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## Women Midwestern University Presidents Reach One in Three: A Potential Tipping Point for Gender Parity

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**Women Midwestern University  
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.69670/mje.1.2.3><https://www.williamwoods.edu/academics/mje>**Elizabeth (Beth) J. Stroble<sup>1</sup> [[ORCID](#)], Christopher Groh<sup>2</sup> [[ORCID](#)]****Abstract**

This research focused on women's leadership in U. S. college and university presidencies. The authors examined publicly available data that reveal trends in women's leadership in U. S. higher education. By placing the analysis of data in a larger context, the study identifies this moment as a potential tipping point for women university presidents. Specifically, the study targets Midwestern U. S. regional universities with attention to these variables: presidents' gender in 2020 and 2023, transition patterns in leadership, and relevant distinctions between public and private institutions. The analysis focuses on leadership changes that differ from national trends and the potential tipping point for gender parity. Further, conclusions are drawn for aspiring women presidents and institutions that wish to advance gender inclusion at the presidential level. Finally, the authors recommend areas of further inquiry and research.

**Keywords**

women's leadership, gender parity, higher education leadership

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## Introduction

Research focused on women in leadership is not new, whether reviewing trends in the United States or globally, or in educational management administration, business and industry. The reason for this focus is clear: while women's participation in organizations has grown to attain majorities in many instances, whether in student or employee numbers, why does a gap in gender parity at leadership levels persist? Why aren't there more women leading schools, institutions of higher education, and businesses? Studies query the demographic trends in specific organizations, document and analyze individual women's approaches to leadership, and investigate larger questions about the attributes and contributions of women's ways and styles of leading.

Entities that track gender representation in management and leadership positions describe the persistent gap between men and women in these roles. Globally, Langton et al. (2024) reported,

When it comes to gender parity, 2023 saw progress – but not enough of it. While last year saw the joint (with 2022) highest-recorded proportion of women CEOs appointed to the world's leading indices, this number was only 12%. Of the people appointed to lead global companies, just 22 were women, as opposed to 156 men. (p. 6)

Similarly, Laidlaw et al. (2023) noted that women CEOs remain rare, as “only 4.4% of over 5,400 companies assessed in the S&P Global Corporate Sustainability Assessment had a woman CEO” (para. 5). While achieving gender parity in corporate leadership roles by 2030 is possible, the closing of the leadership gender gap is fueled by increased percentages of women in board and various C-suite positions in Russell 3000 companies; the CEO gender gap persists (Leech, 2023).

Similar trends prevail in educational settings. Among the five hundred largest school districts in the United States, while modest gains have been made in women's leadership in recent years, women hold only 30% of the superintendencies (ILO Group, 2023). In higher education, men predominate in the presidencies of U. S. colleges and universities. The American Council on Education has regularly published the American College President Study since 1978, documenting gradually increasing percentages of women in the presidency over time; yet men occupy more than 60% of the current total, continuing to outnumber women counterparts (Melidona et al., 2023). By contrast, women represent 60% of university students and 47% of the faculty (Melidona et al., 2023).

## The Gender Gap

The reasons for the gender gap are many, “encompassing opportunity, bias, cultural norms, and individual motivations (McShane & Pye, 2024, para. 1). The presence of the barriers to women's advancement to top leadership positions is so apparent as to have elicited a label, the *glass ceiling*,

a metaphor for the invisible but enduring set of conditions that prevent women from advancing to manager-level and executive positions. While the term may have gained initial use in the 1970s, Marilyn Loden used it in 1978 as she spoke about the systemic barriers to women's promotion (Kagan, 2024). The metaphor proved helpful in describing the barriers to women's advancement; the term has now expanded to include the barriers to those individuals and groups underrepresented in leadership roles. Most recently, the term *glass cliff* has been coined to describe the particularly challenging and fraught positions for which women executives may be recruited, with potentially negative career consequences if they fail.

