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Collaboration brings rich rewards

There are a lot of expectations riding on Sally Blount, the first woman to be appointed dean of one of the top-tier US business schools. She will take over as dean at the [Kellogg](#) school at Northwestern University this summer, arguably becoming the most influential female dean in the world.

Prof Blount's trailblazing appointment is part of a growing trend for women to pin the top job in business school. In North America there has been a rush of female appointments in the past few years – the Universities of [Miami](#) and [South Carolina](#) and [Loyola's Sellinger](#) school, to name three. The deans there join a list of extremely experienced women who have been running the show for years – Alison Davis-Blake at [Minnesota](#), Carol Stephenson at [Ivey](#), Linda Livingstone at Pepperdine, Judy Olian at [UCLA](#) and Carolyn Woo at [Notre Dame](#).

[Prof Woo](#), dean at Notre Dame's Mendoza school for the past 13 years, argues that business schools are behind the trend. Four of the eight Ivy League universities – Brown, Harvard, Pennsylvania and Princeton – already have women presidents. It is because of these presidential appointments that women have finally broken through the credibility barrier, says Prof Woo. [Sue Cox](#), dean at the [University of Lancaster](#) in the UK for the past nine years, believes that there are more women in strong faculty roles, making the appointment of women deans inevitable. "When I came to Lancaster I was the only female professor in the school. Now there more women coming in at a professional level."

Though one of the first women deans in Europe, Prof Cox has seen the number grow dramatically over the past decade. As well as [Strathclyde](#) and [Bradford](#) in the UK, women hold the top job at Sabancı in Turkey, IEDC Bled in Slovenia, [Business School Lausanne in Switzerland](#), Universidade Católica in Portugal and the French school [Skema](#), created through the merger of two business schools, Ceram and ESC Lille.

A change in strategy in many business schools has also helped promote women, says Alice Guilhon, dean of [Skema](#). "Disciplines such as finance were seen as leverage for the brand," she says, and these disciplines are dominated by men. These days, human resources, communications and softer skills are much more in demand. But although she says the appointment of women deans is "à la mode", she is convinced that a more collaborative style is also important. "We [women] listen more. We have discussions and we explain to everybody."

It is an approach that suits the flatter hierarchical structure of academia, says [Prof Olian](#) at the Anderson school at UCLA. "I think successful deans, men and women, have to be comfortable sharing their leadership decisions." This collaborative approach is often the result of experience, believes [Jenny George](#), appointed dean of [Melbourne Business School](#) in October 2009. Because women are in a minority in PhD classes and on the business school faculty, they develop a collaborative or persuasive style, she says. "This approach is particularly successful in an academic institution."

For [Hildy Teegen](#), dean at the Darla Moore school at the University of South Carolina, the globalisation of business education will mean these collaborative skills are even more important. "In general I think that women tend to be more "big picture" people who are more comfortable in the area of relationship building/nurturing and use those skills well to lead their schools," she says. [Christina Ahmadjian](#), recently appointed as dean of the business school at [Hitotsubashi](#) in Japan, has a further theory. "Another topic of cocktail party speculation is that women seem to be more inclined to take 'good citizen' roles in academic associations such as Academy of Management, academic journals, university committees. . . This may give women greater experience in, and a greater inclination towards, administrative and leadership positions."

But there is still a long way to go says Prof Olian. "In this day and age, relative to the scale of business schools, it is still a pretty small bunch [of women deans]. There is still a pipeline issue."

A glance at the data collected for the [Financial Times MBA rankings](#) bears out her concerns. At the top 10 global business schools only about 20 per cent of faculty are women, although this has grown during the past decade from just 13 per cent. "It's incumbent on us all, men and women, to get the best people into professorial roles," adds Prof Olian. As for Prof Blount, already an experienced dean of the undergraduate college at [NYU](#), she believes the most important thing that she can do at Kellogg is "to listen".