

Money & Management

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Presidents: Same Look, Different Decade

For all the attention paid to diversity in recent years, older white men still lead most colleges

By AUDREY WILLIAMS JUNE

The remarkable thing about the profile of the typical college president — a married, graying white man with a doctoral degree — is how little it has changed over the last 20 years.

Although more members of minority groups and women lead higher-education institutions today than in the past, a study of college presidents released this week by the American Council on Education shows the rate of diversification in the president's office has been slow, particularly since the late 1990s.

According to the study, 86 percent of presidents were white and 77 percent of them were male in 2006. In 1986, when the study was first conducted, 92 percent were white and 91 percent were male.

"We haven't seen the kind of progress that we expected," said James C. Renick, senior vice president for programs and research at the council. "What this tells us is that higher education, collectively, is going to have to spend more time on expanding opportunities for women and people of color."

However, the study also revealed a drastic demographic shift among college chiefs that could play a role in the remedy: Presidents in 2006 were older than their counterparts in

1986, suggesting that turnover in the academic presidency is imminent. Only about 8 percent of presidents are now 50 or younger, compared with about 42 percent in 1986. The average age of a president rose from 52 to 60 over the last 20 years. Meanwhile, almost half of presidents in 2006 were older than 60, compared with 14 percent of presidents in 1986.

"A potential wave of retirements means there is an opportunity to create greater diversity in the presidency," says Jacqueline E. King, the study's author and director of the council's Center for Policy Analysis.

Longer Terms, More Women

The council's study is based on a 2006 survey of 2,148 presidents of public and private colleges. It is the sixth on college leaders' backgrounds, career paths, and experiences. Similar surveys were done by the council in 1986, 1990, 1995, 1998, and 2001, and *The Chronicle's* own survey of college presidents in 2005 revealed some of the same trends discovered by the council.

In addition to getting older, presidents are staying in office longer, the council's study said. The average tenure for a president has moved up from 6.3 years in 1986 to a record 8.5 years in 2006 — a sharp jump from 6.6 years in 2001, when the survey was last done.

"I think, given the increasing complexity of the role, institutions are working diligently to keep the leaders they have for extended periods of time," said Mr. Renick.

One subset of presidents, the leaders of historically black colleges and universities, tend to serve even longer, with an average term of 11 years. For example, Norman C. Francis, president of Xavier University of Louisiana, is believed to be the longest-serving sitting president, with 39 years on the job.

Despite their slow gains since the late 1990s, the proportion of female presidents has more than doubled in the last 20 years. Fewer than one out of 10 presidents was a woman in 1986 compared with almost one in four in 2006. In 1998 the percentage of female college chiefs was 19 percent, and it rose to 21 percent in 2001.

Women were most likely to lead community colleges. In 1986, women made up 8 percent of community-college presidents. Twenty years later, that number jumped to 29 percent.

Narcisa A. Polonio, vice president for board leadership services at the Association of Community College Trustees, says the rise in female chiefs at two-year colleges is not surprising.

"Community colleges have been fertile ground for female and minority leadership," says Ms. Polonio, a search consultant at the association. "They opened their doors to women at the very beginning. I have done searches where three female candidates were competing for the position."

The next indicator of progress at community colleges, Ms. Polonio says, is for more women to take the reins at larger institutions — as Jerry Sue Thornton has at Cuyahoga Community College, Ohio's largest — or to become chancellors of entire systems, like Mary S. Spangler, who was recently appointed chancellor of the Houston Community College system.

A Steep Price?

Excluding two-year colleges, women make up 20 percent of college presidents. Doctorate-granting institutions are still the least likely to have a female chief. The percentage of women at the helm of those institutions rose from 4 percent in 1986 to 13 percent in 1998, and it hasn't changed much since then. Notably, three Ivy League institutions — Brown and Princeton Universities, and the University of Pennsylvania — are led by women. In addition, Susan Hockfield is the first female president of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

At Penn, Amy Gutmann succeeded Judith Rodin as president, but at a number of other institutions, female presidents were followed by men. Since the study was last published, Rita Bornstein, president of Rollins College; Audrey K. Doberstein, president of Wilmington College; and Molly C. Broad, president of the University of North Carolina system, were all replaced by men.

The study notes that "if the proportion of women who serve as senior administrators and as full-time faculty provides a standard for equity, then women remain underrepresented as presidents." According to the data, 45 percent of faculty and senior administrative staff in higher education are women.

