

The News & Observer

Programs help increase influence of women in N.C.

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04/11/2015 2:00 PM | Updated: 04/11/2015 8:00 PM

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Valerie Fields has never seen a leadership role she didn't like.



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A successful entrepreneur who founded and runs a Raleigh-based public relations agency, Fields is also a lecturer at UNC-Chapel Hill's School of Journalism and Mass Communications. She's an ordained minister who launched Miracle Ministries, which provides Christian counseling and support for youth and families. Most recently, she became president of the Women's Forum of North Carolina, an advocacy group that bolsters the influence of women across the state.

"Learning about my potential – that's what my journey's been about," Fields says.

As we listen to Fields speak passionately about advancing the interests of women, we have to wonder: How much more potential might we unleash here with new generations of women leaders like her?

As Fields noted in an open letter last year on the Women's Forum website, "The women of North Carolina continue to face more daunting challenges of unemployment, under-employment, domestic victimization, sub-standard housing and impoverishment compared to men. In our state, women fill the majority of low-wage jobs while many also pull double-duty as head of household and primary breadwinner for less money."

Options in the state

Even in highly professional circles, disparities remain rampant. Over the past 15 years, the Women's Forum has studied the gender composition of North Carolina "power boards" – a group of exceptionally influential state boards whose members are appointed by the governor and the

General Assembly, such as the State Board of Education and the Utilities Commission. In 1999, the percentage of women serving on those boards was 20 percent. Two years ago, it was 22 percent.

Similarly, recent studies have shown that the proportion of professional women in senior roles globally remains stalled at about 24 percent, with just 5 percent of Fortune 500 CEOs being women. A particularly compelling study by the EY Center for Board Matters noted that men named John, Robert, James or William hold a higher percentage of board seats on the S&P 1,500 than all women combined.

Having grown up in a family of strong leaders, Fields is convinced that training, development and networking opportunities are critical for helping women make faster progress.

The good news: those options increasingly abound across North Carolina.

In January, the MetLife Foundation, the philanthropic wing of insurer MetLife, gave \$100,000 to create the Women in Business Leadership Program at UNC-Charlotte's Belk College of Business. The initiative will offer an array of learning and mentoring opportunities to ready undergraduate women for business success. It's the latest of many efforts among our state's colleges and universities to help young women reach their full potential.

Gaining clarity

Beyond higher education, numerous development opportunities exist for professional and service-oriented women. On April 22, the Junior League of Greensboro will hold its annual Women's Leadership Summit, featuring best-selling author, business consultant and Paralympic skiing medalist Bonnie St. John. On May 15 and 16, the Women's Forum of North Carolina will conduct its annual spring meeting at N.C. State with a special focus on immigration policy and a keynote speech by Jim Johnson, a professor at UNC's Kenan-Flagler Business School.

In July, the Greensboro-based Center for Creative Leadership (with which we are both affiliated) will launch its new Women's Leadership Experience, a program designed to help develop, promote and retain top-flight women leaders. It focuses on three key elements that research shows are crucial for women's leadership success – gaining clarity about their current identity, taking control of their lives and careers, and building supportive professional relationships.

Meanwhile, the Institute of Political Leadership, a nonpartisan leadership training program for aspiring political candidates, offers Women on Board, a one-day workshop that explores the process for getting appointed to and serving on local, county or state boards. IOPL's Fellows Program, which prepares both women and men to run for public office, counts many prominent women among its alumni, including N.C. Secretary of State Elaine Marshall, N.C. State Treasurer Janet Cowell, N.C. Supreme Court Associate Justice Barbara Jackson, and current and former state lawmakers.

And as we noted in a December column, organizations like Soar and e51 are providing a supportive environment for female entrepreneurs.

As Fields sees it, the more frequently women leverage these opportunities, the more they inspire others to follow in their footsteps. Says Fields: "I believe that when you see something is possible for someone else, it becomes possible for you as well."

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