

Regional

College presidents mostly white and aging

Despite the fact that the leadership of colleges and universities in this country is in dire need of fresh ideas, a report released last week by the American Council on Education (ACE) shows that the people in these positions continue to be largely white, male – and getting older. And while women represent the majority of undergraduate and graduate students in this country and that the number of minorities attending colleges and universities keeps growing and will continue to grow in the years to come, by 2016 less than a third of college presidents were women and less than a fifth were members of any ethnic minority.

The ACE report found that the average president was 61.7 years old, up from 60.7 years old in 2011 and 59.9 years old in 2006. Also, there is an increasing proportion of leaders (nearly a fourth) who had already led other colleges and universities. This seems to indicate that the people in charge of selecting college presidents care more about experience than new ideas.

Further analysis of the results of this study shows other tendencies. For example, the kinds of institutions with the largest percentage of women are community colleges (36 percent) compared to 27.3 percent of private nonprofits. Also, almost all of the changes in the proportion of minorities came from an increase in African-American leaders, growing from 5.9 percent in 2016 to 7.9 percent last year. This accounts for very little growth in diversity despite the fact that the number of colleges and universities

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that claim to be minority serving institutions (colleges with 25 percent of their undergraduate enrollment being minorities of a particular group), keeps increasing. And despite the fact that Spanish-speaking people constitute the fastest growing minority in the U.S., the increase in the proportion of Latino presidents grew from 3.8 percent five years ago to only 3.9 last year, while the percentage of Asian-American presidents grew slightly to 2.3 percent from 1.5 percent for the same period.

There is also a great disparity in minority representation based on the type of institution. According to the ACE study, 22.3 percent of public colleges and universities are being led by a minority president, while that is only the case at 10.6 percent of private, non-profit institutions. Once we exclude minority-serving institutions, that means that only 11 percent of college presidents are minorities.

What is really shocking is that fewer minority-serving institutions are being led by minority presidents. They constituted 53 percent in 2011, but only 36 percent last year.

Other data in the report are also of concern. For example, the percentage of Hispanic presidents who were women dropped significantly from 38.7 percent 2011 to 21.7 percent in

2016, while the proportion of African-American women being presidents remained identical for the same period of time.

When it comes to age, the pattern is also regressive. The proportion of presidents age 71 or older grew from 5 percent in 2011 to 11 percent in 2016, while the average tenure of a college president in their current job was 6.5 years in 2016, down from seven years in 2011 and 8.5 years in 2006.

Another interesting trend is the reduction in the proportion of presidents hired from outside the academy.

It was 13 percent in 2006, 20 percent in 2011, and now is only 15 percent. This may be due to the numerous incidents and even scandals that have occurred when presidents without experience in higher education have shown a gross lack of understanding of the nature of college and universities when compared with the corporate world or government.

This study, titled “American College President Study” has been carried out periodically since 1986 and allows us to gain a historical perspective about the demographics of the leadership of higher education in the U.S. For this edition, they surveyed more than 1,500 colleges and universities.

Why it is important that we look at these numbers? The reasons are many. It is not just a matter of social justice, but a matter of dealing with the multiple challenges faced by colleges and universities these days. When it comes to

issues such as lowering budgets, lack of innovation, and public image, what higher education needs are new and fresh ideas, not the same old same old. To that end, we need people who have backgrounds, skills, and experiences different from the typical presidents of the last few years. Also, more and more students of color are demanding to see more people both at the faculty and at the top administration levels who look like them, perhaps the key to lessen the racial issues that have hounded many campuses in the last few years. After all, 56 percent of presidents reported in this study that the racial climate on their campuses was more of a priority than it had been in the past three years.

Who has the responsibility for making significant changes in these areas? Basically, boards of trustees. They need to show more courage in selecting people other than older white males. If they want their institutions not only to survive but even to thrive in these difficult times for higher education, they need to look seriously into people who are different from themselves.

To pretend that the same kind of people will deal effectively with the growing problems at colleges and universities is just wishful thinking. You cannot get different results by doing the same thing again and again.

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