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OPENING NEW DOORS; An MBA is a ticket to independence

Presented by



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Originally a qualification possessed by relatively few, the MBA has increasingly become a prerequisite for executive jobs. Despite the trend toward gender equity in many fields, the most senior corporate jobs in Canada are still disproportionately male. Women hold only 13% of board-level positions in FP 500 companies, while 40% of these businesses have no women on their boards.

The next generation of leaders are today's business school students, and the picture that emerges from Canada's leading MBA programs reveals that while women haven't yet reached complete parity with men, they've closed the gap significantly.

Simon Fraser University was the first in Canada to offer an Executive MBA, and its inaugural class of 1970 had only one woman. Today, half of its undergraduate business students are women, as are over a third of MBA students at the Vancouver school, and these numbers have been steady for a decade. While there may be a glass ceiling at the highest levels in business circles, these barriers have largely been broken not only for students, but also for faculty.

Almost 30% of tenure-track staff at Canadian business schools are women. Blaize Reich, a professor at SFU and co-author of *Scaling the Ivory Tower*, a study of women in business faculties, considers this an important milestone. When women's participation in any group reaches this tipping point, Dr. Reich says, "it is enough to imbue the organization with the kind of sensibility and leadership that encourages other women."

Women seeking academic careers in business schools now have role models, mentors and an informal support network, something university administration consciously cultivated. "At SFU, all our hiring committees have at least one woman, so it's not just one woman applicant in a room and a bunch of men interviewing her. It's a more balanced environment."

Seventeen per cent of business school deans throughout North America today are women, up from 11% in 2001. This progress comes at a price, though: Compared to their male counterparts, female deans are less likely to be married or have children. Mothers who head business schools are likely to have smaller families, too, while the majority of male deans have three or more children.

The careers of women in administration within academia also follow slightly different trajectories.

Men are more likely to take up a senior position at a university after moving from another institution, while women more frequently rise within the ranks at the same school, often serving as acting heads or deans for an interval before assuming the job. This trend reinforces the perception that men are more willing to relocate in order to advance their careers. In business as well as academia, women, whether single or in a relationship, tend to be less mobile than their male peers.

Balancing the demands of work, school and family is also a factor for female students. Part-time MBA programs, which can best accommodate family responsibilities, have the largest proportion of women enrolled at 37%. Only 22% of students in Executive MBA programs, by contrast, are women. EMBA students have years of management experience and usually continue to work full-time while studying.

Nor are all business schools equally balanced. Enrolments in MBA programs at Memorial University, Concordia University, and the University of New Brunswick-Saint John are almost evenly divided between men and women.

At the other end of the spectrum are schools at which three out of four MBA students are men, including some of Canada's older business faculties. Even these numbers, though, are likely to change as undergraduate business programs see female students number 40% or more.

For business students and faculty alike, expectations and assumptions about gender have evolved over a generation. Leadership in the workplace in the 21st century requires qualities that transcend traditional stereotypes about men's and women's differing managing styles.

Dr. Reich's co-author, SFU professor Dianne Cyr, has a background in psychology as well as business, and sees evidence of a shift in values both in the classroom and the board room.

"Ten or 15 years ago," she points out, "women at senior levels felt the need to hide their marital status or plans for a family, and times have definitely changed since then."

Work-life balance has become a higher priority for men and women alike in the working world. Further, current thinking on executive leadership emphasizes cultivating strengths typically attributed to both sexes.

"Androgyny in leadership is becoming much more important." Dr. Cyr explains. "Women acquire typically 'male' traits such as assertiveness, while the most successful male leaders have characteristics usually associated with women. They tend to be better communicators, and more supportive of their colleagues and employees."

"Those who are most successful, either men or women, have characteristics and values as leaders that are both male and female."

The integration of women into business schools, both as students and faculty, will ultimately lead to equal participation even at the board level.

"There's a trickle-up effect," Dr. Reich says of the most senior leadership in the public and private sectors. The supportive atmosphere for women she and Dr. Cyr have found in universities is increasingly common at all levels of business, from entrepreneurial start ups to boards that develop different dynamics when women take their place at the table.

Younger women especially, the SFU professors agree, set their sights just as high as their male counterparts, and see the MBA as the first step on the road to achieving these goals.

"Women are participating more because they realize that it is a ticket to independence," Dr. Cyr says, "and they're doing this so that they can get better jobs and be self-sufficient.

"There has been a lot of change in the last decade," Dr. Cyr says. "And there is actually quite a lot of support for women now, in schools and in business."

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