

Groundbreaking Study of Women in Leadership Positions in State Government Shows Progress, but Need for Improvement

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A new research study from Utah State University's Utah Women & Leadership Project (UWLP), in conjunction with USU Extension, reports that state government leaders are implementing strategies to diversify gender leadership, but there are still opportunities for improvement.

The research is the first in a series that focuses on women leaders who work in Utah's public sector. It will be followed by similar analysis at the county and municipal levels.

The groundbreaking study included an analysis of gender representation across 3,850 leadership positions within 53 Utah state agencies. Researchers were interested in understanding how women are represented in formal leadership roles within governments in Utah. The goal was to document a baseline of the number of women in leadership roles to track the progress made and help make improvements in the future.

Susan Madsen, founding director of the UWLP and inaugural Karen Haight Huntsman Endowed Professor of Leadership in USU's Huntsman School of Business, said identifying and mitigating persistent challenges and barriers clears the way for enhanced opportunities for

women's equal representation across state agencies and leadership levels.

According to lead researcher April Townsend, the study showed that because departments and divisions tend to adopt "masculine" and "feminine" divisions of labor, the place a woman works often impacts her career progression. "Feminine" agencies tend to be redistributive areas such as education, social services, healthcare, the arts and veterans' affairs. "Masculine" agencies are primarily administrative, distributive and regulatory, such as in business and economic development, labor, defense, transportation, taxes, budget, criminal justice, natural resources, agriculture and environmental quality. These divisions of labor often determined the type of leadership roles men and women held.

The Utah Foundation, an independent research organization, notes that 13 of the 20 largest employers in the state are government entities, and when looking at the top 50 employers in Utah, nearly half are government entities.

Because of the high rate of state government employment, it's important to balance the role of men and women, not just as leaders generally, but at all leadership levels, said Madsen.

The research findings identified that women hold 39.3% of supervisory, managerial and leadership positions in Utah government. Women comprised 41.2 percent of front-line leadership positions, but just 27.1 percent of cabinet-level roles.

"Our research states that organizations increasingly thrive when both men and women hold leadership roles and work together," Madsen said. "Gender inclusivity in leadership benefits not only Utah's businesses, but also its government organizations, such as state legislatures, city councils and state and local bureaucracies. A lack of women's equal representation in the leadership ranks stands in stark contrast to the goal of a diverse government workforce."

The benefits of diverse leadership teams include improved strategic decision making, increased capacity for problem solving, enhanced resilience, increased innovation and expanded capacity to adapt to change.

Researchers recommended several ways to increase gender diversity in Utah leadership:

* Make it clear that diversity is part of the organizational culture, with elected officials and top cabinet members

playing an active role in prioritizing gender diversity and communicating that throughout state agencies.

* Develop strategic plans that clearly show steps for recruiting and advancing women, with an eye to women of color, into leadership positions, particularly in agencies that may be considered “non-traditional” for women.

* Evaluate hiring processes to eliminate potentially outdated language, unnecessary minimum qualifications and other exclusionary measures.

* Update interview practices for hiring managers with a lens to diversity. Emphasize the need for training agency managers to raise their awareness of gender equity and to provide proper ways to address gender bias in the workplace. This includes incorporating unconscious bias training that addresses negative stereotypes of women managers and shows the benefits of hiring women leaders.

* Make gender diversity a priority by tracking and sharing the data, both inside and outside the organization.

* Train women and men to respond appropriately when they encounter gender bias in language, behavior or policy.

“Having women at top levels can inspire other women to pursue their own advancement,” said Madsen. “It also increases the willingness to hire and promote highly skilled, competent women routinely. Shifting to more balanced leadership will benefit not only women and government organizations, but also families, communities and the state as a whole.”

[Click here](#) for the full research brief. Visit the UWLP website at

<https://www.usu.edu/uwlp/>.

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