

Voices from the Field 2023: Experiences of Women Presidents in Higher Education



American College President Study

The American Council on Education (ACE) produced the American College President Study (ACPS)—the most comprehensive, in-depth, and frequently cited source of information about the college president—and its related material, with generous support from the TIAA Institute. *The American College President: 2023 Edition* is the ninth iteration of ACPS, and the data it presents provide a comprehensive view of the demographics, challenges, and experiences of college presidents, helping all stakeholders gain a holistic understanding of higher education leadership and better reflect on ways to diversify the presidency. More information about ACPS can be found at acenet.edu/acps.

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Voices from the Field 2023: Experiences of Women Presidents in Higher Education

Women's representation in the college presidency continues to slowly rise. Since the previous iteration of the [American College President Study \(ACPS\)](#), released in 2017, the number of women in the role grew by 2.7 percent. Yet *The American College President: 2023 Edition* revealed that women presidents remained outnumbered by men two-to-one—a stark gender disparity that widens when also considering race and ethnicity (Melidona et al. 2023). Specifically, less than one in three current women presidents or chancellors are women of color (Eddy 2023). Additionally, women presidents are most concentrated in associate degree-granting institutions (43.6 percent), baccalaureate institutions (40 percent), or special focus institutions (39 percent). Only 29 percent of doctoral institutions—institutions often regarded as the most selective, prestigious, and competitive in the U.S.—are led by women presidents (Melidona et al. 2023).

In addition to their numerical underrepresentation, women's career pathways and experiences within the presidency look different than those of men presidents (Rodriguez-Farrar and Jack 2023; Eddy 2023). For example, the 2023 edition conveyed that women presidents were more likely than their men colleagues to enter the presidency through the faculty or academic pipeline and be promoted into the position rather than hired as an external candidate (Melidona et al. 2023). To provide context to ACPS data and learn more about women presidents' varied professional journeys to and experiences in the role, ACE conducted semi-structured interviews with five women who were either current or former college or university presidents.

The featured presidents have over 130 years of combined experience in higher education. They came to the college presidency with a variety of academic backgrounds, such as biochemistry, English literature and composition, or technical education, and through a variety of pathways, including faculty, industry, administration, and the public sector. Three are women of color—one of whom is both the first woman and first person of color to serve as president of her institution—and two are White women. They also led various types of institutions, including public four-year institutions, private for-profit institutions, community colleges (i.e., public two-year institutions), and special focus institutions.

During the interviews—conducted by ACE in the summer of 2023—they were asked about their career paths, pivotal mentors, and how their knowledge of higher education and leadership developed over the course of their careers. Transcripts of these conversations are provided in this compendium to give voice to the experiences of women who served in the college presidency.¹

1 Transcripts were edited for length and clarity.

Profiles of Participating Women Presidents



Tuajuanda C. Jordan

President, St. Mary's College of Maryland

Tuajuanda C. Jordan has served as the seventh president of St. Mary's College of Maryland (SMCM) since 2014. During her tenure, she was named as one of Maryland's Top 100 Women by *The Daily Record*, a 2018 American Association for the Advancement of Science Fellow in Science Education, and one of the Top 25 Women in Higher Education by *Diverse: Issues in Higher Education*, among many additional distinguished accolades. Before leading SMCM, Jordan served as dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and professor of chemistry at Lewis & Clark. Jordan was also an associate dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and a tenured faculty member at Xavier University of Louisiana—a religiously affiliated historically Black university.



Susan C. Lane

President Emerita, The New England Institute of Art

Susan C. Lane has over 30 years of experience in higher education across college and university campuses as well as at local, state, and national educational organizations. Currently, Lane is a senior consultant at Stevens Strategy, an ambassador at the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, and an adviser for the ACE Learner Success Laboratory. Lane's previous notable positions include serving as the senior director for policy and research at the New England Board of Higher Education, president of The New England Institute of Art, and associate vice chancellor for professional and continuing education at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, among other roles.



Elaine Maimon

Former President, Governors State University

Elaine Maimon is a well-known leader in higher education and a founder of Writing Across the Curriculum, a nationwide movement. As president of Governors State University for 13 years, she led the institution's transformation from an upper-level institution exclusively serving junior, senior, and graduate-level students to a comprehensive, four-year university. Maimon's previous leadership positions include associate dean of the college at Brown University; dean of experimental programs and tenured professor of English at Queens College of The City University of New York; vice president of Arizona State University (ASU) (with chief executive officer responsibilities for ASU West); and chancellor of the University of Alaska Anchorage. Her book on leadership is titled *Leading Academic Change: Vision, Strategy, Transformation*. Currently, Maimon is an adviser for the ACE Learner Success Laboratory as well as a regular contributor to *The Philadelphia Citizen*.



Annette Parker

President, South Central College

Annette Parker is a national leader in higher education and the first woman and person of color to be named president of South Central College, part of the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system. In her 10 years as president, South Central College developed transfer pathways with four-year universities; received a Minnesota State Agricultural Center of Excellence designation; secured more than \$35 million in grant funding; and in 2022 became an Achieving the Dream Leader College. Parker's past leadership roles include leading a National Center of Excellence in Advanced Automotive Manufacturing for the Kentucky Community & Technical College System. Parker began her higher education career at Lansing Community College in Lansing, Michigan, of which she is also a proud alumna. She also serves on local, regional, and national boards to advance the college's mission and support regional economic competitiveness and served on the Obama administration's Advanced Manufacturing Partnership Steering Committee.



Yves Salomon-Fernández

President, Urban College of Boston

Yves Salomon-Fernández was named president of Urban College of Boston, an affiliate of Southern New Hampshire University, in August 2023. Salomon-Fernández is an experienced president and leader in higher education. She previously served as president of Greenfield Community College and Cumberland County College and as interim president of Massachusetts Bay Community College. Most recently, Salomon-Fernández supported Southern New Hampshire University as its senior vice president for operations planning. Among many leadership and service roles, Salomon-Fernández was previously chair of the ACE Learner Success Lab's advisory council and vice chair of the ACE Women's Network Executive Council.

Women Presidents' Perspectives on Diversifying the College Presidency: A Thematic Analysis

The American College President: 2023 Edition highlighted the persistent gender disparity in higher education leadership and the significant work the sector must do to diversify the college presidency. Indeed, based on American College President Study (ACPS) data, ACE estimates that higher education would need to retain 500 women presidents and hire two times more women than men into the presidential role in the next five years to achieve gender parity. To achieve gender equity and be reflective of the current student population, 1,800 women presidents would need to be hired in the next four years.

The five women presidents interviewed discussed a range of experiences, but two themes emerged to diversify the presidency: revised hiring processes at the board level and seeking mentors and other forms of support.

Institutional Boards and the Hiring Process

These former and current women presidents all discussed how governing boards play a pivotal yet often unexamined role in the current demographic composition of U.S. college and university presidents. Boards affect who is envisioned as the typical or ideal president for an institution, who is hired, and—in many cases—how they are received on campus. Participants noted that boards' expectations of the recruitment and hiring process can limit diversity within the college presidency; for example, this may occur if boards focus on candidates with previous presidential experience or those who present traditional markers of success (e.g., degrees from prestigious institutions). These “ideal” candidates who are selected typically tend to be older White men and often reflect the gender makeup of the board itself instead of candidates with different professional backgrounds and lived experiences.

In addition, participants noted that academia has been and continues to be unfriendly toward women, particularly women of color. Yves Salomon-Fernández noted that higher education institutions and the professoriate—which the 2023 edition of ACPS stated was the most common pathway to the presidency for women (Melidona et al. 2023)—tend to undervalue work that women and faculty of color are often drawn to and regularly engage in, such as community engaged scholarship. This bias can have negative implications on their careers and ability to progress in academia and, ultimately, to a college or university presidency.