Interest in identifying the specific nature of these barriers and how to address them is strong. Organizational leadership groups in higher education and business have created initiatives to increase scholarship and interventions for and with women who aspire to higher leadership. Among these are the American Council on Education, the International Association of University Presidents, the European Women Rectors Association, Catalyst, Chief, McKinsey & Company, and Russell Reynolds Associates. Seminars and forums abound. These recent online gatherings and podcasts typify the focus: "The 30%: Female Leadership in Higher Education" (Inside Higher Ed., 2024), "Tackling the Leaky Pipeline in Academic Leadership" (International Association of Universities & European Women Rectors Association, 2024), or "What's Preventing Gender Parity in the C-Suite?" (The New Rules of Business, 2023).

Explicit attention to women's leadership is necessary to reveal what has been hidden in plain sight. As Criado Perez (2019) documented in her global, industry-spanning study,

One of the most important things to say about the gender data gap is that it is not generally malicious, or even deliberate. Quite the opposite. It is simply the product of a way of thinking that has been around for millennia and is therefore a kind of not thinking. A double not thinking, even: men go without saying, and women don't get said at all. Because when we say human, on the whole, we mean man. (p. 10)

Further, "The result of this deeply male-dominated culture is that the male experience, the male perspective, has come to be seen as universal, while the female experience – that of half the global population, after all – is seen as, well, niche" (Perez, 2019, p. 30). In the interest of removing barriers to women's advancement as leaders and increasing equity among genders in educational management administration and leadership, the study of women's leadership matters. As the university chancellor and graduate research assistant, we share a professional and scholarly interest in women's leadership.

## Women's Leadership

The body of scholarship in women's studies and gender studies provides a foundation for examining the dimensions of gender parity in educational leadership. They range from Gilligan's (1982) groundbreaking work on moral development in girls and women to landmark research and analysis of women's ways of knowing, first published by Belenky et al. (1997). Lambert et al. (1995) and Lambert & Gardner (2009) extended and popularized the attention to the characteristics of women's leadership in their publications. As these scholars and many others gave voice to women's lived experiences, profiles of women in leadership increased in number.

While Grogan & Shakeshaft (2011, 2013) focused their work on women leaders in school settings, they not only shared the narratives of women educational leaders but advanced the knowledge base regarding women's approaches to leadership and argued for the inclusion of women's experience in administrative theory. Irwin (1995) paired a case study of instructional supervision with in-depth interviews of women with whom the supervisor worked, describing a style of leadership marked by caring, collaboration, and empowerment. Edited volumes such as Eggins (1997) were written entirely by women leaders and managers in higher education, providing case studies and recommended practices for improving gender parity. Similarly, the publication edited by Longman & Madsen (2014) linked theory, research, and practice, and ultimately called for greater gender parity in leadership as women gain majorities as students. The changes institutions are undergoing require more inclusive approaches to leadership.

## Indicators of a Tipping Point

Given the gradual upward growth of women in leadership roles over time, questions arise about the probable timing of achieving gender parity. Yates (2023) emphasized that,

based on American College President Study (ACPS) data, ACE estimates that higher education would need to retain 500 women presidents and hire two times more women than men into the presidential role in the next five years to achieve gender parity. To achieve gender equity and be reflective of the current student population, 1,800 women presidents would need to be hired in the next four years. (p. 4)

While that pace of change can seem daunting, other phenomena are worthy of review. The 30% figure may represent an organizational reality with more predictive power than imagined, presuming continued closing of the gender gap absent countervailing forces.

Organizational leadership studies of *the power of three* are revealing in this regard. Research on gender diversity in corporate boardrooms posits that "when you reach 30% female representation, you get the benefits of genuine diversity and better outcomes for stakeholders and shareholders" (Stuart, 2018, para. 5). CEO Magazine describes the power of three in this way: "one woman in

the boardroom is a token, two is a presence, three is a voice” (Stuart, 2018, para. 9). Konrad & Kramer (2006) found as they interviewed women directors and corporate secretaries at Fortune 1000 companies that the presence of three women directors makes a significant difference. With three women directors, critical mass is achieved in ways that create more opportunities for all directors to contribute without regard to gender. Percentages matter. In answer to the question of how large minority groups need to be to reach tipping points in overturning established norms, Yong (2018) summarized research by Kanter and Centola showing that the needed number in challenging accepted conventions is at least 25 percent. Regarding boards or higher education institutions, Kramer and Adams (2020) noted that the overall size of a board and the composition of the board’s executive committee matters when considering the impact of women members.

