

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

COLLEGE LEADERS

Most New Presidents at Top Research Universities Are Now Women

By *David Jesse*

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ADAM NIKLEWICZ FOR THE CHRONICLE

The last 20 months have seen a rise in the number of women leading the nation’s premier research universities, a new study shows.

Women now sit in the president’s office in 30 percent of the nation’s 146 R1 research universities, up from 22 percent when the same survey was conducted in September 2021 by the Women’s Power Gap, an effort by the Eos Foundation to increase the number of women from diverse backgrounds in high-ranking executive positions.

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Fifty-three percent of the 38 presidents appointed since that period were women. Nine institutions — including Dartmouth College, Oregon State University, and New York University — named their first female president ever.

That number could rise in the near future, the study notes. At least seven R1 universities, including Boston University, Michigan State University, and Ohio State University, have openings.

“It is heartening to see more women leading our nation’s elite universities,” said Andrea Silbert, president of the Eos Foundation. “This speaks to an increased awareness of the importance of having academic leadership that represents the diversity of the student population it serves. Women have outnumbered men on college campuses for decades, so it’s high time we’re starting to see more gender and racial diversity reflected in the highest roles in academia.”

The key to the increase has been the institutions that cast a wider net when creating a pool of candidates, Silbert said.

But there’s much to do to get to gender and racial parity, the group said. Only six percent of R1 university presidents are women of color, and 39 percent of the universities have never had a woman president.

There's less of a gap between men and women at the provost level, the study found. Women fill 39 percent of the provost jobs, while men fill 61 percent.

But the gap is more like a chasm at 25 university-system presidencies, which include at least one R1 university. Men hold all of them.

The higher percentage of female provosts shows Silbert that the traditional pipeline to a presidency isn't bereft of qualified female candidates. However, there's still work to be done with boards when working through the selection process. She advocates for having the institution's chief human-resources officer in the room during interviews and selection discussions to help boards work past biases.

There's also a gap when looking at the gender of board chairs at R1 institutions. Women hold less than 30 percent of those positions.

This mirrors results from the American Council on Education's [broader survey of presidents](#). In that survey, conducted across all institutional sectors, women made up 32.8 percent of presidencies, up from 30.1 percent in 2016, the last time the survey was conducted. In 1985, women made up only 9.5 percent of presidencies, that survey showed.

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