Multiple participants explained that boards should prioritize candidates who have the skills to navigate the new complexity of the role and of the changing higher education landscape rather than candidates who fit a more traditional profile or definition of credibility, such as candidates who were tenured faculty and have experience at selective institutions. For example, Elaine Maimon expects boards to recognize and value the skills and knowledge acquired outside of more traditional pathways to the presidency.

Participants emphasized that higher education institutions need leaders who are collaborative, self-aware, creative, strategic problem-solvers and effective communicators and who can compose teams that build on their strengths and fill in gaps in their own knowledge or expertise—regardless of where those skills were developed. In other words, higher education will not find the presidents its institutions need in the same places or in the same ways it always has.

Instead, boards and search firms must consider both candidates from nontraditional presidential pathways within academia (e.g., student affairs) and candidates from outside higher education. Participants also noted that institutions need to engage high-quality search firms who present diverse candidate pools and have a track record of success placing women into the presidential role.

Salomon-Fernández went on to detail higher education's gendered and racialized history and its lasting impact on women and people of color's presence in academia. She explained women and people of color are often in their “first-generation presidencies” (i.e., women and people of color are often noted as the first to fill this role at many institutions) and must learn to navigate the role and its expectations for the first time.

Annette Parker, a presiding community college president, highlighted that the community college sector does not entirely mirror this limited representational diversity—the ACPS data indicated that women comprise 43.6 percent of presidents at associate degree-granting institutions or community colleges (Melidona et al. 2023). Parker argued that four-year institutions should seek to emulate community colleges' approach to diversity and inclusion in leadership as well as their agility and responsiveness to changing student demographics and needs.

Although some participants expressed fear or hesitation that diversification efforts would continue to be unsuccessful until boards completely turn over, all participants suggested ways to better work with, educate, and train board members in hopes of improving the presidential search and hiring process for women. For instance, Tuajuanda C. Jordan and Susan C. Lane recommended current presidents proactively work with their boards on succession planning and participate in regular, honest conversations related to the institution's future needs and the skills they must look for in their next president to meet those needs.

It can be challenging, however, for women to raise difficult issues; Jordan and Parker both noted that current women presidents may not be in the best position to advocate for change because of fear of professional repercussions. They looked toward national organizations, such as ACE, Higher Education Resource Services (HERS), the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, and others to support women leaders and advocate for changes in presidential search and hiring processes.

Lane also suggested boards must receive overall better training on the presidential search and hiring process, particularly clarification on what their role is and how to create opportunities for campus and community involvement. She challenged boards to be more reflective, carefully considering their institutional profile and the social identities (i.e., gender, race and ethnicity, etc.) of those who have historically filled the presidential role and who have been left out. In addition to adjusting their approach to evaluating candidates, Parker also explained that boards should “stand behind” and show support for their president, which is critical for women, especially women of color who may find themselves leading institutions in times of crisis—a point echoed by others.

Relationships, Mentorship, and Support

Participants also emphasized the importance of relationships in positioning women to aspire to, achieve, and persist within a college or university presidency. Correspondingly, participants also discussed the loneliness of the presidential role and the new challenges facing institutional leaders (e.g., divisive concepts in higher education, fear of professional retaliation or loss of position and future employment prospects, technological advancements, and climate change). These challenges can make the presidential position unattractive and unsustainable, highlighting the necessity of mentorship and support networks for both aspiring and current women presidents.

Many participants shared the pivotal role mentors played in their own experiences, particularly in envisioning themselves as a future president and, later, pursuing a college presidency. For instance, Jordan and others shared that they did not initially aspire or plan to become a college or university president; instead, a supervisor and mentor recognized something in them and encouraged them to pursue the role. Jordan and Lane also spoke highly of the relationships and mentorship forged through national and regional professional associations and their women-focused initiatives (e.g., [ACE Women's Network](#), HERS).

While all participants described the importance of having relationships and support from mentors and peers who shared their gender and racial identities, they also shared rich experiences of receiving mentorship from men presidents of colleges and universities. These mentors pushed participants to pursue opportunities and shared their approach to leadership, which many participants carried with them throughout their careers and applied to their daily work. Participants stressed the importance of diversity among mentors and recommended that aspiring women have a bench, panel, or council of mentors who each bring their own perspective, experience, and strengths rather than having only one or two trusted mentors. In fact, Jordan shared that the very first thing aspiring women presidents must do is cultivate a group of mentors.

Participants also reflected on the crucial role peers, colleagues, and friends played in their careers. Specifically, participants shared how fellow women presidents as well as friends outside of higher education helped them navigate the potential loneliness of the role, served as a sounding board for them to work through challenging situations, and provided opportunities for self-care. Jordan described her elaborate network of different professional and personal groups that sustain her in different ways, and Salomon-Fernández shared that she also felt rejuvenated from a variety of people or groups, namely her students who often have a better sense of work-life balance, are more in tune with their socioemotional needs, and are more dedicated to self-care than current higher education leaders. She explained that both aspiring and sitting college or university presidents can learn a lot from students, such as courage. Salomon-Fernández noted that the journey to and experience within a college and university presidency can be particularly challenging for women of color who must show courage in not only aspiring to the presidency but also pushing back on expectations in order to sustain their holistic well-being and professional persistence.

Overall, participants noted that higher education—including professional associations, acting presidents, and other higher education leaders—must be intentional in creating access points and positioning women to aspire to and succeed within the college presidency through professional development and mentorship opportunities. Participants all agreed women need more support in their pursuit of and persistence in the role.

Interview Transcripts

Tuajuanda C. Jordan

President, St. Mary's College of Maryland (2014–present)

Professor of Chemistry, St. Mary's College of Maryland (2014–present)

Who was essential to your leadership journey? What did they teach you about higher education that you did not know and still use today?

Jordan: It is hard to remember way back to when I did not know higher education. I have a PhD in biochemistry and think of myself as a bit of a late bloomer when it comes to higher education administration because becoming a college president was not on my career path at all. I feel very fortunate to be in this position. My career has also been primarily in private institutions. I also worked for five or six years at the Howard Hughes Medical Institute, an international biomedical philanthropic institution, where I started a program in science education that is still ongoing. But St. Mary's College is my first foray into the public sector.

The whole trajectory that put me on this path to become a college president started with the associate vice president [AVP] for academic affairs as well as the president at Xavier University in New Orleans. The AVP, Ann Baron, saw something in me that suggested I would be a leader on campus, and she put me on the radar of the president back then, Norman Francis.

Ann and Dr. Francis put me on university-wide committees all the time, which taught me about the complexity and political nature of higher education. When I was a graduate and undergraduate student, I did not realize how political higher education is nor how important it is to just sit down with people face to face, chat with them, try to understand the issues, and come to some type of solution. Ann and Dr. Francis were the two people who got me on this path because they also pushed me to get involved with Higher Education Resource Services (HERS), which is a women's leadership organization. I just recently stepped off as the chair of the HERS board, so I have come full circle, and it has been a wonderful journey. But Ann and Dr. Francis were key to laying the foundation of my understanding of higher education, and HERS was essential in that understanding. Dr. Francis was just huge in my life, because when I started as a young faculty member, I saw how he

interacted with not only campus constituents but also the broader community. He never walked into a place with this air of importance, he was always a common man. I liked that down-to-earthness about his approach, and that is who I am as a person. I learned that you can be a powerful leader, still be humble, and connect with people, which is a very important lesson.

