be more evident. However, given the uneven scale of genders leaning heavily towards males, the sticky floor effect still holds credibility.

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