

Women University Administrators: Dress Choices and Meanings

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For professional women, there are societal expectations regarding dress, as clothing transmits information about cultural norms, cultural knowledge, and behavioral norms (Johnson et al., 2002). In academia, professors' physical appearance can influence his or her perceived credibility (Lavin et al., 2010). Female leaders within academia (and in the public eye including politicians) are often critiqued and evaluated for their clothing choices in a way that many male leaders are not; often revealing underlying societal and individual sexist and racist belief systems (North, 2018; Williams, 2020).

For this study, women university administrators were chosen as the principal focus because of their unique role and contributions to higher education. Today, women earn the majority of all college degrees with significant gains in attaining administrative titles within higher education. However, they often occupy the lowest-paid and least-senior administrative positions (Whitford, 2020). When women leaders ascend to leadership positions, institutional structures, systems, and mindsets pose significant challenges; however, at all levels, administrators remain visible role models inside and outside of the institutions, they serve. While previous researchers have studied teachers' use of dress codes and what their clothing communicates to others (Shoulders et al., 2017; Workman & Freeburg, 2010), these studies focused on K-12 elementary educators. Previous researchers have noted the significance of dress within different career paths (Maran et al., 2021; Ndeke & Barmao, 2021), however, the purpose of this study was to examine the dress choices and messages female university administrators believed their clothing communicated to those within and outside of their institution. It is our goal to provide this information for aspiring female administrators.

We used a purposive, snowball purposeful sampling strategy to recruit potential participants (Creswell, 2009). A pilot interview was conducted to check for question clarity. Following institutional review board approval, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 36 women from central administrative leadership roles (i.e., dean, associate dean, director, etc.) at a large, Midwestern, land-grant institution. The interviews ranged from 35 to 90 minutes and averaged 60 minutes. After transcription, the interviews were shared for editing purposes with the interviewees. Inductive coding was used to identify codes and themes. Inter-coder reliability check revealed 95% agreement. Six key themes related to dress choices and meanings of their clothes as women administrators emerged.

Clothing changes with career advancement. Each of the participants spent many decades within academia or the private sector prior to their current university role. The majority of the women ($n=34$) discussed the subtle and more major style changes that they made as they rose through the ranks from secretary, scientist, assistant professor, to their

current role. Jane stated, “As an administrator, there are many, many, many more meetings, you know, with whether it's with the president or with dean's or business professionals and so, yeah, I tend to have to dress more professionally. When I first started at the center, I would pretty much have many days where I would wear shorts or jeans to work. I would never do that today.”

Importance of representing the office and university. Within the university, participants discussed the importance of branding both the institution and their units. Alicia stated, “On campus, you're always visible to everyone....I am representing the program all the time. I think it is important then to dress nicer to have on professional attire.” At the university level, the administrators discussed the vital importance of representing the institution to others outside of the school. Christina shared that when she first started in her role, she attended an event at another school wearing those school's colors; “an administrator made very clear to me that you should wear the school's color, a scarf or something, and you should be representing the institution.....That was a real key moment for me when I realized the people are watching will have certain expectations that appear on the team.”

Use of clothing to fulfill different roles. Participants discussed how they used more formal clothing to demonstrate their administrator roles or dressed more casually to build community with their staff members. Dressing as administrators often meant wearing the school's colors, dressing “like a professional,” and wearing power suits. According to Julia, she was summoned into an unexpected meeting with the university's provost during a staff holiday party. She arrived wearing an “ugly holiday sweater” and stated she, “felt very silly going into that [meeting] and embarrassed like I wasn't representing our office as well as I could have or should have. But at the same time....it is so important for the team to see that I participate in the office traditions, and I want it to be a fun place and I'm willing to forgo the suit or the pencil skirt and wear work slacks to have fun with them.”

Use clothing to communicate. Participants shared that they used clothing to communicate many different things, such as power, femininity, competence, and university spirit to others. But also used clothing to imbue themselves with certain traits. For example, Kathleen stated, “I sometimes feel very overdressed but yet I think it's still important to dress up for those things because that's what you do. And that's how you build confidence. I think you do feel better when you dress up more, just how, how I am today with the sweater this and that. If I didn't put a necklace and earrings on, I don't feel nearly as comfortable, I feel like I've kind of failed or whatever, because I haven't gotten dressed up enough. Whereas I feel better if I have makeup on my face. If I put, you know, earrings in and accessorize whatever my outfit is.”

Following data analysis, the theoretical lens of identity theory and social identity theory was utilized to make sense of the findings. Both theories place their emphasis on a multi-faceted and dynamic self that mediates the relationship between social structure and individual behavior (Hogg, Terry, White, 1995). Findings revealed that women university administrators used clothing to establish their diverse roles and identities in their office and university. The interviewees noticed cues from their institutional and geographical environments, as well as listened to their internal “authentic” selves to present images of themselves that represented internal traits, such as competence, as well as external roles, of administrators, leaders of units, employees of an institution.

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