



# WHAT

# SHE

# SAID

**By Teresa Davis, Ph.D., CAPP**



## **A Ph.D. candidate studies women in university transportation for her dissertation.**

**N**ine years into my position as the director of transportation services at Penn State, I began work on my dissertation. My professor advised, “Write what you know,” so I opted to study women managers in university transportation departments. I came across information provided by the Transportation Research Board’s (TRB) task force on women’s issues in transportation that identified women leaders in transportation and their career paths as important research topics for the transportation community. I called on my colleagues to obtain information on their demographics, career paths, and professional challenges.

Targeting members of the International Parking Institute (IPI), I recruited 35 women managers from university transportation departments to participate in a survey, interviews, and a focus group. Twelve of the 35 women participated in in-depth interviews. The intent was threefold: to gather demographic data about women managers in university departments; to obtain information about transportation as a career; and to identify career support and advancement potential.

### **Demographics**

The data, obtained in 2007, revealed that all participants were older than 31 years of age. Women ages 31 to 40 comprised 12 percent of our group while just more than half were 41 to 50. Thirty percent of the women were between 51 and 59, and the rest were 60 or older. These numbers revealed that in the near term, there would be available entry-level management positions and advancement opportunities for persons choosing to enter the parking profession.

More than 75 percent of the women were married, 6 percent were single, and 18 percent were divorced. Forty-two percent cared for children in their home.

In terms of education, more than half of the women had completed four years of college. The most common major was business. Only two of the 17 degree holders actually possessed degrees in transportation. Four of the women reported a high school diploma or GED as their highest level of education. Seven possessed master's degrees.

Part of our research involved long conversations with participants about their careers. These in-depth interviews were my favorite part of the process, and the women selflessly shared real stories from their work. Three themes emerged:

### **Climbing the Ladder**

The first theme, climbing the ladder, was the most prominent. Half of the interview participants moved up through their organizations' ranks. One woman related, "When I came to the university, I was a student employee in the parking department working towards a four-year degree in business administration. Here we are 24 years later, and I am running a business."

Another participant shared, "Transportation was never my chosen career field. I fell into it. I was getting married and needed a full-time job. I was going to college. My mother-in-law knew someone in the parking office at the [major university]. I was hired on as a clerk and fell into it, rising through the ranks."

An interviewee stated, "I spent my entire career, even my job as a student employee in this department and in this field. My career is pretty straight and narrow. I started out as a bus driver, loved the department, loved

the people, loved what we were doing, and loved the students."

Several factors were mentioned as motivation for climbing the ladder. Three participants identified transportation as an original career goal. One participant shared, "I took transportation logistics in college and worked for a professor. He got me interested in the whole field of moving product, moving people." Another participant had a degree in urban and regional planning. She said, "My first internship out of school was in the [city] as a transportation intern. From that path, I always stayed in it, since I liked transportation planning, the engineering side."

For two participants, the move to transportation was a career change. One woman shared, "I actually came to the [major university] to do graduate work—a mid-life career change. I was attending graduate school in counseling psychology. I needed a job and was hired to work the counter in the parking office. By the time I finished my graduate work, I had been promoted twice."

One participant cited financial incentive and stability as the attraction to parking. "I started down the path of parking because of money. I started in the airport as a parking manager and was hired away from them to work in the university in a manager role in parking. I was then the interim director and then became director. I guess transportation was an opportunity to manage."

### **Experience is the Key**

Experience is the key evolved as a second theme. In all but one case, work experience took a primary role in preparing the participants for their positions. One professional shared, "I started as the front office clerk, and then became the accountant. Then I became the office manager while it was under the police. I was the secretary to the chief of police, then parking manager and dispatch coordinator. When they (the department) decided to separate parking and police, the administration asked if I wanted to go with police or parking. They gave me a year shot at it with a temporary increase. They were happy. By the time I was 22, I was acting director and then at 23, the director."

Another participant shared her experience outside of the university as a classroom teacher. "There is very little in terms of management that you don't exercise in a classroom. I taught high school. Much of your effort is in managing the classroom as well as managing the educational opportunities for the students. I think in that regard, while it was not formal management training, it prepared me to deal with a variety of issues to deal with differing personalities, differing objectives."

One woman attributed her ability to deal with challenges to training. "I grew with the department. [University] prides itself on training. [University] has

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an excellent program on supervision and leadership. The training has been a huge thing. I can't say enough about it. Our department, because of training, has had multiple people leave to be directors elsewhere.”

The politics of a university transportation department was identified by eight participants as a difficult part of the job. A participant discussed how she and her supervisor create a balance: “The only thing that I get frustrated with is our administration, not our boss. We work as partners. We have a great relationship. We can talk. Above her it gets fuzzy. Sometimes it's hard and you get to the point where you have to pick your battles. It's a balance. I like doing operations and she is more about the policy.”

One professional equated her previous work experience and ability to deal with the politics as key to succeeding in the position. “Through default, if I wanted to succeed at my job, I needed to take the initiative; do what needed to be done. All of those jobs (previous work experience) built up to a point where I am comfortable doing the job and doing new things and ready to take on the politics with the job. Parking is not a popular world, and most people want to stay out of it.”

Another interviewee put it bluntly, “It's the trickiest part of being at a university. The politics make or break you.”

The participants found that managing people is a skill best learned through experience. One stated, “Probably the biggest challenge is managing the people.” In terms of managing the needs of the customers, she related, “When I moved here, my assistant said, ‘Where do you spend most of your time?’ I responded that 80 to 90 percent of the time is the people—faculty, staff, students. If you don't have people skills and don't like people, you can't work in this environment.”

### **Support of the Administration**

The third theme focused on support of the administration. Seven of the 12 women identified issues with a lack of support. One participant shared that through her years with the university, she has gained the support but there remains an overarching issue. “I have to tell you that it remains a challenge being a women administrator on a university campus. Another challenge is advancement. You get to the executive officer level at our campus and there are only two out of 20 at my level. It is a little bit better but still not outstanding.”

Another woman stated, “Probably the biggest thing about being a woman in business is the typical thing that you run into such as the roadblocks or lack of support from male management and stuff. You learn to deal with it and manage those people or manage around those people. I think that it's a lot less than what it was. I also think it's a cultural issue where some people just aren't with it and refuse to get on board.”

Only four of the 12 interview participants identified gender inequity as an issue. Additionally, 11 of the 12 interviewees claimed that their administrations supported their decisions, training opportunities, and participation in professional organizations.

This encapsulation of data and stories identified three themes that these women agreed had major effects on their careers. The information is meant to offer women in university transportation departments a glimpse of who their counterparts are and how their experiences compare. Additionally, the participants offered their stories in hopes that their professional lives might assist in providing information to others interested in careers in university transportation.



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