



What Happens When Women Run Colleges?

Democratic, communal, inclusive. That may
be the future of college leadership.

June 30, 2019

By LEE GARDNER

The first time Susan W. Engelkemeyer addressed the Nichols College community in 2011 as its new president, someone in the audience told her she needed more women around her. The Massachusetts college's seven-member cabinet — known as the President's Council — was seated in the front row. They were almost all men.

"I sometimes try to defuse things with humor," she recalls, "and I said, 'OK, so who would you want me to fire out of this row of people here?'"

But, she adds, "they were pointing out the obvious." Women make up half the U.S. population and the majority of undergraduate students. Women now earn the majority of Ph.D.s. Yet even at Nichols, a specialty business school where women now constitute only about 40 percent of undergraduates, it was clear that the leadership didn't "even begin to represent that."

Today, half of Nichols's President's Council, which now numbers eight, are women. Over the same period, the college's Board of Trustees has gone from only two women out of 22 members, to 10 women out of 32 members.

That level of female leadership is rare. Although academe has a progressive reputation and in the past couple of decades has seen more women assume leadership roles, they're still in the clear minority at the top. Only 30 percent of all college presidents are women, a figure that is bolstered by the portion who are at two-year institutions, where female leaders make up 36 percent, according to the American Council on Education. Recent

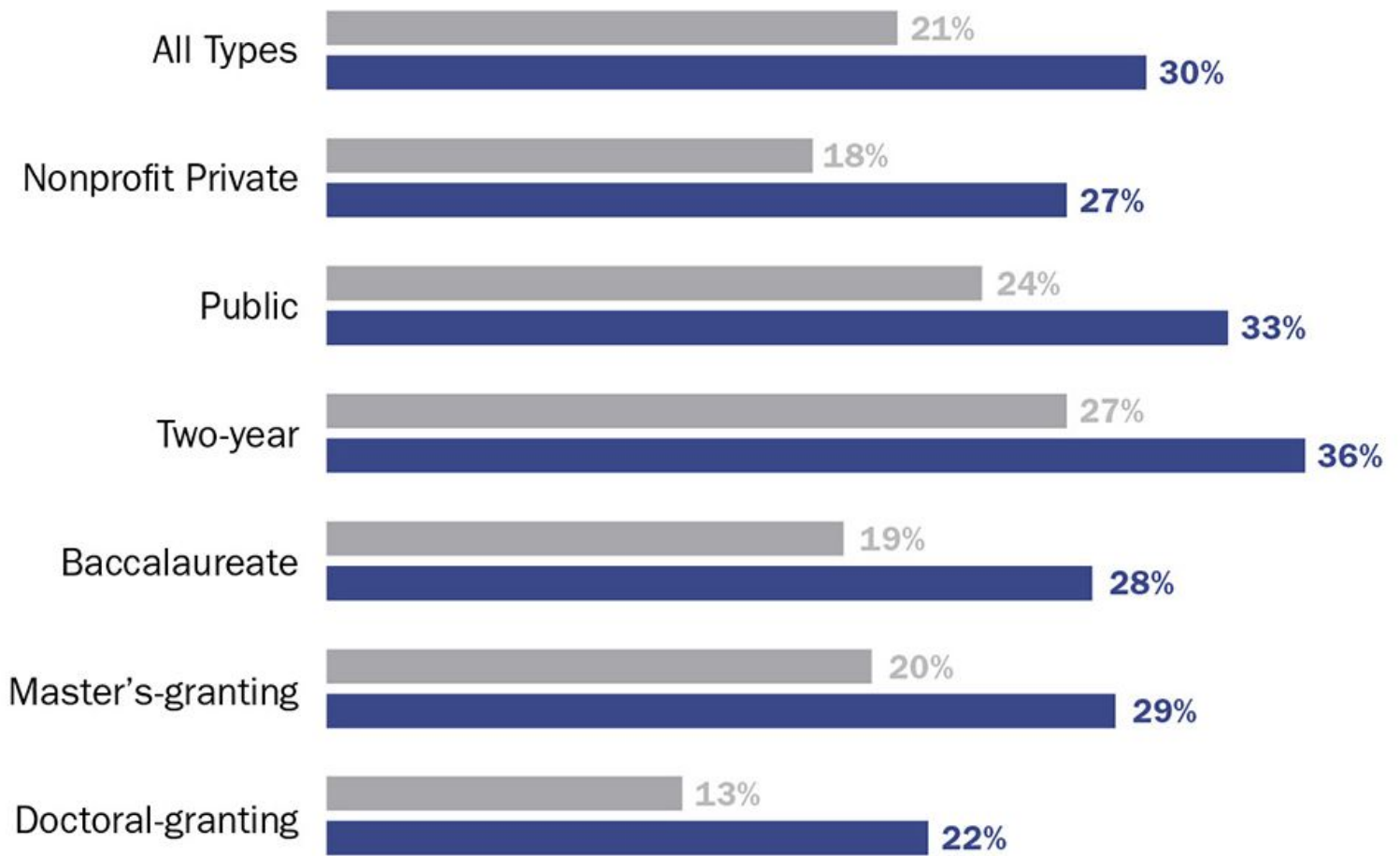
(<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/survey/2017-inside-higher-ed-survey-chief-academic-officers>)

