

# Path to Success

By Victoria Markovitz

*Millennium Leadership Initiative graduates share their experiences, accomplishments*

**T**oday's public college and university leaders face complex challenges, including declining state support for public higher education, conflicts between campuses and lawmakers regarding free speech and civil rights, and the need to protect students from violence and hate speech. Amidst these issues, diversity in student bodies continues to increase, and these students need to feel supported, safe and welcomed.

In 1999, AASCU's African-American presidents founded the Millennium Leadership Initiative (MLI) to ensure the next generation of leaders in higher education reflects the diversity of the nation, providing individuals traditionally underrepresented in the highest ranks of higher education with the opportunity to develop skills, gain a philosophical overview, and build the network needed to advance to the presidency. This mission

remains just as relevant today.

While diversity on college campuses keeps rising, the typical U.S. college president remains "a white male in his early 60s with a doctoral degree who has been in his current position for seven years," according to the *American College President Study 2017*, produced by the American Council on Education (ACE) and the TIAA Institute.

Beyond just "doing the right thing," diversity in campus leadership—including leaders of color and from the LGBTQ community and other underrepresented groups—means more perspectives to solve difficult issues, a better ability to shape inclusive learning environments, and strong role models for diverse student populations, says Dr. Mary Evans Sias, director of MLI and former president of Kentucky State University.

"As our students have become more diverse on our campuses, and you see that demographic shift, who's going to be on those campuses that looks like them—as faculty, administrators and presidents?" Sias says. "How those students perform, how the campus functions, is all tied into that diversity and in having the differences of opinions and backgrounds that are reflected there."

With the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the program approaching, we spoke with MLI graduates to learn how the program helped them achieve success and examined participants' contributions to public higher education.

## What is MLI?

The program identifies African-American, Hispanic, Latino, Asian and Pacific Islanders in senior-level positions who are interested in career advancement and helps them achieve that goal. MLI, however, accepts all qualified applicants who meet the requirements.



MLI participants, also known as protégés, start the program by attending the Millennium Leadership Institute. This four-day conference includes theoretical learning and practical, hands-on training through media interviews, visits with representatives on Capitol Hill, and close interactions with presidents and chancellors.

Afterwards, protégés are assigned a mentor and a coach. Mentors, active presidents or chancellors, provide career guidance and advocate for participants. The coach is an associate of the AASCU-Penson Center for Professional Development and a previous president or chancellor. Coaches serve as sounding boards for protégés and help them strengthen leadership skills.

Participants also complete a project that demonstrates the value of their colleges, such as how many of a school's graduates get jobs. This prepares participants to tell their universities' stories, which will help protégés gain support as higher education leaders.

To date, of 486 total MLI graduates, 119 have become presidents and chancellors, and 24 of those are in their second or third presidencies. With 50 to 60 percent of university presidents and chancellors retiring in the next five to seven years, according to ACE and AASCU research, MLI is creating a pipeline of qualified and diverse candidates.

## Success Stories

How does the program help attendees, and what have graduates accomplished? We talked to some former protégés to find out.



**Dr. Mildred García**

**Dr. Mildred García**  
*President, California State University, Fullerton*  
*MLI Class of 1999*

Since Mildred García became president in 2012, California State University (CSU), Fullerton has seen record-setting graduation rates, eliminated achievement gaps for transfer students, nearly tripled its annual gift commitments, ranked first in California and second in the nation for awarding bachelor's degrees to Hispanic students, and ranked sixth in the nation for graduating students of color.

One of the ways MLI helped García most, she says, was connecting her to a network of presidents. Even in her third presidency—she previously served as president of CSU Dominguez

Hills and CEO of Berkeley College—she still turns to that network to talk through tough decisions and to navigate the traditionally male-dominated world of public higher education leadership.

“Not only am I a woman of color, I’m a single woman of color,” she says. “I have a network of presidents from the MLI cohort that have become my friends and confidantes. I know what I say will stay between us, and I know that’s invaluable.”

