
Regional

Not all presidential spouses are created equal

One of the individuals who is usually around on campuses but many times is almost “invisible” is the president’s partner. Sometimes they take on major roles for social functions, fundraising, and public relations; others are quite inconspicuous. In some cases, they even get financial compensation for their work. In others, they have to make sacrifices for the wellbeing of their partners.

A new study helps to clarify the role of presidential partners and how they feel about their roles. “The Lives of Presidential Partners in Higher Education Institutions,” published by the University of Minnesota, provides a good understanding.

The results of this study are based on surveying 461 presidential partners nationwide. The average respondent age was 58.8 years. The median amount of time the respondents’ partners had held presidential roles was six years. The median number of time surveyed partners have been married or in a committed relationship was slightly more than 30 years. In terms of ethnicity, 87 percent reported to be white, with 6 percent African-American. Ninety-four percent of partners had a bachelor’s degree or higher, while 12 partners (about 2 percent) indicated they were in a same-sex relationship.

Among the findings of that study are that 84 percent of the partners found the role satisfying, very satisfying, or extremely satisfying. Among the things they found most rewarding were interacting with students, meeting interesting people, supporting their presidents and helping to represent their institutions nationally and locally. On the other hand, many mentioned that the major challenges they face were struggles with role clarity and the stresses of a

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very public existence.

Another important finding was that expectations of male and female partners can be remarkably different. Partners are overwhelmingly female. Male partners reported more frequently than females as having no responsibilities in the partner role, while females were less often employed outside the role as partner. Further, women reported that they more frequently had to reduce or quit employment when their partners became presidents. Female partners also had more responsibilities than their male counterparts, and reported higher levels of frustration. Eighty-five percent of females were very involved or extremely involved with their institutions, compared with only 30 percent of male partners. Twenty-seven percent of males reported that they were minimally involved or uninvolved, compared with 12 percent of females. Males stated that they were expected to continue their own work outside their role as the partners of university presidents and are free to skip campus participation.

A major issue seems to be lack of clarity regarding their roles. Not only do they find the transition to the partner role as a major life event, but they also reported a lack of clarity regarding expectations. According to survey respondents, “the role is seldom made clear before presidents accept their positions, few institutions have written partner policies, and presidential

contracts rarely mention the partner role.” Asked to define their role in relation to institutions, 74 percent selected “informal responsibilities in an unpaid role.” This is not an unimportant factor since a quarter of partners believed that an institution’s expectations of them had influenced their president’s decision to accept, decline, or step down from a position.

Regarding perks, 71 percent of partners at public institutions and 67 percent of partners at private institutions reported that their institution had an official residence. “Having an official residence was associated with greater involvement in the partner role,” according to the report. “Eighty-seven percent of partners with official residences reported satisfaction with them. Features partners most liked about residences were their location and beauty. The feature liked least was lack of privacy.”

These are important data for many reasons. One is the increasing proportion of presidential partners that do not believe that they should quit their jobs just because their companions got a presidential position. The other is that there is also an increasing demand for partners to get involved in many functions, including fundraising, particularly given the precarious financial situation of many colleges and universities. Finally, the big question is, given that more and more is expected from them, should they not be financially compensated for their work? After all, if developing a “job description” for them is becoming a necessity, then compensation should follow.

Another important issue regards privacy and public persona. These represent significant changes in the lifestyles of partners, and many of them require

coaching when it comes to communication, fundraising and how to deal with the media. No wonder that those expectations play a role on making decisions on whether or not to accept a presidential job. Given that the complexity and problems faced by institutions of higher education continue to increase, we need better professionals at the helm of these institutions and it is appalling that we can lose some good candidates for the presidency because of the stress and expectations placed on their partners.

One of the survey’s most important results was that 24 percent of partners believed an institution’s expectations for them had influenced a president’s decision to accept, decline or step down from a position, while just 17 percent of survey respondents said the presidents’ contract or employment letter mentioned the partner role.

Needless to say, these partners also have to learn “on the job” what it entails to be a presidential partner and make decisions such as to join this or that civic organization for the benefit of the institution. They also have to be weary of potential conflicts of interest when dealing with many actors inside and outside their institutions.

Generally, it is considered a “no-go” for the spouse to accept a paid job within the institution because it will be viewed as nepotism and will create uncomfortable situations.

It is time to start thinking about “professionalizing” the role of a college president.

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