

DIVERSIFY

the
American College
PRESIDENCY

By William E. Kirwan

Despite the general perception of being hotbeds of liberalism, universities are among the most tradition-bound, conservative institutions in society. From one perspective, this resistance to change is a strength, enabling higher education to sustain enduring values and avoid “faddish” approaches that could compromise core missions. But



from another perspective—on issues where change is clearly needed—higher education’s reluctance to adjust and adapt becomes an enormous impediment to progress.

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The need to diversify the top leadership posts on our campuses is one aspect of higher education in which fundamental change is absolutely essential. The current gender and racial makeup of presidents at American higher education institutions—both public and private—has been well documented. Despite the appointment of several women presidents at some of America's most prestigious universities, both the American Council on Education (ACE) and *The Chronicle of Higher Education* have published studies in recent years highlighting the near-monolithic nature of these offices and the difficulty faced in effecting change.

ACE's *The American College President: 2007 Edition* reveals that the typical college president is a 60-year-old white male who previously served as a chief academic officer or provost. In addition, the report indicates that America's college presidents are older and holding the job longer than at any time during the past 20 years, with the average time in office having increased from 6.3 years to 8.5 years. *The Chronicle's* 2005 survey paints a similarly troubling picture.¹ Of the four-year institution presidents who responded, 89 percent were white and 81 percent were male.

While the past few decades have seen limited success in diversifying this office, with the percentage of women presidents more than doubling and the percentage of ethnic or racial minorities rising by more than two-thirds, the progress appears to have reached a plateau at an unrepresentative—and unacceptably low—level.

As the American college presidency continues to evolve, with new challenges such as increased fund-raising demands, declining state budget support, and a new emphasis on accountability and assessments, presidential search committees continue to look for leaders using the same criteria they have *always* used, with prior experience in senior executive roles in higher education being the determining factor. This approach limits not only opportunities for young leaders, women, and people of color, but also access to new ideas, new viewpoints, and innovative ways of addressing new challenges.

Current data suggest a changing of the guard in campus leadership. A significant number of institutions stand to lose their presidents to retirement in coming years. How we take advantage of this window of opportunity will reveal a great deal about how serious the higher education community truly is in our calls for greater racial and gender diversity at the presidential level.

Building on Past Progress

From my perspective, taking advantage of this potentially once-in-a-generation opportunity to diversify the college presidency requires two significant steps.

First, we need to aggressively build upon and take advantage of recent advancements in diversity. The past decade has seen an overdue increase in the representation of minority and women scholars: According to *The Chronicle's* "Diversity in Academe" supplement, U.S. minority scholars held fewer than 70,000 full-time faculty positions at American colleges and universities in 1995. In 2005, this number had increased to almost 110,000, a 58 percent increase.² This is especially noteworthy given the fact that this past decade was marked by numerous challenges to affirmative action efforts. There has been a similar advance in the number of women scholars, who today hold 275,000 full-time faculty positions, approximately 40 percent of the total.³

These advances did not happen by accident. Decades ago, the higher education community made a conscious effort to improve diversity, both among the student body and in faculty positions. On cam-

puses across the country, presidents, provosts, boards, and search committees put a premium on the values of diversity and inclusion.

But this was just a first step—albeit a vital one—in the effort to diversify the presidency.

Consider the "typical" path to the college presidency. A scholar secures a faculty position and successfully achieves tenure. The professor moves up through the ranks, becoming department chair and eventually dean, gaining an expanded skill set and broader perspective. The individual then moves beyond his or her specific area of study to assume the position of provost. Ultimately, this path arrives at the presidency.

Just as a conscious effort was made to bring a greater level of ethnic and gender diversity to the faculty, a conscious effort must be made to promote advancement through the ranks. The availability of professional development opportunities, such as the ACE Fellows Program, not only gives individuals the skills and insight they need to advance, but also makes the very idea of advancement a concrete possibility. Likewise, diversity training for governing

Advice for Women Seeking a University Presidency

By Dianne F. Harrison



When asked by aspiring women faculty about the best route to a university presidency, I reply, "Solid academic experience." I then explain that few individuals obtain presidencies via nontraditional routes, either inside or outside the academy.

According to a 2006 American Council on Education survey, 82 percent of sitting presidents came from a prior position as president or other senior leadership post.¹ More than half of that group rose through academic affairs, most having served as provosts or chief academic officers. Historically, those with solid academic credentials have a far greater likelihood of achieving a presidential appointment.