surveys (<https://www.aacu.org/diversitydemocracy/2015/spring/behrr>) show women are better represented in the C-suite than in the presidency, but still make up fewer than half the chief academic officers and an even lower proportion of deans.

More Female Presidents, but They're Still Vastly Outnumbered by Men

Over all, the percentage of female presidents has increased in the past 15 years, but the highest share is still seen among two-year colleges.

■ 2001 ■ 2016



SOURCE: The American College President Study by the American Council on Education

Aside from the question of parity, does it matter? Some female presidents and senior administrators contacted for this story dismiss the suggestion that they do their jobs any differently, or say that differences between any two leaders are simply matters of individual style. “I’m not so sure it’s

about gender as much as it is the culture of the institution and the fit between the values and approach of an individual with that institution,” says Susan D. Stuebner, president of Colby-Sawyer College in New Hampshire.

But studies suggest that, while the differences are typically subtle and, of course, not universal, women do tend to have leadership styles with some common characteristics.

Research shows that men tend to be more autocratic

(<https://www.scholars.northwestern.edu/en/publications/gender-and-leadership-style-a-meta-analysis-4>), says Alice H. Eagly, a professor of psychology at Northwestern University who studies gender and leadership, while women tend to be more democratic, involving other people in decision-making. Women more often than men

(<https://www.scholars.northwestern.edu/en/publications/transformational-transactional-and-laissez-faire-leadership-style-2>) favor a style of leadership that builds trust with and empowers subordinates. Women in the workplace at all levels tend to display more communal, less self-centered behavior than men — especially when working with other women

(<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/8189350>).

What would higher education look like if male-dominated leadership were not the default reality? Some colleges led predominantly by women offer hints. The differences illuminate higher education’s lingering structural sexism and illustrate the potential benefits that more gender parity in leadership could bring.

MARY B. MARCY

President, Dominican U. of California

“With male-dominated leadership, there’s often a focus on the big idea or star quality. With women-dominated leadership, I often see a focus less on the individual and more on the institution.”

(Dominican U. of California)

BELINDA S. MILES

President, Westchester Community College

“Leaders do indeed have different styles — autocratic, more collaborative — and it runs the gamut. I don’t see that as being specifically gender-based.”

(Westchester Community College)

Of course, female leaders came up through a system that, for good or for ill, has been shaped by men for centuries. Stuebner notes that two of her most important mentors were men at institutions where she was one of only a few women on the senior team. But she also remembers a board meeting at a previous institution where a trustee, not realizing she was a senior administrator, asked her to clear his lunch plate.

At Harvard University, Judith B. McLaughlin remembers hearing a joke: “You used to go into a room, and if there were largely women in the room, you thought, Well, nothing important’s going to happen at this meeting,” says McLaughlin, a senior lecturer in education and educational chair of the Harvard Seminar for New Presidents. “Women were relegated to mid-management levels, not senior levels, and so you thought, The decision-makers aren’t here.”

The glass ceiling has given way for some top jobs at Harvard and elsewhere, but women still face a gantlet of biases and assumptions that can shape their path upward and sometimes make it more difficult. Even assumptions that might work in a leader’s favor may be flawed. McLaughlin wonders if when a female leader seems more accessible than her male predecessor, is that because she really is or because that’s the gender stereotype?

