

## *Notes From Academe*

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### NOTES FROM ACADEME

# A College Leadership Program Helps a Mother Consider Politics

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New Brunswick, N.J.

Melissa P. Deputy is a 49-year-old mother of five and a community-college student who is running hard. But maybe, she now thinks, not too hard to consider running for public office.

She's studying full time at Raritan Valley Community College, in New Jersey, and expects to finish a certificate program this summer in event planning. She would like to earn a bachelor's degree one day, but money is tight: She's getting divorced, and four of the five children live part time with her. She expects to return to work this fall and continue her studies when she can.

She's been juggling responsibilities for a long time, including caring for a total of 22 foster children since 2000, three of whom she adopted.

In spare moments — one of her few ways to relax is over a cup of South African red tea — she has thought now and then about running for public office. She worked as a real-estate agent for six years and says she saw how poor financial management by a town government hurt local property values. And her work with foster children — she also led a county advisory board on the topic — has made her interested in how public policies could help build stable families.

Until recently, such thoughts were simply curious musings. But Ms. Deputy decided to nurture them by attending a five-day program at Rutgers University earlier this month intended to encourage undergraduate women to run for elected office. She learned about the meeting through her college's Web site and decided to apply, though she doubted she would be accepted.

"Coming here was taking a big step out of my comfort zone — I was shy," she said, although you'd hardly know it once she gets talking. "But there are a lot of things in our world that need to be fixed."

Rutgers has held the annual event, the National Education for Women's Leadership program, since 1991 to try to redress the lopsided gender imbalance among politicians. The United States ranks 84th in the world in the percentage of national legislators who are female, and in Congress only 16 percent of the members are women. The numbers are similar for governors and state lawmakers.

Since the program started, 15 other colleges and universities in other states have adopted the program with Rutgers's help, and organizers at those institutions all stay in touch. Representatives of what is to become the 17th partner, the University of Maine at Orono, observed this year's meeting at Rutgers.

A total of 36 undergraduates attended the event, selected from 21 colleges and universities in New Jersey. The nonpartisan meeting focused on practical skills, like public speaking and finding mentors, necessary to get started in politics or civic activism at any level.

The women stayed in campus dormitories and engaged in late-night political discussions and small talk over ice-cream sundaes. One day, they went on a "scavenger hunt" around the campus to learn about women's political history. Ms. Deputy joined a six-woman team studying women's suffrage for that event, but because she is using a cane as she recovers from a leg injury, she drove her car from location to location to meet up with her teammates.

Looming over the entire event was a milestone in women's history, Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton's run for president. The meeting took place the same weekend she announced she was ending her race, and the Rutgers attendees had plenty to say about what her candidacy and its outcome signaled for the future of women in politics.

Senator Clinton "didn't break the whole ceiling, but she got really high compared to a lot of people, and that just means that we have to go further and further," said Shabnam Salih, a senior majoring in political science at the College of New Jersey.

On the other hand, "what she endured during her campaign makes me more skeptical of how accepting the public is of women candidates," said Ms. Salih, who was an intern in the New Jersey governor's office and a Washington lobbying firm and aspires to run for public office. Commentators, Ms. Salih said, "were critiquing the lines on her face, her cleavage, the color of her clothes."

Despite their disappointment, women at the meeting who had supported Senator Clinton's bid said that Sen. Barack Obama's success as the apparent Democratic nominee for president would help female candidates in the future.

"Before, we had only one image of a political leader": a white man, said Melissa Bazo, a senior at William Paterson University of New Jersey who is studying political science and women's studies. "This campaign opened the opportunity for black males and for women to say, I can do that," she said. Most of the participants, however, needed more persuasion. Only about a third raised their hands during a panel discussion when a city councilwoman asked them how many would consider running for office. (Roughly two-thirds, though, said they wanted to pursue civic activities to improve society.)

Participants cited as reservations the need to raise campaign funds, build a network of supporters, and speak confidently in public.

Those obstacles may be larger in perception than reality: At the Rutgers meeting, the students learned that when women run for office, they are elected at rates comparable to those of men. It's just that far fewer women decide to run.

Several events during the weekend were meant to offer the participants a shot of confidence and some tools to overcome the obstacles.

They practiced writing public-policy proposals. Ms. Deputy was on a team that pretended to be a town council developing local policies to encourage the construction of energy-efficient homes and schools.

But politics, as the attendees were told, is also all about personal relationships. They were tutored, for example, that politicians often make an impression with voters by offering firm, even crushing, handshakes. "You have to make eye contact," counseled Idida Rodriguez, a political consultant. They got to practice that skill, and handed out business cards that Rutgers had printed for them, at a reception that evening attended by some of the program's alumnae.

The night before traveling to the state Capitol in Trenton, the students watched a documentary about Shirley Chisholm, the New York congresswoman who in 1972 became the first African-American in a major party to run for president. She was also the first African-American woman elected to Congress. (Several of the attendees confessed that they had known nothing about her.)

Ms. Chisholm, who taught at Mount Holyoke College after leaving Congress, once wrote, "I ran for the

presidency, despite hopeless odds, to demonstrate the sheer will and refusal to accept the status quo. The next time a woman runs, or a black, a Jew, or anyone from a group that the country is 'not ready' to elect to its highest office, I believe that he or she will be taken seriously from the start."

Perhaps most important, the students heard war stories and pep talks from women who hold public office in New Jersey, like Karen Brown, the Passaic, N.J., county clerk.

Ms. Brown advised the women to be prepared to deal with constant criticism. "I thought I had thick skin until I ran for office," she said, "and I can tell you it is truly a test." Having a confidant and a mentor helped her weather storms, she said.

Ms. Deputy, the mother of five, said that Ms. Brown, who is African-American, offered a compelling role model for Ms. Deputy's 8-year-old adopted daughter, who is also African-American.

Ms. Brown is "intelligent, she's educated, she's beautiful, and she's elected in office, and that's what my daughter can grow up to be," said Ms. Deputy. "The role models need to be in all shades and nationalities." Perhaps additional, future role models were sitting around Ms. Deputy at the conference — the organizers had sought out a diverse group, and about half of the participants were not white.

In turn, Ms. Deputy's story inspired some other participants. "She's a natural leader," said Hillary D. Curry, who graduated from Seton Hall University this year and was a teammate of Ms. Deputy's on the scavenger hunt.

By only the second day of the five-day conference, Ms. Deputy said she had already warmed to the idea of running for office. In one way, she would be a typical female candidate: When women enter politics, more do so later in life than do men.

In part that's because of the child-rearing responsibilities many women take on. And so, because the Rutgers program is only 17 years old, many of its 600 graduates may still be too young to be ready to commit to running, said Sasha Patterson, coordinator of the conference program, run by Rutgers's Center for American Women and Politics.

Of 83 graduates who answered a recent survey, only seven had run for office. (Three were elected.) But one-third of the respondents were planning to run in the future. No similar, aggregate statistics exist for the leadership programs for women at other colleges, which, with Rutgers, now have roughly 1,500 graduates in all.

Rutgers also provides a separate, similar program to encourage professional women to run.

Ms. Deputy said she is, first of all, interested in improving her leadership skills, but she might try for a seat one day on her school board or county board of freeholders.

"It makes it seem like a more realistic goal, like I can do it, after being here," she said. "That's very liberating."

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