Another mentor was Freeman Hrabowski, president emeritus of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. Years later, when I decided I wanted to try to be a college president, I spent quite a bit of time talking to Freeman about it and what it meant. He is the one who told me that this job would be the loneliest and the hardest job I would ever have, and he is exactly right. But being president has allowed me to learn more about my passion and commitment to higher education, to bring what I think about educating people and society to the forefront, and to shape my equity-focused approach.

Being president has allowed me to learn more about my passion and commitment to higher education, to bring what I think about educating people and society to the forefront, and to shape my equity-focused approach.

You mentioned being a college president was not initially in your career plan. How did coming from a science background impact your journey to the college presidency and your approach to leadership?

Jordan: Let's start with my approach to leadership. Being a scientist, you must be able to see things that other people cannot, explain it to anyone, and get them to understand or be excited about it, which is something college presidents must also do. We call it vision in administration. You must be able to not only motivate your team to work towards the vision, but also get funders and others to donate their time or resources to support your institution. I use that skill all the time.

I also developed the ability to write, speak, and tell a story from being a scientist. For example, when you are writing a grant, a publication, a manuscript, you must be able to build the story, provide the background, and take the audience or readers to a crescendo or conclusion, which convinces them you are correct or that it makes sense. These are skills I use all the time as a president.

My ability to sit back and do a lot of critical and analytical thinking comes from being a scientist. It also comes from really valuing a liberal arts type of education, another part of my journey. My training as a scientist really helped me relish or bask in those moments where I have solitude because as president people are constantly asking you to do things, they are chatting with you, demanding your attention, so whenever I get those moments by myself, I love it. Those moments of solitude are not lonely but rather rejuvenating. The loneliness of the role occurs when you have these really challenging things to navigate and you cannot engage others in those conversations or decision-making, you just have to figure it out.

The most recent American College President Study data indicated that the needle on the representation of women in the presidency has not moved much from the previous iteration administered five years ago. Why do you think that is?

Jordan: If I really knew the answer, I could just write it and retire. The problem is not that there are no women in the pipeline or not enough women who aspire to be college presidents. Rather, much of the problem has to do with institutional boards. Boards hold the key to discussions around presidential diversity, and boards are more powerful than we give them credit. Also, oftentimes, institutions are confronted with issue after issue, so they are looking for people who have previous experience as a president. If institutions and their boards take that approach, 99 times out of a 100, they are going to hire an older man. Instead, boards need to be looking for a fresh perspective. People who have lived experiences that bring a diverse perspective to examine issues, have demonstrated an ability to be creative, have great self-awareness, and know how to build teams that are complementary to their skillset. Those are the people and skills we need to look for in college presidents.

Ultimately, until boards change and turn over, it is going to be hard for women to really get to the point where there is presidential parity, especially at four-year institutions,

R1 institutions, and other elite schools. It is going to be incredibly difficult to increase diversity because institutional boards do not turn over quickly enough. Also, if you are in a state where you have public institutions with boards controlled by the governor, that does not always fare well for women. It makes it more difficult for women to break into the role and lead institutions in those situations. Until people are ready to look outside of the mainstream and really take a risk and hire individuals with different experiences and perspectives, we are going to be stuck here for a while.

Also, women who are already in leadership positions should speak with boards more. I know we have organizations, such as the Association of Governing Boards

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[AGB], but if you look at the leadership of AGB, the very top person is a man, so how do women become the top voices in this conversation? That is the challenge. Those of us who are in these senior positions, we can make an impact on our own boards by talking about succession planning and what skills they should be looking for in a candidate. But there also needs to be a national perspective in the conversation. Maybe there are organizations, such as HERS, that can help women speak to and educate boards on the need for change. But until these organizations get a national presence, it is going to be hard to move the needle.

Women must find a way to be better advocates for what type of leadership is needed, band together, become a leading voice in reshaping higher education leadership, and then do it. Our challenge is we have not been strong enough advocates for ourselves. For whatever reason, we tend to wait for others to advocate for us. Maybe it takes older, more senior leaders—like me—who can take a more active role and engage people in these kinds of conversations.

What do you think it will take to reach parity by race and gender in the American college presidency? What one thing would you recommend higher education leaders do now to help us realize this goal in the future?

Jordan: First, looking outside of the academy for women of color who might pursue the presidency because there is widespread frustration within the academic environment

that tends to drive us out. Secondly, achieving parity will be even more challenging because the system relies on looking at the pedigree of candidates (that is, what institutions they attended; who their mentors and advocates are).

The Supreme Court of the U.S. [SCOTUS] decision [*Students for Fair Admissions (SFFA) v. Harvard University and SFFA v. University of North Carolina*] will make it even more challenging for women of color. Even though that decision is focused solely on race, when you look at most of the people of color in the pipeline, specifically considering Black and Latina individuals, most are going to be women. So, if college admissions cannot consider race as a variable, you are also eventually restricting women of color from coming to the presidential pipeline. This decision is going to make it incredibly challenging, more challenging than it was before to pursue gender and racial parity. Thus, boards need to be better informed and educated about these issues.

Navigating the SCOTUS ruling requires creative thinking at multiple levels. If you look at our country and its demographics, we must educate all people, we must be able to educate all people. We must allow all people to pursue education within institutions that are going to push them to succeed and allow them to thrive. This ruling is going to be challenging for us to continue to make that happen. How do we ensure that there are women and people of color in positions of power and authority regardless of institutional type? That is a challenge! We must turn to advocacy, to thinking innovatively and creatively, and to bringing more voices to the table to ask, "How do we get this done in spite of what happened at the highest level?" We must do something now that is really action oriented, creative, and cannot be easily challenged to build up the presidential leadership pipeline and ensure that women who are coming through the pipeline have the support they need.

There are several groups now that are focused on women college and university presidents, but they are primarily at White institutions. Leadership is most successful when we reflect the groups we are trying to lead, so looking at long-term student demographics, there must be more women, more women of color. We need to figure out a way to strengthen the pipeline, so they are there and ready for the role.

Higher education cannot be afraid to look beyond itself to find leaders. We have a lot of work to do and we understand what the problems are, but we keep letting the noise detract

us from what we need to do. Some of us need job security, and we cannot speak out and advocate the way we know is necessary. So, how do we begin to advocate in a way that protects a person who is trying to do what is right and trying to lead and educate? I do not think having tenured presidents is the answer, but there must be some way for us to advocate for truth, justice, and equity. We just need to figure it out.

What advice would you give to a woman, in general, or a woman of color, specifically, who is considering applying for a college or university presidency?

Jordan: Whenever a woman thinks she wants to become a college president, the first thing she needs to do is find a mentor. You need to have a chief mentor, but you must have multiple mentors.

The second thing she needs to do is find a support group. Otherwise, it is going to be a hard path. The presidency is only getting more challenging, so one mentor is not going to be able to help you navigate everything and thrive. There must be a group of people, and you might even need multiple groups to help you thrive. You can have one group for advice and support and another group for self-care because it is all important.

For example, I have a group of college presidents that I network with consistently, and they span a variety of institutions because that level of perspective is important for processing the complex problems we are facing. I have another group comprised of individuals who are not necessarily in higher education but, interestingly, are all scientists. I also have a group of women that I call my pontificate and rejuvenate group. Lastly, I have a group I meet with occasionally comprised of all women of color who were brought together over 10 years ago by one of the foundations that saw a need for it. Their leader was a woman of color, a long-time president, and one of my mentors. But over the years, we have broken off into smaller groups because our needs are different now. Things are very dynamic, but as you come and go, the people who you encounter usually remain your long-term friends because you have a common thread. You just cannot get everything from the same group of women, so you need a big support network.

