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## Leading through the Messy Middle: Women Presidents of Maine Colleges and Universities

### Keywords

leadership, higher education, women presidents, diversity

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# Leading through the Messy Middle: Women Presidents of Maine Colleges and Universities

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## Abstract

Women have historically been substantially underrepresented as presidents of colleges and universities in the U.S. and globally. Maine is an exception in that fifty-five percent of presidents of the State's colleges and universities were women at the time that this study was conducted. This research is intended to provide both a deeper understanding and a broader perspective on the leadership trajectories and personal and professional development of women presidents in higher education. This qualitative study of Maine female Presidents in higher education revealed a number of leadership themes, including their role perceptions, common attributes, and how they lead.

## Keywords

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## Introduction

### **Presidency - General Landscape Over the Years**

The presence and progression of women presidents of colleges and universities in the United States have improved over the past few decades, albeit slowly. Today women in the U.S. remain underrepresented at the senior-most levels of administrative positions. In 2017 corporate America, women comprised only 5.4% of CEOs of Fortune 500 companies (up from 0% in 1995) (Brown, 2017). According to data from the Pew Research Center, women presidents of institutions of higher education have increased from 21.1% in 2001 to 30.1% in 2016 (Johnson, 2016). The demographic profile of the typical president of an American institution of higher education is slowly changing, but remains largely as it has been for the past 25 years: a white 61-year old male, married with children, Protestant, holding a doctorate in education, and having served in his current position for six to seven years (Phelps & Taber, 1997; Cook, 2012; Johnson, 2016). According to the American Council on Education (ACE), in 1975, five schools in the category of four-year public universities were led by women presidents: less than 1% of total institutions in the U.S. at that time (Touchton & Ingram, 1995). In 1986, 10% of institutional CEOs of four-year academic institutions were women, increasing to 21% in 2001 (Cook, 2012), 26% in 2011, and 30% in 2017 (ACE, 2017). These percentages are dramatically higher than in *Fortune 500*

corporate America. Many of the women who are presidents of a college or university are the first females in that position (Cook, 2012). College and university governing boards and presidential search committees are increasing attention to filling higher education CEO vacancies with skilled women leaders (Glazer-Raymo, 2008).

### **The Historical Landscape**

The most common road to the presidency for women (43%) continues to be the traditional route of academic affairs: faculty to department chair to college dean to university provost and, finally, to the presidency (ACE, 2017; Brown, 2017). Access to quality, inclusive education has long been identified as a key indicator in a society of equity, growth, and development (Allen, 2011; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 2012). According to Thelin (2004), in the early days of American higher education, women were excluded from participation by statute. No woman was recorded as earning a degree in the colonial era (Thelin, 2004). Although women gained entry into institutions for higher education by the 1900s, women were limited in what courses of study men deemed appropriate for them to pursue (Nidiffer, 2001). It was not until 1972 with the passage of Title IX of the Educational Amendments Act and the Women's Educational Equity Act in 1974 that the greatest changes came about for the inclusion and treatment of women in higher education

(Somers, 2002). Title IX prohibits gender discrimination in educational systems where institutions in non-compliance risked losing federal funds (United States Department of Education, 1997). The implementation of this statute resulted in an increase in the acceptance, enrollment, and graduation of women at public colleges and universities (Somers, 2002; Valentin, I. 2003; Glazer-Raymo, 2008), significantly increasing the number of women in the pipeline with potential to be presidents in higher education.

### **The Current Study**

The women who were interviewed for this study have managed to beat the odds through their ability to manage the challenges and biases facing women on their pathways to the presidency (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Glazer-Raymo, 2008). Multiple studies on barriers to advancement have made clear that organizational environments can themselves be “gendered,” and that this gendered nature of organizational structures “ensures that women have limited access to positions of power in the organizational hierarchy” (O’Neil, Hopkins, & Bilimoria, 2008, p. 736). A complex labyrinth has replaced the absolute barriers of the “glass ceiling” (Eagly & Carly, 2007), and the ways in which women presidents have navigated their labyrinths of academe tells a compelling story. Our purpose for this research was threefold: to learn about who the presidents are in their role as leaders; to address the interplay of our interviewees’ core sense of self within the large-scale, complex, demanding, and predominantly patriarchal and hierarchical system of academe; and last, to learn about how they do it. The common attributes identified in this study will assist people of all genders who are interested in personal and career development, as well as educators, administrators, and consultants who design leadership development programs and recruit for presidents of colleges and universities.

### **Literature Review**

Few scholars have published studies specifically about the lived experiences of women presidents of colleges and universities (Springer & Clark, 2007; Madsen, 2008; Wolverton, Bower, & Hyle, 2009). However, there is substantial research on women leaders in the arenas of political, business, government, and non-profit organizations. For this reason, this literature review draws on these as they relate to the themes discovered in this study. Persistence of gender disparity in higher education administration has been viewed through multiple lenses, including higher education, for-profit, non-profit and

government sectors (Barreto, Ryan, & Schmitt, 2009; Hannum et al., 2015), structural & worklife quality (Johnsrud & Heck, 1994a; Johnsrud & DesJarlais, 1994b; Christman, 2003; Jackson & Leon, 2010), and sociocultural and intersectional approaches (Noe, 1988; Luke, 2001; Richardson & Loubier, 2008).

