

# Leading the Way to Parity

Preparation, Persistence, and  
the Role of Women Presidents

Elizabeth Howard  
Jonathan Gagliardi

## AMERICAN COLLEGE PRESIDENT STUDY

In 2017, in partnership with the TIAA Institute, the Center for Policy Research and Strategy (CPRS) of the American Council on Education (ACE) released the eighth edition of the most comprehensive survey on the college presidency, the American College President Study (ACPS). The survey and its findings have provided a comprehensive view of the college presidency. ACPS helps ACE, and all stakeholders in higher education, better reflect on ways to diversify the presidency.

In September 2017, CPRS convened a group of 10 current and former presidents and association leaders for a roundtable to reflect on what ACPS data tell us about women presidents, and to discuss their own experiences. The discussion provided qualitative points to help us understand why we may see some differences in the responses of men and women presidents. Observations from the roundtable, shared anonymously, are represented throughout this brief. We thank Gailda Pitre Davis, director, ACE Leadership, for serving as the roundtable moderator.



ACE and the American Council on Education are registered marks of the American Council on Education and may not be used or reproduced without the express written permission of ACE.

American Council on Education  
One Dupont Circle NW  
Washington, DC 20036

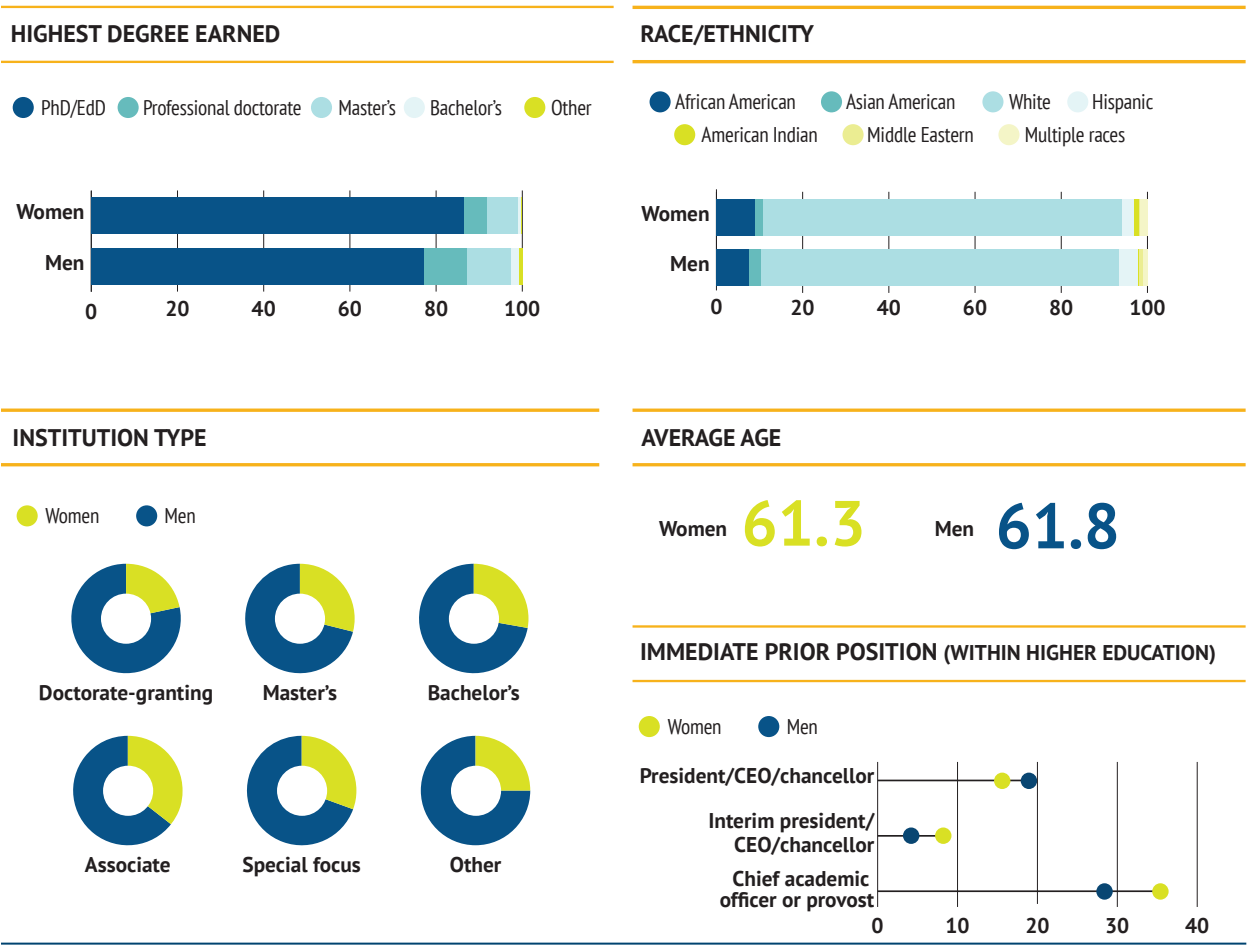
© 2018. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