Susan C. Lane

Senior Consultant, Stevens Strategy (2011–present)

Senior Fellow, Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) (2019–present)

Adviser, ACE Learner Success Lab (2020–present)

President, The New England Institute of Art (2008–10)

Who was essential to your leadership journey? What did they teach you about higher education that you did not know and still use today?

Lane: My professional background includes both policy and practice work. I worked in the governor’s office, legislative offices, the New England Board of Higher Education, and the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education. On the campus side, I worked at public and private institutions and for-profit institutions in roles including dean, assistant to the president, associate vice chancellor, and president. In that work, I focused on adult learners and continuing education. I was also a member of the Massachusetts ACE Women’s Network board and had the opportunity to work with and mentor women currently in and aspiring to leadership roles at Massachusetts colleges and universities including the presidential role.

In terms of my own mentorship, I was very fortunate to [have met] the person who was and still is most influential in my career as an undergraduate student at Clark University, where I got my start in higher education. As a freshman, I was elected to the academic committee, which governed all the academic things happening on campus and included deans, the provost, department chairs, and me. I remained on the committee all four years of undergraduate and even became the most senior member of it. In doing so, the university’s leadership became my network—including the interim president Alan Guskin, who was my mentor. He went on to be chancellor of the University of Wisconsin–Parkside, president of Antioch University, and a national leader in higher education. As a student, I learned by observing him manage an institution and make it a place for people to grow. Once I graduated, we continued to talk and share stories about our experiences. So, very early on, I got a sense of what makes a phenomenally successful academic team—knowledge I carried forward into my career.

Since then, I worked with many presidents in my various roles and was able to both see and participate in successful institutional leadership teams. I saw what relationships leaders develop with their campus and how they bring people together in governance. Because I worked in both

the public and independent sectors, I also had the chance to see how unions help by providing a structure. Massachusetts is very unionized, so everyone is in a union, and everyone is required to be in the decision-making process. In some cases that can be frustrating, but in other cases it gives everyone a role. Unions also gave me an understanding of term appointments, faculty governance, and relationship building. So, to answer your question, I was able to watch other presidents and observe firsthand how to build team relationships and collaboratively lead an institution through some very tough decisions, which helped me and continues to help me in my career.

The most recent American College President Study data indicated that the needle on the representation of women in the presidency has not moved much from the previous iteration administered five years ago. Why do you think that is?

Lane: We have a long way to go. I went to ACE’s [Annual Meeting] and had some heart-to-heart conversations about addressing issues around presidential hiring, and it comes down to the boards and who appoints the boards. Boards continue to be very purposeful about increasing diversity in their composition—by including a range of racial, gender,

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and sexual orientation identities—and in members’ experience; for example, seeking board members with community-based leadership experience. However, board members need specific training on the presidential search process including their role in it and how to

integrate authentic campus and community engagement in the hiring process. Boards should also review the profiles of their respective institution’s past presidents. If they find there is a lack of diversity amongst their past presidents,

the board should then analyze the search process and identify ways to adjust the process to support a more diverse outcome. Unless the boards take this issue on, it is not going to change. So, I look to the boards, who is appointing those boards, and who is engaging in the presidential hiring process. I also look to search firms to consider if they are presenting a diverse candidate pool as well as if the results or outcomes of their searches lead to women and people of color being hired.

The other thing is the issue of the presidential pathway. I do not think there is a shortage of women in the presidential pipeline, but I do think women in the pipeline need to be supported and encouraged through professional development opportunities that allow them to observe different leadership styles and lessons. We are also currently looking for presidents from different pathways, but if these pathways are through predominately male-dominated fields—such as looking for presidents who led large corporations, sat on corporate boards, or were leaders in the military—then you are still limiting diversity. The college presidency is also a hard job and not very friendly, so people may question if they really want to fulfill this role. Women may need encouragement to take on the presidential role, particularly at institutions that are experiencing challenging times.

I hope ACE and other organizations can step in and help strengthen the presidential pipeline and encourage boards and search firms to think differently about the presidential role and the qualities that they seek in future presidents. We also need to have some conversation around the candidate profile and how expectations can be slightly amended to reflect the strengths candidates are bringing, particularly those of women and their leadership pathways.

What do you think it will take to reach parity by race and gender in the American college presidency? What one thing would you recommend higher education leaders do now to help us realize this goal in the future?

Lane: When I first started working in higher education, I was usually the only woman in the room. I am happy to say that women's representation in higher education grew and there are more women presidents in Massachusetts, particularly in the public sector. But there needs to be proactive national- and state-level work focused on both mentoring women for the presidency and offering opportunities for women presidents to talk with one

another. One of the things that the Massachusetts ACE Women's Network did—and I know other ACE groups do as well—is we always built in time and invited presidents, particularly new presidents, to get to know other presidents in the region. It can be helpful to know what is happening in higher education regionally, the strengths of presidents in your area, and who you can talk to about diversifying the presidency.

At the institutional level, I would say intrusive mentoring is key for strengthening the presidential pipeline, particularly helping people be part of their own professional development and giving them the opportunity to grow their responsibilities and visibility. Institutions really need to make space for that to happen, but it is a challenge. A challenge that

is exacerbated by budget cuts, administrative turnover, and not being able to fill open positions, which is happening now more than ever. If that is happening, how do you encourage a dean or an associate dean to participate in broader, professional development activities in addition to doing their daily work? Current presidents, chief academic officers, and other senior leaders can be more proactive in identifying opportunities and helping their staff develop networks to move their careers forward. I also want to recognize that a provost may not want to be a president, but they can still mentor other people into that role. We must stop thinking that only a president can mentor someone into the presidency.

Mentorship and professional development can also focus more broadly on the kinds of responsibilities one needs to be a competitive candidate and an effective president. In Massachusetts, the ACE Women's Network focused on asking aspiring women presidents to reflect on what they do professionally that develops their strengths and makes them competitive in the job market. We also worked on providing people voice and agency in the diversity, equity, and inclusion network, shared fundraising strategies, and discussed how to best present your strengths during interviews. Applying this type of approach across the board, namely being more direct with women about how

There needs to be proactive national- and state-level work focused on both mentoring women for the presidency and offering opportunities for women presidents to talk with one another.

to move forward and making them consider how to better position themselves in a diverse candidate pool, could help. Meanwhile, we still need to work with the boards and the search committees. We must never let them off the hook.

In working with boards, campus leadership can formalize a discussion on leadership and succession planning at all levels of the institution. This succession planning could take place at a yearly board of directors retreat, during which leadership can regularly educate the board about institutional and higher education trends, changes, and developing needs. This type of retreat also provides an opportunity for ongoing noncrisis discussions about an institution's future and the talent needed to get there. Most significantly, this retreat establishes a model for campus leadership to engage the board and search committee when there is a future presidential search.

How do you think higher education leadership will be different in the future? What kind of talent should we, as higher education constituents, be cultivating to fill these roles in the future?

Lane: To succeed in the future, higher education leaders need to be skillful in collaborative leadership, team building, doing the hard work, having direct conversations, and including people in discussions. Higher education leaders cannot be silent, but they also need support. ACE and other organizations can help by showing that the presidency does not need to be lonely or a solo operation. We can develop a regional network to allow presidents to discuss the big challenges or topics facing higher education and develop a collective plan. Modeling the ability to learn from each other while building a network—and maybe this network is not just for presidents but for all those in senior leadership roles—will help develop these necessary skillsets.

Higher education really wants to and needs to be more innovative in the future; specifically, postsecondary institutions will need to have greater flexibility in how they see and present themselves. They must not be afraid to go down a slightly different path. Institutions need to bring academic talent and rigor to the table, but at the same time

they must be willing to develop new programs and follow new ideas and directions. Institutional flexibility requires a flexible leader, and it does not really matter what their degree is in—it is really the combination of the personal pathway, experience and degrees that provide credibility.