García also mentors MLI protégés to pass on what she’s learned.

“MLI is playing a critical role in transforming what is so necessary in the college presidency,” she says. “I want to give back in the way MLI gave to me.”



**Dr. Eduardo M. Ochoa talks with California State University, Monterey Bay students.**

**Dr. Eduardo M. Ochoa**  
*President, California State University, Monterey Bay*  
*MLI Class of 2002*

Before serving as president of CSU Monterey Bay, Eduardo M. Ochoa worked as the Obama administration’s assistant secretary for postsecondary education.

MLI helped Ochoa build practical, hands-on skills, such as media interviews and budgeting, and also provided him with a network of sitting presidents who could share their firsthand experiences and give advice. He says this especially helped him during his

first year as a president.

“It helps you during the first year to be more surefooted and avoid pitfalls that those who don’t go through the training fall into,” he says.

**Dr. Renu Khator**  
*Chancellor, University of Houston System*  
*President, University of Houston*  
*MLI Class of 2004*

In January 2008, Renu Khator became the “University of Houston (UH) System’s first woman chancellor and the first Indian immigrant to head a comprehensive research



**Dr. Renu Khator helps a student with her books.**

university in the United States,” states her biography on the school’s website. Under her leadership, UH “experienced record-breaking research funding, enrollment and private support.”

MLI’s practical, hands-on training helped prepare her for a presidency, particularly by improving her resume writing and interviewing skills. During her presidential interview, she says, about 80 percent of the questions she was asked were similar to mock questions she received at MLI. MLI gives visionary and passionate leaders a safe environment to grow and mature, Khator says.

“The higher education landscape is getting more and more complex as disruptions emerge and as economic and social forces pose new challenges,” she states. “We want leaders who believe in the values of the academia and yet can innovate new ways of meeting the mission.”



**Dr. Fayneese Miller poses for a selfie with Hamline University students.**

### **Dr. Fayneese Miller**

*President, Hamline University (Minn.)  
MLI Class of 2009*

One of Fayneese Miller’s top priorities is for students to know they matter.

“I make sure that I’m moving around the campus and students see me, that I’m a role model for them when they think of their own future and what they can do as leaders,” she says.

In 2015, Miller became the first African-American and second female president at Hamline University. She says the school has healthy enrollment and finances, which is challenging in today’s environment. MLI helped her master the complexity of university finances, including balancing a budget, having cash flow and paying attention to bond ratings.

“I can take a look at that budget and do the work I need to do on behalf of the university,” she says. “I can own it without people having to explain it to me.”

### **Dennis J. Shields, J.D.**

*Chancellor, University of Wisconsin-Platteville  
MLI Class of 2009*

As chancellor of University of Wisconsin-Platteville, Dennis J. Shields led a number of diversity initiatives on campus, including “establishing the University Bias Incident Team, founding the Wright Center for Non-Traditional and Veteran Students, re-envisioning the Patricia A. Doyle Center for Gender and Sexuality, and providing pre-college programs to students from at-risk populations,” states his biography on the school’s website.

MLI helped Shields understand the breadth of responsibilities chancellors must manage, such as balancing multiple goals and stakeholders, and provided him with a network of peers to shape his skills and to consult with to solve challenges.

“When you see other people who are like you, come from different sorts of backgrounds and are of color who have become presidents and chancellors, it inspires you to think, ‘I can do this,’” he says. “I just need to get to work and make it happen.”

### **Dr. Fred Wood**

*Chancellor, Contra Costa Community College District (Calif.)  
MLI Class of 2011*

When Fred Wood came to MLI, he had spent his academic career at one institution, the University of California, Davis. MLI exposed him to the value of different types of schools around the country, built his confidence in pursuing a top leadership position, and demonstrated the positive impact leaders could have on students and local communities.