One explanation for gender disparities is perceived incongruity between the stereotypical characteristics of women and the stereotypical characteristics of a leader. Koenig et al., (2011) identified this phenomenon as a “double-bind” and discussed it in terms of Role Congruity Theory, which states that individuals are expected to align their behavior with stereotypical gender expectations (Bosak et al., 2012; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Eagly & Mladinic, 2011; Eagly & Wood, 2013). Gender is a defining feature of human interactions, and this paves the way for gender stereotypes, even if unconsciously held (Devine, 1989; Ridgeway, 1997). In the U.S., women tend to be viewed as communal and characterized as caregivers, being social, kind, helpful, and sympathetic, whereas men tend to be viewed as agentic and characterized as achievers, being aggressive, independent, and decisive (Heilman, 2001). Leaders are stereotypically perceived as aggressive, direct, well-informed, self-confident, objective, and ambitious (Heilman et al., 1989; Schein, 1973). Thus, as Eagly and Karau (2002) argue, stereotypes of being female are incongruent with stereotypes of being a leader. In other words, to “think leader” is to “think male” (Schein & Davidson, 1993; Schein et al., 1996), and when women lead with decisive and direct action, they are perceived as being inauthentic and/or ‘too male.’ The “no win” double-bind is that women are always viewed as ‘atypical leaders,’ violating organizationally prescribed masculine leadership norms no matter the leadership behavior (Catalyst, 2007; Heilman & Okimoto, 2007). If women leaders act consistent with gender stereotypes, they are considered too soft and not a leader. If they go against gender stereotypes, they are considered too tough and not likable or not stereotypically feminine (Oakley, 2000). Either way, falling too much within or straying too far outside of social constructs of femininity results in detrimental consequences to their perceived leadership competence (Eagly et al., 2003; Eagly et al., 1992; Oakley, 2000).

Eagly et al. (1992) found that women were devalued in three circumstances: when they led in a masculine manner, when they occupied a typically masculine leadership role, and when the evaluators were male. Moreover, the effects of perceived incongruity are cumulative and contribute to the “pipeline problem,” by resulting in smaller numbers of women available for promotion to leadership positions over time (Agars, 2004). Other barriers to advancement include women’s late entrance into the workforce (Heilman,

2001; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Garcia-Retamero & López-Zafra, 2006; Glazer-Raymo, 2008; Rhode & Kellerman, 2007), which resulted in both a pipeline problem (e.g., Eagly & Carli, 2007; Ibarra, Ely, & Kolb, 2013) and a “chilly climate” (Maranto & Griffin, 2011) characterized by informal exclusion, devaluation, and marginalization. Still other barriers include challenges of life/work balance stemming from women’s culturally prescribed role; self-imposed challenges based in self-concept; and lack of mentors and sponsors.

Researchers broadly agree women who aspire to prominent leadership positions encounter paths full of ‘twists and turns’ (Eagly & Carli, 2007), and higher education is no exception. Eagly & Carli (2007) have used the term ‘labyrinth,’ arguing that, while women no longer encounter the widespread phenomenon of the “glass ceiling” (Hymowitz & Shellhardt, 1986; Glazer-Raymo, 2001), they now encounter instead a complex maze filled with barriers and roadblocks, in which barriers have become increasingly invisible and difficult to detect. Nevertheless, some women have found paths forward around obstacles, and as women navigate these impediments to leadership positions, organizations also are changing in response to new gender leadership styles and expectations. Eagly & Carli (2007) insist that the path to leadership for women is not furthered by manifesting male behaviors in predominantly male cultures, especially as the need for transformational and authentic styles of leadership becomes more apparent for leading institutions of the 21st century.

### **Characteristics of the Presidency**

Before 1970, little was known about gender and leadership (Evans & Chun, 2007); indeed, the issue could be said to even have not been “on the radar.” Early biographies of college presidents used phrases such as, “Great Man” and “Man on a White Horse,” in reference to the “great man” leadership theory of the 19th century. A president was described as a paternalistic patriarch and moral leader who maintained the soul of the organization (Reynolds, 2002). Pre-World War II conventional thought clearly dictated that the university was an arena where (Caucasian) male leadership was the sole option (Evans & Chun, 2007).

