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Research Note

Women's Academic Careers in Business Administration and Economics. Findings of a Multi-level Survey

Achieving a doctoral degree while working as a research and teaching (r/t) assistant is often the first step of an academic career. The starting point of our investigation is the fact that in the department of business administration and economics of the Freie Universität Berlin women r/t assistants more often than their male colleagues terminate their employment relationship without having completed their doctoral thesis. As is true in the majority of university departments, about 50 percent of students are women, but only 30 percent of r/t assistants and no more than about 5 percent of full professors.¹

Earlier research indicates that this typical pattern is the result of a number of factors including a lack of female role models in academia, a lack of well focused career aspirations, family responsibilities and prejudice against women, particularly in the sciences.

In order to examine these factors we conducted a survey on three levels. First, 97 (41 women and 56 men) advanced students and recent graduates completed a questionnaire on topics such as satisfaction with the university, support from faculty members and experience with being discriminated against by faculty members. Additionally, we asked if they are planning to become an r/t assistant and/or to obtain a doctoral degree.

Second, we conducted 29 interviews with current and former r/t assistants (19 women and 10 men) concerning several aspects of their working conditions, difficulties such as choosing an appropriate topic for their doctoral thesis, finding time to work on it, obtaining support from faculty members or being discriminated against by them in other ways, and their private life interfering with their academic progress.

Third, we conducted 10 interviews with full professors (all male). We asked them to explain the gender differences in the dropout rate and those we had identified in our interviews with the r/t assistants. We were interested in the similarities and differences between women and men and in factors related to successfully earning a doctoral degree. Below, we concentrate on the gender differences (for further details see Krell et al. 2005).

The analysis of the sample of students and graduates revealed various gender differences: About one third of the participants (slightly more men than women) said that they were interested in becoming r/t assistants and/or in obtaining a doctoral de-

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¹ Since in German universities faculty of lower rank play a rather minor role we do not consider those positions

gree. However, more women than men were not sure whether they were interested in those goals (more than a third of the women compared with less than a quarter of the men), indicating that women are less determined in planning their (academic) career. This is consistent with statements regarding encouragement and support from faculty members: Fully 82 percent of the women but only 64 percent of men said that encouragement to be self-confident is important to them. However, only 29 percent of the women received encouragement compared with 36 percent of the men. At the same time, interestingly, more women than men said that they obtained moral support from faculty for an academic career (14 percent of the women and 11 percent of the men).

Several other aspects of gender differences are worth noting: Nearly every third woman compared to every eighth man stated that scientific work doesn't suit them very well. Women more often than men expressed the fear that obtaining a doctoral degree may worsen their job opportunities outside academia because employers who are thought to prefer young graduates with practical experience might consider them to be "over-qualified" (25 percent of the women, 12 percent of the men), to be "too theory-oriented" (43 percent of the women, 30 percent of the men) and "too old" (45 percent of the the women and 42 percent of the men).

The interviews with the r/t assistants also showed several gender differences of which the following three are especially noteworthy: First, gender differences regarding the coaching by full professors² become apparent. For example, only 44 percent of the women but twice as large a proportion of the men said that their supervising professor encouraged them to participate in conferences. Only one third of the women and again twice as large a percentage of men published with their supervising professor as co-author. Moreover, every fifth woman said that her supervising professor had little or even no interest in the topic of her doctoral thesis. Not a single man had this experience. Additionally, women had less frequent, less intense, and less useful discussions with the professor supervising their dissertation.

Second, only about one third of the women interviewed but a far larger proportion of men reported a sense of belonging to their faculty team. This is not surprising in view of the fact that only 32 percent of the women but 90 percent of the men had taken part in activities such as joint meals, birthday parties or other social events. Nearly half of the women didn't feel they had been "in the right place", or had been noticed by others, while fewer than one third of the men expressed this feeling. All these findings are, no doubt, the result of the fact that women are a minority in a working environment dominated by men.

Contrary to prevailing assertions, we did not, however, find gender differences regarding the family situation and the r/t-assistants claimed that they shared household duties equally with their partners. Likewise, the work they do and the way they allocate their time for the most part seem to be very similar for women and men – with the exception that women r/t assistants devoted far more time than their male col-

² Because, as noted before, full professors play by far the most important part they are the only ones considered here.

leagues to teaching. Since our analysis also shows that all these points are relevant for successfully obtaining a doctoral degree, the identified gender differences should be taken seriously.

When the professors who were interviewed were confronted with these findings and were asked for possible explanations, they had diverse reactions. Some questioned the validity of the findings because they never had noticed any gender differences in their own team. However, after thinking for a while several of them did admit that some of their behaviour patterns could result in at least small gender differences, such as their preference for talking to and travelling to conferences with men. Some of them also mentioned that science and universities are male dominated. Nonetheless most of them concluded that lower career ambitions and family responsibilities caused the higher dropout rate of the female r/t assistants. And, although there was a broad consensus among the professors that it is not a matter of knowledge or “hard“ research skills, a few of them claimed that some women show small deficiencies in self-confidence, courage and the ability to assert themselves.

In a nutshell, most of the professors who were interviewed were not aware of the minority status of female r/t assistants in a male dominated environment and the effects this would have. Therefore, it did not come as a surprise that these professors tried to explain the higher dropout rate of women by personal characteristics of the female r/t assistants, whereas the assistants ascribed it mainly to a lack of support from their professors. Consistent with earlier research findings (e.g., Berg/Ferber 1983; Martin 1994; Savage/Witz 1992) our survey showed the typical characteristics of universities as gendered organizations, including a certain “gender blindness“ of the faculty that contributed to the higher “dropout rate“ of women. Although survey participants reported experiencing only minor incidents of discrimination, with only small differences between women and men, our findings show that women at universities still confront a male culture that makes it more difficult for them to succeed. Recognizing these difficulties might well be the first step toward remedying this situation.

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