Obviously, there are no guarantees, but those seeking the surest route might do well to stick with a traditional academic progression—from assistant professor, to associate, to professor, to department chair, to dean, to vice president or provost. This progression serves future presidents well by positioning them to develop broad insights, problem-solving abilities, credibility, deep understanding

of faculty and institutional issues, and an ability to serve as a spokesperson on issues facing the institution and higher education.

I have spoken to many faculty women who strive to attain leadership status sooner than the more traditional path allows. While I admire their focus, taking on administrative roles such as associate dean or assistant vice president before acquiring the full set of experiences afforded by the teaching, research, and service required for promotion and tenure puts these women at risk of being seen as unqualified for higher-level responsibilities further down the road. In addition to the real, valuable learning experiences that come from climbing the academic ladder, most search committees include senior faculty members who may question the credibility of candidates who have skipped rungs. There are always exceptions, yet I heavily favor letting your record speak for itself.

While rising through the ranks, presidential aspirants should seek as many university-wide experiences as possible. Serving on the faculty senate or on university committees related to the budget, athletics, research, academic affairs, student affairs, student fees, and facilities helps shape a larger view of the institution. Mid-level administrators and deans should establish a track record in fund raising, community and government relations,

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boards, search committees, and department chairs can open minds to new possibilities to consider and new horizons to explore. Providing greater flexibility to faculty members as they advance can remove obstacles that had previously been viewed as intractable. Strategic plans that specifically and explicitly incorporate diversity and inclusion can advance a campus-wide mindset to embrace these vital goals. Most of all, leadership—from trustees, board members, administration, and the outgoing president—can create a clear path for women and minorities to pursue advancement.

Of course, this is just one aspect of the challenge. Just as we have to address the “presidency pipeline,” we have to address the “PhD pipeline.” We must intensify efforts to direct women and minority candidates into doctoral programs, through aggressive recruitment, financial aid and other incentives, and innovative programs. And we must intensify efforts to encourage these candidates to get on the path toward university faculty positions. In the long run, this will determine how successful we are in diversifying the presidency.

Professor Caroline Turner from Arizona State University has studied the issue of faculty diversity extensively. In her research on this issue, she has noted the importance of presidential leadership in creating a campus-wide ethos of inclusion, aggressive action to foster diversity, and leadership in embracing new approaches to reach our goals and dispel misperceptions. For example, the perception that minority faculty members shift jobs faster than their white counterparts is not true, but tends to occasionally tamp down aggressive recruiting efforts. The belief that minority scholars eschew academe for more lucrative positions in the private sector also is false. In fact, those who do fall into this category often make the decision based on the problems they encounter when establishing an academic career, as opposed to the draw of better opportunities elsewhere. Many exit the academy citing problems like social isolation, bias and hostility, excessive and “token” committee assignments, and limited leadership and research opportunities.

diversity initiatives, faculty and staff recruitment, student relations, and interaction with the board of trustees.

Expanding experiences also helps aspiring presidents answer a set of critical questions: Is the presidency right for me? Aside from working long hours and weekends (which most faculty do as well), can I make tough decisions? Am I comfortable (or at least appear to be) in most any social situation? Can I converse with strangers, both friendly and unfriendly, with sincerity and patience? Can I ask for money to support the institution? Am I passionate about higher education? Am I prepared for public scrutiny, accolades, criticism, and the inevitable crisis? Am I prepared to forgo a significant portion of my private life?

Presidential candidates need to show passion for both higher education and leadership. Again, time serves a candidate well, as career maturity and varied experiences build the confidence necessary to become a leader. Time also allows the aspiring president to establish a network of mentors, who may be sitting presidents, provosts, consultants, trustees, alumni, and elected officials. This network can provide feedback and advice throughout a candidate’s career, including helping with the decision to apply for a presidency.

The decision to apply is an important one. Candidates must look for a good fit between their skills and values and those of the institution. Many potential candidates

believe that a presidency at one institution is the same as a presidency at any other institution. Not true! Discovering the challenges, expectations, culture, history, core values, and mission of a specific university will determine the fit.