# INTRODUCTION

Data from the *American College President Study 2017* (ACPS) show a growing population of women presidents who bring years of experience and preparation to the position. Many are uniquely qualified as representatives of their institutions, having served before their presidency in provostships and other academic administration positions on their campuses. They bring training from formal pathways, such as PhD and EdD programs, as well as professional development from leadership programs designed for higher education administrators.

The current picture of women presidents shows the highest representation of women presidents in associate colleges and the lowest representation of women presidents in doctorate-granting institutions. The average age of presidents does not differ substantially between women and men, nor does the representation of women minority presidents compared to men minority presidents.

**FIGURE 1. Characteristics of Presidents, by Gender**



In the 2016 ACPS survey, women made up 30.1 percent of the population of presidents, up about four percentage points since the 2011 survey (26.4 percent). The percentage of women presidents completing the survey has roughly tripled since the initial survey in 1986—9.5 percent to 30.1 percent, and, if the proportion of women presidents continues increasing at the same annual growth rate (3.9 percent), gender parity in the presidency will occur by 2030.

Both higher education and the presidency are changing—over 50 percent of presidents intend to leave their current presidency over the next five years, which suggests that the presidency will necessarily evolve. When these presidents leave their current positions, there will be hundreds of opportunities for campuses to embrace diverse choices to lead institutions into the future. Over 80 percent of all ACPS survey respondents indicated that it is very important or important to encourage searches to yield a significant number of qualified women candidates. With this level of commitment to increasing gender diversity on campus, gender parity should be attainable. This brief outlines the unique ways women are equipped to lead and to persist in the presidency, in spite of additional expectations and demands on their time and energy in the role of president.

We hope that this brief, the data from ACPS, and observations from the September 2017 roundtable with women presidents will contribute to our understanding of what helps women reach for—and succeed in—the office of the college presidency.

## WHERE WOMEN SERVE

Women are more likely to serve as presidents at institution types where they are responsible for overseeing educational outcomes for often marginalized populations of students, including post-traditional learners and students of color. They represented 35.8 percent of the presidents of associate institutions, the highest percentage of women presidents among types of institutions represented by survey respondents. Associate institutions serve a large percentage of post-traditional students, who are more likely to be women than the typical student population. The success of women presidents in that role may have implications for the success of female students more broadly, feeding back into a pipeline that holds the presidents of the future.

About a quarter of women presidents were currently serving at a minority serving institution (MSI)—26.1 percent compared to 23.2 percent of men, and about one-fifth served in their immediate prior position at an MSI or women’s college—20.2 percent compared to 11.3 percent of men. If women presidents are represented in larger numbers at associate and minority serving institutions, they are poised to be drivers of success for students for whom higher education can make a vital difference in their career possibilities.

