



BLAZING A TRAIL

Women Who Paved the Way in Higher Ed HR



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Human resources administration has come a long way over the past four decades. From the name itself (“personnel,” anyone?) to the duties, responsibilities and nature of the work — much has changed. And the workplace itself has evolved, as well. Forty years ago, the concepts of diversity, equity and inclusion weren’t even on the radar of most employers. It still was as it had always been — white men held leadership positions and minorities and women, for the most part, did not. For this two-part article, we spoke to several individuals who we consider to be trailblazers in the higher education human resources profession. They made their own way and carved their own career paths, often having to prove themselves at every turn, and many times having the distinction of being “the first.” Looking back at how far we’ve come in the arena of diversity, equity and inclusion in the higher ed workplace gives us cause to celebrate the progress that has been made in our institutions and in the profession, but we also must realize that there is still much work to be done, and so we continue pushing forward.

This first part of the “Blazing a Trail” article focuses on women in higher ed HR (we’ll feature our minority trailblazers in the spring 2014 issue). The five women we spoke to for this piece began their careers in higher education human resources when higher ed administration was male-dominated (much more so than today). Most were the first or one of a very few women in director-level positions, not only in their departments, but throughout the institution. Men overall were paid more, entrusted with more responsibility and provided with more advancement opportunities. In order to survive in this “man’s world,” the women we spoke with oftentimes had to work harder, longer and make more sacrifices. But they each had an end goal in mind, and all eventually went on to hold the top HR positions in their respective institutions. Now retired from long, fruitful careers in higher ed HR, Barbara Smith, Jackie McClain, Sara Phillips, Shari Anderson Fassett and Patti Couger look back on their journey and share their challenges, their regrets, their successes and a few war stories, to boot.

Q When did you begin working in higher education human resources and in what capacity? What other positions did you go on to hold?

Barbara Smith: I began my higher ed HR career at Princeton University in 1972 when I was hired as an employment/recruitment counselor. Over the next 17 years, I moved up through the ranks at Princeton, serving as HR representative, manager of wage and salary, director of compensation and benefits and deputy director of HR. In 1989, I joined Carnegie Mellon University as director of HR, then went on to serve as assistant vice president for HR before being appointed chief HR officer in 2006, a position I held until my retirement in 2011.

Jackie McClain: After I finished college I worked for several years as a clerical employee on a college campus. I quickly became frustrated with campus HR operations and so I went to law school with the stated intention “to work in higher education HR.” My first HR position was in 1979 as the first affirmative action director for University of Missouri. I then went on to serve as labor relations manager, director of HR and vice chancellor for HR, all at large public universities or systems.

Sara Phillips: I was serving as associate director of administrative computing at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville and had gotten my master’s in student HR (personnel at that time) with a minor in adult education and psychology. In 1980, I was asked to apply for the open position of director of the UT System HR office (my background in IT as well as handling much of the training, orientation and standards for an IT department gave me the background they were seeking to help implement a new HR information system). I got the job, and stayed at UT for 23 more years, going on to serve as assistant vice president for HR for the UT System, assistant vice president for HR at UT Memphis and UT Knoxville, and interim vice president and assistant to the president (a role in which I was still responsible for the safety and health aspects of HR). After I retired from UT in 2003, I continued to serve in a consulting role for a few more years.

Shari Anderson Fassett: My introduction to HR, or personnel services as it was known then, was in the mid-1970s at Medical College of Wisconsin. The newly created department consisted of the director, a classification/compensation manager, an employment assistant, a

faculty records assistant and an administrative/staff assistant — that was my role. My background had been in hospital public relations, so while the move to personnel services in a medical college kept me close to the medical field, it really launched me into two completely new arenas — higher ed and HR.

I had the distinct privilege of learning HR from the ground up, and in varied roles — staff assistant, operations manager, employment manager, assistant director. In the mid-1980s, I worked as associate executive director of CUPA-HR before accepting my first HR director position at a small, prestigious, private university where I was hired to create its HR department. I was the first female to hold a non-academic director position there. Often during those early months I felt like a stranger in a hostile land. However, I learned valuable lessons about organizational change that served me well throughout my career. Over the years I also held HR director positions at Bethel University, Springfield College and Harvard University. I retired from Harvard in 2004 but did some consulting work for a couple more years before full retirement.

Patti Couger: I was hired into an entry-level, newly-created professional staff associate position immediately after receiving my bachelor’s degree from Texas A&M University in 1975. The position reported to the associate vice chancellor for budgets and HR in the TAMU System office. Along with a secretary, we comprised a staff of three. The HR function at that time was limited to policy promulgation and oversight. I made my entire 30-year career at TAMU, working my way up from staff associate to administrative assistant to budget/payroll/personnel operations manager to director of budgets and compensation to assistant vice chancellor for HR and finally chief human resources officer.