At the same time, caution should be raised in presuming the slow but constant growth in percentages of women in leadership will continue in a positive direction or at the same pace. In 2023, for the first time in twenty years, women lost C-suite roles in publicly traded U.S. firms (Stych, 2024). Not only did the representation drop, but the C-Suite role growth rate slowed to the lowest in more than ten years. Researchers noted a declining corporate focus on diversity initiatives as a possible cause. Citing the unanticipated and surprising 2023 numbers, researchers Chiang et al. (2024) at S&P Global Market Intelligence suggested they indicate an inflection point in a negative direction and an even longer timeline to achieve gender parity.

Our study specifically focuses on the status of gender representation in U.S. college and university presidents. We have examined publicly available data that reveal trends over time and describe the U.S. context for women’s leadership in higher education and business. By placing our analysis in this larger context, we describe the dimensions of this moment as a potential inflection point in women’s U.S. higher education leadership.

The Midwest as a region to conduct the study was chosen as it is of interest from different standpoints, one of which is the presence of the authors’ institution at the time of the study, Webster University. The Midwest had a pivotal role in developing the United States, impacting significant historical events, and contributing to economic advancement, especially in early history, by being a center of agriculture, industry, and transportation (Trepanier, 2016). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Midwest saw a notable increase in universities, which were distinguished by their emphasis on accessibility, practicality, piety, and civility, also producing a disproportionate number of professional scientists in the region (Gelber, 2012). The development of universities was heavily impacted by the cultural and social context of the region, characterized by conservatism, protestant values, and a commitment to democracy (Hoeveler, 1974).

The United States has 5,983 degree-granting postsecondary institutions, of which 3,779 are public, 1,587 are private non-profit, and 617 are private for-profit (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). The United States Census Bureau (2021) defines the states of the Midwest region as follows: Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, Wisconsin, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri,

Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota. The Midwest has 887 public, 420 private non-profit, and 90 private for-profit institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024).

### **Methodology**

This study investigates the landscape of gender equality in higher education across the United States, with a particular emphasis on the Midwest region, where Webster University's main campus is located. The paper investigates the dynamics at play and seeks to identify trends, barriers, and potential solutions to drive gender parity. The methodology chapter outlines the research design, data collection methods, and variables involved in this study.

Multiple questions of interest were established during the topic's exploration. The purpose of further researching gender parity is to gain further insight into the historical development within higher education. The exploration seeks to identify contributing factors driving potential changes, barriers hindering the advancement of parity, and potential measures to support gender parity further.

### **Research Design and Approach**

A mixed-methods approach was selected to comprehensively address the research questions by covering qualitative sources within the existing literature, quantitative sources in the form of existing statistics, and our own evaluation of a select group of higher education institutions within the United States Midwest region.

### **Data Collection**

Nationwide resources on gender-related data in higher education leadership are widely available; a significant provider of such information is the American Council on Education and its publication, *The American College President*. Webster University's geographical location in the Midwest led to the question of whether local trends align with the nationwide findings of the ACE ACP publication.

The research was conducted by analyzing existing data sources and relevant publications on the topic. In addition, the authors conducted a quantitative analysis of gender distribution in the presidencies of leading Midwest universities over the years 2020-2023.

### **Sample**

The source for the Midwest universities' subject of the analysis was retrieved on September 9, 2023, from the U.S. News & World Report (n.d.) Best Regional Universities Midwest Rankings. U.S. News & World Report (n.d.) provides extensive content on the institutions, including publications and rankings on higher education, with in-depth statistics on the institutions' tuition, acceptance rates, and other factors. The institutions are classified based on the respective Carnegie

criteria (Morse et al., 2023). Each institution was inspected on transitions in their executive leadership role between 2020 and 2023. Only the highest executive position was investigated, which is commonly referred to as the president, but depending on the respective institution it can be referred to as chancellor or CEO as well. In the case of an institution with multiple branches, only the main branches' leadership was considered for the analysis.

