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Womanpower:

**a look at a women's organization
among graduate students in
educational administration**

As women graduate students studying to become educational administrators, we clearly knew we were in the minority. When we looked about, we realized that we were only eleven women among over two hundred part-time and full-time students in our Department of Educational Administration. When we looked a bit more, we learned that the proportion of women in our department was illustrative of the educational administration field as a whole: nationally in 1973 only two percent of all professors of educational administration were women,¹ and only twenty-six percent of public school administrators were women.² Sex-segregation in the field of education was pervasive, with women highly concentrated in teaching and men highly concentrated in administration.

organization

Seven of us joined together in the spring of 1973 to learn more about women and their role in education. We found that within our own department women students were not only fewer in number than men students, but also less active in leadership roles, less a part of the communication network, less likely to be recipients of financial support, and generally less likely to be visible in departmental activities. As many of the problems concerning the women's role became more apparent to us, we found ourselves meeting more regularly, motivated by our common interests and desire to work together. We wanted to understand better why the women's position in education existed as it did; we wanted to share and discuss our own experiences; and most important to all of us, we wanted to begin ways of planning and implementing changes.

We formalized our interest by organizing into a women's group which we called the Organization of Women in Educational Administration. We viewed ourselves as a fluctuating system, in which

flexibility was critical in order to meet the needs of the women involved. We developed a system of rotating leadership, where one person acted as the chairwoman of the organization for a period of two months. Although we had a more permanent executive committee of five women, the general membership of the group fluctuated greatly, with members playing roles for varying lengths of time depending upon their needs and commitments.

action

During several of our early women's group meetings, we related the general purposes of our organization to specific areas where we hoped to effect change. This was done largely through brainstorming activities from which we developed priority targets for action. Some of the areas of change were:

Sensitizing Department Members to Women's Issues: To begin changing the status of women in our department, it was essential for us to try to sensitize and educate other people regarding the problems and issues involved. We made a commitment to each other to raise questions when we experienced sexist and patronizing attitudes from students and staff members. This was effective in beginning to make others aware of their unconscious feelings.

We began to discuss with department members several norms, rules, and policies that required modification if women's needs were to be better met. Most of the classes were taught between four o'clock and eight o'clock in the evening. Holding classes during dinner hour was particularly difficult for women with families. Our department required that all its students take at least one year on full time load. This regulation discriminated against the poor, those with one income, and those in jobs which would not permit a year's leave. Many of these people were women. Furthermore, there were no women faculty members in our department and no stated plan or policy for adding women to the staff. Our organization initiated the creation of a faculty-student committee to devise an affirmative action plan.³

Developing Support Systems for Women Students: To facilitate the involvement and success of women in our department, we developed a communication network that provided us with information concerning activities of our department, interests of other students, job opportunities, etc. The vehicle for this information exchange was a desk and bulletin board set up in a central location in the department. We also sent a newsletter to our members, keeping them informed of important items and events. For example, we used our communication network to relate news about financial aid. Although aid within our department was very limited, women did not receive an equitable proportion, often because they were not part of the

informal department information flow and did not know about the available funding. Our organization sent out periodic mailings with information about grants, fellowships, and application details to all women and encouraged them to apply.

Increasing the Leadership Roles of Women: In the first year of its existence, our organization was highly instrumental in almost tripling the number of women students in our department! Women played roles in recruitment, admissions, and governance. They became visible as talented students and competent administrators and consequently were elected or appointed to leadership positions: student representative to the faculty, administrative assistant to the department chairman, and president of the Educational Administration Graduate Student Association. In the community, women played active roles in discussing issues of employment and promotion of women educators. Our organization conducted a seminar on "Women in Educational Administration" at a regional conference in which women administrators presented their perceptions of problems faced by women in the field.

reflections and suggestions

Having been gone from the scene for more than six months, we now look at our experiences with the usual perceptiveness of hindsight. For those readers planning to organize a women's group in their graduate departments, we offer some suggestions:

1. Recognize that a women's student organization is a temporary system operating in a more permanent one, the department. This means that the input of women's energy and involvement into the organization will fluctuate and change. By accepting the women's group as a temporary system, techniques for harnessing the members' fluctuating energy and interest can be developed. Thus some projects may take one semester, others two years or more; some task forces may have one person, others several; some groups may remain fixed in membership, others may have people dropping in and out.
2. Identify and gain access to the regular departmental information flow. Making this information readily available to all the women can be facilitated through the use of a simple newsletter. If your department already sends a newsletter, getting a student with feminist interests to handle it can be a great idea.
3. Establish your organization's existence and permanence by getting some physical turf. That means at least a desk, a mailbox, a phone. This is not simply vicarious imperialism. If people are to contact you, they have to know where you are. The proximity of this space to the center of departmental activity should correlate with your objectives. You may want to be far away from the eye of

the storm. And naturally, space is not a substitute for substance.

4. Develop a reward system that goes beyond the existing departmental reward system. The rewards must not be solely determined and distributed by the department. Loyalty can more easily be manipulated by the reward bag-“man” if the power is concentrated in a single unit, especially one with no ideological ties to the women. Women can fulfill each other’s needs with rewards that are as meaningful as those controlled by the department. For example, a woman working in the organization may have anxieties about her comprehensives; other women can help her. A woman doing a research project may be frustrated by the writing; someone can proof-read or help her develop facilitative techniques.

It is crucial that the women’s organization itself be recognized as the source of some rewards and support. The ability to work together and help each other out builds an organization with power and sisterhood.

notes

1. In 1973, in a survey conducted by the University Council for Educational Administration, it was found that two percent of all professors of educational administration were women.
2. R. Gregg and S. Knezevich, “The Superintendent: A Good Look at Him,” *The American School Board Journal*, Vol. 158, No. 12 (June, 1971).
3. In the United States, institutions of higher education (as federal contractors) are legally required “. . . to take affirmative action to ensure [employment] without regard to race, color, religion, sex, or national origin.” (The Executive Order of the President, #11246, amended in 1968). The program by which institutions go about doing this, in light of their historical pattern of discrimination, is called an affirmative action plan. In such a plan an analysis is made of past and present employment conditions to determine whether women and minorities and other groups have been underutilized; then goals and procedures for remedying past deficiencies are established.