Q What were your greatest challenges initially?

Smith: When I began at Princeton, I was only one year out of college (with a degree in sociology) and had only worked in one previous “real job” — at an employment agency in New York. So I was pretty green about work in general and about HR and higher ed in particular — even office protocols were a learning experience for me!

McClain: Not only was I one of the few women in administration, but I was also setting up a new concept — affirmative action — with many unpopular procedural

requirements. I had to work hard to earn credibility for both myself and the program. My word had to be golden. I had to do what I said I would do, often having to pull out case law to support what I was telling people they had to do.

Phillips: Having no formal background in HR, I was forced to learn from others: my staff, my boss and my colleagues in CUPA-HR as well as from a lot of trial and error. Fortunately I had support from my boss and the UT administration.

Anderson Fasset: My initial challenges were lack of experience and comprehensive understanding of the HR role within the larger organization, lack of a college degree (I later earned a bachelor's degree in organizational leadership and a master's in industrial organizational psychology), trusting my own abilities, balancing a young family and a budding career, and thinking I could do it all and have it all.

Couger: The “Queen Bee” was my first challenge. She worked for the vice chancellor for administration and was all powerful. Even the leadership team, all males, knew they had to bow to her wishes. Although there was an empty private office, I was assigned a desk in the “clerical bullpen.” A day or two after I started, she provided me with a kitchen duty schedule on which I was assigned my week for making coffee throughout the day, cleaning the kitchen and serving coffee to guests. Being the only professional on the kitchen duty list (men in entry-level positions elsewhere in the administration department were excluded), I spoke with my boss about the disparity. He asked me to go along to get along. One can imagine what message this sent to visiting professionals from throughout the System when they observed me serving coffee. So, I learned to be humble and to bow to the Queen Bee like everyone else. (Dr. Rosabeth Kanter, who holds a chair in business administration at Harvard University, perfectly described the “Queen Bee” in her 1977 book *Men and Women of the Corporation*.)

Another challenge was a pervasive conservative mentality at what was a heavily male-dominated system of institutions and state agencies. The one bright spot was the chancellor at the time I was hired, who was a true Renaissance man and an anomaly in the string of prior CEOs. In year two or three of my tenure, my hope soared when he stated in a meeting that his daughter had just graduated from a prestigious college in the Northeast and was struggling to be considered for professional positions. He was aghast at the discrimination against females. I

believe that planted a seed of conscientiousness in the minds of the leaders in my department — regardless of whether they embraced the concept of gender equity.

Q Were there other women in HR positions when you started at your first job?

Smith: There was one other professional woman working in personnel, as it was called then. But instead of feeling like she was my ally and had my best interests at heart, I felt like she was trying to mold me into her minion. She immediately tried to pull me into her orb, which I rather quickly understood to be somewhat adversarial with the office leadership. I listened to her so as not to be rude, but never lost sight of her apparent ambition to bring down the leadership of the department.

McClain: There were some other women, but mostly at lower levels and none in leadership roles.

Phillips: There was one female chancellor at one UT campus, and a few female administrative department heads; but I was one of the first female HR directors.

Anderson Fasset: Men were definitely predominant in all professional HR roles, most notably at the director level. There was a handful of women I met through CUPA-HR who were at the director level in their organizations, and they appeared to have some influence within their group of male peers. Many of those women had come up through the ranks as I hoped to do, so I observed their struggles closely. The women professionals I admired the most were those who had a kind of pioneering, collaborative spirit and the sheer determination to keep learning, working hard and moving up. They were the ones I wanted to emulate.

Couger: A couple of the System's small universities had females in CHRO roles, all of which had been promoted from clerical jobs. Their responsibilities dealt primarily with staffing and employee discipline. The flagship university had several females in professional jobs but none in managerial positions.

Q Did you face stumbling blocks on your career path?

McClain: My real love in HR was labor relations. I was lucky enough to have a male administrator who thought I had the skill to do labor negotiations and took me as his second for the negotiation process. That gave me the

chance to prove what I could do. Otherwise, as a woman, I would have had an incredibly difficult time getting into the negotiator role. Once I made that transition, I wanted to move to a director role. Unfortunately I had to leave higher education, an atmosphere in which I loved working, in order to get my first director position in a large organization. Two years later, I returned to a large higher education medical center as the HR director and I was then able to progress to more demanding roles in higher ed HR.

Anderson Fasset: The biggest and most frequent stumbling block I encountered along my career path was resistance to change. The emerging role of women in higher ed HR was difficult for many of the “ol’ boys” and members of executive management to embrace. I continued to see this later in my career too when, as a director, I wanted to promote young women and there was strong resistance from my male superiors. At best, I would describe those times of resistance as circumstances requiring of me a well-purposed plan, patience, commitment, a sense of humor, a few strong organizational allies (my boss being the most important), and the willingness to stay the course and work for what I believed to be right for the overall organization and the individuals involved. HR professionals have been referred to as “change agents” for a reason. Managing change was a big part of the job.