### Variables and Parameters

Five parameters are subjects of the research utilized to distinguish the institutions. The president's gender in the year 2020 and the gender in 2023 are the two main criteria. Further, whether there was a transition within the position between 2020 and 2023 was answered with either a yes or no. Additional parameters were if the position was, or actively is, held by an interim president within the years 2020 and 2023, in combination with their gender and documentation if the interim position became permanent. The last parameter was the type of institution: public or private. The outcomes have been visualized with a focus on showcasing the development of gender distribution.

### Findings and Discussion

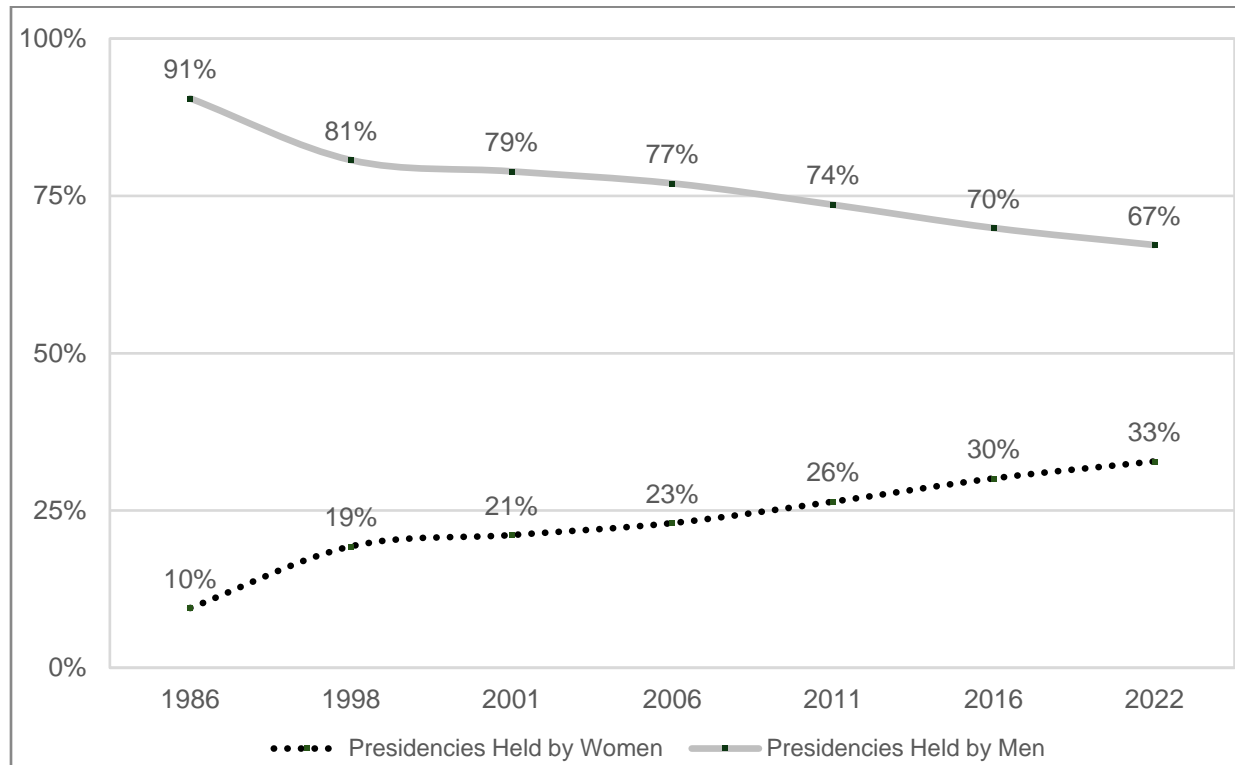
The data available from multiple publications of *The American College President*, published with varying authors over the years, were extracted to accommodate a big picture of historical development on gender parity in executive positions within higher education in the United States as shown in Table 1. Publications are released periodically, with changing survey questions and insights; nevertheless, the primary trend of gender distribution in presidencies has been continuously monitored.

