Fix the system, not the women: The Women's Power Gap Initiative

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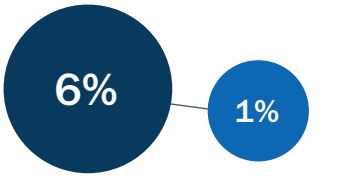
Now is the time for equity among America's leaders. There could be no more singular moment to push for systemic changes to elevate women and people of color to the chief executive's office across all sectors of our economy, including at our nation's colleges and universities. COVID-19 has disproportionately impacted women, particularly women of color, in the workforce, laying bare the tremendous vulnerability in the scaffolding of our economy. If we don't take forceful action to build back our institutions differently, women's advancement will backslide to levels witnessed decades ago, greatly diminishing our economic growth. To rebuild and improve our institutions, we need to take full advantage of the diversity of lived experiences and embrace disparate leadership qualities.

For more than four decades, women have been earning the degrees, credentials, and experience to scale the leadership ladder. While we have experienced some progress diversifying boards of directors, women's advancement to the top inside our major corporations and institutions has been glacial. Today, women represent only 6% of the chief executives of the S&P 500, and just 1% are women of color, according to a recent study by Catalyst.

Why has progress inside our institutions been so slow? Efforts have largely focused on providing women and people of color professional development programs, mentors and sponsors, which can only take us so far. If we are to break the glass—or, as some prefer to say, the concrete—ceiling, we need to tackle institutional cultures that often undervalue less traditional leadership styles. To close the representation gap, which we at Eos Foundation call the Women's Power



Women represent 6% of S&P 500 chief executives; 1% are women of color

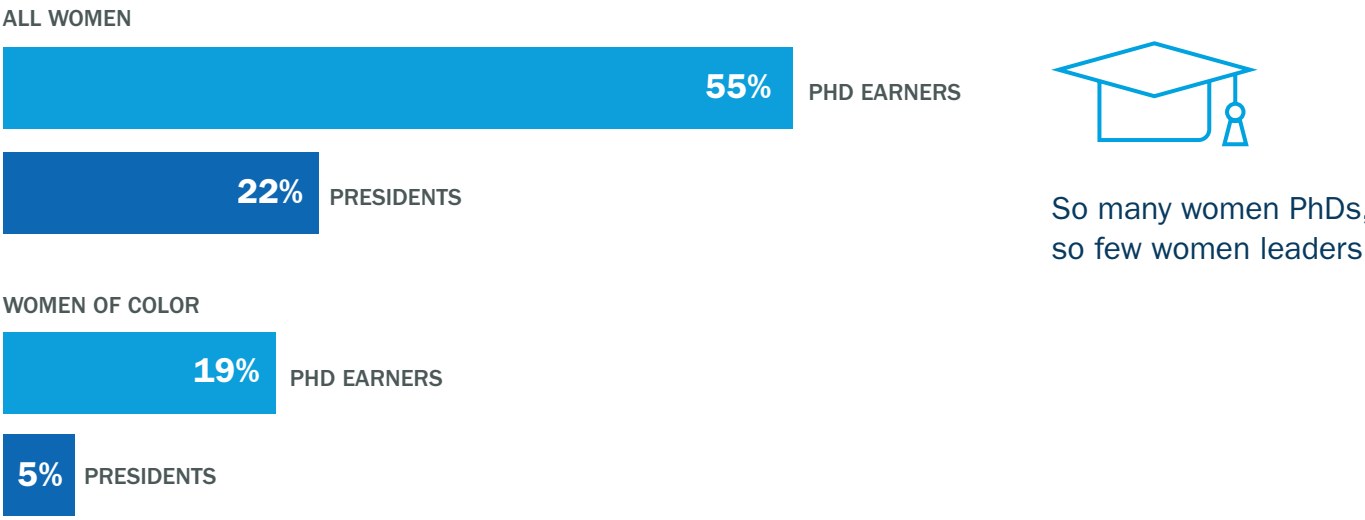
Gap, efforts must focus on fixing the system, not the women. So where to begin?

Let's start with data. Eos Foundation launched The Women's Power Gap Initiative in 2018 to collect and analyze publicly available data about the status of women and people of color at the highest levels of leadership across all sectors of the economy. Our Women's Power Gap studies provide specific organizational-level data that consumers, stakeholders and activists can use to accelerate change within the executive suite and board of directors. In each study, we compare each institution to its peers and rank them based on gender diversity across several categories. It is critical to note that while the names of executives and board members are generally publicly available on websites, we at Eos Foundation have to research each and every individual to discern gender using photos and pronouns. The limitation with this approach is that we cannot equally discern race. Yet the most essential first step to achieving diversity in leadership is for all institutions to report their diversity data for their executive teams and boards publicly. That which is measured is managed!

Our approach with the ranking methodology creates a race to the top. Most CEOs and boards truly want to increase diversity at the top, yet believe they are already doing everything possible. However, after reviewing our rankings, organizational leaders realize that some of their peer institutions are doing better. In addition, we create aggregate data by sector, which often contradicts false narratives about pipeline problems. Finally, our data is broken down with an intersectional lens on gender and race to ensure that women of color are not left behind. Without disaggregated diversity data at the institutional level, we are tilting at windmills.