Couger: I faced many! The abiding mentality that men should rule was pervasive until I retired. Females were increasingly hired and promoted into managerial and leadership roles, but they had to be super women and undeniably the best performers and best credentialed. Then there was the very small cadre of “professional” women who positioned themselves close to the powerful decision makers and seemed to believe their value and prestige could be enhanced by demeaning other women professionals. I watched one such woman work to get her prior boss, an amazingly intelligent, richly experienced and gifted department head, fired for totally unfounded reasons — all contrived.

And I always felt that lack of exposure to the legislature and state-level meetings early in my career (because my boss, always the gentleman and well-intended, advised me that it would be inappropriate for me to travel with him on out-of-town trips to the state capitol) was a roadblock for me. Traveling by myself solved that problem.

Who were your most steadfast supporters?

Smith: I came to trust and rely on my boss who was a great coach and mentor for me during my 17-year stint at Princeton. He was very supportive of me and encouraged me, when growth opportunities arose throughout my career, to volunteer for special projects to gain the experience and exposure these projects would offer.

Anderson Fasset: My boss at the Medical College of Wisconsin saw my potential, encouraged me and promoted me. He was an effective coach, providing me with meaningful learning opportunities that helped build a foundation for my future professional career. I was fortunate to have both talented men and women as role models and mentors. My relationships with them were forged through CUPA-HR, and those relationships remain among my most treasured possessions to this day. These were individuals who in the early days saw the organizational landscape changing and who saw the value and the need of women in leadership roles and were excited about it. These were people who had established credibility in higher ed and who were selfless about sharing what they knew and offering encouragement and counsel to those of us on the rise. No amount of hard work on my part would have allowed me to accomplish my professional goals and aspirations without the genuine interest, advice and counsel of other HR leaders and friends.

Couger: My boss set high expectations and afforded me opportunities to work in both the budget and HR arenas, and he was a strong supporter of my seeking an MBA, obtaining professional certifications, and participating in professional organizations such as CUPA-HR. The HR and financial professionals throughout the system were also supportive, appreciative and made sure to commend my work to the leadership (which made a world of difference!).

Did you experience what could be described as gender disparity in salary, promotion, recognition or opportunities?

Smith: Absolutely. It seemed like universities were just entering the world of work that had emerged after World War II, 20 years after the fact! There were few personnel systems and structures in place, and those that were established had not been tested by the demands of a

growing research agenda, women and minorities in the workforce and the emergence of technology. Back in the 1970s and 80s, Princeton was the epitome of the “ol’ boys” network. I remember speaking to a relatively new African American colleague who remarked that although he was Black, at least he was one of the boys. Women had no such infrastructure for support.

One memorable instance was when I learned that my boss’s boss had hired a male in a position parallel to mine at a rate of pay 20 percent higher, and my experience was completely on par with that of the new manager. I brought the issue up with my boss and my pay was increased above that of the new hire. I did manage to learn several valuable lessons from this incident. The first was to speak up. What may seem obvious to one individual may not be so obvious to others. And I learned that when voicing concerns, do so in a nonthreatening manner. Threats may achieve short-term gains, but if you want to remain in an organization and be successful, you must operate within acceptable norms. The only other woman who was in personnel when I was hired at Princeton had by this time been fired largely due to her adversarial approach. Finally, I learned that someone else’s gain is not necessarily my loss. The pie is expandable. In fact, a number of other times in my career, the addition of a new staff member resulted in my pay, status or benefits being improved.

McClain: In one senior position, even though my boss supported me in every other way and repeatedly stated publicly that next to him I had the most difficult and complex job in the organization, I made about 25 percent less than my male peers.

Anderson Fasset: Yes. In fact, it wasn’t until my last directorship that I felt I was adequately compensated for the work I did and in comparison to other non-HR positions. I am sure that was, in part, a reflection of the progress made in organizational understanding and attitudes around the value of human resources through the years.

Couger: Oh yes, all of that. Early in my tenure my boss proposed a merit increase for me, outside of the budget recommendation cycle. The aforementioned Queen Bee’s boss denied the raise stating, “My gosh, she would be making more than the chancellor’s secretary! We can’t have that.” I had graduated at the top of my class in the college of business and was working on a master’s, but my compensation glass ceiling was that of the top clerical employee.

Are there any “war stories” you can share?

Smith: One war story and one unforgettable moment. First, the war story. One of the first things I did after joining Carnegie Mellon was to suggest the introduction of a paid time off program. After more than 50 meetings with various campus constituencies and departments, the proposal was finally brought to the administrative group that would decide whether to adopt the plan. One vice president had refused to let me meet with his group of employees and then during the meeting complained that I had not met with his group! I was so angry, but decided against arguing with him publicly.