**Table 1**

#### *American College Presidencies by Gender*

	1986	1998	2001	2006	2011	2016	2022
Presidencies Held by Women	9.5%	19.3%	21.1%	23.0%	26.4%	30.1%	32.8%
Presidencies Held by Men	90.5%	80.7%	78.9%	77.0%	73.6%	69.9%	67.2%

*United States university presidencies by gender, 1986-2022 (Center for Policy Analysis, 2007; Center for Policy Analysis, 2012; Gagliardi et al., 2017; Melidona et al., 2023)*

**Figure 1***U.S. University Presidencies by Gender*

*Visual representation of United States university presidencies by gender, 1986-2022 (Center for Policy Analysis, 2007, Center for Policy Analysis, 2012, Gagliardi et al., 2017 & Melidona et al., 2023)*

The national data were visualized to allow insight into trends and historical development. Figure 1 shows a continuously rising pattern over all years. The earliest considered year, 1986, exhibited a proportion of 9.5% women to 90.5% men, making an unproportioned jump to the following available data in 1998 with 19.3% women and 80.7% men. The next available years are 2001, 2006, 2011, 2016, and 2022, with an average increase of 2.7% per year. The last year's ratio of presidencies held by women to men is 32.8% to 67.2%; therefore, women make up around one-third of all presidents for U. S. institutions.

The results for Midwest universities, Table 2, shows an increase in presidencies held by women from 26.8% in 2020 to 34.0% in 2023 and a decrease in presidencies held by men from 73.2% in 2020 to 66.0% in 2023.

**Table 2***Midwest University Presidencies by Gender, 2020-2023*

	2020	2023
Female Presidents	26.8%	34.0%
Male Presidents	73.2%	66.0%

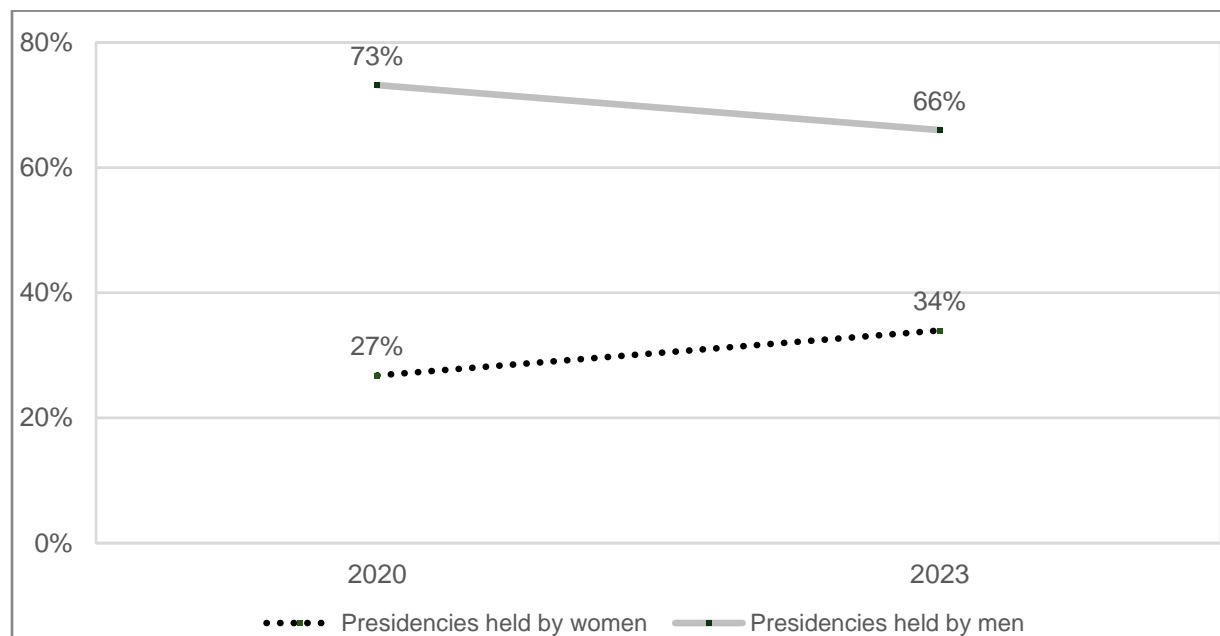
**Figure 2***Visual representation of Midwest university presidencies by gender, 2020-2023*