A changed societal landscape, new leadership models, and an evolving climate and priorities for university presidents of the 21st century requires a different set of presidential characteristics to lead a successful enterprise: to be able to juggle competing priorities from faculty, staff, students, parents, alumni, and community members, as well as to be politically savvy, a skilled fundraiser, and a confident leader (Pierce, 2011). Although the most frequent

path to the presidency is via the faculty route (Pierce, 2011), our data and that of others (Bagilhole & White, 2013) indicate some exceptions. In every case, however, advanced degrees such as a J.D. or M.B.A. and significant work experience are expected. In 2011, 17% of new presidents came from outside higher education, revealing a current trend to hire presidents who possess prior business or government experience to help the university reach financial and strategic goals (Pierce, 2011) as state appropriations for higher education dwindle. Presidents are expected to be skilled and affable fundraisers, to maintain a strong on-campus presence, and to guide the institution towards a compelling vision. Other priorities may include maintaining a strong relationship with the neighborhood surrounding the campus, assessing tenure and promotion applications, working with faculty governance, managing local media requests, navigating the politics associated with the board of trustees, and working with businesses and local and state government officials. Presidents also are expected to be in tune with the continuously changing nature of the 21st century college student experience, which includes but is not limited to: equality and justice issues, traditional age and nontraditional adult learner needs, mental health concerns, compliance requirements, multicultural competence, emerging technologies for teaching and learning, evolving social media, and campus housing, safety and security issues in a post-9/11 world (Pierce, 2011).

### **Leadership for Today and the Future**

Contemporary views of effective leadership encourage teamwork and collaboration and emphasize the ability to empower, support, and engage workers (e.g., Hammer & Champy, 1993; Senge, 1994), not only recommending the shrinking of organizational hierarchies, but also placing the leader more in the role of catalyst, coach, facilitator or teacher than prior models of leadership (Heifetz, 1999; Pierce & Newstrom, 2006; Drath W. et al., 2008). Although the specifics vary, most modern approaches emphasize that leader roles are changing to meet the demands of greatly accelerated technological growth, increasing workforce diversity, and intense competitive pressures on higher education as well as other organizations. Team building and cooperation have become the organizational norm, and corporate leaders of both genders are expected to practice a communal style (Rhode & Kellerman, 2007). In order for higher education to remain relevant, “new forms of leadership...[should] be called upon to navigate through these turbulent times” (Hannum et. al., 2015, p. 65).

The 1980s and 1990s saw the rise of a new paradigm, *transformational leadership*, that appeared to be linked

to more effective leadership and was more congruent with changing organizational needs. Transformational leadership is contrasted to other leadership styles, such as a *transactional* and *laissez-faire* (Eagly et al., 2003). A transactional style includes clarifying employee responsibilities, rewarding them for meeting goals, and correcting them for failing to meet them. The least productive leadership style is *laissez-faire*, characterized by managers providing little to no guidance. The transformational leadership paradigm emphasizes skills and abilities of leaders to inspire employee growth and development to reach their full potential, while nurturing their ability to contribute to a shared organizational vision, mission, and goals (Bass & Riggio, 2008).

Eagly et al. (2003) conducted a meta-analysis of 45 studies that compared male and female managers on measures of transformational, transactional and *laissez-faire* leadership, including organizational leaders of mostly educational settings and various business organizations. The meta-analysis revealed that female leaders were more transformational than male leaders, exceeding men the most on the transformational dimension of individualized consideration (e.g., being aware of the abilities and aspirations of followers). Women also engaged more in one component of transactional leadership, contingent reward behaviors (e.g., complimenting employees when they accomplished a goal). Both of these are related to increased effectiveness (Lowe et al., 1996; DeGroot et al., 2000).

Although women's leadership styles "are more effective within the context of team-based, consensually driven organizational structures that are more prevalent in today's world" (Applebaum et al., 2003) and are particularly critical given generational shifts in expectations (Kezar & Lester, 2008), recent findings suggest that the devaluation of female leaders by male subordinates extends to female transformational leaders (Ayman et al., 2009). The single most important barrier preventing women from reaching the top is probably the tenacious stereotypical association of leadership with being male (Schein, 2001).

## Methodology

### Recruitment and Participant Demographics

All private and public institutions across Maine that award four-year bachelor's and advanced degrees were included in the background research for this study, both for comparative purposes and for context for conceptual analysis. These institutions were identified by accessing publicly available information through the National Center for Education and Statistics (NCES) online, followed by internet searches of university websites to determine the gender of, and

contact information for, the current presidents. Letters of introduction were emailed to all female presidents, supplemented by phone calls as necessary. All eight of the female presidents thus contacted agreed to interviews, which took place between July 1 and November 1 2013. Interviews were conducted using a structured interview protocol containing nine demographic questions and 39 questions from four categories: perceptions about leadership; values, spirituality, and ethics; mentorship; and life space/stages. Each interview lasted one and a half to two hours in length.

Interviewees provided information about their academic backgrounds, age, race/ethnicity, marital status, and number of children. The eight respondents ranged from 52-72 years of age with a mean of 61, and all were Caucasian. Four were single, two were married, and two were in long-term same-sex partner relationships; four had previously been divorced. Four of the interviewees had biological children, one had stepchildren, and one had both biological and stepchildren; the number of children ranged from 2-5. There was significant variety in their academic backgrounds which included law, human communication, English literature, public and international affairs, business and economics, history and humanities, and philosophy. Six women held doctoral degrees; one held a master's degree and honorary doctorate; and one held a law degree. In terms of their trajectory to the presidency, participants came from diverse backgrounds, including conventional academic routes, leadership positions in economics and public finance, and legislative politics.

