Chapter Eleven

Gender Equality in the American Research University: Renewing the Agenda for Women’s Rights

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This chapter assesses the role and status of American women in their efforts to achieve gender equality in higher education. It examines the economic, political, and social framework of policies that have contributed to women’s advancement in the United States, the complex interrelationships of the federal, state, and institutional decision makers, and the mechanisms and strategies for assuring the autonomous status and access to power of women in the academy as faculty and administrators. It is informed by the recognition that all American women are experiencing the ungendering of public policy. The strategy seems to be threefold: (1) raising the level of policy making from the state to the federal level while also proclaiming the sanctity of constitutional guarantees for states’ rights; (2) turning to the courts, through the appointment of conservative judges, to rule on controversial policies on constitutional grounds; and (3) using threats to world peace as weapons for abrogating civil liberties and instilling fear and distrust among Americans. These tactics manifest themselves in a more polarized society characterized by social justice concerns that affect women’s ability to attain full equality. In that context, the role of the higher education community should be to provide independent leadership; however, economic and political uncertainties constrain their actions. What do these uncertainties and altered priorities portend for women, including women of colour? And what can be done to build a more inclusive agenda for women’s rights?

The Research University in Context

American higher education is unique in its complexity, variety, and organization, setting it apart from most other nations and making comparability of cases a difficult task. Its diversified and unsystematized structure reflects the multiple influences on its historical development and the decentralization of responsibility to each of the 50 states rather than to the federal government. As a result, an array of diverse centres of learning has originated, representing distinctive levels of control and financing, academic missions, and organizational structures.1 Public institutions predominate, generally structured as complex hierarchical systems with research universities as their
‘flagships’, governed by elected or appointed boards of trustees or regents, and comprising 76.5% of all enrolments. Private institutions, governed by largely self-perpetuating boards dominated by corporate executives, civic leaders, alumni, and wealthy donors, account for 24.5%. Operating budgets and capital expenditures are derived from a combination of state tax funds, private contributions, federal student aid, tuition and fees, and grants and contracts. In 2003, appropriations of state tax funds for operating expenses of higher education in the 50 states totalled $60.3 billion, a decline of 2.1% from the previous year and indicative of a trend to decrease public reliance on state and federal tax dollars (Arnone, 2004). Throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, as the federal contribution to higher education grew, the 50 states engaged in massive capital construction programmes, portraying their institutions as major corporate enterprises of central importance to the development of each state’s geographic regions. The corporatization of American universities can be seen in the escalating budgets for administrative and managerial positions and the multiplicity of job functions, ranging from development, communications, human resources, and legal counsel to accounting and finance, real estate, information systems, physical plant, and security. Business-industry consortia, comprehensive health centres, global networks, and intercollegiate athletics also contribute to the revenue-producing operations of the research university. Although these occupations expand opportunities for non-academic employment of women and minorities, their justification often places them in competition with the heart of the enterprise – faculty, students, academic programmes, and scholarship.

As a small proportion of higher education institutions, research universities comprise 260 (6.4%) of the 4,074 institutions: 64% public and 36% private (Chronicle of higher education almanac 2004–5, 2004, p. 16). Though small in number relative to four-year or two-year colleges, they are the primary beneficiaries of public and private largesse. In 2002, revenues from alumni, corporations, foundations, and religious organizations totaled $24 billion; research universities generated an impressive two-thirds (62%) of this total, with the average of $73 million per institution (Chronicle of higher education almanac 2004–5, 2004, p. 30). Further evidence of their dominance is indicated by the fact that, in 2000, 18 federal agencies obligated $20 billion for academic science and engineering activities with more than a third (36%) awarded to 20 research universities (Bennot, 2002). The increasing dependence of the research university on governmental and private resources has played a significant role in their support of programmes to end sex, race, and other forms of discrimination on their campuses. And as the historical record shows, anti-discriminatory policies in higher education as in other organizations, gained credence through the determined efforts of civil rights and women’s rights groups demanding greater representation, inclusion, and a voice in the political process.

Enacting a Women’s Rights Agenda

In 1961, President John Kennedy issued Executive Order 10925, mandating that federal contractors take affirmative action in treating minorities without regard to race, creed, colour, or national origin and granting investigatory powers to an Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in the Department of Labor (‘sex’ was not part of this order). However, another executive order (10980) issued that year