After the meeting, I approached him and said, “You know, you can’t have it both ways — refuse to let me meet with your employees and then publicly fault me for not meeting with them.” He looked me straight in the eye and said, “I don’t know where you worked before, but this is Carnegie Mellon, and I *can* have it both ways.” Although I had known from the start that Carnegie Mellon was very different than Princeton (CM was highly decentralized, very entrepreneurial and very under-resourced), it was not until that very moment that I realized the enormity of the differences and how different my job would be there.

My unforgettable moment came while I was at Princeton, and it rocked my world! I was asked to present the findings of a classification study I had just completed to the university administrative department heads during one of their monthly meetings. When I entered the room, I was brought up short — an entire room of suits (there *was* one woman, but also in a suit)! Knowing that one operates in a male-dominated setting is one thing, but experiencing a sea of suits in a wood-paneled room, men smoking cigarettes and pipes, walls lined with books — it took my breath away, and I’ll never forget the way I felt at that very moment.

McClain: There are a million memorable incidents, from “taking the bullet” for a president in an instance which got me on the front page of the newspaper and almost into trouble with the law, to dealing with all kinds of situations where I was able to help the institution avoid costly litigation. The only incident where I think my gender was a real factor has to do with labor negotiations. In one instance I came into the organization when there was a very hostile relationship with one particular all-male union. They had walked out of the most recent

negotiations yelling and swearing. Most members of the union leadership were very traditional older men. Knowing this, I wore a soft dress (not my normal suit) to negotiations. When they began to yell and swear during the bargaining session, I gathered my material, stood up and said, “I am a lady. When you are ready to bargain like civilized gentlemen I will return to the table.” They came to get me in about two minutes and the rest of bargaining was, although still contentious, civilized and without a walkout.

Q Looking back, is there anything you would have done differently in your career?

McClain: I wouldn’t have changed a thing. I think the challenges made me a better professional and a stronger person.

Anderson Fasset: Before HR, journalism was my passion and it was what I envisioned myself doing. I actually kind of stumbled into HR, but I found it to be a challenging, gratifying career. I think of human resources management as a purpose-filled profession, and I am proud to have been a part of it. Having had the opportunity to make a difference in the lives of others is something for which I will be forever grateful.

Couger: Throughout my career, I worked harder, longer and never accepted less than excellence from myself. I should have been more self-confident and outspoken, but there was always the fear that the “good ol’ boys” would jump at the chance to point out even the slightest misstep on my part. My career probably would have moved along more rapidly had I taken the opportunity to work in the private sector or for other institutions, but a tenured, entrenched faculty member spouse kept me geographically grounded. But I did love the challenge of higher ed HR and I cherish the wonderful friends I have made through my association with CUPA-HR.


Q Do you have any advice for those just beginning their careers in higher ed HR?

Smith: Become well-grounded in the professional, legal and technical aspects of HR, have a strong personal commitment to the underlying mission of higher education and your institution, and hold on for the ride of your life! A career in HR is never boring, always changing and ever challenging, but it’s so very rewarding in the end.

McClain: Get active in a professional organization. Read, ask questions, write and present on topics of interest in your field. Recognize that you should never stop learning no matter how much expertise you develop.

Phillips: Absorb, learn, listen, watch the successes and failures of others, and be ready to acknowledge and learn from your mistakes. Practice and hone your communication skills and continue your personal learning throughout your career. If you don’t love what you’re doing, look for something else to do. I believe that HR is a profession that you need to love and nourish in order to be truly effective.

Anderson Fasset: Learn to really listen to people. Focus on trying to enrich the lives of others. Become and stay knowledgeable, consistent, credible, creative and open-minded. Choose to work for an organization that has similar values to yours and then give it your best effort, every single day.

Couger: Learn the business of higher education and your institution from top to bottom. Take the initiative to showcase your department’s accomplishments and to propose new programs, different ways of doing business, and strategies for facilitating the accomplishment of organizational goals. Learn how to deal with adversity, change and seemingly insurmountable challenges, because there are many in today’s higher ed environment. Practice humility and be quick to give others credit and accolades and slow to lay blame. And finally, be a go-getter, stay current, always go the extra mile and don’t ever settle for average. 

If you’d like to read more about women’s struggles and successes in higher education administration, check out CUPA-HR’s new book, *Cracking the Wall 20 Years Later: Women in Higher Education Leadership*. In 1993, CUPA-HR published the first iteration of this book, in which women in leadership positions in higher education detailed the challenges they faced while climbing the ivory tower ladder and offered specific strategies on how women could enhance their advancement opportunities in academia. Now, 20 years later, many of those same women have revisited the topic and explore the progress that has been made over the past two decades. Visit www.cupahr.org/bookstore to read more about the book or to order your copy.