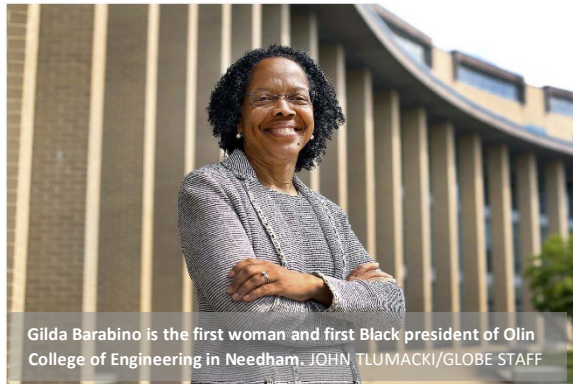


With a large number of college presidents stepping down, now could be a perfect time to diversify

By **Kate Selig** Globe Correspondent, Updated July 6, 2022



Gilda Barabino is the first woman and first Black president of Olin College of Engineering in Needham. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

An extraordinary number of local colleges and universities have presidential vacancies this year, presenting what some experts say could be a golden opportunity to diversify the highest levels of higher education, where women and people of color have historically been underrepresented, and reshape the leadership of an industry that's been buffeted by the pandemic.

In Massachusetts alone, 11 institutions have or will have open presidencies in the coming year, ranging from big-name institutions like Harvard to liberal arts colleges like Smith and

public schools like the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

Only about one-third of college presidencies in the state are held by women, and 25 percent are people of color, according to a new study by the Women's Power Gap Campaign at the Eos Foundation.

"This is a time of rapid change, but it's one of opportunity as well," said Julie Chen, who recently began her chancellorship at UMass Lowell, where she is the second woman, first Asian American, and first LGBTQ+ person to hold the role. "My hope is that we continue to chip away at this until we get to the point where the diversity of our leaders reflects the diversity of the community."

The Eos Foundation found the share of people of color leading colleges and universities increased moderately since its last survey in 2018 — from 16 percent to 25 percent, and the share of women leaders has hardly budged at all.

Andrea Silbert, the foundation's president, said institutions need to seize the moment to bring women and people of color to important roles — boards of trustees, senior administrative positions, and presidencies.

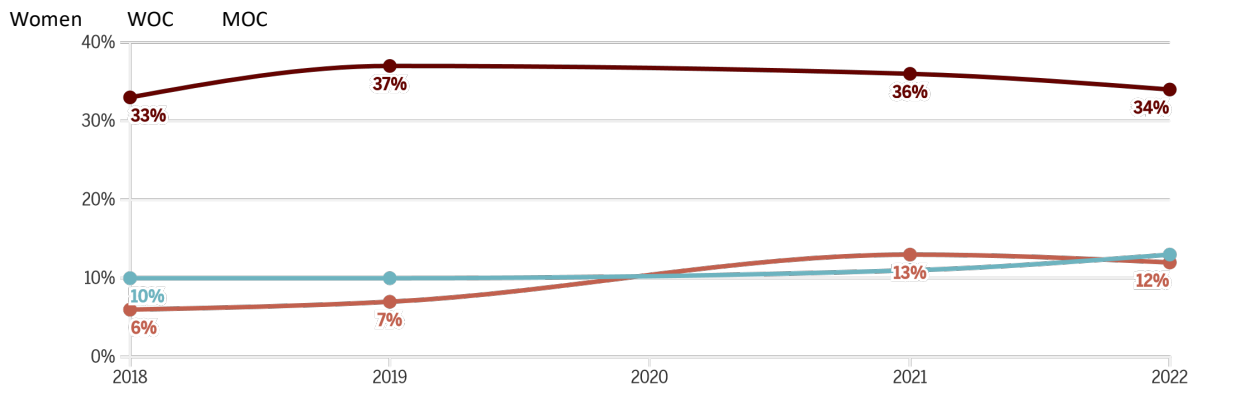
"We need bold change," she said. "We need to demand parity."

The leadership turnover is both caused and compounded by the forces confronting higher education. Presidents are being called upon to lead their institutions not only through the pandemic but also to steer them through a time of social and racial reckoning. Amid inflation and the potential for a recession, students are reassessing the value of a college degree and coping with the fallout of pandemic learning, exacerbating a downward trend in enrollment at many institutions. Community colleges have been particularly hard-hit.

Simmons president Lynn Perry Wooten, who has extensively researched crisis leadership, said moments like these present an opportunity to inject diversity and innovation. Wooten is the school's first Black president, and she said that as she was completing her PhD in the '90s, institutions were making a push to invest in diversity. Those students have now grown up to have the age and experience to lead, she said.

"I see this as a turning point," she said. "This is a time for us to redefine university presidencies."

Representation of Women and POC across Years



Source: Eos Foundation • Data do not include interim presidents, but presidents-elect are included
Ryan Huddle / Globe staff

✶ A Flourish chart

The number of high-profile institutions with openings is especially unusual — and these are the institutions where the lack of diversity in leadership is most stark. Among other institutions, the leaders of Harvard, Dartmouth, and MIT have announced that presidents will step down.

According to the Eos Foundation’s findings, there are no women presidents among any of the eight Massachusetts R1 universities, a designation indicating the doctoral university has “very high” research activity. Five of those schools have never had a woman leader: Boston University, Boston College, Northeastern, UMass Amherst, and Tufts. Of the five, UMass Amherst and Tufts are looking for new leaders.