Search committees and trustees expect presidential candidates to have plans and a vision for the campus. That should come as no surprise. The corollary, however, is important: Those plans and vision must be consistent with the president’s own. Everyone on a campus wants you to be their candidate, whatever their perspectives or issues. My advice is to be as honest and sincere as possible when interviewing. If candidates respond only to please a certain audience rather than expressing what they genuinely believe, someone is going to wind up unhappy. Candidates should remain focused and clear about their plans and goals. If they have done their homework and found a good institutional fit, this comes naturally.

My final recommendation: Once you believe a presidential position fits you, go for it. There are plenty of women (and men) to call on for advice and encouragement. Count me as one of them. ■

Note:

1. American Council on Education. (2007). *The American college president: 2007 edition*. Washington, DC: Author.

Widening Our Perspective

The second step higher education must take to help diversify the presidency is to expand our outlook and consider fresh approaches to filling vacancies.

When it comes to generating a truly diverse candidate pool for presidential positions, the actions we are taking—such as they are—are uneven, erratic, and uncoordinated. While it would be presumptuous of me to propose a specific, comprehensive approach in this forum, there are several actions that could be part of a common agenda for most colleges and universities. I make no claim of originality with any of them. For the most part, they are things I have discussed or heard discussed in other forums. Taken together and as part of a comprehensive approach to this issue, however, I think they could make a huge difference.

The first thought I have is the potential benefit of looking to community colleges as we consider presidential candidates for our four-year institutions. In recent years, community colleges have become a fundamental component of the higher education continuum. More and more students are opting to begin their postsecondary educational careers at two-year institutions, then transferring to four-year institutions to complete their degrees. In addition, community colleges have incorporated more aspects of four-year institutions, with entrepreneurial efforts, business incubators, ambitious fund-raising efforts, and community outreach that all rival upper-division schools. And, of course, community colleges are a fertile ground for developing leaders.

Traditionally white institutions also can look to our historically black colleges and universities and Hispanic-serving institutions. It is most unfortunate that minority-serving colleges and universities are far too often viewed as a distinct and separate aspect of higher education, with “internal” leadership tracks for racial and ethnic minorities. A world of talent exists within the ranks of the vice presidents and provosts of these institutions, and majority colleges and universities should look to them more systematically when they are seeking to fill senior leadership positions.

Finally, we need to look outside academia. The private and not-for-profit sectors have done a better job than academia in diversifying their leadership. I understand that academia has unique issues that make internal experience of great value. At the same time, however, the rising importance of fund raising, fiscal stewardship, innovation, and accountability makes the skill set of leaders in the private and not-for-profit sectors equally attractive.

At the Forefront of Change

As we work to make the presidency both more diverse and more representative, we must keep in

mind that our efforts are driven by two parallel forces. First is the moral imperative. The very roots of our diversity and inclusion efforts lie in the basic values of justice and equality that are the underpinnings of our society. We take steps to move our campuses—and our society—in this direction simply because it is the right thing to do. In addition, we face the demographic reality that our nation is becoming more racially and ethnically diverse at an impressive rate. By the middle of this century, we will have no majority racial or ethnic group. This will be true of the college-aged population at an even earlier date. As we move toward becoming a nation of minorities within a few decades, it is difficult to imagine a more compelling national interest than to ensure that our colleges and universities reflect the diversity of our nation.

I opened my “argument” by noting that *as institutions*, our colleges and universities have always been deliberate with regard to change. Paradoxically, *as campus communities*, colleges and universities have often been at the forefront of social justice issues, clamoring for change. The lively and intense debate over issues—women’s rights, minority rights, civil rights, apartheid, environmentalism, and countless others—has always been an integral part of campus life. Over the years, many of these social issues have been integrated as institutional concerns: equity, diversity, tolerance, inclusion, and others.

I have no doubt that many of our current presidents were affected both personally and professionally by the passion and energy surrounding social justice issues on our college campuses. As their service draws to a close, they can honor—and build upon—this legacy by calling for fundamental change at the highest campus level. We have made substantial progress in diversifying the student body. We are moving in the right direction in diversifying the professorship. But diversifying campus leadership is a hurdle we have yet to clear.

As we approach this once-in-a-lifetime chance to make transformative progress on this issue, we have a special responsibility to take full advantage of that opportunity. ■

Notes:

1. Selingo, J. (2005, November 4). Leaders’ views about higher education, their jobs, and their lives. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 52(11), A26.
2. Gose, B. (2007, September 28). The professoriate is increasingly diverse, but that didn’t happen by accident. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 54(5), B1.
3. 2007–08 Almanac. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 54(1), 24.