Leadership all comes down to responsibility. It is the president's responsibility to move higher education forward in a positive, more flexible, and inclusive direction, which is easier to do with the necessary resources. But, to solve problems, you really need to bring all your expertise and collaborate. Being able to bring together teams to problem-solve and not being afraid to sit back and rely on the team, that's where leadership comes together. My talent was bringing the right team together, so I'm not the expert anymore—rather, this team is, and my job is to support the team and move it forward.

What advice would you give to a woman, in general, or a woman of color, specifically, who is considering applying for a college or university presidency?

Lane: First, I would say: go do it! Also, make sure you have a network of people that you can talk through ideas and strategize with to support you in this process. Be very mindful in putting together and using that network. Also, consider the types of institutions that would be a good fit for you and focus on those institutions. Ask yourself, if you could design an institution with all the qualities you were looking for, what would it look like? Then, as you are applying, consider how many of those desired qualities does this institution have? It is probably not going to have all of them, but does it have enough that you feel that you would want to be there? Then, really push your way through that process and make sure to get feedback from your search firm on what worked and what did not after each stage in the process. Figure out why you did not move forward if you did not move forward in a search. Also, ensure you are working with a search group that is successful in getting people with a similar profile to a presidency. Do not be afraid of the no—instead, think through the search process and reflect on how it went.

Elaine Maimon

Contributor, *The Philadelphia Citizen* (2022–present)

Adviser, *ACE Learner Success Lab* (2020–present)

President, *Governors State University* (2007–20)

Who was essential to your leadership journey? What did they teach you about higher education that you did not know and still use today?

Maimon: I must start, personally, with my mother, who really was an incredible person. I lost her when I was 17, but in my formative years, she taught me many important lessons that made me an effective president. One was [to] do constructive worrying, meaning if you start to worry about something, make a list of the things you can do about it. If there's nothing on your list, take a walk. That was advice that has stayed with me always. She also had a great sense of humor, which I think is essential to a college presidency. You must be able to have enough perspective to look at some of the hilarious things that are going on around you. A sense of humor helps you deal with problem-solving in those areas very well.

My mother also gave me confidence and poise. We were really a low-income family, but I never really knew it until I picked up my financial aid papers when I was in high school and I said, "Mother, we're poor. You never told me." But she made sure that I had every kind of experience as a child, including what in those days were called elocution lessons. Because of [elocution lessons and theater], I grew up with no fear of public speaking and the skills to be able to do it. There are many other things my mother bequeathed to me, but I will go on to other mentors.

I also was mentored by the executive vice president of Beaver College, David M. Gray, who had vision.² He saw that I could do some things for the institution, and I was pretty outspoken. One of the things that comes from the poise that you develop through theater training is that you are pretty outspoken. I was reading about the Berkeley Bay Area Writing Project that the National Endowment for the Humanities [NEH] was sponsoring at the time, and I expressed that we could get a grant. Dr. Gray fully supported me, set up a meeting for me with NEH, and even offered his secretary to assist me while I finished the proposal. We got the grant—the largest grant in Beaver College's history.

I gained further mentors through Writing Across the Curriculum, which by then was becoming a movement. I became connected with people on the national scene, such as Harriet Sheridan, the acting president of Carleton College, whom I met on a cable car in San Francisco. She went on to become the dean of the college at Brown [University]. And so, from the very start of Writing Across the Curriculum, she came and did workshops for the Beaver College faculty. She later asked me to come to Brown and be her right-hand person and I did that, so she was a lifelong mentor and taught me so much.

[A] lesson learned from this executive vice president was if you believe in something, go for it and do what you know. With Harriet, it was absolutely [to] follow principle. Whatever you do, make sure that it's not careerist, that you are doing something because you want to make good things happen.

My next mentor was Shirley Strum Kenny, who was the president of Queens College at that time and then became the president of Stony Brook University. I also knew her through Writing Across the Curriculum. I learned enormous things from her, such as when you are in a position of power you

are going to have enemies. You are going to have people who are jealous. You must find a way not to take it personally. Theater training helps with that too, believe me. You really need to stay principled, do the right thing, and not be diverted by all the attacks that you can encounter.

I must also give credit throughout my career to the [former] ACE Office of Women in Higher Education. Donna Shavlik was a tremendous mentor to hundreds of women. Donna

I started out and did not expect or aspire to be a university president. I just wanted to get things done. I saw that I could do a lot in the classroom, and I've won teaching awards and that's great, but I could have a broader scope if I were in administration.

2 Beaver College officially changed its name to Arcadia University on July 16, 2001.

was just so incredibly helpful and honest; she would look at resumes and cover letters and be very honest. She also organized programs through ACE that were tremendously effective in terms of bringing [people] together. What I learned from her is that it is all about relationships.

Here's the thing, I started out and did not expect or aspire to be a university president. I just wanted to get things done. I saw that I could do a lot in the classroom, and I've won teaching awards and that's great, but I could have a broader scope if I were in administration. That gives you a mentoring picture and I've been very, very lucky in my mentors.

The most recent American College President Study data indicated that the needle on the representation of women in the presidency has not moved much from the previous iteration administered five years ago. Why do you think that is?

Maimon: Gender stereotypes are just so deep; you see them manifest across the country in several different ways. Pamela Eddy's [article in *Inside Higher Ed*](#) was on the mark. We have not done enough to educate potential and current board of trustee members. They do the [presidential] hiring, and they are not in an everyday environment where they are going to pick up what we know about the unfortunate nature of stereotypes in academia, so more active education must be done. It was very interesting to see in the article that the percentage of women on governing boards reflects the percentage of women in the presidency. That is not an accident, so that is one reason.

I also thought the article was right on the mark with search firms. Search firms vary greatly. The best ones are genuinely committed to diversifying the pool, but they vary greatly in how they educate search committees, particularly on how to read resumes. If you get a good search firm, the institution must be willing to work with them on some of these fundamental issues. For example, many search committees will not look at people with the title vice president of student affairs because they want people who have faculty experience. There are some outstanding university presidents who come from student affairs, such as Adele Simmons, who was the vice president of student affairs at Princeton [University]. There must be active, deep education of the people who make the decisions because otherwise it is central casting or this person looks like what I imagine a college president should look like, which just undercuts everything.

What do you think it will take to reach parity by race and gender in the American college presidency? What one thing would you recommend higher education leaders do now to help us realize this goal in the future?

Maimon: There must be very active work with boards, search firms, and search committees, but let's also look at the candidates. Right now, there's too much emphasis in the various training programs on careerism. Careerism works sometimes, but it's not good for higher education. Candidate preparation really needs to be [focused] on leadership. It is not just a question of equity in terms of having women and people of color in these positions; we ought to make some real changes in what we do. If we are basically hiring somebody who is just interested in his or her own career and not in advancing higher education, serving students and so forth, then why do it? I think that is extremely important.

Of course, with PhD preparation, especially in the humanities, there must be more preparation for scholars to stay in higher education. There also must be more openness to higher education PhD programs, but there also needs to be major reform, especially in the humanities and social science PhD programs [that would prepare people for administration]. The sciences are a little different because the kind of lab work that's done gives the scientists greater collaborative experience. They start running grants earlier and they get some budget experience that way. What is terrible is that people get their PhDs, they become adjuncts, and [they] are underpaid, overworked, and resentful—which helps no one. Whereas if you have preparation in your PhD program that allows you to get a full-time position as a writing program administrator or another on-campus position, you gain experience. Then, through that combination of scholarship, teaching, and administration, you are positioned to move through the ranks in ways that others are not.

The percentage of women on governing boards reflects the percentage of women in the presidency. That is not an accident.