Figure 2 notes the substantial 7.2% increase over three years in presidencies held by women in the Midwest, which is comparably higher than the patterns observed for countrywide presidencies with data provided by the *American College President* publication. The increase to 34.0% of presidencies held by women is comparable to the result from the respective publication for 2022, and women represent over one-third of all presidencies in the Midwest as of 2023.

**Table 3***Transfers of Midwest Higher Education Presidencies by Gender, 2020-2023*

Transfers	Number	Percentage
Woman to woman	9	11.3%
Woman to man	7	8.8%
Man to man	47	58.8%
Man to woman	17	21.3%

Furthermore, part of the quantitative analysis provided insight into the transfers of positions between male and female presidents, shown in Table 3. A total of 153 positions were investigated, of which 72 had no change in leadership in the years 2020 to 2023, and of these 72 positions, 25 were consistently held by women, and 47 by men. A total amount of 80 leadership transitions were observable, of which 11.3% were between two women, 8.8% from a woman to man, 58.8% between two men, and 21.3% from a man to a woman.

**Table 4***Transitions by Gender and Institutional Type, 2020-2023*

	Private		Public	
Woman to woman	7	12.5%	2	8.3%
Woman to man	5	8.9%	2	8.3%
Man to man	30	53.6%	17	70.8%
Man to woman	14	25.0%	3	12.5%

Additionally, the question of whether there were gender-specific patterns regarding the transitions in context with the institutional type arose. To investigate this question, all institutions transitioning between 2020 and 2023 were inspected on the president's gender each year. The results, Table 4, were drawn with hindsight on the type differentiating public and private institutions.

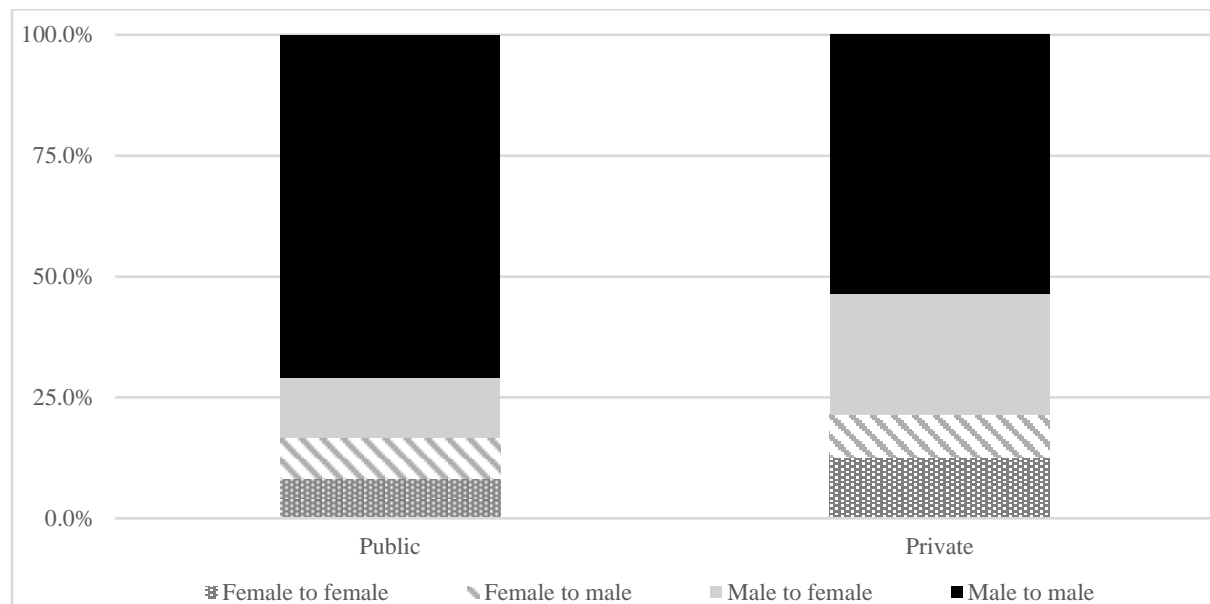
**Figure 3***Successor Patterns in Public and Private Universities, 2020-2023*

