

# Voices from the Field

Women of Color Presidents  
in Higher Education



## AMERICAN COLLEGE PRESIDENT STUDY

In 2017, in partnership with the TIAA Institute, the Center for Policy Research and Strategy of the American Council on Education (ACE) released the eighth edition of the most comprehensive survey on the college presidency, the American College President Study (ACPS). The survey and its findings have provided a comprehensive view of the college presidency. ACPS helps ACE, and all stakeholders in higher education, better reflect on ways to diversify the presidency.

Findings from ACPS show that the representation of women in the presidency has nearly tripled since 1986, although women remained underrepresented in 2016. About one-third of college and university presidents in 2016 were women, and only 5 percent of all presidents were women of color. In order to better understand some of the reasons for the slow growth in the number of women of color in the presidency, ACE conducted four semi-structured interviews with women of color who are serving as presidents or chancellors of colleges and universities. These conversations focused on how race and gender affected their pathway to the presidency, how they measure success, and their hopes for the future of higher education leadership. Interviews were edited for clarity and collected here to share insights from the field of higher education leadership.

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## ROSLYN CLARK ARTIS

PRESIDENT, BENEDICT COLLEGE  
COLUMBIA, SOUTH CAROLINA

### Question: What made you aspire to be a president or chancellor?

Answer: My primary aspirations were developed around students. I started off teaching and leading a program in a college and really engaging them and getting excited about that work. I was practicing law full-time with no desire at all or interest in higher education until I started teaching part-time, and then decided it was the most wonderful thing in the world. No one ever says thank you or likes their lawyer, but in education, we obviously have the opportunity to change the world one student at a time. That was the start of it for me in terms of my career in education.

What made me aspire to be a president really was, as a faculty member, program director, and even a dean, recognizing that I had limited capacity to impact all of the levers that affect our students' trajectory. So I could talk with them for my 50 minutes, or my hour and 15 minutes, and I could advise them a little bit, but what happens to them in res[idential] life, what happens to them in career services, what happens to them in financial aid, those kinds of things were all beyond my control. And those are the kinds of things that cause students to stop out or leave, and I had no control over those things. So I really wanted to have a more global ability to really shape the students' experience in ways that eliminated barriers to their success.

### Were there any significant barriers on your path to presidency that you experienced because of your race and/or gender?

I think gender has been a bigger issue for me, quite frankly, than race. Obviously, I've chosen to serve in the HBCU space, so race obviously has not been an impediment in any way to me, but gender is significant. As a people, we are somewhat conservative. Both of the institutions I've served have been Baptist-affiliated institutions, which by definition

means when I go out to speak on behalf of either Benedict or previously Florida Memorial, the cultural norms associated with whether I could stand in the pulpit or I have to stand on the floor are still very real. And when I was at Florida Memorial, for example, we had a large international population, and I had the leader of a country's alumni group say, "We are not accustomed to women leaders, but we'll try." So there are cultural biases, religious biases, that sometimes create barriers for women in leadership positions that are tough to overcome.

The rule of thumb for me is, "I'll show you better than I can tell you." I can tell you that this is my style and this is how I will lead, but it just takes time. I mean, they have to see the vision, they have to see things begin to happen before they will be fully on board, so it's a war of attrition, you have to survive long enough to prove you were right. Women do have to prove themselves at a much higher level than men do to garner the support that men seem to get by default. So gender has certainly been an obstacle in many instances.

There is a perception that there are certain characteristics that define women, particularly women of color, that may not necessarily be accurate, but people hold those perceptions.

### What do you think is the single biggest issue facing women of color interested in a presidency today?

I think perception. Perception is 90 percent of reality. There is a perception that there are certain characteristics that define women, particularly women of color, that may not necessarily be accurate, but people hold those perceptions. You know, the "angry black woman," the chip on the shoulder, the always trying to prove something, always has to be right. Those kinds of stereotypes are a challenge.

People perceive us a certain way based on those kinds of negative stereotypes, so I think that becomes a big deal, which bleeds into the second biggest factor, which is just positioning and opportunity. The reality is, this is based on relationships. Boards of trustee members who are making presidential selections, principals in search firms who are facilitating those searches, if they like you, you get opportunity. If they know you, you get opportunity. If someone called someone who knew someone, you get an opportunity. It's all about relationships. Women have not been in the rooms to make those relationships. Women have not been exposed to opportunities to gain the attention of, whether it's search consultants or potential board of trustee members, to distinguish themselves in ways that would've allowed them to rise to the top of the search, so it's access and opportunity in a much larger kind of cultural context than I think we're willing to admit sometimes. It is often what you know and who you know.

