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## Women College Presidents:

### Interviews about Journeys and Adaptations

*Jo Young Switzer*

Manchester College

While the progress of women into higher education presidencies is dramatic, it is also, in the words of one experienced woman president, “not exactly a lot!” In the 15 years from 1986 to 2001, the American Council on Education (ACE) reports that the percentage of women presidents increased from 9.5 to 21.1 (*The American college president*, 2002). Of these women, 26.8% led two-year institutions; 18.7% led baccalaureate schools; 20.3% led comprehensive universities; and only 13.3% headed doctorate-granting schools; with the remaining 14.8% guiding specialized schools.

Higher education agencies such as ACE, American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASC&U), Council of Independent Colleges (CIC), as well as scholarly journals and presses have monitored these quantitative and qualitative changes. These publications have provided periodic snapshots about demographics and attitudes, but because the role of women in senior leadership positions in higher education is in a time of transition, it makes sense to listen at more frequent intervals to these women. In addition to giving some benchmarks about the changes, their experiences and suggestions can be particularly helpful for women who are considering presidencies.

One woman president said that “the university is just one subset of society, and the same factors that prevent women from making more progress to the top of corporations or government are also at work in education” (Glazer-Raymo, 1999, p. 157). This project looked at the ways that socialized gender roles are intertwined with perceptions about effective leaders.

#### Leadership

Stereotypical views of men’s leadership is that it is results-oriented, assertive (if not aggressive), decisive, bold, and hierarchical, much like the masculine stereotype (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001). Women leaders are seen as more relational, emotional, people-oriented, indecisive, and participative, all

stereotypically feminine characteristics (Helgesen, 1990; Todd-Manchillas & Rossi, 1985). Effective leadership has long been traditionally associated with the masculine approach because of the perception that this kind of leadership got results. These stereotypes created the double bind for women because women who act in stereotypical feminine ways (emotional, relational) are perceived as weak leaders. If they act in accordance with the stereotypical men's approach to leadership, they are perceived as pushy, rude, and aggressive. This double bind has been documented in many occupational contexts (Cantor & Bernay, 1992, p. 74-75; Haslett & Lipman, 1997, pp. 38-42).

At the same time, critical changes have reshaped contemporary organizations (flatter structures, self-managed teams, workforce diversity, and strategic alliances). As a result, organizations require leaders with strong relational abilities and team-oriented management, skills that have traditionally been associated with women. These "people skills" are as valuable in the new corporate environment as the more traditional "masculine" approaches were to more hierarchical organizations, yet a new irony emerges (Acebo, 1994). The new paradox is that women are still not being selected for top leadership positions to the degree that the current organizational needs would appear to require (Merrill-Sands & Kolb, 2001). Some women are not selected because of the "glass ceiling," about which much has been written (Annenberg Public Policy Center, 2003; Morrison, White, Van Velsor, & The Center for Creative Leadership, 1987). In addition, women may not apply for these positions because they perceive that the glass ceiling will inhibit their success.

### The Research Questions and Design

In order to take a current snapshot of women presidencies and to assemble their reflections on ways women can move successfully into presidencies, this report focused on several key questions, including some practical issues not typically included in the current literature but which may be of practical interest to women who are considering presidencies.

1. How do current women presidents describe their journeys into the presidency?
2. What role, if any, did mentors play in their journeys?
3. Knowing what they know now, would they do it again?
4. How did the presidency affect their family dynamics?
5. How do they get the housework done? What additional services would be most helpful?
6. What was best advice they received as they considered a presidency? What advice would they give to women considering a presidency?

The responses of current women presidents to these questions amplify and extend what we already know about how people become and remain presidents. Fifteen women presidents, representing two-year community colleges (n=5), baccalaureate colleges (n=5), comprehensive institutions (n=4), and doctoral institutions (n=1), participated in interviews about these questions. Invitations to participate went to women in the four primary sectors of higher education and to women in different geographical areas of the U.S. This modified random sampling selection process generated a sample size that was sufficient to give voice to differences, but small enough to be able to schedule and complete the interviews. Telephone interviews ranged from 25 to 75 minutes. Of the 27 individuals invited to participate, 2 declined, 10 did not respond, and 15 participated.

Each invitation included a brief description of the project and a biography of the investigator. Once the presidents had agreed to partake, participants received copies of the questions and a brief demographic

questionnaire in advance of the interview. Interviews were completed in a three-month period in late 2003 with follow-up notes sent to each participant. All were told that their responses would be kept anonymous and that results would be reported in aggregated form or without specific attribution. They included women in their first presidencies, and several in their second. They included 4 African-Americans, 1 Hispanic-American, and 11 Caucasians.

All of these presidents responded to the open-ended questions which were included in the standard protocol. If they chose to take their responses a different direction than the question protocol, they could. In addition to the interview, each president completed a short demographic questionnaire, with questions about age, family background, socioeconomic class, marriage, children, tenure in the current job, and academic discipline.

Their responses indicated that gender is not a factor that they think about overtly when they think of their leadership. Instead, they described being female as a more fundamental part of who they are and how they work. One said, "I try to be self-reflective about this, but I have no distance. I don't know how not to be a woman leader." Another argued that "leadership differs more among men and women than between them." Their stories, however, did not always support this observation. They shared varied experiences in which being female gave them skills that enhanced fund raising, administrative effectiveness, and work with their boards. They also described times when they got resistance because they were female. All of them, however, provided insights about ways women can diffuse resistance and strengthen their institutions by acting in accord with their own values and leadership styles.

The voices of these women highlighted the special challenges that gender has posed for their presidencies. Even more important, they shared a plethora of insights about ways that women can, and should, seek out presidencies, and suggested ways women can succeed in those positions.