Other differences may be real, but that doesn’t mean they’re inborn: It’s possible women develop different leadership strategies to cope with people’s perceptions of them.

Think of a maze — a metaphor Eagly, the psychologist, uses in a book she co-wrote, *Through the Labyrinth: The Truth About How Women Become Leaders*. A maze can’t be beaten by force — it must be navigated, often through trial and error. Research has shown that “when women act in a style that’s recognizably dominant, they tend to get more backlash than a man would get doing the exact same thing,” Eagly says. “If a woman is leading a group that’s mainly men, she has to be quite smart about how she handles that.”

Eagly offers an example: a female friend who rose to provost. At her first meeting with the mostly male deans, “they were all trying to engage in what we psychologists sometimes call male-male competition — I can speak louder and longer than you can,” she says. So her friend started meeting with them in small groups, instead. “It took much more of her time,” Eagly says, “but she could actually talk to them, without them engaging in the ‘I’m going to talk more than you, and I’m the biggest dean in this university’ kind of thing.”

Women may be discouraged from being too dominant, but research (<https://www.scholars.northwestern.edu/en/publications/gender-and-leadership-style-a-meta-analysis-4>) has shown they may also receive criticism for not being dominant enough (https://www.researchgate.net/publication/232509765_Gender_and_the_Evaluation_of_Leaders_A_Meta-Analysis). Engelkemeyer, the Nichols president, recalls a male provost she worked with — “more of a fist-pounding person,” she says — who criticized her strategy of working outside the cabinet to gain support for her case. “He saw that as a weakness of sorts,” she says.



Andrea Chapdelaine, president of Hood College, has a six-member cabinet, four of whom are women. Here she is with Debbie Ricker, provost; William Brown, vice president for enrollment management; and Nancy Gillece, vice president for institutional advancement. (André Chung for The Chronicle)

Ultimately, such sexism may offer a perverse advantage: Any woman who rises to senior leadership at a college has trod a narrow path in the face of second guesses that their male counterparts don't face, and that can help make any leader stronger. It's like the old joke: Fred Astaire was a great dancer, but Ginger Rogers did everything he did backward and in heels.

Andrea E. Chapdelaine became president of Hood College in 2015, succeeding Ronald J. Volpe. Volpe is a 6-foot-4 man and, Chapdelaine says, a "kind of larger-than-life personality — and I say this in the most positive terms." She is, as she notes, a 5-foot-2 woman who is 20 years younger than her predecessor. "Immediately there's a set of assumptions that perhaps Andrea is not as strong and able to lead because she just doesn't have that force of nature," she says. She's found it interesting to see people around her "sort of wait and see if the backbone is there, if you will, and then be a little surprised when it shows."


When Mary B. Marcy, president of Dominican University of California, invites people into her office, they usually sit at a round table. Her choice of furniture is deliberate. A round table has no head — everyone enjoys equal status.

She does sometimes sit behind her desk, she notes, consciously taking a more traditional position of authority. But for the most part, like many women leaders, she prefers an “integrated, collaborative approach.”

Marcy, who served as an administrator at Bard College and Antioch University, has often worked on male-dominated teams. In her experience, male leaders tend to operate on a “kind of hub-and-spoke model, where they have individual relationships with their leadership team and everyone has their individual area of responsibility, and it’s the president who integrates all of that,” she says.

Nicola Pitchford, vice president for academic affairs, says people have told her that the leadership culture at Dominican shifted under Marcy. Pitchford came to the university as dean of the School of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences in 2011, 25 days after Marcy took over as president. As in many male-dominated environments, the institution’s previous leadership seems to have favored a competitive ethos that “derived strength from keeping everybody on their toes” so that no one got too comfortable, Pitchford says. Working on Marcy’s team, she adds, where three of five cabinet members are women, involves “a much more collaborative ethos, where we benefit from building one another up rather than scoring points or showing one another up.”





Mary Marcy (center), president of Dominican U. of California, emphasizes the importance of working across departmental lines and having “each other’s backs, whether it’s workload or providing information or problem-solving.” (Dominican U. of California)

Each vice president has clear responsibilities in his or her area, Marcy says, but she stresses the importance of working across departmental lines and having “each other’s backs, whether it’s workload or providing information or problem-solving.”