For those women who do make it to the president's office, there are often trade-offs. Most male presidents, 89 percent, were married. By comparison, just under two-thirds of female presidents in 2006 were married, though that is up from about one-third 20 years earlier. Also, 68 percent of female presidents in 2006 had children, compared with 91 percent of male presidents. The study showed that 15 percent of female presidents who responded in 2006 had altered their careers to take care of children or a spouse, while 5 percent of men had done so.

Patricia A. McGuire, the 18-year president of Trinity Washington University, in Washington, D.C., says the nature of the college president's job can be "extremely burdensome" and the job isn't really structured for people, male or female, who are married and have children.

"I've been amazed at the women presidents I know that juggle children and spouse," says Ms. McGuire, who started her presidency at age 36, and is the institution's second lay president. "I'm not sure that I could do that if I had a spouse and children. I'm not that brave."

Minorities Lag Behind Women

The increase in minority presidents in the last two decades lagged sharply behind that of women. In 1986, 8 percent of college leaders were members of minority groups. That proportion rose to 14 percent in 2006, in part because more members of minority groups became leaders of institutions that are predominantly white. When institutions that primarily serve African-Americans, Hispanics, and American Indians are excluded, only 9 percent of presidents are from minority groups.

The data show almost imperceptible changes since 1986 in the ascension to the presidency for individual minority groups. For instance, the share of African-American presidents rose from 5 percent to 6 percent over 20 years. Hispanic presidents, at 5

percent in 2006, saw the most growth from 1986, although it was from a low base of 2 percent.

The key to turning around those numbers, most observers say, is to make a concerted effort to groom members of minority groups and women for the academic presidency.

Frank G. Pogue, chairman of the Millennium Leadership Initiative — a program that trains senior administrators, most of whom are from minority groups, for the chief executive's job — says that although progress has been made, "we are nowhere near convinced the numbers are large enough." In its eight years of existence, the initiative, an offshoot of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, and its training program have had 251 graduates. Thirty-two of them are now serving as college presidents or chancellors.

"I think we could move much faster in preparing and assisting underrepresented people to become president if we had a large number of people in the pipeline who were currently serving in senior-level positions where the next step could be the presidency," says Mr. Pogue, president of Edinboro University of Pennsylvania.

In 1996 Mr. Pogue became the first black president to lead a predominantly white institution in Pennsylvania. Eight institutions in the state, including two historically black colleges, have black presidents. Five of those institutions are in the state university system. "We're still virtually invisible when it comes to the presidency in private institutions," Mr. Pogue says.

Minority leaders in 2006 made up 13 percent of the presidents hired within the last two years, a number that hasn't changed much since 1998. Baccalaureate colleges were the most likely to have minority presidents as new hires, at 18 percent, with doctorate-granting institutions on the other end of the spectrum, with 7 percent. Eleven percent of all presidents at doctorate-granting institutions were members of minority groups.

"If current hiring rates for minority presidents continue," the study said, "minority representation among all presidents is unlikely to increase significantly."

Prior Experience Wanted

With the job of college president more complex than in years past, senior-level experience is still as important to institutions as ever. In 2006, one out of five presidents had served in a presidency immediately before their current position, compared with 17 percent in 1986. However, the more traveled route to the presidency is a stint as provost, with 31 percent of presidents in 2006 serving in that position before their presidency. That is up from 23 percent in 1986.

Meanwhile, the percentage of presidents tapped from outside academe is on the wane. In 2006, slightly more than 13 percent of presidents held an immediate prior position outside higher education, down from 15 percent in 2001. And no matter what a president's background, the odds are high that a search consultant will be a part of the hiring process. Nearly half of presidents in 2006 were recruited that way, compared with 38 percent of presidents in 1998, the first year the council collected such data.

Ms. King says the council plans to do a basic demographic survey of other members of a college's administrative team in hopes of determining if the traditional pipeline for the presidency is aging as well.

"If the provosts and other senior-level people are moving toward retirement, too, that's a big issue," Ms. King says.

In the end, Ms. King says, more diversity among leaders of college campuses will come once boards of trustees, often anxious to go with proven leaders, break away from a cautious approach to hiring that has for the most part shut out those who don't fit the traditional profile of college president. Says Ms. King: "They have to be willing to be more risk-taking and look at candidates whose résumés don't have every single box checked off."

"The American College President: 2007 Edition" was underwritten by a grant from the TIAA-CREF Institute. Copies of the report are available for \$40, plus \$8.95 for shipping and handling. Call (301) 632-6757 or write to the ACE Fulfillment Service, Department 191, Washington, D.C. 20055-0191.

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