

At the Top of

Donna Shalala is one of the few women to excel in the two very different arenas of academia and government. She has relied on humor, flexibility, and a sense of teamwork to manage complex organizations rich with their own cultures.

by Sharon Shinn



CARL JUSTE/MIAMI HERALD

Her Game

In 1994, the University of Wisconsin at Madison received its first invitation to the Rose Bowl. Last January, the University of Miami football Hurricanes blew through the Nebraska Cornhuskers to win its own Rose Bowl competition. At first, it seems as if the two events are unrelated—until you realize that both schools achieved this sports pinnacle after being associated with Donna Shalala. She was chancellor of UW Madison from 1987 to 1993, and in June 2001, she assumed the presidency of the University of Miami in Coral Gables, Florida.

The football successes are important because, as Shalala points out, the two areas perceived as weaknesses for women running major universities are overseeing college athletics and raising money. It hasn't been true for Shalala. While she was at the University of Wisconsin, various sports facilities were opened or renovated, football attendance increased substantially, and the hockey team won the NCAA championship. She was also successful in raising more than \$400 million for the school's endowment and spearheading a \$225 million state-private partnership program to upgrade the university's research facilities.

While Shalala is probably best known for her stint as Secretary of Health and Human Services under Bill Clinton, she has held other key roles in education and government as well. Her success in diverse environments has contributed to a winning formula in higher education.

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

2001-	President, University of Miami
1993-2001	Secretary, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
1987-1993	Chancellor, University of Wisconsin-Madison
1980-1987	President, Hunter College of the City University of New York
1977-1980	Assistant Secretary for Policy Development and Research, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development
1975-1977	Director and Treasurer of the Municipal Assistance Corporation of the City of New York
1972-1979	Associate Professor and Chair, Program in Politics and Education, Teachers College, Columbia University
Education:	A.B. degree in history from Western College for Women, Ph.D. from The Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University

BusinessWeek once named you one of the five best managers in higher education. What does it take to be a good manager in this field?

A great deal of experience. Running a university is very different from managing a Cabinet department, because a university is so nonhierarchical. There are so many centers of power. A university position requires more consensus-building, more interpersonal skills, and more attention to process. In addition, you can't have a controlling personality, or you'll get an ulcer. I once described myself as a tugboat captain, a world-class nudger.

In your career, you've alternated between academic and government environments. What skills have you been able to transfer between the two worlds?

First of all, I think that academia made it easier for me to be an administrator in government, particularly in an umbrella cabinet department. Each agency has its own culture and own traditions, very much like higher education. There are large egos to manage. To get things done, you have to build a consensus and co-opt the bureaucracy. You have to have a good sense of humor. And you need a skill set that allows you to juggle a lot of things at once—the politics, the substance, the interpersonal matters, the budget, and the policy questions.

I've tried all sorts of approaches to building a consensus and promoting teamwork. For instance, in the government, I got all the agency heads to sit in on each other's budget hearings. I made *them* build the budget for the department, using the same budget number that the Office of Management and Budget had given me. Over time, they began to listen carefully. They didn't necessarily favor huge increases in their own programs after they heard about other programs. The process also fostered collaboration because they heard about overlapping objectives and knew there were projects they could do together.

As a university president, you have to possess very strong management skills. If you were teaching a management class right now, what would you consider the most important skill to impart?

How to put decision-making systems in place so that people don't feel left out but decisions get made. The second skill would be how to delegate.

“Learn how to work with the faculty, that’s the most important thing. University presidents get killed if they don’t listen carefully enough. Faculty members can either make or break a presidency. At the same time, they are the key to the reputation of the institution.”

All over the world, enrollment in business schools is going up. Why do you think the study of business has become so popular?

I think people perceive a business degree as being the most valuable terminal degree they can get. For instance, a law degree isn’t as useful as a business degree because it doesn’t offer skill training. A business degree actually gives you skills.

Business schools worldwide have implemented global alliances and curricula that focus on global issues. What are some of the key skills that business educators need to teach so that their students are effective in global settings?

Managing in multicultural settings and managing people from different cultures. We’ve also got to recruit more sophisticated students. I remember a CEO telling me he took his brightest young manager to Europe, and all the manager wanted to do was find a hamburger. Business students will have to learn to speak other languages and have respect for other cultures.

Do you have plans to increase the international emphasis at the University of Miami’s business school?

We’re going to be even more international than we’ve been in the past. We’re the only university in the United States that offers an MBA in Spanish. We also probably have more bilingual finance students, in a number of languages, than anyone else in the world. Knowing our students are going to be facing global challenges, we’re also recruiting a student body that’s highly diverse.

In management education, we’re facing growing competition from for-profit schools. Is that a concern in other areas of education?