### Interviewing and Transcriptions

Interviews were conducted in the familiar surroundings of the Presidents' own offices, both to promote comfort and convenience for the interviewees and to provide contextual insight into their sense of themselves and their world (Herzog, 2005). We are cognizant that the interviewer's own biases, comments, tone and body language may have had an effect on how respondents answered questions. In an attempt to minimize such effects, the interviewer kept her verbalizations to a minimum and remained close to the structured interview protocol within the limits of maintaining conversational ease. Nevertheless, interviews are fundamentally social constructions; they are re-tellings and re-creations of stories about events that have already happened rather than a faithful copy of a static world (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999).

All interviews were transcribed, two by the primary researcher and six by experienced, independent transcribers. Etherington (2007) reminds us, experienced researchers "can remain sufficiently close to the data, even when we

do not ourselves transcribe, providing we listen repeatedly to the tapes... the time spent with tape recordings and transcriptions is an important part of the immersion phase of heuristic research: noting our feelings and responses can enhance the depth and quality of the research process” (pp.79-80). To this end, many hours were spent listening to and making notes from the tapes and transcriptions to help ferret out emergent themes. The researchers scrutinized the transcripts separately at first, and then again jointly to share initial thoughts and feelings, to discuss similarities and differences, and to reach agreement about possible significant themes displayed in the interview transcripts.

### **Data Representation and Analysis**

While rooted in a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), this structured qualitative study incorporated elements of narrative inquiry, with emic and etic perspectives interwoven in the findings. In the discussion of data analysis, we followed Polkinghorne’s (1995) approach by melding the text into thematic groupings, yet also sharing components of what he terms ‘narrative analysis’, that is, representing on the page a storied account of people’s lives. The transcripts were grouped, as Clandinin and Murphy (2007) suggested, around “topical threads” (p. 632), with vignettes combined with patterned themes derived from analysis of the transcripts, presenting an ongoing dialogue between the general and the specific to provide illustration and context. The bricolage of instances, events, and themes that emerged from the interviews were brought together in a unifying interpretation.

Following Miles & Huberman (1994), analysis of the interviews unfolded in a continuous, iterative process. Transcript content was analyzed for emergent themes, which were sorted into relevant categories. The notes taken during the interviews and from transcriptions were then organized and integrated, and the themes further refined. Finally, a conceptual framework was created within which the interview data could be interpreted.

nVivo 11 for MAC, by QSR International, was used to categorize multilevel themes from the interview transcripts, in the following sequence of steps:

**Initial Coding:** First, transcripts were read and reread by two researchers, and initial content codes were developed and assigned to each substantive statement made in response to a given structured interview question for each participant/interviewee. Content codes were revised (renamed/refined, expanded, or collapsed) as necessary as the coding process progressed systematically through the series of interviews in an iterative process. Codes were periodically compared across researchers and revised as needed. Memos were generated in journal

format throughout this process, including observations from interviews and audio-recordings not directly captured in the transcript, and clarifications of interview responses obtained in follow-up telephone conversations where initial language was unclear.

**Identification of emergent themes:** As initial content coding continued, consistent themes began to emerge and were created as “parent nodes” within nVivo, with content codes becoming “child nodes” in a hierarchical organization. nVivo allows multiple codings at single and multiple levels, combination and revision of codes without loss of more fine-grained designations, as well as searches within and across participants. Content-level memos were reviewed and integrated into the creation of parent nodes. Theme-level memos were created as needed to document agreements, questions, and differential perspectives between the researchers, as well as the decision-making process, broad conceptual observations, and relevant connections to published literature.

### **Findings**

This study focused specifically on Maine women presidents of colleges and universities because, at the time the data were gathered in 2013, the percentage of female college presidents in public and private institutions in Maine was disproportionately high compared with other Northeastern states in the U.S., calculated by the researchers: 12.8% higher than the 29.2% average for the whole of the Northeast region, and higher than the next highest state, Rhode Island at 36.4 %. In public universities alone in Maine, the percentage of women presidents was even higher at 55.6%.

#### **Overview: Women ‘at the top’ in Academia**

Two categories emerged: who they are and how they did it. The first describes the participants in terms of their core sense of self (self-concept, values, capabilities) within large-scale, complex, and demanding systems. The second focuses on their methods, i.e., how they accomplish their goals, and highlights an emergent theme of relationship building and organizational development.

From these aforementioned two categories, eight themes surfaced: 1) growth-oriented continuous learners, 2) the role of otherness, 3) the lens of leadership, 4) innovative big picture thinkers, 5) visioning, 6) the presidential identity, 7) mentoring, sponsoring, networking and learning by observing others, and 8) relationships and trust. What follows is a summary overview of the emergent themes, subthemes, and content codes, followed by explication melded with illustration from respondent interviews.

## **I - Women at the Top in Academia: Who they are.**

Our interviewees had a strong sense of *progression and mastery* over their own lives. They consciously developed and maintained connections, generated support from others, cultivated their reputations, and were given power and influence to effect change in their roles before becoming president. Thus, by the time they became president, they had clarity about who they were as administrators, managers, and leaders.