“It’s shocking,” Tufts student body president Jaden Pena said of the lack of diversity. Tufts president Anthony Monaco will step down next summer, and Pena said he hopes diversity and inclusion will be at the forefront of the search committee’s mind.

Mary Churchill, a higher education expert and associate dean for strategic initiatives and community engagement at BU, said the disparities at elite institutions are not surprising: The more competitive the opportunity, the more likely it is to result in the selection of a white man.

Churchill said less-selective and less-well-resourced institutions are more challenging to lead and manage, resulting in less interest from white and male applicants. The demographics of predominantly white and male search committees and boards at elite institutions can also affect who is selected. And institutions that have hired a diverse candidate once can fall victim to a “one and done” phenomenon, where the next leader chosen is a white man.

Institutions can also struggle to think outside of the box when looking for candidates, she said, and a lack of mentorship and encouragement of diverse faculty and administrators can contribute to them not seeking the job.

But Churchill said institutions can’t claim they’re facing a “pipeline problem” when looking for diverse leaders, where institutions say there are not enough diverse candidates to allow for parity at the presidential level.

Institutions that have never had a woman president – 2018 vs. 2021

26 institutions have never had a woman president

Institution	Never Had a Woman President in 2018	Never Had a Woman President in 2022
American International College	X	X
Assumption College ‡	X	X
Benjamin Franklin Institute of Technology	X	
Berklee College of Music	X	
Boston Architectural College	X	X
Boston College ‡	X	X
Boston University	X	X
Clark University	X	X
College of the Holy Cross ‡	X	X
Fisher College	X	X
Fitchburg State University	X	X
Franklin W Olin College of Engineering	X	
Gordon College	X	X

Source: Eos Foundation • Ryan Huddle / Globe staff

 A Flourish data visualization

“The majority of undergraduates are women, the majority of master’s students are women, the majority of PhDs are women. We have women professors, chairs, deans, vice presidents, and provosts, yet there’s this challenge of getting them into the presidency,” she said. There is also a trend of people of color taking on vice provost roles for diversity, equity, and inclusion that can lead to a presidency, she said.

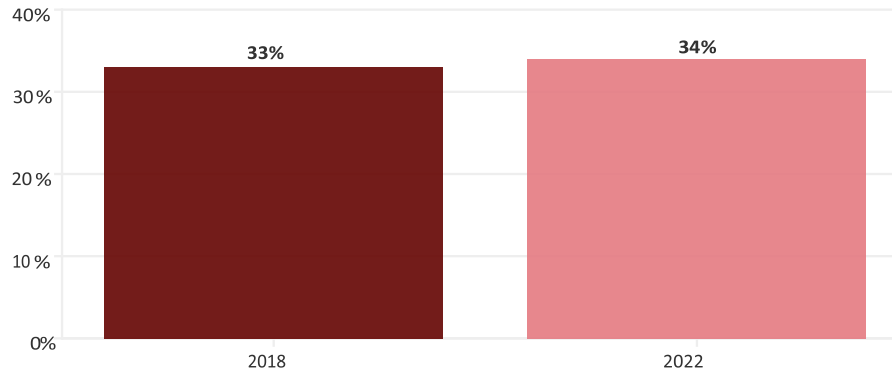
Keight Tucker Kennedy, a partner at the executive search firm Isaacson, Miller, agreed. Kennedy, who has helped higher education institutions identify their future presidents, said it’s become easier to find diverse candidates in recent years. Of the firm’s presidential placements over the last decade, about 41 percent of the hires were women and 36 percent were people of color.

Kennedy said institutions that prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion are more likely to attract and then hire diverse candidates.

Rhode Island College, a public college in Providence, is one such institution, said Shannon Gilkey, Rhode Island’s commissioner on postsecondary education. The college, which is searching for a new president, is federally designated as a Hispanic-serving institution and has a large number of commuter students.

“It will be critical for the president to have that perspective and understand how to serve that population,” Gilkey said.

Minimal progress for women as presidents overall



Source: Eos Foundation • Ryan Huddle / Globe

 A Flourish chart

Experts added that institutions can also diversify their search by including candidates who do not follow the traditional pathway to the presidency. Candidates from underrepresented groups who did not intend from an early stage in their career to seek the presidency may not have followed the traditional track, experts said. Experiences outside academia can also bring valuable perspective.

Gilda Barabino, president of Olin College of Engineering and a Black female engineer, credited the college for recognizing her national leadership in professional societies, and for taking an atypical path through leadership positions in academia. Barabino served as a vice provost twice and then as a dean before becoming president.

“This is an opportunity to step back and see who’s been missing, where are the gaps, who’s not been at the table,” she said. “We need to think about why. What do we need to do to reach those whom we’ve not been reaching? Where have we not been looking?”

Those selections will have ripple effects. Chen, of UMass Lowell, said the presidency was not on her radar until she was encouraged by others, including outgoing Chancellor Jacquie Moloney, to apply. Moloney, Chen said, didn’t take “no” for an answer.

“I know how much an impact it made on me when Jacquie Moloney became the first woman chancellor for UMass Lowell, and so then I thought, OK, in that role, I can also be a model for not only women but students of color and LGBTQ students,” she said. “They can see and say, ‘OK, that’s what a university president can look like.’”

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