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For Women Seeking to Advance in Academe, Advice From 4 Who Made It to the Top

By Jack Stripling

Washington

Be on powerful committees that control money.

Avoid petty disputes.

And always have the last word.

Such was the sometimes tongue-in-cheek—and sometimes not—advice a panel of female presidents gave an audience at the National Archives here Thursday night.

At the "Fourth Annual Forum on Women in Leadership" series, female university leaders discussed their trajectory through academe and the challenges that remain in a profession dominated by men. Speaking to an audience of mostly women, the presidents of four institutions warned that women are easily sidelined in academe in part because they are lured into positions and onto committees that won't help them advance through the administrative ranks.

"Be on the finance committee. Don't be on—this is going to sound awful—the child-care committee," said Catharine Bond Hill, president of Vassar College.

Ms. Hill, who has children, went on to clarify that one of the positive strides academe has made in recent decades is to begin to accommodate professors who are also parents. She noted, for example, that many institutions stop the tenure clock for faculty members who become pregnant. At the same time, however, Ms. Hill spoke to themes taken up by her fellow panelists: In a college environment, female full professors are still sometimes assigned duties such as note taking at meetings, and, in rooms full of men, women often have to fight to speak without interruption.

Teresa A. Sullivan, the first female president of the University of Virginia, also had some advice on the topic of speaking up: "Say things succinctly so that you have the sound bite at the end of the conversation."

Other forum participants included H. Kim Bottomly, president of Wellesley College, and S. Georgia Nugent, president of Kenyon College. Donne G. Kampel, associate dean of faculty at Touro College, moderated the discussion.

When Ms. Kampel pressed the panel on the challenges they'd faced as women in achieving leadership roles, several suggested that their successes might be partially attributable to not dwelling on every slight. Ms. Nugent, for instance, recalled an occasion when a man told her at a cocktail party that there were too many women at Kenyon College. He was apparently unaware that the national population is majority female as well, Ms. Nugent said. So what did she do? Ms. Kampel inquired.

"I probably just refreshed his drink," Ms. Nugent said with a laugh.

Ms. Nugent's response spoke to the delicate balancing act the assembled presidents said they still face as female college leaders. At the same time, however, their experiences reflected seemingly universal elements of the modern college presidency. It is a consuming job from which there is seldom if any respite, the participants said. Indeed, it's a "lonely job," Ms. Bottomly noted.

"It's very hard for a president to have sort of an outside-the-presidency life," she said.

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