### **A. Moving up: Growth-Oriented Continuous Learners.**

A conspicuous characteristic of these women presidents is that they are uniformly growth-oriented: deeply motivated to learn from their challenges and failures, to set high expectations for themselves, to continually strive to develop their skills, to make themselves better, and to reach their potential. Growth and development demand extending oneself beyond a comfort zone to test one's potential for developing new skills and handling greater thresholds of responsibility. As one woman said,

I wasn't ready, but I saw an advertisement in *The Chronicle* for a Presidency... I called that search firm and spoke to a consultant and said, 'I would just like to hear a little more about the job. I am not going to apply for it. I am not ready.' ...Whoever was the person I spoke to must have made a note for that particular search firm... And so somebody called and sent me an email. I get nominations and am pursued about Presidencies all the time now, but back then I thought, well I will learn something from this and it was fun, and I love to interview... Over time I have become much more efficient and much more convicted about my approach, because it has worked.

Growth orientation and learning were not sufficient, however, unless accompanied by visibility and recognition for achievements. All of the respondents discussed various experiences in which they enjoyed visibility and acknowledgment for their achievements in their earlier roles as teachers, scholars, lawyers, economic developers, administrators, and researchers. They took advantage of available training and development opportunities, at times extended to them by mentors or sponsors. Through their experiences—both successes and overcoming failures—their confidence grew. For example, one president reflected:

It was the start of the academic year. ...All men, they had never had a woman.... So I gave the Convocation speech that year. And I really, really worked on it... it was about where Universities

are going. I spent a huge amount of time on this speech. ... And I think it was a moment when people saw me differently. They saw that person as being capable.... To have that platform to be able to get up and speak to all my colleagues.... I think they saw me as having a vision for higher education.

In stretching personal boundaries, 'right fit' emerged as very important. All of the interviewees were moved to take their current positions because of a connectedness they felt, even upon preliminary visits to their respective college or university, which tapped into their growth orientation for both themselves and the institution they came to lead. For instance:

When I came and interviewed, I fell in love with the school. This will sound really hokey but I could see it. I could see blue shutters, there were double wide trailers in this parking lot over here. I could see those gone, the research building sitting there, the science building ... I could see where this school could be. So ...I asked [my old president] to be a reference, and he called and said, 'Well why do you want to do this?' And I said, 'I can really make a difference here. I could add value and change this place.'

In other words, they wanted to feel purposeful and to be in a place where they could make a difference; and in their respective college or university, they found a community with complementary values where they felt they would be positively challenged.

### **B. Countercultural Women: The Role of Otherness.**

Despite the many opportunities presented to the interviewees, they often were "othered" for not adhering to more conventional gender roles. The women whom we interviewed progressed personally and professionally through continuous learning in and outside of the workplace, accepting ever more responsibilities. However, in doing so they also had to reject conventional expectations for women. Despite clearly communicated expectations from family and/or community members, our interviewees maneuvered themselves around these barriers to achieve their professional goals, consciously choosing to deviate from the normative expectations of the time (1960s - 90s) for women. They had the confidence, principles, and self-expectations *not* to do things in "the usual way," not to succumb to their own self-doubts about whether they could perform, and assertively to develop their capabilities as administrators. A telling illustration came from one of



our respondents who, as a young mother, needed to “sneak away” to attend college classes while her children were in daycare, rather than playing tennis with her contemporaries. Another described:

...I was one of the only women in our married circles who worked or who was pursuing a doctorate and so in some ways I think I am an outlier. ...I was terrified we would be invited to a coffee klatch because I didn't know how to manage that. Luckily I met some wonderful women but I also went to NOW meetings, National Organization of Women, where the whole message back then was put your kids in daycare and devote yourself to your career. So, I didn't fit in either place.

For these women, when growth orientation conflicted with societal norms, it was the growth orientation-along with determination and a sense of justice that won. For example:

It was the same thing when I was finishing my doctorate. All male committee. Intellectual gangbang. They used to let people go ahead with one [incomplete]. I had one incomplete, it was a team project, and they said I couldn't do my orals. And I said, ‘When did you decide that?’ They said, ‘Today.’ So I got my people together over the week, we wrote the paper. ...I remember saying, ‘I'm not going to let a bunch of guys stop me after everything that I've done.’

Although their gender undoubtedly created extra challenges at times, these women did not want to be defined by it. Strikingly, in spite of sharing many illustrative stories such as those above, *most did not view themselves as being held back based on their gender*. Did they ignore the signs, deny the experiences, to stay focused on their goals? Social psychologist Faye Crosby (Crosby, Golding, & Resnick, 1983) uncovered a surprising phenomenon wherein women may be unaware of having personally been victims of gender discrimination and deny it exists. Crosby termed this “the denial of personal discrimination” (pp. 183). Illustrating this, as well as how women who work in male dominated organizations, can find power in common experiences, one president recalled,

I didn't realize [the sexism] until the Anita Hill incident. I went to lunch over in the cafeteria and I'm sitting there with women. One of the women is in the Academy of Science. ...She is this top tier scientist. There was a woman who is now a federal judge at the table. There was a woman who was a surgeon. I'm talking about the caliber of people and we were sitting there having lunch. Emotional, tears in our eyes. Everybody, they all

started to tell stories that none of us had ever told about sexism and humiliations and things that we had had to put up with and endured... It was an amazing moment for me because you realize how tough this is.