## WOMEN PRESIDENTS’ PREPARATION FOR THE ROLE

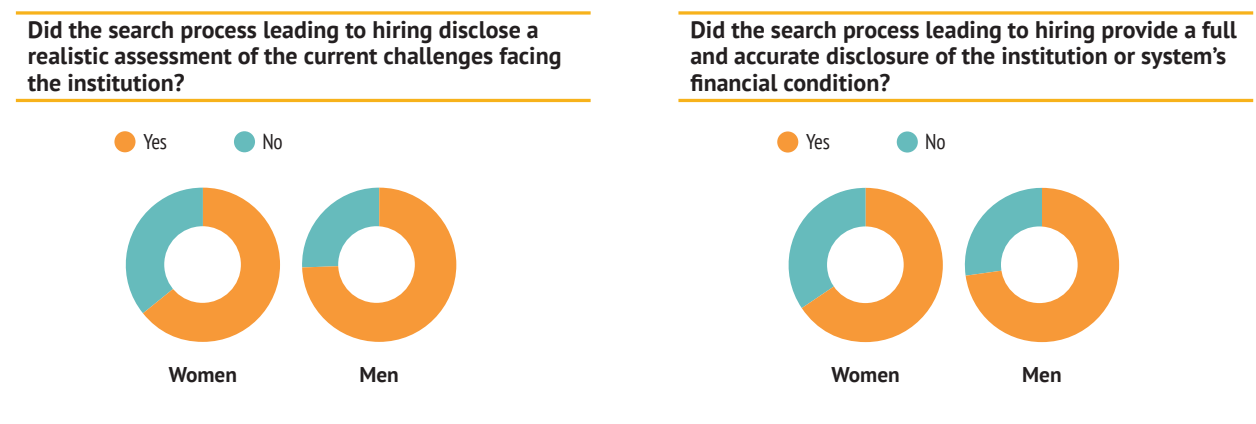
Though the ranks of women in the presidency have increased over the past 30 years, there are still a number of areas of disparity, reflecting the need to develop or bolster supports and interventions to continue to reach parity. Data show that women may be in some ways more prepared than men to advance to the presidency, with greater percentages having served as an interim president, earned advanced degrees, and participated in formal leadership development opportunities—yet it is reasonable to infer from their numbers in the presidency that they are less likely than men to be placed in the position.

Because a larger percentage of women than men entered their first presidency through an interim position (24.5 percent for women versus 18.6 percent for men), part of the analysis rests in better understanding how women function in interim roles. While not all presidents entering an interim position are leading an institution through a crisis, roundtable participants considered whether women are disproportionately tasked with addressing crises. They also acknowledged the challenges of serving as interim president: “When you have an interim [presidency], it is hard to get the joys of the job because they just want you to manage.”

While some women are brought in as interim presidents, others are chosen when colleges are already experiencing financial difficulties, or are responsible for advocating for institutions in the face of threats of reduced funding or other support from boards or state legislatures. One roundtable participant noted that interim presidents “are usually coming into a disruptive situation.”

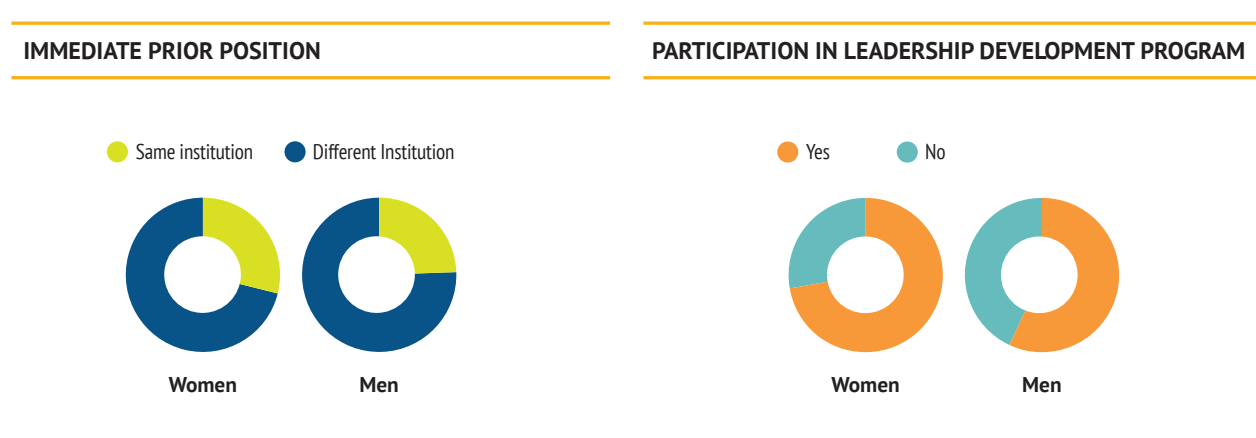
Women were less likely than men to indicate that the search process leading to their hiring had disclosed a realistic assessment of the current challenges facing their institution. In addition, women were also less likely to report that the search process provided a full and accurate disclosure of the institution or system’s financial condition (see Figure 2). Roundtable participants observed that ideally 100 percent of presidents would report that this information had been fully disclosed during the search process.