### **In an ideal world, what changes would take place? How would you mitigate the issues around perception and opportunity?**

The biggest role that I can play is for women who have talent and potential and desire to serve in these kinds of roles is affording them the opportunity to be seen and heard and to demonstrate what they can do. One of the things I value most about Ruth Simmons's leadership methodology is that the members of her cabinet, her inner circle, are broadly exposed to issues around the university. So it's not, you're finance, so you stick to finance; you're student affairs, so you stick to student affairs. She really pulls them into all aspects of college and university management. I try to do that with my staff so that the women on my team, regardless of their role, have a more global perspective because that's what search firms are looking for.

The key is not whether you distinguished yourself in student affairs and student affairs only. The question is whether you can work across the institution to engage other people and projects

or opportunities that really are bigger than your department. Are you a bridge builder? Are you a visionary? Are you creating new programs? Are you managing budgets? So by exposing women to those different areas of management and leadership within a higher education institution and helping them to become more well-rounded in those spaces so that they're articulate and knowledgeable about all aspects of the management of a college or university not just in their discipline or their silo is the best way that I can make an impact.

And then making those connections. Making sure that when I'm traveling, I have someone with me and I'm introducing them and really talking about the value they bring to my team so that they get that exposure and that engagement with folks who may at some point in the future be able to assist them in securing an opportunity.

### **How do you measure success in your role?**

For me, it's our students succeeding. I tend to be very data-driven, which surprises a lot of people. I'm pretty outgoing and talkative, but at the end of the day, all that talk doesn't mean a thing to me if the numbers don't speak to it. So I run a dashboard, and I'm keeping track of how many of my students have been retained, how many of my students are graduating on time or under time, how many of my students are getting jobs in their discipline at a decent rate of pay when they leave my institution and are able to therefore meet their obligations. It's all student outcome based, it is all whether we're moving the needle.

I love to disaggregate that data and look at the most challenged students. Are they better when they leave here than when they came, and have we added value to those students? If we didn't, I'm having a really bad day. When I see students stop out, it is a personal loss for me individually. That's why I've chosen to be in a smaller environment where I kind of know them. It becomes very personal to me, my student success is the only measure that matters for me at the end of the day because I think if our students are winning, the school wins.

So retention and enrollment and completion and students being able to meet their obligation means I have high graduation rates, I have low default rates, I have great alumni give rates. All of those things impact the health and the sustainability of the institution at the end of the day.

### **How do you think your identity as a woman of color contributes to your presidency?**

In this context, both woman and color matter. So as a female leader, my leadership style does tend to differ just a little bit. I am a communicator by nature, so I try to have lots of town halls. I meet with the housekeeping staff, I meet with the lawn care staff, I meet with the faculty, so that everybody is on board with the vision because everybody's contribution matters to the life of the institution. I'm not sure how many men spend as much time communicating and engaging people as women do, as a general rule.

I'm also somewhat maternalistic toward my students, and you can probably hear that in my comments, that I view them as my children, and I tell them so. So I would treat you as I would treat my own, so that means I expect a lot from you, and it also means that I'm going to love you unconditionally and help you through it if I can solve a problem for you. I think that crosses both being a woman and color, [and] I think that really defines the kind of look and feel of the institution for a student and the extent to which they feel connected to it.

Outside the institution, amusing that I still get comments like, "Oh, you're so articulate," even among colleagues. People still express shock that you contribute intelligently to a conversation, that you understand business. The business models of our institutions are at best fragile, so having a very clear understanding of long and short-term bond financing and amortization and collateralization matter more for our institutions than they do typically for more resourced institutions, so as I enter into conversations with banks and lenders and other people, they always express some shock that I understand money, which I find amazing.

It's somewhat satisfying at times to just dispel people's notions about your knowledge base. It's the same thing, when we're dealing with construction projects or sports. So very often what people see is not who we are, right? We do understand money, we do understand contracts and construction and sports and all sorts of other things, and I think no one ever sees that coming.

### **Women of color accounted for 5 percent of all college and university presidents and chancellors in 2016. How do you hope higher education leadership will change in the next decade?**

My hope is that higher education leadership ranks will reflect the ranks of our student bodies. As we are rapidly entering a majority minority phase of our country's demographic development, it's important to me that the leadership at our colleges and universities reflect that. You know, within HBCU-land, 66 to 67 percent of our students tend to be female. We're typically two-thirds female. Now, we would like to see that demographic shift and more of our young men pursuing college educations. At present, two-thirds of HBCU students are female. Why on earth are two-thirds of HBCU presidents not female? Our young women deserve role models too. They understand people who understand their lived experience too. And so the hope is that as that demographic continues to shift nationwide, that our institutions majority and minority will see value in having the leadership ranks reflect the true demographic of our country. I think it helps to really define those experiences for the students that we serve.