While some of their experiences clearly are examples of harassment, we believe being “othered”, i.e., a pervasive sense of being different from the norm, may have freed them to apply their distinctive-and particularly effective-lenses to the task of leadership.

### **C. Lens of Leadership: Mother, Teacher, Bossypants.**

In spite of their willingness to violate normative gender roles, and determination in the face of related obstacles, these presidents did not advance by tossing out their normative feminine value of caring for others' well-being and development. Instead, through their family upbringing (Madsen, 2007) and life choices as teachers, mothers and administrators, along with their education, values, and encounters along the way, they incorporated these aspects into their “lenses” of leadership. One president described the responsibilities of motherhood as her “executive training”:

My style of leadership, part of it, how I developed it does come from mothering... Because I sort of subscribe to the leading from the “messy middle” kind of approach... I think you're here, kind of stirring the pot, keeping everything spinning. I think I learned very early, because of having my children and then going back to school, and I had a husband who was president of a company ... so there were responsibilities of all those things happening at once.... [W]hen I see people who can go to school to just study-I never had that. It was always carving out and keeping things moving. And as I moved forward, it's interesting, that I think those skills have really served me well. To manage a complex, an increasingly complex university.

Yet another described developing her lens of leadership through assuming responsibility early in life: “My brothers and sisters are... younger than I am and I was the eldest... They would say I was bossy. Of course, with the lens of your own view you don't see it that way, but I was always in a position of responsibility with expectations-and again this is the teacher part-for organizing or moving things in a particular direction.” Research has indicated that women who take charge are described as “bossy,” while men who exhibit the same behavior are described as taking charge

and strong. This is consistent with gender stereotypes in which *women take care and men take charge* (Schein et al., 1996). Here, her parents gave this future president the opportunity for significant responsibility. They sponsored, endorsed, and appreciated her “bossiness,” i.e., being confidently in charge, and encouraged her leadership development at an early age.

#### **D. Innovative Big Picture Thinkers**

The interviewees like to think at high levels and are change agents at heart. Visionaries and “dream weavers” focused on the mission of their university or college, they see opportunities that others may not. Purpose is the rudder that allows them to direct their attention toward the shared goals of the college or university, in order to clarify what they need to learn to achieve those goals. These women did not define themselves as “female leaders” but, rather, focused on their leadership to advance the organization toward a vision, grounded in principles and values for which they stood. Virtually all articulated some sense of responsibility to make the world better, something one president referred to explicitly as the Jewish concept of *tikkun olam*, which means to bear responsibility for healing and repairing the world. For example, “My old president..., I asked him to be a reference, and he called and said, ‘Well why do you want to do this?’ And I said, ‘I can really make a difference here. I could add value and change this place.’ And he said, ‘Well, that’s the only reason to do it.’ That got me excited.” This is consistent with Ibarra et al.’s (2013) research-based conclusion that effective leaders develop a sense of purpose by pursuing goals that align with their personal values and also advance the collective good. “Doing so... gives them a compelling reason to take action despite personal fears and insecurities” (p. 5).

## **II - How They Do It**

#### **E. Visioning**

As ‘Big Picture Thinkers’ able to see both what is and what can be, these women naturally envision pathways forward. Bennis & Nanus (1985) defined leadership in terms of the capacity to create a compelling vision, to translate it into action, and to sustain it. Such skill sets are grounded in the values of growth and development-optimism about others and the future, imagination, and an openness to future possibilities. As one president put it, “I can see people more competent maybe than they see themselves. I saw [my university] becoming more than it was....” Their inherent growth orientation then propels them to action. One president tells us this recollection of when she first arrived:

I felt I had to move everything forward. ...We’ve had a lot of turnover. To me, that’s been a healthy thing for the institution. The way I see it is that you get on the bus or you get out of the way.... It attracts people who like a little chaos, who can deal with ambiguity. ...Because of growth, we’ve had a lot of new hires and we’ve been hiring the next generation. That’s our future intellectual capital... We’re hiring top tier new PhDs. So the school is only going to get stronger if we have those people there. ...We’ve created change at a pace that is unprecedented... I did a re-organization after 6 months on this job, and we’ve created 8 new programs of study in the past 6 months. We’ve got 2 more teed up. Because we’re the type of school we are, we’re not caught up in the bureaucracy, we can be much more agile, not just responsive, but proactive in things.

While visioning is a necessary skill, we believe it is the inherent nature of our interviewees as ‘change agents at heart’ who provide the drive, determination, and interpersonal potency to move their initiatives forward.