**FIGURE 2. Presidents’ Experience of the Presidential Search Process, by Gender**



A possible area for additional investment by institutions is in internal pipelines, which the data suggest are helping to position women for the presidency. Women were more likely than men to have held their immediate prior position at the same institution or system where they currently served. They were also more likely than men to have participated in a leadership development program (see Figure 3). Taken together, these two data points suggest women may be uniquely qualified to combine formal preparation and familiarity with their institution. This might be especially helpful in leading institutions through times of crisis.

**FIGURE 3. Presidents’ Immediate Prior Position and Leadership Development Program Participation, by Gender**



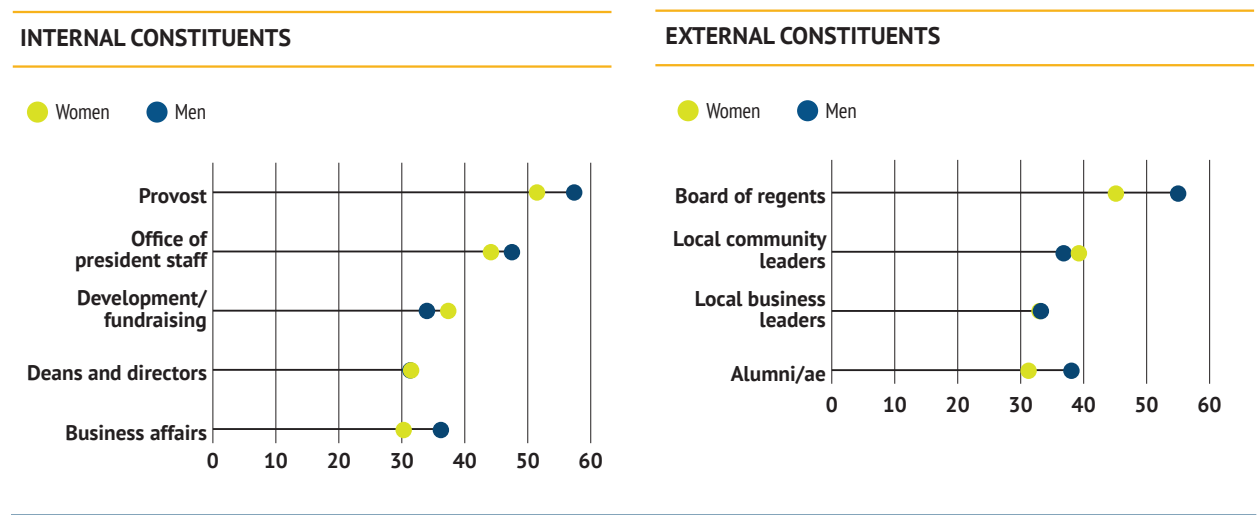
Roundtable participants tied the question of whether women are tasked with leading institutions at a crisis point to an emphasis on the importance of longevity in the position of president. Just being established in the position is not sufficient—the ability to effect meaningful change resides in having enough time to see changes through and in ensuring that the president and stakeholders have a common understanding of the metrics of success. Presidents need to know that they will have the support of their board and other stakeholders, particularly as difficult choices are made or unpopular changes are implemented. Given women’s experiences leading in an interim capacity, their commitment to their current institutions, and their formal leadership preparation, they may be uniquely positioned to be drivers of the type of long-term change and institutional stability needed at this time in higher education.

In addition to thinking critically about the pipeline that leads to the presidency, analysis suggested that a closer look at the circumstances under which women become college presidents would enrich our understanding of the challenges of achieving parity. Roundtable attendees suggested that reaching a 50 percent distribution is not sufficient in and of itself. Meaningful parity will only be achieved when it is sustained and sustainable—when women not only reach the presidency, but are established in the position in a way that sets them up to succeed and endure.