It seems to me that again back to perception and judgment, I think many of our women leaders are judged far more harshly than men in the same position. Someone joked and said, "You're kind of a glass shatterer. This is the second time for you." And I said, "Yeah, I appreciate that, but the challenges with shattering glass is that the shards come raining down on you." You break that glass, you will stand under a shower of sharp shards. It's interesting to me that if I make a misstep, it will be amplified.

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We do have a very different lived experience. Once we get to this position, it is such a cross to bear in the sense that any misstep, we will be subject to termination, where men seem to be given multiple opportunities if their mistakes ever come to light

## WADED CRUZADO

PRESIDENT, MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY  
BOZEMAN, MONTANA

**Question: What made you aspire to be a president, and can you tell us about any significant barriers or roadblocks to the presidency that you experienced because of race and/or gender?**

Answer: First of all, let me just say that I have always thought that I'm an accidental president. Contrary to many of my male counterparts, [who] would gladly tell you that they knew since fourth grade that they wanted to be a college president, that was not my case. In fact, I would place myself in the category of those provosts that say, "I never want to be sitting in that chair," or in the category of so many women who say, "I'm not ready."

It was basically by accident. My president moved out to a different institution. We discussed the possibility of me serving as interim president, and I told them, I have been in my position as provost for only eight months. I said, "I'm not ready, so I would like to have more experience before considering that option." And then the Board of Regents invited a retired vice president to come to the position as interim, and three days before that person was supposed to start, the chair of the Board of Regents called me, and . . . said, "Our person is not coming because of medical issues. We need you to step up to the plate."

at all. So I'm hopeful that as more women ascend to the position and lead these institutions successfully, that our boards will begin to shift, that our public opinion will begin to be a little more balanced as it relates to the work that we do. We often do not get the credit. The way we are perceived and judged—all I can do is continue to do the best job I can do and pray that as time goes on and people see effective leadership being exhibited on the part of women, that the judgment will be less harsh toward us. ■

So in that unceremonious fashion, I became interim president at New Mexico State University. I find that contrast interesting, that usually my male counterparts have a better definition about their aspirations than what many female presidents do. We tend to gravitate more towards the service component, doing this for the sake of the university or to advance the institution rather than to advance our own professional careers.

**Did you think race and gender had any impact on your presidency, whether it's when you first started or even now?**

Well, yes. Sometimes it's more subdued than in other circumstances, but certainly it played a factor. In New Mexico State, it was a big deal for some groups that it would be the breaking of a glass ceiling. And that did create some problems with some other constituencies in the university. In the case of Montana State University, that was even more improbable, as you can imagine.

I'm on my 10th month as interim president of New Mexico State University, and [received a call from] a search consultant. And they said something to the effect of, "We want you to know that President Gamble has announced his retirement from Montana State University, and we would like to have

a conversation with you about Montana State.” And I said, “Thank you so much, you know, I have been following Montana State University with our strategic plan, I’m very impressed about what they have accomplished, but quite honestly, I don’t like to move, so thanks a lot for considering me,” and I just hung up. So a month later, he called again, and he said, “Well, I would like to tell you that now you have been nominated for the presidency of the university.” So I said, “Well, thank you so much, let me think about it.”

My first thought was to go to the U.S. Census Bureau page because, here was my thought: my thinking was, I came from Puerto Rico, born and raised where perhaps 96 percent of the island is Hispanic. Then I moved to New Mexico, where about 48 percent were Latino. So I wondered, what’s the Latino population in Montana? I went to the U.S. Census page and found that it was a robust 2 percent.

I thought and thought, and finally I crafted an email and I thank the search firm, and basically what I said was, “This is not a good fit for me at this moment in my career.” And I hit the send button. You know what happened next? The phone rang again. It’s this guy. Now I am pretty unnerved, and I basically tell him, “Listen, I have never been to Montana. When I think about Montana, I think about mountains and horses and snow.” “By the way,” I said, “do you know where I was born? I don’t look like, I don’t sound like anybody in Montana.” After my exasperation, I remember I lowered my head and I told him, “What do you see in me that I’m not seeing?”

