

Critical Mass on College/University Boards

Over the last two decades there has been much work to increase the number of women and minorities on the boards of U.S. corporations and educational institutions to better reflect the shareholders they represent.

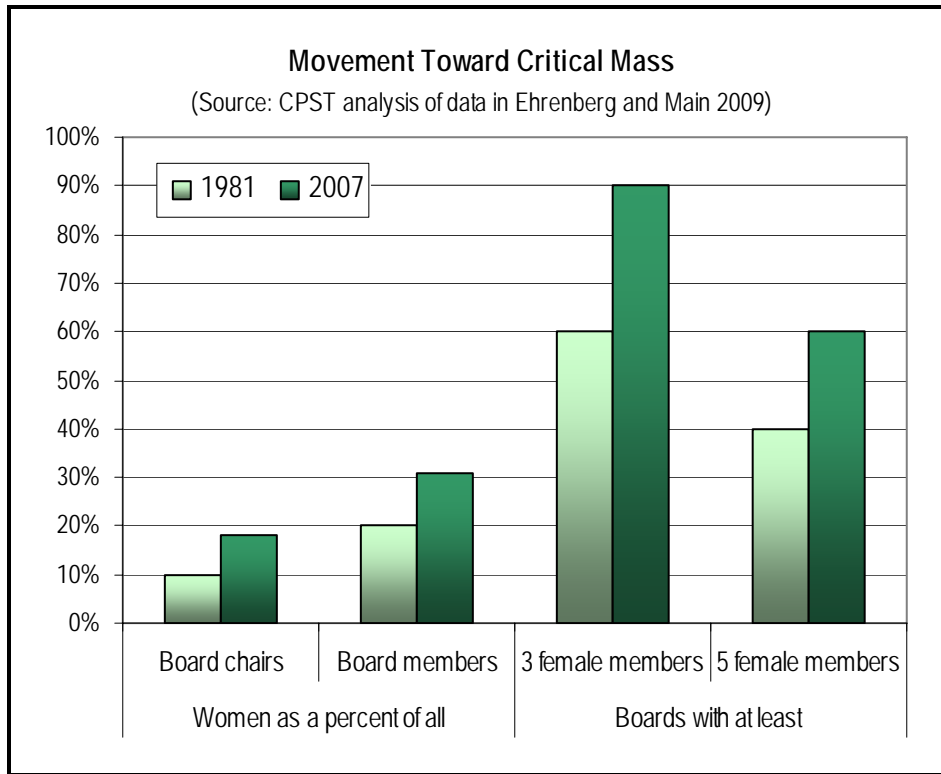
In a recent survey by the Cornell Higher Education Research Institution (CHERI), in conjunction with the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB), between 1981 and 2007, college boards saw an increase from 20% to 31% of female members. Over the same time period the number of university boards being chaired by women nearly doubled, going from 10% to 18%. These numbers are consistent regardless of an institution's status as a public or private entity; however, there is a correlation between doctoral institutions and fewer female board members. The response rate for the survey was 69.7% (indicating that the results are generalizable to the population of college and university boards). The researchers report many data points for both the full sample of institutions and those that reported – in a nutshell there's no significant response bias. That is the reporting is institutes are quite similar to the larger population from which they were drawn. CHERI is currently preparing a paper related to their work, which should be available later 2009.

The survey by CHERI affirms the data and narrative statements that have been coming from the corporate sector relating to the growth of women serving on boards of Fortune 1000 companies, conducted by the Wellesley Centers for Women and its partnering organizations. According to the Wellesley Centers for Women, which recently published "The Impact of Three or More Women on Corporate Boards" in *Organizational Dynamics* (Vol. 37, No. 2 pp. 145-164, 2008), as the number of women increases on boards, their viewpoints are less likely to be marginalized by male colleagues and discussion about "soft" issues are more likely to occur.

Using both descriptive and narrative analyses, the Wellesley survey looked at 50 women directors serving on 175 different Fortune 1000 boards. The results show consistently that depending on the number of women on the board and whether or not they are the first female to be appointed to the board, their board service and experiences vary. For example, rather than as an individual or as a capable expert in their field solo women suffered from either being ignored and were often expected to represent all females. Women who served alone following the departure of another female member, were judge based on the service of the previous female board member.

Importantly, supporting the notion of "critical mass," survey participants indicated that when women served on a board either together or with 2 or more other females, they felt the group dynamic of the board changed and their opinions were more considered or more highly valued. These findings echo the classic work in this area by Rosabeth Moss Kanter, whose research on gender composition in work settings broke new ground in the 1970s. From this work the concept of "critical mass" has been applied to point out the need for institutions, work groups, etc., to be more "gender-balanced."

Data in the graph indicate that it is becoming more common for women to serve with other women on college and university boards. In 2007, 90% of college/university boards had at least three female members, with 60% reporting at least five female members. In addition, whereas women as a share of board members was just 20% in 1981, this figure rose to 31% in 2007, which is considered "critical mass."



Both female and male CEOs that were interviewed by the Wellesley researchers commented that the real impact of women on the board was felt when there were three or more of them at the table. A male CEO participant also remarked “women have greater connection to the business, which is very good for our business, because if you help more people, you win.”

On the Web: <http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/cheri/surveys/2008surveyResults.html>
<http://www.tiaa-crefinstitute.org/research/grants/docs/CriticalMassreport.pdf>

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