Figure 3 shows private institutions exhibited more woman-to-woman transitions with 12.5% versus 8.3% at public institutions. The number of woman-to-man transitions was similar, with 8.9% for private and 8.3 for public institutions. The number of man-to-man transitions was significantly lower at private institutions, with 53.6% versus 70.8% for public institutions. The number of man-to-woman transitions was significantly higher, at 25.0%, compared to 12.5% in public institutions. Overall, the number of female presidents in public universities increased from 25.6% to 30.2%, while the representation in private institutions increased from 27.3% to 35.5%.

Summarized, both the national and Midwest regional data exhibited an increase in female presidents over the years. When looking at successor patterns, differences between public and private institutions are noticeable. At public universities, the number of male-to-male transitions is greater, and the number of male-to-female transitions is significantly lower compared to private institutions.

### **Predictions and Presence of Opportunity**

As early as 2007, Cook noted the predicted high rate of presidential turnover and several high-profile appointments of women presidents as providing the potential for increasing women's opportunities to serve as college and university presidents. She cited observations of the Center for Policy Analysis (2007) in the American College President report, which highlighted changing demographics and "massive presidential turnover" (p.1) as creating opportunities for greater

diversity. However, Cook (2007) cautions that “hiring trends will have to change for those opportunities to bring more women and minorities into the presidency” (p. 1). Cook (2007) elaborates,

One in four recently hired college presidents is a woman, about the same rate as in 1998. If the rate stays the same when current presidents retire, women’s overall numbers in the presidency won’t change much from where they are today. (p. 2)

Historically, women presidents predominated in women’s colleges, often held by women religious; both the institutions and members of religious orders have declined in number. Community colleges often provided greater opportunities for women presidencies, while long-serving presidents of four-year co-educational institutions were most often men. As those men reach retirement age, more opportunities become present for presidential candidates, with the potential for advancing gender parity if the rate of hiring women increases. Among our Midwestern institutions, it is notable that more than half of the presidencies changed during the review period. While 35% of the presidencies continued to be held by women, the new appointments brought a hiring rate of 31%, approaching 1 in 3. This trend of accelerated rates of hiring women was more evident among private institutions. There, the hiring rate for women was 33%, or one in three.

Are there distinctive dynamics in private or independent institutions that tilt the balance toward appointing women as their presidents? Any number of factors may be identified with further research, including but not limited to the composition of the governing boards that elect the successful presidential candidate. The primary differences between public and private institutional boards are their relative size and trustee appointment process. Private boards are typically larger and govern their own process for inviting new trustees, whereas the state’s governor usually appoints public boards for four-year institutions. Do those differences contribute to greater diversity on private college boards and a more inclusive hiring process? Recent research has explored the relationships between board composition that mirrors the student body and students’ graduation rates. Interestingly, greater alignment between the demography of the board and the student body is currently more related to the political party in power at the state level than their status as public or private institutions (Rall et al., 2023). Studies of hiring practices related to board diversity comparable to those in corporate settings (Columbia Business School, 2023; Gilbert, 2021) are hindered by the lack of publicly available data and the overall lack of diversity of college boards (Whitford, 2021).

### **Implications for Aspiring Presidents**

As we investigated and analyzed these trends in presidential appointments in a population of Midwestern colleges and universities, some conclusions can be drawn for women aspiring to the presidency.

While the number of women presidents is growing across the United States, that trend is even more evident among these institutions. Further, the growth in percentages of women hired as presidents is even greater at private or independent institutions. Factoring in the gender of departing and incoming presidents, women's rate of succeeding women or men presidents exceeds that of men succeeding women. Applicants, women and men, continue to gain appointments at these Midwestern institutions led by women and men, according to our data.