Because internally, this was my thought process, what I was telling me was, there’s no way, right? You’re a woman, a Latina, speak with an accent, five feet tall, background in humanities? It’s like minus, minus, minus, minus. And what I heard from him was very interesting. He said, “Well, what we see in you is your experience with land-grant universities, systems rather than just one campus, your passion for underrepresented minorities, and we’re looking for someone with a lot of energy.”

And I said, “Well, oh, you got me on that one.”

One more thing about barriers: so I made the first cut to the airport interviews. What I have learned since is that when I left the room, a committee member said something along the lines like, “Wow, she would be great for Montana State, but the state will never accept someone like her.” And that it was a Republican woman regent who said, “I’m sick and tired of people saying that we can never have a woman in a position of leadership in our university.”

So answering about your barriers or roadblocks, I think the biggest barrier or roadblock is ourselves. We are too prone to discount ourselves too quickly because women, and particularly women of color, we always tend to believe that we’re never ready, that there’s one more thing that we need to do or there’s one more challenge that we need to surpass, and that holds us back tremendously.

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**You said the biggest roadblock for women may be our lack of imagining ourselves there already. Would you say that that’s the biggest issue facing women of color interested in the presidency?**

I think that it needs to start with a profound conviction on your part that you can do this job, that it will yield incredible benefits to the institution if you are given the reins of a university or a college, absolutely. If you don’t believe that deep in your gut, how do we expect others to believe it or to believe in us?

### How do you measure success in your role, Dr. Cruzado?

There are the normal metrics, about growth in student enrollment, growth in retention rates and graduation rates, growth in research expenditures and gifts—those are the easy targets. The unspoken measures of success are more subtle, but it's what really anchors the success in numbers, and by that I mean it's the fulfillment of the mission. And I am passionate about the land-grant university mission, and I'm passionate about it because I think it's an incredible story. I think that universities—public universities—are constantly challenged and seduced to follow a different model than the reason why they were created in the first place.

One of the things that I have done since my first day at Montana State is to tell the story about the fact that we belong to a very special brand of universities. The fact that it literally took an act of Congress to change the landscape of higher education in America, that they were incredibly visionary in changing a paramount that had been in existence for over 700 years in the western hemisphere. Because up until 1862, universities in America were following the same European tradition: they were for the most part private, for the most part had a very limited academic portfolio devoted to theology and medicine and law, and they were reserved for men from wealthy backgrounds and privilege. Then along came this notion that we're going to open not just one public national university, we were going to open one public university in each state and territory of the union, irrespective of the number of people or whether they were college ready. We're going to open one of these new brand of colleges and universities and—this is the phrase from the bill—we're going to educate the sons and daughters of the industrial class of America. We are called to educate the sons and daughters of the working families of America. Because of that, we have played an enormous role in strengthening democracy.

So to me, that is the most important sign of success. How closely have I helped this institution or not, to

adhere to that model, to that aspiration that we are going to open the doors to everybody. When I first arrived, we were like so many universities, chasing privilege. And I always say, instead of chasing privilege, we're called to choose promise. Don't take me wrong, I like my best and brightest students. In fact, Montana State captures 73 percent of all best and brightest students in the state of Montana. But if all I do is to limit my vision to the best and brightest students, then I think that I limit the promise of the land-grant university and I reduce it to nothing more than a conveyor belt, a conveyor belt in which the outcomes are going to be the exactly the same ones as the inputs. And I would rather believe that a university, it's not a conveyor belt, but a combustible engine, right? Something happens in the four or six years where a student is with us that then we take that student from wherever he or she is and we transform him or her into a competent professional, a committed citizen, and a happy and healthy human being. That is success.

### How do you think your identity as a Latina woman contributes to your presidency?

It's amazing. Because, of course, I think it challenged assumptions. [A] Latina woman president, it's not too common yet. For it to happen in Montana, it's been a beautiful thing. And, quietly, we have this tacit, unspoken agreement—the people of Montana and I—in that we know that we need to make each other successful. I know that I need to make this university successful for the sake of other women, whoever wants to be president here at this university. If I don't do a good job, I am, in fact, closing the doors to women in the future. I'd better do a good job, right?

And then I also think that the state has done a remarkable job strengthening me and helping me be successful and in that manner portraying a different image about, what's Montana? Who is Montana? What do they believe in? And this is what I have found about these beautiful people: they believe in authenticity and hard work. If you can be authentic and if you can come and work



hard for the sake of others, then you're going to be totally accepted and supported, and you will be able to accomplish extraordinary things. And for that, I'm so grateful.

We are doing great things, you know. Half of my leadership team is composed of women, and I have people from South Africa and from Jamaica, from Scotland, from all over. So there's a quiet transformation taking place.