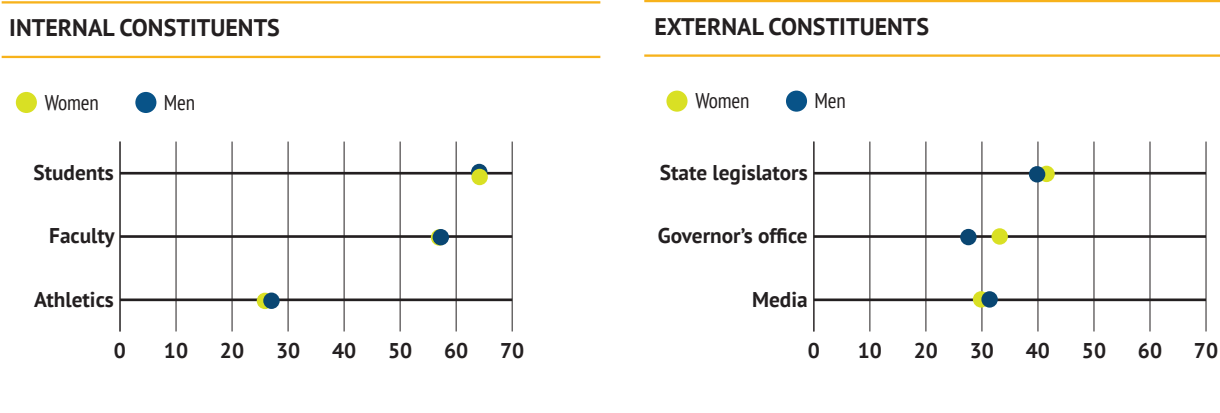
## MISSION AND STAKEHOLDERS

Roundtable participants emphasized the value of mission-driven work in higher education. It may be more valuable to women presidents to tally their accomplishments in terms of academic achievements rather than new building projects or athletic team achievements during their tenure: “Presidents who are mission-driven are able to stay through rocky times, but [if they are] career-driven, [they] might be out at the first sign of conflict. It might cut against the kind of leadership troubled places need.” The concept of a mission-driven presidency is tied to accepting the possibility of failure in the intermediate steps leading to institutional change in education: “The fact that there is noise can probably mean you’re making change that is durable.” What was clear from the discussion is the value of clear communication and buy-in for presidents to share this embrace of institutional mission, and its resultant goals, with stakeholders such as their leadership team and their board.

**FIGURE 4.** Presidents’ Top Three Constituents That Provide the Most Support to Advance the Institutional Mission



**FIGURE 5.** Presidents' Top Three Constituents That Understand Institution Challenges the Least



Women presidents and men presidents noted the same internal and external constituents as among the three most supportive groups (see Figure 4). While both women and men indicated that the board of regents is among their most supportive external constituent groups, men were more likely to do so (55.0 percent versus 45.1 percent). Women and men presidents also indicated the same internal and external constituents as among those that understood their institution's challenges the least (see Figure 5). Women were more likely than men to indicate that state legislators (41.4 percent versus 39.9 percent), the governor's office (33.1 percent versus 27.6 percent), and other state agencies (18.1 percent versus 14.0 percent) were among the top three least understanding external groups.

The need for greater communication of the goals of the presidency was a striking recurring theme. Even among internal and external stakeholder groups identified in ACPS as mission-supportive, additional work could be done to better frame the work of the president and how that work corresponds to the value offered by both their institution and higher education as an enterprise more broadly. Successful negotiation of these stakeholder relationships, especially those that support institutional mission, should serve to better position colleges as their leaders look to the future: "When I hand off the institution, it will be a vital institution, a vibrant institution with great possibility in terms of student success and mission. It has to be in terms of mission."

## THE ADDITIONAL JOB OF A WOMAN PRESIDENT

ACPS data and roundtable feedback present a striking view of the intangible extra job expected of women presidents, whether in demands for emotional support from campus constituents or in conflict with external boards. Men and women frequently identified similar attitudes regarding internal and external stakeholders, but with notable difference in percentages regarding some relationships and the feeling that they were supportive to the institutional mission.

Roundtable participants offered personal and anecdotal insights into the dynamics of presidents' relationships with internal stakeholders and the ways that a gendered perception of the president's role might influence those relationships. Roundtable participants also shared their impression that they were sometimes viewed as holding a practical, front-line role in addition to their role as president, with colleagues expecting them to be conversant in the minutiae of the institution. One roundtable participant noted, "It's hard to think they would stop and ask a male president [what the fax number is for the office]. Some

people see a woman and think you're in a service role. They see women as having infinite wisdom about stuff to keep the day going.”

In addition, several roundtable participants shared the impression that they had been conscripted into a sort of substitute “mother” role, expected to provide emotional support for internal stakeholders in a manner they believed would not be expected of male peers. Some participants emphasized that this emotional support role is not one they naturally assume, with one roundtable participant noting, “I have a young chief of staff, for example, and she’s productive, but she expects me to know her whole personal life. . . . I never developed that skill set.”