In Eddy's article, it was also very interesting to look at the concept of sponsorship as opposed to mentorship—where established people in the fields are sponsoring women and people of color by making sure that they acquire certain

skills, that they are able to talk about what they can do, and that their names are heard in various conversations. So, that kind of active sponsorship is very important as well.

How do you think higher education leadership will be different in the future? What kind of talent should we, as higher education constituents, be cultivating to fill these roles in the future?

Maimon: Well, right now, elitism is killing us. We have a climate where some people are just twisting and turning this narrative and there is a seed of truth in the [claim of] snobbism and that is something we can remedy. That group of people are communicating with a large population of citizens who could benefit from college, basically saying to them, “You don’t want to join a club that doesn’t want you”—the consequences of which are serious; we are not just talking about losing enrollment. We are at a pivotal moment right now where higher education is under the greatest threat in my lifetime. We are having a class war right now and higher education is in a position to make it better or make it worse.

We must have universities and colleges cooperating with community colleges on four-year pathways, and there cannot be this elitist perception that if a student took the course at a community college, it must be no good. I did a program at Governors State with the university cooperating with 17 Chicago-area community colleges, which was very successful and continues to be successful. The Kresge Foundation supported [a guidebook on this program](#), which highlights the principles for cooperation in different settings.

So much of what we need has to do with a leadership style that understands the essential nature of cooperation. We must cooperate with community colleges and with other

four-year universities. We must cooperate with the cities or rural areas in which we are located, and we must make sure that we are seen as a benefit to these areas and not as the enemy. Because we [higher education] are seen as the enemy right now in far too many places. We are at a moment where we must change. Women and people of color need to be leading this change because our life experiences will help us be effective in bringing those changes about.

You left off your last answer with women and people of color really needing to take the lead on some of these necessary changes in higher education. So, what advice would you give to a woman, in general, or a woman of color, specifically, who is considering applying for a college or university presidency?

Maimon: Basically, you need to be committed to a principle and [the] principles of leadership. This is not always going to get you the job, but if you get the job and you are not principled, then you should not have the job. Also, be passionate about what you want to achieve—not only for your institution, but for higher education, for students, and for society because that is where real leadership comes in. To enlightened search committees—passion comes across and that is incredibly important.

Then, there is some traditional advice. Steven Sample, president emeritus of the University of Southern California, said, “Know what hill you’re going to die on, and don’t try to die on every hill.” Principle is extremely important, but when you are aspiring to and when you are in positions like this, you cannot die on every hill. You must find ways to deal pragmatically without totally compromising your principles, and that is why you must know what hill you are going to die on.

Annette Parker

President, South Central College (2013–present)

Who was essential to your leadership journey? What did they teach you about higher education that you did not know and still use today?

Parker: To begin, I want to give a little background on my educational and professional journey because I come from a nontraditional, adult learner background. My husband and I both started our careers at General Motors [GM] in Lansing, Michigan. As we began to see changes happening at GM and in the auto industry, we decided one of us needed to go back to school. So, I went to Lansing Community College [LCC] for an associate degree in industrial drafting. Just before I graduated, I was hired as a student employee there in two different divisions. When the institution realized this conflict, they decided to promote me to lab technician. My career in higher education really all started with this role. I fell in love with teaching and decided I wanted to become a career and technical education teacher. I went on to get my bachelor's degree with a certification to teach secondary education and taught high school, college, and corporate training courses. I also went on to earn my master's degree in educational administration at Ferris State University and later my doctorate in higher education leadership as well. But, as I was pursuing my master's degree, LCC hired me to go into administration to help design and lead their West Campus or Michigan Technical Education Center building complete with an entirely competency-based modularized curriculum.

But, looking back on my 17 years at LCC, I had a very strategic president, Paula Diane Cunningham, who always put vision at the forefront. She always spoke about the mission and vision of the college. Her approach helped me see how my developing role fit into where we were going as an institution. That [approach] is something I saw with every one of my leaders and I have picked up and used it myself. I often talk with my folks to keep the vision of where I and our leadership team want us to be front and center. It is important to remind people of the mission and vision of the organization and where leadership wants the institution to go.

Also, once I went into administration, I had some senior deans who taught me about really understanding labor contracts. Michigan is a bargaining state with a strong

labor tradition; this understanding was critical. Labor bargaining and a strong tradition of labor has always been personally important for me as well. There is also a strong labor tradition here in Minnesota that relates to shared governance, so that knowledge helps in my current role as president.

Another powerful leadership experience I had was working with Toyota to build a national center of excellence in automotive manufacturing in Kentucky, which followed my long tenure in Lansing. The person who was leading the Toyota effort, Ms. Caren Caton, was responsible for ensuring that the American continent, South and North America, kept the Toyota Way culture. My opportunity to work with Ms. Caton building and growing an auto center helped me with the ability to maintain team culture and problem-solve.

Also, I must mention, I really did not see myself advancing in roles, but the roles always came to me. I had some strong mentors who taught me the ropes. You must have people who came before you to reach back and pull people along, too.

The most recent American College President Study data indicated that the needle on the representation of women in the presidency has not moved much from the previous iteration administered five years ago. Why do you think that is?

Parker: First, when I think about the diversity in hiring presidents, the numbers are very different in the community college world than they are in four-year institutions. Also, when I think about reforms that are necessary for us to compete globally and address technological changes, demographic shifts, and the changing needs of our students, universities have been slower to reform than community colleges. I also think in certain pockets of the country we

Diversity needs to be present at the table in terms of leadership styles, culture—just everything—so that you are weighing and considering everything in order to make good decisions for the institution.

have been slower to change and realize the demographic shifts. But, at my institution, on my cabinet there's only one man; it's a very diverse cabinet.

Based on my engagement with the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC)—I have served on their board, commissions, and in other roles—there has been a huge shift in the last three or four years in terms of women and people of color in leadership at community colleges. Right now, it's harder to get men in the sector. I'm looking at diversity and saying, "I need men on my cabinet," because diversity is everything. Working with Toyota taught me to be able to look at everything around me and see that diversity needs to be present at the table in terms of leadership styles, culture—just everything—so that you are weighing and considering everything in order to make good decisions for the institution.

What do you think it will take to reach parity by race and gender in the presidency across higher education? Specifically, what are some ways that four-year institutions can emulate what's been going on in the community college sector? What one thing would you recommend that higher education leaders should do now to help us realize this goal in the future?

Parker: I think colleges and universities are on the right path. They understand the nation's demographic changes, the reduction we are seeing in high school graduates, the diversity amongst those graduates, and the need for institutional change. But, to make the necessary changes, it is going to be central for trustees to support leadership. You must be able to stand behind the president, the chancellor, whomever, to make the necessary reforms. They all see reforms coming, even the faculty see change coming. As the pie shrinks and there are school closures and mergers, it is going to necessitate essential reform.

Also, with artificial intelligence and where we think jobs are going to be in the future, our colleges and universities need to deal with the devaluation of higher education or people feeling like they do not need college. Some people will say they do not need a four-year degree and I always respond, "What do you think college is? Community colleges are colleges, too." So, that's another challenge that will lead to reform over time.

R1 universities—the big schools—will have a better chance of survival and, subsequently, may be some of the last

institutions to reform. But small liberal arts colleges are going to have to reform sooner. R1 universities' work is essential; we cannot survive without the research and the work that they do, but they must find ways to focus more on adult learners. Not everyone coming to higher education now is going to be an 18-year-old who can come and live on campus for four years. [Four-year institutions] must make higher education accessible to working adults whether it's offering classes online, in the afternoon, on the weekend, et cetera.