**Women of color accounted for 5 percent of college and university presidents and chancellors in 2016. How would you hope higher education leadership changes over the next decade? What would your vision statement for higher education look like?**

I would love for higher education to be more magnanimous. More liberal. More embracing. For so long, we have been chasing just the narrow top, what we have been doing is leaving so many people behind. And imagine, if higher education had been more generous, more accepting, where would we be as humankind had we had more educated people? Perhaps many of the grand challenges that we

confront today would have been solved. Perhaps we could have found the cure to cancer. It's this profound conviction that we all need to embrace, that society will always be better if we have more highly educated people than if we have less.

If we want more women leaders, we need to open our arms and open those doors to many other individuals. I have always felt that one of the big hurdles [is that] we can have all these wonderful women being highly educated and highly successful, but we don't have key individuals in positions of authority as trustees or regents. Like I had that incredible woman who said, "I'm not buying this." If we can have more trustees who are ready and willing to vouch for and to stand behind the woman of color, then that's when we really start transforming this landscape. And I think that the key for us to [someday] have more individuals that are brave enough and courageous enough in those boards is when we have more individuals in our classrooms and then they go out and we give them the tools to be successful, and then they start serving on those boards, and then they want to say "I'm ready to give a chance to a different type of leader." ■

## JUDY C. MINER

CHANCELLOR, FOOTHILL-DE ANZA COMMUNITY COLLEGE DISTRICT  
LOS ALTOS HILLS, CALIFORNIA

**Question: What made you aspire to be a president or a chancellor? Were there any significant barriers or roadblocks on your way to the presidency that you may have experienced because of race and/or gender?**

Answer: There are some historical inequities for women and persons of color in terms of what "had been" [the traditional pathway,] because I think we're breaking out of what might be viewed as the traditional pathway. When I first became an administrator in the community colleges in 1979, a typical pathway to the presidency was experience as a full-time faculty member, probably a department chair, a dean, then a vice president of instruction,

which prepared you for serious consideration as a president. The representation from the student services side of the house, or fiscal, or development, or public relations, or legal counsel, were just not considered as appropriate ways of getting into a presidency.

But for the community colleges, the expanded opportunities that opened up in administration tended to be in the student services areas. Those who were getting hired into faculty positions, often had networks in institutions and programs that were primarily majority populations, as opposed to individuals of color or women. Even though you may have had a good number of women who were

going into various programs as full-time faculty, conscious or unconscious biases were there. I think a lot of this has probably just gone underground but I think there are still concerns about our capacity to participate as fully as men if we have families or if we have spouses or significant others.

So that's the context for myself in thinking about advancing in leadership. I thought about whether or not I wanted to be a president when I was still at City College of San Francisco as the dean of admissions and records. My advisor in the doctoral program at USF actually said, "Well, you probably couldn't get there from Student Services." He was just very open about his own experience and his own views. He said, "I don't see how you could do that if you don't become a full-time faculty member." But that wasn't my interest as I've really enjoyed administration; I've always wanted to be there.

I had an opportunity to work at the state chancellor's office for the community colleges. I received great experience around public policy and legislation and the opportunity to visit a lot of campuses. [I gained] some really broad experience before I went to De Anza as a dean of matriculation. Thanks to Martha Kanter's mentorship and support when she was president of De Anza, I eventually moved over into instruction as dean of academic services responsible for accreditation, program review, enrollment management, and various support services for faculty that ultimately led to my appointment as the provost of Arts, Letters, and Social Sciences.

My career took a surprising and wonderfully organic turn. We basically reorganized my area of Arts, Letters, and Social Sciences to include all instructional divisions, and I became the Vice President of Instruction. Having been primarily in the student services arena for so many years, my trajectory was a very different kind of pathway.

When the president of Foothill retired in 2006, I had a number of Foothill colleagues saying, "We would really like you to come to Foothill." They

knew how dedicated I had been to the student equity agenda and diversification of faculty, staff, and administration at De Anza as our demographics changed, and hoped I would bring that same focus to Foothill.

There was much I wish I could have done at Foothill but do think we had a lot of great accomplishments. I worked with many innovative champions who were there within the institution. As president, I was able to hire faculty who were already converts to the student equity agenda, who had track records of volunteerism, and were very much committed to better outcomes for our populations of color.