#### **F. The Presidential Identity: Situating Oneself Within Systems.**

A critical feature among the eight women whom we interviewed was their deep and reflective understanding of their knowledge and life experiences, and an ability to see the big picture and to delve into the details simultaneously. This was exemplified in their understanding of how to retain their core self within a large-scale, complex, and demanding system. The presidents articulated clear intentions about ensuring that their actions aligned with their values. They focused on the school’s mission and the students’ well-being when faced with complex issues and competing desires, needs, and expectations. As one woman said:

Circus! Circus! You know, three rings, lots of flaming hoops, jumping through, (and) wild animals, you know the whole thing. ...One of the things you have to do as a leader is sometimes try to stay centered and do the things you need to do. And some people will get it, and some people won’t ... you’re not acting for the audience, you’re acting to enact the things that need to be carried forth.

Thus, on their path to the presidency, these women learned to trust their judgment, experience, and knowledge. Their stories indicated a firm belief that alignment between espoused values and actions requires honest questioning and critique of oneself. In seeking the best outcomes, they questioned themselves as much as they questioned others to gain information.

Finally, becoming a president of an institution involves a fundamental shift in identity, a sense of the weight and limitations of one's influence within a larger system. Each of the presidents spoke about their need to be insightful when navigating through the heavily politicized organization of academia.

### **G. Mentoring, Sponsoring, Networking, and Learning by Observing Others.**

All the respondents in this study have benefited from relationships with influential individuals, as well as from networked groups of successful individuals. From luncheons with former presidents to close alignment with political dynasties and state senators, each respondent gained influence through their professional alliances, activities (Kanter, 1977), and achievements. They frequently described their mentors or sponsors as the ones who saw the potential in them, to be actualized, which they had not yet discovered in themselves. We use the term *mentor* to refer to a relationship in which one individual, the mentor, supports and encourages another individual, the mentee, helping the latter to realize his or her own capabilities. A sponsor also could be a mentor but in order to be characterized as a sponsor one must help to advance the career of those sponsored (Hewlett, 2013). What distinguishes a sponsor from a mentor is "agency," defined as power with authority. This is illustrated in the following vignette referring to an unsuccessful application that ultimately resulted in the confidence to apply for her (now) current position:

And I would not have considered a college presidency but for the fact that a colleague, a retired colleague, came to me one day out of the blue and said I have an off the wall idea, why don't you apply to be president.... And I said, I can't apply for that job for all the reasons I gave you before: I don't have the resume, I absolutely don't have the qualifications... well his wife had been class of '47 at this college... and she is now an Emerita Trustee, and he said I've just got feeling about it, you know, you would be a good role model for these girls and all that. And for him and for her, I applied...

As one interviewee described her mentor:

They kind of saw something that I didn't even realize that I had and that I didn't appreciate... the assistance came more as a matter of coaching. "Here is how you should do a resume for an administrative position; ...we think you would be good at this kind of thing." So it was more of a kind of opening of doors...I had a really important mentor...who coached me for the last couple years of college and was the one who said, "You need to go to graduate school...and here is how you apply."

Research shows that most university presidents were connected to influential individuals through situations, positions, and opportunities (Madsen, 2008). This implies a recurring mosaic of contextual factors, especially in regard to upbringing, previous employment, and career achievements that have informed and facilitated the success of these female presidents.

Patriarchy is embedded in the dynamics of mentorship in organizations. Sinclair (1998) found women appreciate and benefit from male mentoring and, in some cases, do not tend to think of themselves as leaders until older males demonstrate support. One respondent observed a sequence of events at a cocktail party in the 1990s that illustrates the importance of male-female professional relationships. After giving a speech earlier, the woman was pulled aside and told by the president of the university where she taught and was chair of the senate about the job of a university or college president:

...He said "these are tough jobs." He took my arm and he said "but these are great jobs. You should do this someday, you should do this." I walked into the library that [same] night... and a Dean walked in and said, "so do you see yourself in this, could you do this? Do you think you could be a president?" What is this thing all of a sudden?

While More-Brown (2005) found that mentorship is one factor that facilitates women's climb up the administrative ladder to college presidencies, women often underestimate the role of sponsorship in their career advancement. Especially when a potential sponsor is a man, ambitious women often avoid the pursuit of sponsorship because they fear that it will be misconstrued as sexual interest (Hewlett, 2013). Perhaps avoiding this predicament, all of the women in this study relied on friends as mentors rather than sponsors at work: "I have had really good, supportive friends who told me 'you need to do this for yourself and to

get going.' You know, women friends." The lack of women in influential positions in higher education and, hence, the lack of availability of women mentors and supports did not deter the respondents. Sponsors and mentors at high levels saw their talent and either leveraged opportunities for them or provided the support necessary for the respondent to achieve her professional goals.

### **H. Relationships and Trust**

Organizational visioning requires one set of skills, but another set of skills and abilities is necessary to gain commitment toward that vision. The role of the president is to express, but not impose, her vision, to get buy-in in order to implement it. To share a vision and its implementation calls for open, caring relations with employees and face-to-face communication (Tichy & Sherman, 1994). The respondents tackled the challenges in their new roles with their strength as relationship builders. They reached out to longtime friends and colleagues outside of their college or university for advice, support, and reality checking.

The respondents all found individuals and networks within their setting to encourage their growth and push them further in the organization. As one president said, "You must uplift others in order to succeed yourself. Your developing others' leadership capabilities allows you to achieve your vision."