That distributed problem-solving made it easier to respond to new legal requirements for handling Title IX-related training and sexual-assault complaints. When Marcy arrived, the university had a Title IX coordinator and hired lawyers to handle individual complaints. Replacing that approach, which “lets everybody else walk away from it,” with sweeping Title IX training and education fit well with her ethos. Now, she says, “everybody’s responsible for the climate, everybody’s responsible for knowing not only the rules but getting it right.”

Collaboration and collegiality are also watchwords for Mary A. Papazian, president of San José State University. “Everybody’s point of view at that level is important and valued,” she says. “I’m not going to have people jumping on other people, explaining to other people, taking an idea that somebody else has expressed.” Sometimes the best solution to a challenge comes from someone who hails from a different part of the institution “but has been included, and feels comfortable sharing their perspective.”

Kathleen Wong(Lau), chief diversity officer at San José State, says she has been in other leadership environments where, tacitly or otherwise, administrators are encouraged to stay in their lane if the subject under discussion isn't directly connected to their title. "People say it politely," she says. "That's really great, but that's really not your area. Let's see what so-and-so has to say." Under Papazian, she says, "minor voices and opinions are given a little more room than in other types of leadership rooms I've been in." Papazian "will really notice when someone hasn't said something," says Wong(Lau). "You're not forced to say something, but she does check in."

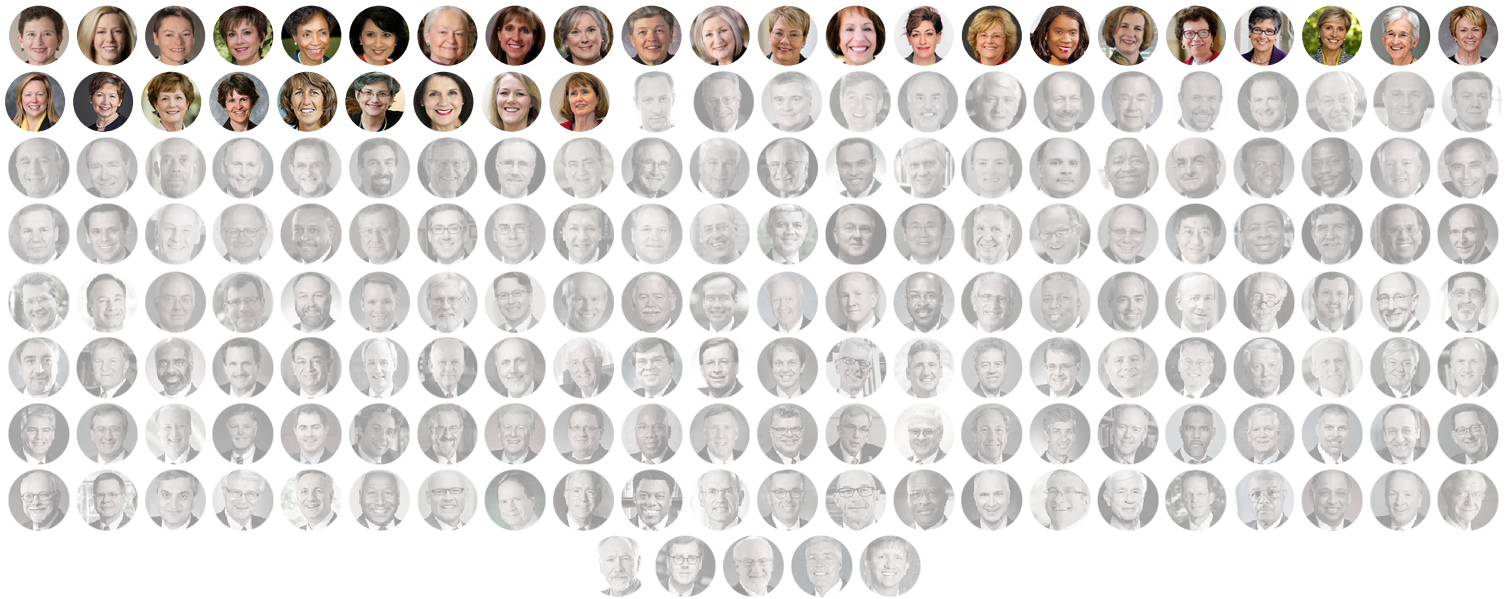
EXPLORE

Female representation in presidential roles varies depending on the size and type of institution. Use this tool to explore the gender breakdown over the years.

