

Roadblocks on the Road to Diversity



Five presidential search experts respond to a Trusteeship query on why there are not more females and minorities leading American colleges and universities today.

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HE AMERICAN COLLEGE PRESIDENCY, an increasingly demanding position that chews up the best in higher education, is still largely a preserve of white males. Despite decades of progress in opening opportunities for women and minority chief executives, many presidents and observers of the institution note that efforts to diversify top leadership on campus continue to hit roadblocks.

The percentage of female presidents rose to 19 percent in 1998, from 9.5 percent in 1986, according to latest figures from the American Council on Education. In recent years, 25 percent of newly hired presidents have been women. Minority presidents rose from 8 percent to 11 percent from 1986-98. Those minority incumbents now comprise 6.3 percent African Americans, 0.9 percent Asian Americans, 3.2 percent Hispanics, and 0.9 percent Native Americans.

The reasons for this slow pace of change might include everything from old-fashioned prejudice, to a limited pool of qualified and experienced female and minority candidates, to a reluctance among board search committees and executive search firms to self-consciously promote female and minority prospects.

To pinpoint some practical reasons why the goal of diversity remains elusive, *Trusteeship* asked five experts who work for prominent executive search firms to offer their thoughts on why as many as 80 percent of U.S. college presidents are men. Some of their observations also may apply to efforts to diversify other sectors of higher education, including boards of trustees.

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Ask the question why the presidents of America's colleges and universities are predominantly white males, a disproportionate 80-plus percent, and the likely answer will be: "Qualified women and minorities just aren't out there." While some of those espousing this rationale no doubt believe it, the argument is specious. Such candidates indeed are "out there."

Of full-time higher education administrators, the group that supplies 92.2 percent of new presidents each year, 54.6 percent are men, 45.4 percent are women, and total minorities (male and female) make up 14.1 percent. Put more simply, there are nearly as many women as men in the group, and the minority 14.1 percent, according to the U.S. Equal Opportunity Employment Commission.

In other words, there are nearly as many women as men in the group, and the minority 14.1 percent is higher than the 11.2 percent of current college presidents who, according to ACE, are minorities. We must remember, of course, that the minority-president percentage includes the chief executives of the country's 105 historically black colleges and universities.

The issue of who is "qualified" is difficult to address, and in many instances is contrived to be so. Those of us engaged in academic presidential search know that there are a great many more highly qualified women and minorities "out there" than the presidential numbers suggest—very likely by a factor of two.

If this is true, why does redressing the imbalance proceed at such a tortuously slow pace? One significant factor is the

problem of tokenism. Consider this common scenario: A governing board and search committee state a strong desire to include women and minorities in their search. The search counsel presents four or five such candidates among the top 12 to 15. The committee selects seven or eight semifinalists, including three women and/or minorities and after interviewing them chooses four finalists, one a woman and/or minority. The board and committee are pleased with the slate, and a white male is selected as the institution's next president.

There is one respect in which the scenario is not typical. The search counsel tries to target women and minorities in the effort to identify four or five for inclusion among the top candidates. Unfortunately, our scenario has repeated itself so often over the years that women and minorities become frustrated and opt out of searches, which ultimately diminishes a major talent resource.

Therein lies a major challenge for search firms: gaining the board's confidence so that members may speak to search consultants frankly. Only then will the institution go beyond encouraging search firms to recruit women and minorities to telling them about the barriers to the acceptance of such candidates, so that the firms can realistically help prepare the candidate for the search.

Search firms have proved that they are skilled at finding high-potential female and minority candidates, and they are uniquely positioned to do so. The next challenge is to convince more female and minority candidates that they can trust the search firms. Only by gaining the confidence of our clients on the institutional boards can search firms accomplish that.