For example, at the start of her presidency, one woman described how she had asked employees a series of questions to learn more about them:

I asked about their pathway to the University. I am fascinated by pathway stories. ...I asked: if the campus knew you like you know yourself, what would we be having you do? This gave people a chance to say how they thought they were misunderstood or under-appreciated-it gave them a chance to say "here is my strength" ...You are sitting in front of the new president, what should I know, what would you change?

The presidents also knew the science of team decision making where answers lie in the collective intelligence and wisdom of an effective team process in which conclusions and assumptions are questioned and debated. Effective leadership to move a vision forward requires the trust of one's team, the skilled facilitation of dialogues and shared problem solving, and comfort with seeing various perspectives in order to arrive at the best solution and strategy for implementation. For example: "I know because they are comfortable pushing back when we are debating about what is the direction that we are going.... I like, I love a vigorous debate and a dialogue."

Tichy and Sherman (1994) say that the most effective organizations will have "people who can instinctively act the right way, without instructions, and who feel inspired to share their best ideas with their employers. That calls for emotional commitment. You can't get it by pointing a gun. You can't buy it..." (p. 195). Because there are many uncertainties and so many pieces of information that each team member holds, a president must be willing to trust her team and her team needs to trust her back. These presidents understood the importance of partnering with and empowering others as part of their orientation toward growth and continuous learning. They also needed to be able to trust themselves in order to gain the confidence of others, which was a key marker in their growth as leaders. Finally, they either had supports in place or constructed them to assist themselves out of restrictive circumstances and into supportive environments. In addition to forming close team-working relationships to achieve a compelling vision, such bonds also offset the consequences of loneliness CEOs may experience.

### **Discussion**

The specific qualities associated with our women presidents included a powerful growth orientation for themselves, others, and their institutions; the role of 'otherness' in freeing them from normative expectations; the lens of leadership based in experiences of being mother, teacher, or older sibling; and innovative, big picture, and systems-savvy thinkers. Additionally, we found they successfully used their abilities of visioning what could be, situating themselves strategically within the system, and building significant, trusting, and enduring relationships with colleagues and constituents. Although factors mined from our interview data described women, they are equally applicable to men. As Eagly and Chin (2010) have shown, *although women outshine men in the qualities associated with transformational leadership*, men too can have these capacities; and emerging leadership demands are forcing men and women to exercise leadership in both transformational and transactional styles (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

As our society moves towards a greater understanding of our interconnectedness and the positive effects of diversity in achieving organizational excellence, we should continue to study women's ways of leading as a model for achieving progressive visions for the leaders of tomorrow. We share our findings with the backdrop of a groundswell of rising women's voices and movements calling for change, and a growing body of research that suggests *women-led companies outperform their male-run*

*competitors*. A 2015 study showed that women-led teams were more collaborative, cohesive, participative, and positively associated with cooperative learning—including in the leadership of geographically dispersed teams (Post, 2015). Those results suggest *women-led companies foster a more effective corporate culture that leads to success*.

A culture of growth and development in institutions of higher education calls for greater diversity in leadership. We focused our study not on the multiple barriers that women face (Bornstein, 2008; Heilman, 2001; Jablonski, 2000; Madsen, 2007), but rather on the qualities and practices that encouraged the women in this study toward the presidency, and helped them to succeed. We wanted to learn from these women in order to spotlight what women bring to a CEO position in higher education and to encourage both women and men to develop their leadership potential in the ways outlined in our findings. Qualities and best practices identified with transformational and relational approaches to leadership were plentiful in our findings, and may be a harbinger of changes to come, not only within higher education, but in all healthy and productive organizations. Organizational structures of the future will rely more on relational approaches that encourage networking rather than hierarchy, and men and women faculty, staff, and students need role models to change their mental models of “leadership qualities.” Higher education institutions that identify, acknowledge, and eliminate structural and cultural impediments to women’s leadership can serve as models of the new twenty-first century organization.

## Conclusion

To answer the increasingly pointed question about connection between higher education and success in the workplace, we must mirror equity in gender diversity at all levels, not only in individual colleges and universities, but throughout the US. We must model the way for our male and female students, not in words but in actuality so they may see the possibilities for themselves. The most forward-thinking, change-oriented institutions recognize that reform on the scale mandated by today’s challenges in higher education requires an evolution in institutional culture. This change applies not only to a new era for higher education, but also for our society at large, where women’s representation at the highest level is congruent with the proportion of women enrolled in our colleges and universities (Sneed, 2007). We have an obligation as a society to move away from a preference for power in leadership decision making (Kanter, 1977) toward a preference for collaboration, sharing influence, inclusion, and trust building.

Although this study contributes to the literature on women in higher education by discussing normative challenges to traditional notions of leadership, self-imposed challenges additionally may limit advancement for women. Further research is needed on this topic and for other underrepresented populations who possess or are developing the qualities for pursuing senior level roles in higher education. It is our hope this study provides inspiration and strategies for those women who sit in the president’s chair and for those who aspire to do so one day.

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