2017

Public

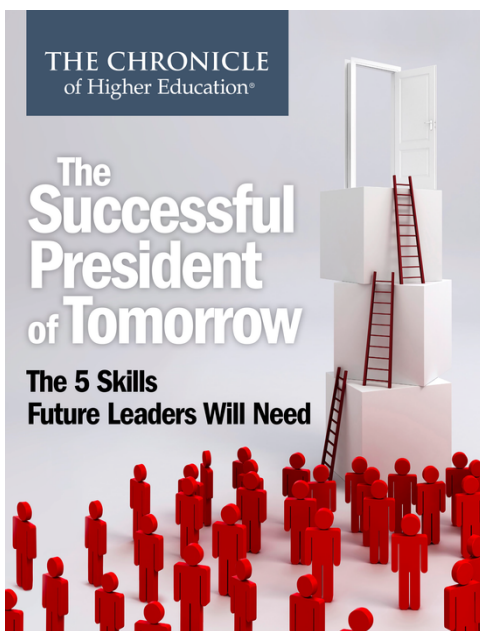
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SOURCE: The data are from *The Chronicle's* executive-compensation survey of more than 1,400 chief executives at more than 600 private colleges from 2010-16 and nearly 250 public universities and systems from 2010-17. If a president served at two different universities within the same calendar year, they are only listed once.

Process is not the only thing that may shift under predominantly female leadership — so may the culture and what gets on the agenda.

Of course, female leaders are just as concerned as male ones with questions like student success, resources, and other pressing concerns, says Belinda S. Miles, president of Westchester Community College in New York. “We’ve got a lot of heavy lifting to do.”



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But others point to changes that might have been less likely at a college led predominantly by men. Last year, Dominican was looking for a new space for faculty, staff, and potentially students who were breastfeeding and needed a quiet place to pump. Marcy and Pitchford quickly homed in on a storage space in the main administration building, between their two offices. Putting the wellness room near the workspaces of two of the most powerful people on campus sent a message that “this is something we as a campus and as a leadership really value,” Pitchford says. “It’s not something I would necessarily expect at a predominantly male-led institution.”

Having more women in positions of power on campus can also change the tone, and the candor, of conversations. As the #MeToo movement became a topic of conversation nationally, Pitchford identified herself at several campus meetings as a survivor of sexual assault “in a way that was intended to make the environment more comfortable for survivors of any gender to speak up,” she says. “I’m not sure that in a more male-led environment, I would have felt comfortable standing up in front of faculty or students” that way.

A preponderance of women in leadership roles can shift the agenda at the system level, too. Twelve of the 23 presidents in the California State University system are now women. (Seven years ago, there were three.) “The richness of the conversation is palpably different” when the CSU presidents gather for their every-other-month meeting, says Timothy P. White, the chancellor. In discussions about improving student well-being, for example, the female majority among the presidents brings to the table “more understanding, more compassion, more willingness to look at a series of solutions rather than one size fits all.”



The majority of California State University presidents — 12 out of 23 — are women. (Michael Farmer, California State U.)

Female leadership can help make a stronger connection with other women on campus.

Chapdelaine, the Hood president, says that one female student confided that her brother is an addict, another that she was being stalked by a former boyfriend. Chapdelaine says she thinks other women “are more willing to disclose personal information” with her than if she were a man.

Beyond the ways in which a campus with more female leadership may create a more empathetic environment lies the possibility of a campus where women’s distinct concerns get the proper attention as a matter of course.

At the height of #MeToo, Marcy and Pitchford were concerned that, despite the female quorum among senior administrators, they had perhaps not been proactive enough in taking the temperature of the campus climate for women. Last spring, they invited a group of female faculty members to the president’s home to talk about that. To Marcy’s surprise, their primary concerns were not about their daily experiences as women. When more gender parity is spread throughout the institution, it seems, gender is less of an issue.

MARY A. PAPAIZIAN

President, San José State U.

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(San José State U.)

How likely is it colleges will arrive at that point? Perhaps not so soon. “I think people, by and large, want to do the right thing,” Marcy says. “But I think there are a lot of societal norms about what leadership looks like, and about what authority looks like, and who’s in what role, that are hard to shift.”