While the vast literature advising aspiring presidents often targets the specific challenges women face, several threats to women's success are worthy of note in the context of this study. Notably, the challenges faced by U.S. institutions continue to grow: the changing demographics of college-going populations, constrained resources, skepticism about the value of college education, increased public and political scrutiny, and a dynamic competitive landscape. In this environment, boards may prefer to manage institutional risk by hiring an experienced president. In 2 out of 3 cases in the U. S., experienced presidents are men. If men also have the traditional advantage of greater mobility, they may enjoy more options for the institutions they seek to lead. Additionally, as King (2007) observes, when hiring committees create longer and longer lists of criteria that candidates must meet, the pool of candidates who can meet all of them is diminished. As women fall victim to imposter syndrome and underestimate their own abilities while overestimating the significance of each listed requirement in a position profile, they may limit their opportunities as candidates and appointed leaders.

Finally, caution should be raised about the growing trend to propose legislation that limits or prohibits diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives at colleges and universities. In the wake of the Supreme Court decision regarding affirmative action, at least 23 state legislatures have considered 85 bills that seek to end diversity, equity, and inclusion offices or staff, diversity training, use of diversity statements in hiring or promotion, and/or prohibit considerations of race, sex, ethnicity, or national origin in matters of admission or employment (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2024). While not all proposed legislation reaches legislative approval or is signed into law, the effect on advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion can be chilling, particularly for public, state-supported institutions.

### **Recommendations for Universities**

University boards in the U.S. lack diversity and exhibit a predominant representation of white males, failing to represent the population they represent while contributing to the lack of diversity by relying on existing social structures for recruitment and introducing unconscious bias (Kramer & Adams, 2020). For example, women are significantly underrepresented on boards of Louisiana's public universities, where only 2 of 16 board members are female; similar representation exists across other university systems as well, falling short of the national average of women representing 32% (Canicosa, 2021). Despite the increasing emphasis on transparency in higher education, none of the institutions studied by Chait et al. (2024) disclosed the demographics on race and gender of

their board members on their websites, which contrasts with publicly traded companies, where such information is readily available to the public.

Board diversity has proven to be a valuable tool to foster diversity throughout the organization by introducing different perspectives, experiences, and expertise. Women trustees especially contribute significantly through involvement in the governance and decision-making process (Kramer & Adams, 2020). Diversity is essential for ensuring that decisions appropriately reflect the population and are representative of all stakeholders; current board compositions suggest insufficient representation of student diversity (Canicosa, 2021; Palmer, 2023). Institutions can increase diversity on their boards to foster it within the organization by examining and modifying the recruitment methods to reach a broader pool of candidates or by reconsidering financial requirements to encourage socioeconomic diversity, which can overall lead to better governance and representation of the population (Kramer & Adams, 2020). Higher education institutions should be more transparent about the composition and demographics of their boards, which is suggested to help stakeholders assess the diversity and relevance of board members and could contribute to fostering more diversity overall (Chait et al., 2024).

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

Our investigation of the increased presence of women as presidents of these Midwestern universities and colleges provides insights into the opportunities for candidates and institutions to advance gender parity. Nevertheless, questions remain that merit further study. The scope of our study was limited to a specific geography and category of institution. How do the patterns we observed compare across institutional types and across U. S. geographies? How can differences between public and private institutions impact gender inclusion? Moreover, to what degree are those patterns changing over time?

As presidential tenures shorten and generational turnover progresses, open positions increase. To what degree are the dynamic changes in presidential tenures affecting men and women differently—both for those leaving the role and those aspiring to it? Further studies should investigate succession patterns by gender and their relationship with successful candidates' external or internal status. Additionally, the strength of any relationship between gender representation on governing boards and the gender of successful candidates may reveal opportunities and limitations for inclusion in presidential appointments. Finally, examining more institutions would enable meaningful analysis of presidential characteristics beyond the gender binary, including ethnicity, age, marital status, and sexual orientation.

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