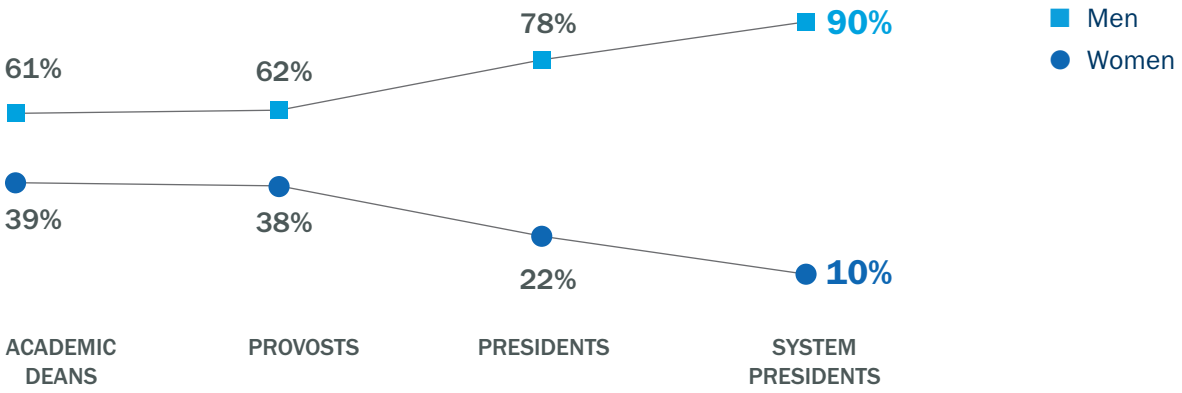
Eos Foundation's most recent study, *The Women's Power Gap at Elite Universities: Scaling the Ivory Tower*, takes a deep dive into institutions of higher education. We found that women represent just 22% of the presidents of our nation's elite research universities (R1 Carnegie Classification), and women of color represent just 5%. This is despite the fact that women comprise 55% of all students and have been earning the majority of PhDs for nearly two decades. Women of color are earning 19% of all PhDs, and Black women represent the fastest growing portion of that population. (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1. Fast facts: 130 elite (R1) universities as of 9/15/21



Additionally, as shown in Figure 2, women comprise nearly 40% of provosts and academic deans at these elite universities, yet their numbers drop precipitously at the next rung such that they account for only 22% of campus presidents and 10% of multicampus system presidents. Given the ready supply of qualified women among the immediate feeder positions, the disproportionately small number of female presidents cannot be explained away as merely a pipeline problem. Our data suggest that the leadership ladder is broken at the top rung, and we believe that is primarily due to systemic and structural biases at the highest levels of power and influence embedded within our institutions.

Figure 2. Is it a glass or concrete ceiling?



According to a 2019 McKinsey study, "Social science research shows that we tend to overestimate men's performance and underestimate women's. As a result, women are often hired and promoted based on past accomplishments while men may be hired and promoted based on future potential."

So, what can be done to combat systemic barriers and biases? We offer a few recommendations to start:

Start with the president. Culture is set at the top. Presidents need to deeply examine their own biases and the role unconscious bias plays in advancement practices at their institutions. They need to re-envision what a great leader looks like and think beyond historical models of traditional, primarily male, leadership. They should work hand in hand with chief diversity officers to elevate this effort, and chief diversity officers should report directly to the president.[1]

Boards of trustees should tie the president's compensation to setting and achieving annual diversity goals and benchmarks. Presidents should submit gender and diversity goals at the beginning of each academic year to their boards which, in turn, should determine whether the goals represent significant and acceptable progress toward gender parity and fair racial representation at all levels of the institution. The board should vote on the goals so as to put the institution's commitment to progress on record, creating a reference point for measuring progress at the end of the year.

Universities should post detailed annual diversity reports on their websites. Transparency is critical to driving change. A good report should provide quantitative diversity detail at all institutional staffing levels, including academic deans, the board, and the executive leadership team. Most importantly, intersectional data is critical, and so the data must be disaggregated by both gender and race for each demographic group. For example, we need to go beyond reporting percentages of Black people in leadership and instead break that down to report Black men and Black women (and the same for all groups), to make sure that women of color are not left behind.

1 CUPA-HR has contributed a commentary to this TIAA Institute WVOEE series that documents the positive effects on women's career advancement and pay equity at colleges and universities where women have greater representation in leadership positions.

Tackle unconscious bias head on. Providing unconscious bias training is a good start, especially for managers engaged in hiring and advancement, but it is only a start. Universities need to de-bias all processes within the organization, including job descriptions, compensation policies, HR policies, daily operations practices, and informal networking opportunities.

Focus on equity of outcomes in addition to equality of opportunity. When the focus is on end results in hiring, managers must go the extra mile to reflect on the structural obstacles that may preclude equitable outcomes. Despite a concerted effort to ensure women and people of color are fairly represented among applicant pools for top jobs (often called the "Rooney Rule"), we still see disparate end results. Could it be possible that the Rooney Rule cuts both ways and, in certain situations, has the unintended consequence of hurting women candidates? If boards and individuals in power consider a representative number of women in the pool as a sufficient measure to ensure a fair outcome, they may not be examining the many ways that partiality and unconscious bias can enter into the final selection.

In closing

For the past 40 years, the primary approach to increasing organizational diversity of far too many professional development initiatives has been to train women and people of color to fit into existing corporate culture. Starting at this moment, let's spend our time and energy working to create a new corporate culture that values and draws upon a multitude of leadership styles and perspectives. Let's rebuild our institutions intentionally, with gender and racial justice at the center.

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