As he went on to serve as chancellor of University of Minnesota-Crookston and later Contra Costa Community College District, skills he learned at MLI helped him adapt to those institutions and establish the right initiatives to help them succeed. These include implementing programs focusing on diversity and inclusion, new types of student learning (such as online course delivery), economic development, and opportunities to help faculty innovate within their classrooms.

“Those are all things I’m proud of that would not have occurred had I not had the skill sets to connect well with the institutions I was at,” he says.



**Dr. Fred Wood**



**Dennis J. Shields, J.D., hands a student her diploma.**



**Dr. Karrie Dixon**  
*Vice President  
 for Academic  
 and Student  
 Success,  
 University of  
 North Carolina  
 System  
 MLI Class of  
 2013*

**Dr. Karrie Dixon**

Karrie Dixon started MLI as a senior associate vice president for academic and student success at the University of North Carolina (UNC). Attending MLI and working with her mentor, Mary Evans Sias, helped her broaden her portfolio to become more competitive. This led to her promotion at the UNC system.

“[MLI] provided me with an opportunity to reflect on my leadership, how effective I am currently, and the areas that I can build upon to be an even more effective leader,” Dixon says.

In particular, the program’s workshops helped her hone her communications skills. By listening to different perspectives, understanding crisis management, and keeping teams informed, leaders can ensure they make strategic decisions about how they are directing an institution, she says.

**Greg Schuckman**

*Assistant Vice President, University Relations and Director, Federal Relations and Research Advancement, University of Central Florida  
 MLI Class of 2017*

In addition to lobbying on behalf of the University of Central Florida (UCF), Greg Schuckman has advocated for higher education by serving on over 20 boards, councils and commissions at the local, state and national levels, most recently as a commissioner on the Maryland Higher Education Commission. Attending MLI inspired him to pursue a presidency as he completes his doctorate.

“It’s very reaffirming and reassuring to be told you have what it takes to be a president,” he says.

Being diagnosed with multiple sclerosis several weeks after he started at UCF in 2000

also made him think more about how people who are differently abled are represented in university leadership. He would like to see more higher education leaders who are differently abled, reflecting the over 50 million people in the United States who live with a disability.

“I think it is important for students to have role models to say, ‘If that person was able to ascend to a presidency, maybe I can do that, too,’” he states.

**Looking Ahead**

MLI has helped protégés from a range of backgrounds advance to the highest levels of academic leadership. Along with strengthening their schools in general, protégés created more inclusive campuses, such as by serving as role models, implementing efforts to help diverse students succeed, and mentoring future generations of leaders.

“America’s promise is about providing higher education for everyone, regardless of race, creed, national origin or socio-economic background. It is important that our presidents represent that student body and those types of students,” says Sias. “If we truly want to deliver America’s promise, now is not the time to let our guard down. Now is the time where we have to be ever more vigilant.” **P**

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**Greg Schuckman**

**Diversity continues to rise**

on U.S. college campuses, according to the National Center for Education Statistics data:

- › The majority of students (56 percent) in 2014 were female.
- › From fall 1976 to fall 2014, the percentage of Hispanic students rose from 4 to 17 percent; Asian/Pacific Islander students rose from 2 to 7 percent; African-American students rose from 10 to 14 percent; and American Indian/Alaska Native students rose from 0.7 to 0.8 percent.
- › From 2012 to 2023, enrollment is predicted to increase 25 percent for African-American students; 34 percent for Hispanic students; 11 percent for Asian/Pacific Islander students; 1 percent for American Indian/Alaska Native students; and 14 percent for students who are of two or more races.

However, the diversity of university presidents does not currently reflect this, states the *American College President Study 2017*:

- › The typical U.S. college president remains “a white male in his early 60s with a doctoral degree who has been in his current position for seven years.”
- › Only 30 percent of university presidents are women, increasing just 4 percent from 2011.
- › Only 8 percent of presidents are African-American; 4 percent are Hispanic; 2 percent are Asian-American; and 1 percent each are Middle Eastern, American Indian or multiple races.