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Academic housework

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Female professors view their role differently, and it is holding them back.

By Bruce Macfarlane and Damon Burg

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What it means to be a professor is an important question for anyone interested in academic leadership. Just under 15 per cent of all university academics in the UK hold a professorial title, which means they have reached the top of the higher education career ladder. While not all lead by holding a formal management position, such as head of department or dean, intellectual leadership is crucial to the role. And professors view this in very different ways.

Our research for the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education has found most professors see their role as creating new knowledge through high-quality publications and bidding successfully for research funding—something that has become central due to the pressures of the Research Excellence Framework and a more market-driven environment. Others see it as being a good academic citizen by focusing on the needs of less experienced colleagues within the university and serving society by connecting theory with practice beyond the ivory tower. Some professors look to cross discipline boundaries and create new academic fields, while others seek to influence society as public intellectuals.

One of the things we were interested in finding out was whether the way professors saw their role differed according to whether they were male or female—and, if so, why?

Women make up 56 per cent of students in British higher education and around 39 per cent of university academics. Yet less than a quarter of university professors are female. The reasons for this ivory ceiling have been much discussed, and initiatives have been set up to tackle it, such as the Athena Swan charter, established in 2005 to advance the careers of women in science, technology, engineering, maths and medicine, and expanded in 2015 to cover the humanities and social sciences. In recent years, the percentage of women professors has crept up slightly—from 19 per cent in 2009 to just under 24 per cent in 2014. In some subjects though, such as engineering, the proportion of women professors remains considerably lower.

The barriers to career progression are important to understand but so are the experiences of those women who have made it to the top of the academic career ladder. Our research has shown that female under-representation in the professorial ranks affects how women perceive and exercise their role once they become a professor. Female professors are much more likely than their male counterparts to talk about the importance of being a good academic citizen as well as being a knowledge creator. They feel very committed to mentoring inexperienced colleagues and contributing to the development of the university.

Many women professors feel an obligation to act as a role model to less experienced female academics and to use their position to advance the cause of gender equality in their discipline. The small control group of male professors we interviewed was far less likely to mention mentoring and other service activities as a key part of their role. Some women professors believe that the mentoring role is essential because their own female mentors were not always as encouraging as they could have been. These interviewees felt that their female mentors might have been institutionalised to believe that opportunities for women to become professors were limited.

Our findings reflect earlier research suggesting that women academics more generally are expected to do more than their fair share of “academic housework”. A number of researchers have used this pejorative phrase to describe gendered responsibilities in academia and the way women contribute disproportionately to time-consuming and often lowly esteemed service and administration roles. Research has shown that it takes women longer on average to become a professor due to the amount of service work they do. And our preliminary findings indicate that women who become professors continue to take on more service and administrative work than their male counterparts, with women professors in disciplinary areas where women are especially under-represented, such as computer science, feeling under particular pressure to do this.

Several of our female interviewees also reflected with a sense of sadness that their professional path had delayed them from becoming a professor until quite late in their careers, due to a lack of role models. Some reported a lack of self-confidence and a sense of gratitude at becoming a professor, as well as immense pride.

The highly competitive nature of contemporary academic life means there are few rewards for being a good academic citizen. Professors are evaluated in terms of their individual academic productivity, with high impact publications and major grants now the expected norm. The tendency for female professors to focus more on the collective responsibilities of the role, rather than the individual opportunities—and rewards—it affords has consequences for their pay and status. And while they remain an exception rather than the norm, they are likely to continue to do more than their fair share of this academic housework.

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