How do you think higher education leadership will be different in the future? What kind of talent should we, as higher education constituents, be cultivating to fill these roles in the future?

Parker: Chief academic officers or provosts are generally on the pathway to the presidency, and the path to that job has been very traditional, so reform is going to have to come in how future presidents are prepared. They tend to come out of the faculty ranks, so faculty have a big stake in who gets to the presidency. However, faculty do not always have access to see what administrators see around institutional sustainability, funding, etcetera. We need to do more to prepare provosts for the changes that will come.

Another important thing to mention in this conversation is the reform specifically happening in community colleges. Because of their focus on student success and workforce development, which is what people are looking to them for right now, community colleges are hiring a lot of vice presidents of student affairs. That is when the reform happens, once you change the institutional culture and you focus on student success. In community colleges, we often discuss that we do not need students who are ready for us. Instead, we need to be ready for the students we receive. We cannot pick our students because we do not have selective entry like universities. We serve the students that come to us, which we started calling the student success agenda in 2000. Now, the community college sector is fully in a workforce agenda, coupled with student success, and focused on closing equity gaps. This focus changed the type of people that we look to hire for leadership positions. Community colleges' unique focus has led to reform around who gets the CEO job in ways that universities have not yet experienced.

What advice would you give to a woman, in general, or a woman of color, specifically, who is considering applying for a presidency?

Parker: Seek out mentors in women and others who have come before them. Not all my mentors are women and not all of them are people of color. I think it is important to have a diverse group of mentors around you. One mentor is not enough. Be open to asking your mentors about the hard questions they have had to answer and making difficult decisions because they have been there and done that. It is also critically important for presidents of color, women of color, to have women of color be their mentors, so they can have conversations that they cannot have with others and talk about very specific challenges they face.

It is important to have a diverse group of mentors around you. One mentor is not enough. Be open to asking your mentors about the hard questions they have had to answer and making difficult decisions because they have been there and done that.

Mentors can also be very helpful in sharing insights into how to maintain the presidency, particularly in rural, conservative areas where African Americans and other minority groups are making numerical gains in community college presidencies. But there is a big difference in where you can take the presidency as a minority depending on the institution's location (e.g., rural area or urban center)

and its associated sociopolitical context. There's a book focused on community colleges called *The Chocolate Truth* that talks about the pitfalls and issues for minorities in the field, which can be a helpful resource.

Mentors can also help women navigate issues when something happens and the board does not support them,

which can sometimes ruin their career while White men presidents always seem to land on their feet. These are real aspects and concerns of the job. There are ways to navigate these situations, and that is where mentorship becomes critically important.

How do you navigate the extra burden or pressure often placed on women of color to mentor and provide emotional labor for not only students but also other professionals?

Parker: For me, it has not been a burden. I learned the value of being a mentor while working at GM as an African American woman because things were not always fair. This was the case when I was an hourly United Auto Workers employee and the young, pretty, blonde, White girl would get the good job and I would get the heavy industrial job. I just had to make it through. That experience probably prepared me for differential treatment and how to navigate it throughout my career.

When I first became faculty at LCC, I taught manufacturing to mainly young, White boys in a rural intermediate school district, corporate training classes at engineering firms, and college classes. I remember some of the young men did not think I could teach them anything and wanted to show off. But it did not bother me because I knew what I was doing and knew that I could show them I knew what I was doing. I liked proving it to them.

I think women of color do have to prove themselves more often, but if you know what you are doing then it does not matter. I also remember my high school students who got so close to me. I liked showing my students, most of whom probably never experienced or knew a Black woman before, that I was knowledgeable and pretty cool. In teaching those young men, I think I changed their lives. So, you can be a role model and really pull down those barriers.

Yves Salomon-Fernández

President, Urban College of Boston (2023–present)

Senior Vice President for Operations Planning, Southern New Hampshire University (2021–23)

President, Greenfield Community College (2018–21)

President, Cumberland County College (2016–18)

Interim President, Massachusetts Bay Community College (2015–16)

Who was essential to your leadership journey? What did they teach you about higher education that you did not know and still use today?

Salomon-Fernández: There are a variety of people who continue to be helpful in my leadership journey. They are people of diverse backgrounds including White men, White women, and people of color who helped me see how my lived experiences can serve as both an asset and an inhibitor or barrier to my leadership journey. They gave me great perspective and those lessons stay with me.

I learn a lot from the next generation, from my students, my staff, and my children. Their ideas and convictions around equity, self-care, mental health, and boundaries tend to be much better than my generation. Gen Xers and Boomers believe you work, work, work, work. Work is what we expect of each other and what we do. But Gen Z and Gen Alpha are saying, “Wait a second, I care about myself.” When you see things like the #MeToo movement, body positivity, and self-care being introduced into our vocabulary—those are things the younger generations are sharing with us, and we should listen to them.

Some of my greatest teachers have been my students, both students who have taken my courses and students I have served as either a president or an administrator. When I taught research methods, my students taught me that learning can be hard and that teaching takes patience. My academic background is in mixed methods research with an emphasis on statistics, measurement, and psychometrics,

By observing my students, I was reminded that learning is meant to challenge you and it is in those moments of difficulty that we learn and grow the most.

so teaching that course was well aligned with my academic background. By observing my students, I was reminded that learning is meant to challenge you, and it is in those moments of difficulty that we learn and grow the most. I saw students who started my

class crying from just looking at the syllabus. They would say, “I cannot possibly do this. I will never learn multiple regression.” But then I watched those same students give it their hardest and become some of the highest performers in the class, which was very gratifying. They taught me that I can continue to learn, and lifelong learning should be a part of every leader’s toolbox. As leaders, we never stop learning. Leadership means coming to the classroom and approaching our work with a sense of humility as well as confidence and leaving space for us to learn, grow, be challenged, and experience difficult moments that will teach us great lessons.

For me, learning happens in a variety of places and from a variety of people. I also learned a variety of things like courage, which continues to be a theme throughout my leadership journey. Whether it is the courage or audacity to tackle hard things, to dream big on behalf of and with our students, faculty, and staff, and to implement those aspirations. It takes courage to change those aspirations from just dreams to reality.

The most recent American College President Study data indicated that the needle on the representation of women in the presidency has not moved much from the previous iteration administered five years ago. Why do you think that is?

Salomon-Fernández: There’s a systematic lack of intentionality, follow through, and availability of resources to ensure more gender and racial diversity. When we look at the history of higher education, it was developed for White men to become members of the clergy or teachers. Look at the top institutions, the first three colleges in the U.S., they were designed for White men, many of whom were slaveholders. Higher education was never intended to serve women or people of color.

However, we eventually saw a progression with women being admitted and then people of color being admitted although some were admitted under de facto or de jure segregated circumstances. Then with the advent of land-

grant universities—which were problematic for Native Americans whose lands in many cases were taken without their consent—and community colleges, we saw greater expansion in higher education access.

The education of women and people of color en masse really did not start happening until recently. Even now with women representing the highest proportion of current college graduates, there is still a race to catch up in many disciplines where they are underrepresented. Also, when you consider the resources needed to be able to attend college and who had the means to devote time to four years of full-time study, there was a level of class advantage that you needed to have to even participate. The class struggle persists. The intersection of race, class, and gender poses challenges to many.