### **What do you think the is biggest issue women that of color who are interested in the presidency are facing, and what changes need to be made to address that issue?**

The biggest barriers are the expectations of search committees about what makes the candidate most qualified. At the beginning of the hiring process for my replacement at Foothill College, I met with the search committee and I also had conversations with the search consultant. I explained to them how different the presidency is from the days that some of us who are more senior would have thought about the presidency [in terms of] what we ask our presidents to do at this point and where we are going as an institution. It was so clear that Foothill really moved in the direction of deeply embracing equity and diversity, and that they needed somebody at the top who could do that. People can come prepared for [the role] in some very different ways than may have been the case before. They ended up recommending Thuy Nguyen, an attorney with community college experience in a district office and the state chancellor's office. I am incredibly proud of her accomplishments over the past two years and grateful to the search committee for recognizing her exceptional readiness to lead after traveling a nontraditional pathway.

The work that we have to do is on so many fronts and with so many constituencies. To the extent that you do have some opportunities to have nontra-

ditional candidates in the administrative pools, that certainly helps a lot. I encountered this when I was hiring instructional deans. If as a woman of color you didn't have that opportunity to be hired as a full-time faculty member somewhere, you were often just dismissed out of hand as a viable candidate. People would say, "Well, she has no teaching experience." Ah, but what experience does she have? Because you know what? Her job is not to teach. Her job is to lead all of you who are the faculty who are in the classroom. So what's in her background that would actually suggest she could do that? What skills does she have to let you focus on your teaching so that you're not having to worry about filling in the gaps of administrative leadership? Consider what we're asking of the person who is hired.

### How do you measure success in your role?

I would measure success in the way we have changed our search and selection process throughout the district. EEO reps are [now] appointed by the district office instead of the colleges because I think there was a comfort level to get people that you thought might side with you instead of opening it up to other people who might be more objective. Anybody who serves on a committee, it doesn't matter if you are serving to hire a custodian, an instructional associate in the mathematics lab, or a dean or a faculty member in auto tech, everybody has to go through equity training, and that's a requirement. In effect, you have everybody bringing an equity and diversity lens instead of just saying, "Well, the EEO rep is going to take care of that." It really forces that broader view about what your role is on the committee and thinking about this candidate, as being a member of a larger community.

### How do you think your identity as a woman of color contributes to your presidency and to your leadership?

I think it's been really important as we have increased the diversity of our student population. I'm a Latina Pacific Islander, so I think I am repre-

senting mixed race issues for a lot of students who are increasingly falling into that category. We need to advance individuals who then have these deep roots in their own communities, and the communities can begin to see themselves being reflected, this is just huge. That's been really important.

There's such a sense of hope that the assets that people bring you from their own cultures are valued. We don't want people to feel they have to somehow give up their culture in order to be successful as Americans or as residents of our communities. There really is nothing stronger than having people in leadership positions who are there and who can talk about being a first-generation student—like myself—so that's huge to our students.

We need to advance individuals who then have these deep roots in their own communities, and the communities can begin to see themselves being reflected... There's such a sense of hope that the assets that people bring you from their own cultures are valued.

And I love saying, "Hey, you know, somebody out here might actually be a chancellor in the future of Foothill-De Anza, or you could be president of Foothill, you could be president of De Anza," or "Come back to us when you get your master's degrees because we would love to have you teach."

### Women of color accounted for 5 percent of all college or university presidents and chancellors in 2016. How do you hope the higher education leadership will change over the next decade?

I think our goal should be to have presidents and chancellors more representative of the students we're serving, so it should be much higher. We know that the increased diversity of our students is already well beyond 5 percent. I think it's a big lift, but we've got to do it. And everybody can do something, in their own way, within their own institution. I think there should be those individual

metrics that areas have. We know that the work that Bob Fairleigh has done out of UC Santa Cruz documents that having a person of color in the classroom actually increases the success rates of the students who come from populations of color, whether or not they're the same ethnic group. So that matters to us as we think about the people we are hiring. If we're hiring because we want our students to be successful, then who is the best

## JUDY K. SAKAKI

PRESIDENT, SONOMA STATE UNIVERSITY  
ROHNERT PARK, CALIFORNIA

**Question: What made you aspire to the presidency? Were there any roadblocks or barriers to the presidency that you experienced because of race or gender?**

Answer: I, in all honesty, never really aspired to be a president or a chancellor. There were no role models for me. I didn't see anyone that looked like me in a position as a president. So I didn't really think it was possible. I remember early on, I was recommended for a leadership program, and when I was in that program, someone stood up and said, "We're here to help you become presidents." And I thought, oh, they don't mean me. I must be in the wrong room.

My journey started with my desire to learn about how universities really ran. I was a counselor, and I put myself in positions to serve on different academic senate committees to see, who makes the decisions about budget? What is shared governance? How does this work? And I was elected and served on every academic senate committee even though I was in student affairs.