Yes, most of higher education is facing competition from proprietary institutions that do not make the same kind of investments in the physical buildings or tenured professors that we do. Because we have not been as responsive as those schools have been in terms of hours and access and cost, many people have floated over to those institutions—only to get, in many cases, very weak degrees that really don’t give them the qualifications they need. It’s a challenge for us. It’s lit a fire under higher education. I think it’s important that we teach across the day and recognize that adult students have different kinds of needs. We shouldn’t lower the quality of what we teach, but make it more accessible.

One current trend in business education is toward integrated curricula. How important do you think it is for schools to offer cross-disciplinary degrees?

Knowledge now is very interdisciplinary. Increasingly, you cannot just study through the lens of a single discipline. What is important is that, within the discipline itself, there is some kind of theoretical framework—that you get the intensity that you need to learn a new subject and that you acquire new skills. I’ve never thought the subject matter was as important as the way in which the course was conceptualized and the intensity with which it was presented. For example, we once conducted a freshmen seminar where one of the world’s great scientists taught a whole course on the potato. And it was a great course.

A growing number of business schools are adding online programs to their curricula. Do think traditional universities will embrace online education?

I think they will to some degree, but mostly to reinforce what goes on in the classroom. I’m very wary about online education. It can reinforce, and it can enrich. But at the end of the day, education is all about the interaction among students and a gifted faculty member. And that is why we have never fundamentally changed the education system since the Greeks put a teacher in front of a group of students and had them talk to each other.

While at the University of Wisconsin, you were instrumental in expanding the school’s research facilities. Universities are sometimes under attack for focusing too much on research and not enough on teaching. How would you answer such criticism?

In fact, when I went to the University of Wisconsin, we did a survey, and teaching was what the people of Wisconsin were concerned about. They sent their best and brightest kids to Wisconsin, which paid no attention to undergraduates. So we embarked on a major effort to reform undergraduate education. We focused on teaching and on improving the way undergraduates were treated. At the same time, we expanded research and built better research facilities. But we never abandoned undergraduate education. We made it better.

Are there other issues facing higher education today?

How to integrate technology into the classroom and how to find talented people who can use that technology while still having human interaction with students are critical issues. The great challenge is to get the student away from the computer and into a conversation.



How is such technology being implemented at your School of Business Administration?

Every classroom at the University of Miami is outfitted with very sophisticated technology. In addition, we're entirely wireless. Students can sit anywhere on campus without having to plug in their computers—they can even sit outside. Increasingly, business is an IT culture, so students are learning modern technology while they're learning business.

What other challenges will your business school face in the next three to five years?

I think increasingly our challenges will be related to our ability to operate globally in a world we don't necessarily know. One day you might be in India, and the next day you might be in Iran. Students can't just take business courses. They need to understand culture, philosophy, and religion.

Let's turn to the subject of women in education. How do you think the picture for women has changed in the past 20 years?

Number one, women dominate higher education. Most of the people *in* higher education are women. Two, women have moved into administrative positions in higher education, including leadership positions, particularly in public higher education. Women have had wonderful opportunities to manage large institutions. But the stumbling blocks for women in higher education have always been fund-raising and athletics. Before Nan Keohane became president of Duke University, she and I discussed the best way to talk about athletics. I just said, "Show your enthusiasm." I think there's no question now that women can raise money, and that they can talk to basketball and football coaches.

As the first woman to head a Big Ten University, did you face any specific challenges or obstacles?

I certainly did. In fact, until I got to this position, no one thought I was qualified for any position I had. Right through my career, I overreached, until I got here. I've never been in an administrative position in which the consensus was that I actually had the qualifications.

Because you were a female or because you hadn't had the experience?

Both.

How did you convince them?

You just do a good job. You surprise them. There's something to be said for low expectations.

In management education, only about 33 percent of the student population is female. How can we interest women in business schools?

Make them gender-friendly. Women aren't underrepresented in law or medicine. Business is just lagging behind. But those numbers were five percent when I was in school, so there's been a huge increase. Do I think it will get to 50 percent? You bet. Over the next decade? Yes. No question in my mind.

How can schools improve the numbers of women occupying top administrative positions?

I think that number will keep growing, particularly now that we have women in the Ivy Leagues, leading some of the best universities in the country.

Do you consider yourself a role model for other women?

I've helped coach a number of college presidents over the years. I had a number of senior women at the department of Health and Human Services. And here at Miami I have three women vice-presidents. One I employed, two were already here. It's a very diverse set of vice presidents.

What advice would you give to other women first assuming a presidency of a major university?

Learn how to work with the faculty, that's the most important thing. University presidents get killed if they don't listen carefully enough. Faculty members can either make or break a presidency. At the same time, they are the key to the reputation of the institution. Therefore, shared governance becomes extremely important to understand. It's a different world, a different culture. It's a guild.

What are some of your goals for the University of Miami while you're there?

To make it better! To move it to the top ranks of American research universities, to improve the quality of undergraduate education, to help our medical school move to the top 20, and to help the school be a better citizen of our community. That's good enough. 