When observers discuss women leaders, there is a tendency to focus on their family life and family status, whether or not this is in the foreground of the women leaders’ identities. The roundtable discussion brought forward a more nuanced view, highlighting that the population of women presidents is multifaceted. At the time of the study, 74.7 percent of women presidents reported being married and 73.7 percent reported having children. As one might expect, women were nearly twice as likely as men to have altered their career progression to care for a dependent, partner, or parent (31.6 percent versus 16.4 percent). Women who indicated that they had altered their career progression for caregiving were most likely to have postponed a job search (15.0 percent), reduced their schedule/worked part time (8.1 percent), left a position (3.9 percent), or some other path alteration (4.4 percent). At the same time, over 50 percent of women presidents’ spouses had altered *their* careers in order to support the careers of the women presidents. The data show there is no one type of path women presidents follow to reach the presidency.

## MOVING FORWARD TO PARITY

Presidents describe their job as always challenging, but ultimately deeply rewarding. Opportunities abound to support women in both advancing to the presidency and in succeeding and persisting in the role. Women who have reached the role of president emphasize the value of mentorship in helping them see the position as a goal and continue to make progress along their path. The seemingly simple act of imagining themselves in the position can be a mental hurdle for prospective presidents, and the support of peers and superiors can help them to lift over it.

Roundtable participants emphasized the value of mentorship, not only in persisting and succeeding in the position of president, but in some cases, in helping them see themselves take the step into the position. Several of these current and former presidents shared particular instances when men reached out and offered support in making a case locally or nationally for the importance of building the corps of women in the presidency.

The ACPS data suggest ways that the presidential search process can provide more candid and comprehensive information about an institution to prospective leaders. As one roundtable participant noted, some information discrepancies are unavoidable—for instance, projected enrollment numbers upon initial hiring in February can be very different from those a president sees upon assuming the office in July. However, the collected data suggest that presidents can only benefit from institutional candor in the search process and inaugural months—they should be as equipped as possible to succeed, and placed in the best possible position to use their talents to help an institution be even better.

Close to 90 percent of presidents indicated that it is very important or important for the president to ensure periodic review of institutional or system policies and procedure to eliminate gender bias. Over 80 percent indicated that it is very important or important for the president to encourage that searches yield



a significant number of qualified women candidates. The task, then, in moving toward gender parity does not need to come through winning buy-in. Presidents, and the field of higher education more broadly, do not need to be convinced to value the contributions of women in college and university leadership. They just need more ways to translate that desire into action. Based on data from the *American College President Study 2017* and insight from our roundtable, below are some recommendations to support such continued progress.

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO INCREASE THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN AMONG COLLEGE PRESIDENTS

### CURRENT AND FORMER PRESIDENTS

- Engage in formal mentoring to identify and groom future women presidents.
- Support and advance women to become chief academic officers, a key stepping stone to the presidency for women.

### PRESIDENTIAL SEARCH PARTICIPANTS

- Ensure equal disclosure of the institution's challenges and financial condition.
- Ensure a strong pool of women candidates.

### LEADERS AT ALL LEVELS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

- Invest in women in earlier stages of their leadership development.
- Provide formal leadership training opportunities.

---

Over 50 percent of current presidents plan to leave their current presidency over the next five years, and women are well prepared to lead a changing field. When ACE surveys college presidents in 2021, we hope to see a greater representation of women presidents—and we hope they anticipate persisting in the role.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ACPS data show that presidents already want to expand opportunity for women in the higher education pipeline.
- Women lead institutions that enroll historically underserved student populations, and can serve a vital function in propelling them to success.
- A better understanding of the differences women presidents report in challenges helping their institutions will help articulate ways to support persistence and patch leaks in the pipeline.
- Gender parity in the presidency will only be meaningful when it is sustained and sustainable.

## REFERENCES

Gagliardi, Jonathan S., Lorelle L. Espinosa, Jonathan M. Turk, and Morgan Taylor. 2017. *American College President Study 2017*. Washington, DC: American Council on Education.

Johnson, Heather L. 2017. *Pipelines, Pathways, and Institutional Leadership: An Update on the Status of Women in Higher Education*. Washington, DC: American Council on Education.



[www.acenet.edu](http://www.acenet.edu)



[www.tiaainstitute.org](http://www.tiaainstitute.org)