It was this process of sitting "at the table" where I realized that other people were making decisions that affected students. I'm a first-generation student. My parents didn't have the opportunity to go to college. I was sitting there thinking, people are making important decisions, and they're not as attuned as they might be to the needs of our

qualified? It will not necessarily be [that] the candidate went to an Ivy League college, or they have a doctorate versus somebody else having a master's degree. Where is the passion for teaching? What evidence do we have that this person is viewing this as their life's work, as opposed to a job that will get them to retirement? Students can tell. If you're authentic, students will be able to tell. And if you're not, they pick that up immediately. ■

increasingly diverse students. I decided, I'm going to try to make a difference. But I felt that I wasn't given as much credibility because I didn't have a terminal degree. That's when I thought about getting my PhD and enrolled at the University of California, Berkeley. I realized even after that, as a woman of color, sometimes people would act surprised and say, "Oh, you have your PhD? What's it in, or where is it from?" The old adage that as a woman of color, you have to be twice as good to be given half the credit I think is still unfortunately often true, and it's still true even when you assume the presidency.

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I think there are still the stereotypes [that] are implicit, and sometimes there's explicit bias. I had been told things like, "Oh, your style is not quite right." You know, style was kind of code. And it was, "Well, have you ever fired anybody?" And the question behind that is, "Are you tough enough?" I always felt that if I was 6 feet tall and I was big and I was male, they probably wouldn't ask me that question.

I think those are still things that we have to work to overcome. Probably every professional senior administrative position I've gone into, right after I was hired and walked in, I've had people say the most unbelievable sexist or racist things directly to me. I think the most egregious that has stuck in my mind was when I was hired into a senior cabinet-level position, and one of the direct reports—a white male—came in to meet with me and said, "I can't believe they really hired you. I can't believe it. If I would have known that they were going to hire you, I would have gotten on the search selection committee to make sure that didn't happen." And I'm thinking, you're going to now report to me? That wasn't really brilliant of this guy to be saying this to me, right? So I said, "So we have some difficulties?" And he said, "Yeah, I can't believe they hired someone younger than me, a woman, and an oriental."

And that's after you have your PhD from Berkeley, you get appointed to a position, you've gone through open forums and public vettings, you've earned the position, and then you still get faced with those kinds of comments. I think that there are still some challenges.

### **What could have gone differently in your experience where you would have felt like it was more welcoming and inclusive?**

Of course, having more women of color in positions of authority or folks of color. I think it's having advocates and mentors in high places.

I've always been surprised and disappointed that colleagues, no matter who they are and no matter how much you think they like you and are on your side, don't speak up on your behalf. Just like we have bystander training for our students, I think we need bystander training for administrators. Because I have been in situations where people have almost been verbally abusive, and others would witness it but likely didn't say anything because they're likely just glad it's not happening to them. And only later on, when a situation has resolved itself, I went back to some of the people and said, "I was having a

really difficult challenge," and they said "Oh, yeah, I really felt badly for you." And I said, "Well—one, it would have been helpful if privately you acknowledged what you were seeing, or two, it would have been even better if you could have spoken up." It would help having more advocates and mentors. The word "deliberate" comes to me. We have to think about how we put structures in place or do something that is a deliberate action that can be supportive of women of color.

### **How do you measure the success of your role as president at the end of the day?**

My background is counseling, so it's always interpersonal. I always ask for feedback. I say that everyone is a work in progress, and we're always working to get better in situations. One part of that is getting direct feedback. The other is looking at your data indicators. If you're talking about graduation rates or how much advancement fundraising dollars you're bringing in or if a goal is faculty, staff, student diversity, then how are we doing? Looking at those numbers. I also think about the accomplishments of my team. I'm really a team-oriented person, so my cabinet is my team. If each of them are hitting their goals, then together we are making progress.

A heavy lift for me on this campus was really helping to change the culture to be more student-centric and what I call creating a "campus community of care." If more people are walking across campus and smiling and engaging with people or actually stopping and asking you how you're doing and really listening, then to me that's success. Some of the things are non-quantifiable in that way.

One thing I do to get feedback is I have walk and talks. This means anyone—students, staff, faculty—can call my office and sign up to walk with me. Part of it was when I was new to the campus, that I wanted to learn the campus, and I wanted to be more visible. Also as the president, if you have breakfast meetings and dinner meetings and night things, you don't exercise. So doing the walk and talks at least made me feel like I was doing some-

thing, and I would literally put on my sneakers and walk around. That's also a way for me to stay in touch and hear from people. It's not just in a big forum like an academic senate meeting or a large convocation, but it's being out with people. If we have an event on campus, we have a performing arts center, I mill around in the before and after of intermissions and check in with people. So I think there are sort of data success indicators, and then there are sort of "feeling" indicators.

