

UPWARD MOBILITY

for Women in Higher Education

By Maya Ranchod Kirkhope, Vice President, Senior Consultant, and Senior Executive Coach, Academic Search

While the number of women in leadership positions in higher education continues to be on the rise, it's clear that women are still behind when it comes to breaking the glass ceiling of the academy.

Women increasingly outpace men in college graduation and enrollment rates. According to the [National Student Clearinghouse Research Center](#), women accounted for nearly 60 percent of all college students by the end of the 2021-22 academic year. Yet, even with greater enrollments of women in college, those at the executive level of leadership within our institutions do not equally reflect the student population they most serve.

A 2017 study conducted by [CUPA-HR](#) revealed that although there has been a trend toward hiring more women since 2001, the percentage of women in top executive positions in higher education remains less than 30 percent.

In addition, CUPA-HR's 2020 Administrators in Higher Education showed only 32 percent of colleges and universities have female presidents, and a report published in 2022 by the Eos Foundation in partnership with the American Association of University Women, "[The Women's Power Gap at Elite Universities: Scaling the Ivory Tower](#)," noted that only 22 percent of presidents at elite US research universities (those ranked as R1 Carnegie institutions) are women.

Marjorie Haas, President of the Council of Independent Colleges, addresses in her book, [A Leadership Guide for Women in Higher Education](#) (2021), the unique challenges women face as they move into senior leadership roles at colleges and universities, including how biases and perceptions can impact the career paths of women, who often are faced with more scrutiny than their male counterparts. Whereas males may have been "lauded as experienced," women were "passed over as too old" when being considered for a position.

The American Council on Education (ACE) discusses how women have altered their career progression in ways that males have not, for instance, to care for a dependent, spouse/partner, or parent. ACE also notes how women presidents are less likely to be married or to have children.

Generally, there is an expectation for executive leaders to spend many hours on campus with little flexibility in their schedule. The unspoken expectation of campus leaders may include attending sporting events, concerts, art exhibits, presentations, and fundraising events outside of the typical working hours. There may also be the need for extensive travel to meet with benefactors and attend conferences, which leads to many hours away from the home.

All of these factors can cause strain on anyone who seeks the presidency while also wishing to raise a family, as they must face the constant battle for their time and attention.

Overall, higher education tends to move slower when it comes to updating and adapting to new workplace trends, which includes offering flexible work arrangements. We have seen a greater push for flexibility across all sectors following the COVID-19 pandemic, to which higher education has been forced to adapt. However, it can prove difficult when the focus of many higher education institutions is to serve residential students.

We must acknowledge that there is some need for residential campuses to be physically staffed to fully support the student experience and it may be important for leaders to be seen on campus. But we must also understand that a lack of flexibility in the workplace may impede qualified leaders to climb the ladder.

In addition to women typically facing stereotypes and assumptions about their abilities and commitment to their careers more than men, on average, women have lower salaries than their male colleagues. Due to these salary inequities, some states have taken it upon themselves to update their legislature to require organizations to share salary ranges in job descriptions. By requiring salary transparency, organizations can work to build a more equal pay scale based on merit and not on race or gender.

Higher education institutions should also consider looking closely at their policies to ensure that women have an equal opportunity for upward mobility, as it is worth noting that the path to the presidency, in particular, can often be quite different for women. The way higher education institutions are structured can greatly affect how they are able to excel in their careers.

If we want to continue to see positive change in the academy, it is important to stay informed about the issues facing women who strive to enter leadership positions and to use our voices and influence to help in their endeavors. Diversifying the workforce in academia can lead to better decision-making, problem-solving, and overall organizational performance since there are more diverse and creative viewpoints brought to the table.

As an executive search firm with close ties to leadership development programs through our parent organization, the [American Academic Leadership Institute](#), it is our goal to not only find talented women to add to our candidate network but to work to place them into leadership positions.

Academic Search has been a long supporter of the work the American Council on Education has done with the [Moving the Needle: Advancing Women in Higher Education Leadership](#) campaign, which brings awareness to gender disparity in the academy. In addition, we are fortunate to work with organizations like HERS (Higher Education Resource Services); several of our senior consultants actively participate in the [Next Stages Next Steps](#) and [Executive Coaching Circles](#) programs designed to equip women with the insight, skills, and practice needed to navigate the often challenging academic search process.

This Women's History Month, we dedicate ourselves to continuing our work in diversifying leadership across the academy through our search work, executive coaching, and leadership development programs.

About the Author



Maya Ranchod Kirkhope serves as Vice President, Senior Consultant, and Senior Executive Coach at Academic Search and has completed numerous searches both domestically and internationally. Ms. Kirkhope has specialized in presidential searches, created programs to strengthen the work between the president and Board of Trustees, and developed Academic Search's signature transition and onboarding practice.