When you consider the history of slavery, the history of women's marginalization, and women's rights, there is a long history of disadvantages toward women and people of color and a long history of advantage in favor of one group. Even when women eventually were able to gain the right to vote, they were still marginalized. Women were not allowed to work. Then, when they were allowed into the workplace, they were kept in jobs that were more administratively focused. All this history leaves us with White men having a generational advantage within the academy. If we want to see more women and more people of color, we must consider the fact that women and people of color have not always been well represented in the academy. The academy was not built for them, so they are catching up. We need to be much more equitable and create a pipeline, professional development, mentoring, and leadership coaching opportunities for folks to be able to develop the confidence, skills, and knowledge to succeed in academe. Many women and people of color are just learning how to be college and university presidents; they do not have that generational or historical depth of knowledge, experience, and know-how. It is like being a first-generation student. Right now, we have a lot of first-generation, women, and people of color presidents who are figuring things out, and maybe we have some second-generation presidents, but it is just so recent for these groups to have access. We must create opportunities and experiences for women and people of color both inside and outside the academy.

For me, the representation of women in the college presidency is a historical issue that we must address. Unless we are intentional in being more equitable and investing

in these populations in pursuit of achieving parity, we are never going to attain parity. All these things—gender, race, and class—are at play and influences why we do not have the diverse talent pool and pipeline we need. But we can be much more intentional about growing it.

What do you think it will take to reach parity by race and gender in the American college presidency? What one thing would you recommend higher education leaders do now to help us realize this goal in the future?

Salomon-Fernández: It is important to have coaches, mentors, and sponsors who represent the racial identity of those seeking mentorship and those of privileged identities in higher education. It is important to make a diverse group including older White men, who tend to be presidents and have a lot of power, and next generation leaders available to aspiring leaders.

Organizations like ACE, the American Association of Colleges and Universities, and several other organizations can also help us reach parity by saying, “For our fellowship programs, we are going to admit X number, X percentage of people of color, of people who have been historically underserved in higher education.” These organizations need to make a commitment to support a broader category of folks who have been historically underserved in higher

Even now with women representing the highest proportion of current college graduates, there is still a race to catch up in many disciplines where they are underrepresented.

education and be very intentional about developing these groups' leadership. They can also help cultivate among nonminority leaders an understanding of the challenges that women and people of color face at all institutions, especially at predominantly White institutions. We need allies who understand microaggressions, who are willing to intervene to stop those behaviors, and who can use their agency for change and to create a seat at the table for those not represented.

Also, we need to commit to investing in the resources that we know historically underrepresented groups need. ACE's been doing the American College President Study survey for quite a long time; we know what leaders want and how they feel they could have been better prepared for the job.

We collected the data and this year we have even more data because we have qualitative data that we did not have before. So, we know what they need and where they are, we can cultivate leaders and prospective leaders to be the kind of change agents that higher education needs right now.

How do you think higher education leadership will be different in the future? What kind of talent should we, as higher education constituents, be cultivating to fill these roles in the future?

Salomon-Fernández: There will be several changes imposed on us, which are unpredictable. We saw ChatGPT’s launch and the evolution of this technology in just a few months. It is forcing unanticipated change in higher education. There are technologies still in development that will impact us as well.

Learners are also changing, which will impact higher education. Our country is becoming more diverse and integrated with the fastest-growing population identifying as two or more racial categories. The surveys tell us that this younger generation is not as interested in a four-year degree. They want certificates, convenience, hybrid-learning modalities, and networking opportunities. They want to harness the power of technology to study from home or wherever they may be. They also have more mental health needs, so we need to adapt to support them. We also need to provide wraparound services and referrals to support student success in this era of increased income inequality. We will continually need to support students in new ways.

Geopolitical forces are also changing higher education. With the [COVID-19] pandemic, we saw an acceleration of learning technology and more universities adopting online learning. With increased globalization, we are seeing borders becoming more porous, so students can now study at universities across the globe without ever leaving their house. Related to geopolitics, the U.S. has been very effective at importing some of the best and brightest students and scholars from around the world. So, future higher education leaders will need to continue to navigate geopolitics and ensure that the U.S. remains a conducive and attractive location for both students pursuing higher education and scholars looking to contribute to it.

Lastly, climate change is currently—and will continue—impact[ing] higher education, whether we like it or not. We have campuses impacted by floods, fires, tornadoes,

and other natural disasters at unprecedented rates. We need to cultivate leaders who can be leaders in their local communities, understand how their individual and collective behavior impact the environment, and will do something about the ways we degraded the environment. We need future leaders who can educate our students to be both local and global leaders.

We must help leaders focus not only on their areas of expertise or academic discipline but also on cross-disciplinary engagement. They must understand their role within the local communities within which their institution operates and within the context of the global community. Having both this awareness and multidisciplinary leaders is important because higher education does not exist in a silo despite higher education being highly siloed.

We need to find ways to incentivize cross-disciplinary, cross-community engagement, teaching, learning, and service. We need to better value engaged scholarship, which is an area a lot of faculty of color gravitate toward because they want to make a difference in their communities, if we are going to build a pipeline.

If we are looking to the academic pathway for future presidents, we need to value the work they are doing, the ways they are contributing to the local community, and the ways they are enhancing town-gown relationships.

What advice would you give to a woman, in general, or a woman of color, specifically, who is considering applying for a college or university presidency?

Salomon-Fernández: People of color and women need to have a lot of courage and be persistent. Again, higher education was not designed for them, so the structures are not designed to sustain them and, in some cases, may work against them. It also takes a certain amount of courage and self-care to say, “Okay, I know that my personal resources—intellectual, emotional, and psychological—are being depleted at a certain rate. How do I adjust my self-care when things are difficult? How do I have self-care, so I can

If we want to see more women and more people of color, we must consider the fact that women and people of color have not always been well represented in the academy. The academy was not built for them, so they are catching up.

sustain myself over time?” They need to ensure they have the support structures in place, so they do not burn out.

In addition to coaching and mentoring, aspiring women should listen to the next generation of leaders. There is so much they are teaching us. There is so much that they will not stand for [but] that Gen Xers and Baby Boomers did. A lot of younger women today are saying, “No, absolutely not.” Listen to women and folks across different generations, identities, and lived experiences because that is how we teach one another. It is not just about what others can teach me, but what can we learn together? What can we co-construct together? How do we critique each other so that we are stronger, more effective learners who ultimately improve higher education?

It is also important to have interests and hobbies that go beyond the academy. Have sister circles or a cabinet of people who know you, who are your advisers, who can sustain you, lift you up, and give you a good dose of reality because working in higher education is not easy. It is important to take a breather and schedule downtime.

You mentioned that working in higher education is not easy. Is there anything that you wish you had in your training or development before becoming a college president?

Salomon-Fernández: First, people often say, “I do not do politics,” but when you become a president or are on your way to becoming a president, you need to manage institutional politics. Politics are everywhere—it’s not just higher education. Consider how you manage that; it is really important.

Second, it is also good to take a sabbatical of sorts. I think every president or aspiring president should be able to have a period when they go outside of their home institution to learn, grow, and figure out how some of the best institutions are integrating knowledge to better support the institution’s mission and employee satisfaction.

In my most recent role at Southern New Hampshire, I learned a ton in just two years. Now, returning to the presidency, I feel better equipped having worked at a university that really knows how to harness the power of machine learning, artificial intelligence, and predictive analytics and is equally focused on students and employees. Seeing how Southern New Hampshire University manages evaluation and compensation, and invests in learners, employees, faculty, and staff, I’m encouraged. It is a new model for an institution to encourage people to experiment.

At Southern New Hampshire University, I was also able to observe Paul LeBlanc, who is steadfastly committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion. I was able to see how the institution approaches diversity, equity, and inclusion differently than traditional institutions. It is not perfect, it is taking time as it should—but it is bold and audacious, which is very inspiring.

It is also important to have interests and hobbies that go beyond the academy. Have sister circles or a cabinet of people who know you, who are your advisers, who can sustain you, lift you up, and give you a good dose of reality because working in higher education is not easy. It is important to take a breather and schedule downtime.

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