

Women's Leadership in Residential Theaters Project Update

Project Overview

American Conservatory Theater (A.C.T.) and the Wellesley Centers for Women (WCW) are conducting a research study into the gender equity of leadership opportunities in the nonprofit American theater field, led by A.C.T. Artistic Director Carey Perloff, Executive Director Ellen Richard, and WCW Senior Research Scientist Sumru Erkut. For the past 20 years, women have not exceeded 27% of artistic or executive director positions in the League of Resident Theaters (LORT). Why? In a field in which over 65% of tickets are purchased by women and in which "representation" is at the heart of the stories we present to the public, the persistent underrepresentation of female leadership is puzzling and problematic. A.C.T. and WCW's investigation will combine personal interviews, survey results, and detailed analysis of resumes collected to identify the ways artistic and executive directors are currently selected, identify the obstacles preventing greater equity, and develop recommendations on how the candidate selection process can be more gender balanced.

Current Climate on Diversity in the Field

In the nearly 100 interviews conducted with artistic and executive directors so far, WCW researchers have found a variety of opinions and reactions to the state of women's access to leadership positions in the American theater and the relative urgency of addressing gender parity as compared to more startling statistics faced by minority groups. But respondents uniformly agree that while great progress has been made in increasing gender parity in lower and mid-level positions, the persistent inability to move women into artistic and executive director positions is the very picture of a glass ceiling. Still there exists in the public discourse a misconception that women's representation is in competition with the representation of minorities. Instead this study will examine experiences of both women and minorities in their paths to leadership positions in a manner that incorporates gender as a critical component of diversity so that progress can be made on all fronts.

Activities to date

- WCW researchers have gathered 166 resumes and conducted 96 interviews with artistic and executive directors as well as those in next-in-line positions at LORT theaters across the country
- 1,050 directors completed a survey sent to members of the Society of Directors and Choreographers (SDC) who identified as directors, which is one pipeline to artistic director appointments
- Researchers have finished a preliminary analysis of the SDC survey, separating the answers by both gender as well as race/ethnicity; more than half of the women of any race reported being artistic director of a theater they founded, as opposed to one third of male respondents of any race, suggesting that women are less likely to be *selected* by search committees
- When explaining why they felt they did not get selected by a search committee or did not apply for artistic director positions, women gave reasons including lack of mentorship, experience directing or producing in a variety of theaters, or fundraising experience, suggesting insufficient opportunities for experience

Next Steps

- The researchers will next analyze the 166 collected resumes to note the presence or absence of elements identified in the career blueprint
- The researchers will also expand efforts to determine patterns in multiple pathways towards executive director positions
- They will also interview principals of search firms who conduct theater leadership searches and board members of LORT theaters who have recently served on leadership search committees
- WCW will combine information from these interviews, resume analysis, and the surveys to describe multiple reasons for the scarcity of women in theater leadership and develop recommendations for moving women already in the pipeline to leadership positions and for strengthening the pipeline

Conclusion

The chronic lack of gender equality is a longstanding issue throughout the theater field, requiring serious self-reflection and analysis. Preliminary findings from survey results and interviews suggest a positive trend in the theater world's attention to diversifying ethnic representation in artistic leadership, which gives us hope that informed and conscious policies and practices can lead to greater inclusion. We are excited to announce that The Virginia B. Toulmin Foundation has just awarded a second \$100,000 matching grant to the project to cover the remaining costs of the research and analysis. Help us meet the challenge and raise the funds to present the findings at national conferences, convene relevant stakeholders to develop an action plan, and broadly disseminate our results for effective change in the field. Visit www.act-sf.org/wlp to donate today!