### **How does your identity as a woman of color contribute to the presidency?**

I feel that because there are so few of us and because of who I am, I take great responsibility in being a role model, being there for female students, for students of color, for young professionals, for even middle managers or deans who are aspiring to higher positions. Being a woman of color is who I am. It's a combination of my family upbringing, my cultural background, the education I've received, the professional leadership development training that I've had, my own values. I bring all of that to any table or room I'm in, and I say I do that with integrity.

I don't always have the loudest voice in the room. I've often been told, "You're just going to have to speak louder and stand up every time you speak." Some of that I will do in certain situations. But part of that is that we have certain images of what a leader is, and for women of color, we don't always fit that image, and we get criticized. If you're too strong, then you're the aggressive "B-word" woman trying to throw your weight around at the university.

I think it's a very fine line. We face a lot more criticism. As a president or any senior administrator, you're going to make decisions that not everyone is happy with. But when you do—and sometimes you'll just say later, well, that was a dumb decision. But in my experience what I think happens for women of color is that you can't just make a bad decision. If you do, someone will tie your gender and your ethnicity to that bad decision. So I have been called,

since I've been president, every anti-Asian name that you could think of in a derogatory way. I've been called a "genetically inferior weed," and I've been told because I'm "an anti-Asian name" and from an internment camp that I'm not their university president.

It's those things, they're still out there in society. And now, probably more than ever because of the climate in this country, people are even more overt in some of their racism and some of their sexism. So that creates additional challenges, and I think we can't ignore that. Some people say things that are very, very hurtful or are about my parents or about my grandparents.

But that's the additional hard work of being a woman of color in a presidency today, and I don't think we can ignore that. I don't know that others appreciate that or understand that. I'm sure that there are many on my own campus or people on our board of trustees or other senior administrators who don't really think about that. But I have to. It's hard for us to say, when we're up for evaluation, not only am I having to raise this kind of money and do all these things, but people are calling me names. You know, I get threats, and I have to ask, "Am I safe or not?"

### **Women of color accounted for 5 percent of all university presidents and chancellors in 2016. How do you hope the higher education atmosphere or leadership will have changed in the next decade?**

I hope that higher education leadership will invite, encourage, support, create more opportunities, will mentor and coach women of color specifically in this deliberate way, that higher education leadership will acknowledge the implicit and the sometimes very explicit bias that we face. I think otherwise, you're so very alone. It's hard to speak about these things. I think it would be hard for many in our community to hear how tough it is sometimes to be who we are in the leadership positions we are, and I do hope that in the years to come, we'll see the percent increase from 5 percent.

I started thinking about what are some of those things that we could do? I don't see many women of color being offered [the opportunity for] senior-level interim appointments. We're often criticized that we don't have quite enough experience, but we don't get that opportunity because we don't have enough experience, or there's always some excuse. I think that that's going to have to change.

We often think that if I just studied harder, worked harder, if I just had more experience fundraising or volunteering in the community or doing 1,000 things, besides being a single mom and getting your PhD and doing all these things, if I just did more, then I would be given the credit to make it to that final interview, make the final cut. And we sometimes don't know, I didn't know about executive coaches and didn't know that someone in that small pool with me had someone next to them that was calling people on the search committee and saying, "Oh, this person is really good," or calling this politician and saying, "Oh, can you call this board of trustee member?" I did not know about that process. So when I fell short, I always felt that it was personal, that I wasn't quite good enough. It's like just being a first-generation college student. You don't have parents or people who say, "Oh, you should be doing this," or, "Let me introduce you to this person who is going to look over your materials and make sure that everything is perfect. You can send your materials to someone, and they'll review it and make sure it fits with the job announcement." I mean, who knows that? We don't really know that, or I certainly didn't.

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It's taken a while for me to get here in my career. I will say maybe I've grown and matured and gotten better, but to get this presidency, I had an executive coach. If I look at some colleagues, they all had coaching. They all had people who were advocating for them and helping them in a way that we don't know how to do on our own. I feel that we may need "an intervention." If folks feel like they want to really help you and you feel like you're ready, then it almost feels like you need more intensive guidance and support than networking and attending an annual conference.

I am grateful for the support that I have received and the confidence others have had in me. Because of this amazing opportunity for leadership as president, I am able to serve as a role model and am able to make a positive difference for our students, our communities, and higher education. ■

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