Some female presidents discuss amongst themselves another sign that women are not seen as natural leaders: When one steps down, especially if she was the first woman to lead an institution, her successor is typically a man. There are a number of prominent exceptions, such as Amy Gutmann succeeding Judith Rodin as president of the University of Pennsylvania, but “that’s something that I can tell you a lot of us talk about,” Marcy says. “It’s like, ‘Well, we did that, so now we can move on.’”

But more boards and search committees are asking for candidate pools that are diverse in gender, as well as in race and discipline, says Vivian Brocard, president of Isaacson, Miller, an executive-search firm that works with colleges. “It is de rigueur now,” she says. Still, some colleges fail to name female finalists. A search for a new president for the University of South Carolina derailed (<https://www.chronicle.com/article/Disputes-Over-Diversity/246221>) recently after students and faculty objected that not one of the semifinalists for the job was a woman or a person of color.

Figures from Isaacson, Miller's own data show that women are increasingly prevalent in candidate pools. Women made up about 15 percent of candidates in presidential searches the firm handled in 2008; in 2018, it was 26 percent. Over that same period, the firm saw the number of presidential hires who were women go from "a very small percentage," Brocard says, to 57 percent. The number of female candidates and hires the firm handles at the provost and dean level is also increasing.

A modestly larger percentage of women in the running isn't likely to push university leadership toward gender parity anytime soon, especially since most boards are still dominated by men. Brocard notes a 2016 study (<https://hbr.org/2016/04/if-theres-only-one-woman-in-your-candidate-pool-theres-statistically-no-chance-shell-be-hired>) that showed that if there's only one woman candidate in a pool, it's statistically impossible, given people's prejudices, that she will get the job. "If you have two or three, the dynamic changes a lot in the way people look at it," she says. "I think that until the candidate pools get to be really 50/50, there still will be some implicit bias at work."

Getting to that 50 percent may prove a challenge, thanks to what Papazian calls "a leaky pipeline." The traditional process of earning a Ph.D., winning tenure, and climbing the leadership ranks can take even longer for a woman than for a man because more women serve as primary caregivers, whether for children or aging parents. Several presidents and senior administrators noted that the demands of the jobs don't easily accommodate caregiving responsibilities, and that women often feel forced to choose one or the other.

Papazian also says she's seen many promising women get sidetracked into positions off the traditional leadership pathway. "They get into these associate thises, and associate thats," roles that are less likely to impress a hiring committee, which wants "to see the person who actually has to say yes or no to something." Why do women take these jobs? "They get asked," Papazian says. They don't do the career calculus because "they care more about helping and getting the work done than about their own self-promotion."

If parity is ever to be achieved, it must build from the bottom of the ladder. Many presidents stress the importance of female leaders mentoring other potential female leaders, and mentoring their students as well. Nichols College's Institute for Women's Leadership, for example, helps prepare a new generation of students by building their confidence and such skills as putting themselves forward for opportunities and negotiating salaries. The pay gap for women often starts with their first job out of college, says Rachel Ferreira, director of the institute. Women tend to question themselves, she says, but ideally young women could understand "maybe I'm questioning myself, but that doesn't mean that I'm not as good as my male counterparts."

Despite the gaps in the number of women represented on boards, in the president's office, and in the cabinet, Chapdelaine, the Hood president, is sanguine about the future. The 2018 election, which swept an unprecedented number of women into Congress, fell on her birthday, and she calls it "the best birthday present ever." Not because women are inherently better at running things — plenty of female leaders have been disasters, she adds. But when more women gain political office or leadership positions, she says, it means "there isn't this whole swath of women who aren't even being considered."

Lee Gardner writes about the management of colleges and universities, higher-education marketing, and other topics. Follow him on Twitter [@_lee_g](https://twitter.com/_lee_g), (http://www.twitter.com/_lee_g) or email him at lee.gardner@chronicle.com. (<mailto:lee.gardner@chronicle.com>)

Jacquelyn Elias is news applications developer. Erica Lusk is photo and video editor. Scott Seymour is senior art director.

Clarification (7/3/2019, 11:00 a.m.): In a previous version of this story, a joke related by Judith B. McLaughlin was characterized as "bitter." Ms. McLaughlin disputes that characterization. The adjective has been removed from the story.

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