### The Journey

Why do women become college and university presidents? How do they describe their "journeys" into the presidency? Only 1 of the 15 women interviewed said that she had set a presidency as a goal and gone about "methodically to achieve it." She took advantage of professional development opportunities, and she also "spent time watching and looking at what the president did" and observing what boards wanted the president to do. Within 11 years of setting the goal, after moving quickly from a faculty position through a series of administrative posts, she became a president.

The majority of the women described their journeys quite differently, one saying poetically, "it was a very crooked road." The majority began as successful faculty members who, fairly early in their careers, were chosen for key committees or administrative assignments (e.g., honors program and women's center directorships, personnel committees, planning committees). In those appointments, they discovered they enjoyed learning about the "bigger picture" and networking with people whom they would not have met otherwise. Looking back, they realized that their professional visibility increased significantly because of these ancillary assignments. One said, ". . . in retrospect, it looks perfectly organized, but it wasn't."

They described themselves early in their careers in non-presidential terms, such as, "a very hard worker who likes to think that nobody works harder than me;" "someone who likes to act outside the box;" "happy as a faculty member;" "a happy second person;" "organized;" and "able to articulate aspirations for the larger group." Several said outright, "I didn't see myself as a president." One president began her very first administrative assignment when she was pregnant with her first child: "I had a notion of what a president looks like and it is typically a man who doesn't have a couple of kids running around...being a president wasn't a life goal at all."

None of the women moved into senior administrative positions because they were unhappy with what they were doing. All enjoyed the successes and visibility of their early work as professors, school superintendents, continuing education administrators, and counselors. They did, however, become interested in the bigger picture somewhere along their journeys in these earlier positions. They especially enjoyed working in multidimensional assignments.

Ten of them described their initial surprise at the intellectual challenges they found in these non-teaching assignments. Those who had been faculty members critical of administrators were particularly surprised at the intellectual vitality required by administrative work. They were also surprised at what they learned about their institutions, and some were amazed at their successes in these roles. Only two of the presidents became ACE Fellows, one of them describing that program as “the single greatest leadership preparation one can have.” Both ACE Fellows alumnae were extremely positive about what they learned through that experience.

The majority of these women had at least one person who saw in them more than they saw in themselves. Several said that senior leaders encouraged them to participate in the Harvard Institute for Educational Management (IEM), Bryn Mawr’s summer program for women leaders, the Kellogg Foundation leadership program, and the ACE Fellows program. Only one month after being invited to serve as an executive assistant to the president as an untenured faculty member, one woman heard this from her president: “I really want you to consider becoming a college president.” Another served as an interim president and deeply enjoyed the interaction with the public, particularly “telling the institutional story.”

Since a full year participation in the ACE Fellows program was not possible for one particular woman, her creative president and mentor tailored weeklong opportunities for her to shadow the chief financial officers at a much wealthier campus and at a major corporation. Both of these experiences exposed her to an entirely different component of organizations than she was used to seeing and expanded her professional networks dramatically.

Those who had not completed their graduate work were encouraged to do so. One third of the women, mostly from the community colleges, had not completed their doctorates when the lower-level administrative doors began to open, so they completed their graduate studies, often at the same time they had children at home.

These women took very seriously the effectiveness with which they handled their non-faculty assignments and the messages from supervisors saying, “you ought to consider a presidency.” One woman said that her mentors “opened themselves to show me the joys and the things that are not so joyful about a presidency, and what the trade-offs are.” This enabled her to seek a presidency with her “eyes wide open.” Another’s mentor “just modeled good people skills, and I learned a lot from how she works with people.” Another woman had a mentor whose promotion of her benefited him too: “he plucked me out of the role of being a radical faculty union advocate into administration.” As a result, he redirected her leadership effectiveness which had been strongly anti-administration into a role that broadened her perspective and lessened her constant lobbying for unionization. Another woman’s dean and president, both men, said, “you would make a great president...why don’t you try it?” Like other mentors, they followed up that encouragement with professional development opportunities for her.

The mentor of a different woman pressed her to think about what she would do if she did not get the presidential job she was seeking, or what she would do if she got it and did not like it. These questions nudged her to gather information and think carefully about her own aspirations. As a result, she went into a candidacy fully informed about the nature of the job. Another mentor consistently encouraged the woman regularly to consider her “reasonable next steps.” One woman who participated in the Bryn Mawr summer institute for women found her “aha!” moment in the assignment to design a career map. When the group

gave her feedback on her very ambitious map, they said, “it sounds perfectly reasonable. Go for it.” And she did.

One interviewee found that her mentor was only helpful to the point that the interviewee surpassed her mentor. She cautioned women mentors to make sure they are comfortable with the success of those they mentor since, in her situation, “my success broke our relationship.” Friendships and mentoring relationships were not always positive for these women. One president reflected on those people who took credit for some of her early work: “I had to kiss some frogs along the way.” The interaction between the women and their mentors is multi-dimensional. The mentors were able to “name” the possibility of the women’s potential as presidents and to provide an array of experiences to enhance development toward that end. The women were able to hear those confirming messages, embrace the professional opportunities even when they were new and uncomfortable. They were also able to celebrate their own part in their successes.

Women also adapted the pace and locations of their careers to their spouses’ jobs. None reported that this adaptation was debilitating, but they nearly all reported that it took hard work to negotiate the needs in two-career households. One woman and her spouse had a commuter marriage for 16 of their 33 years of marriage. This intense negotiation and problem-solving is in direct contrast to the example which was shared about two unnamed men who accepted presidencies and then went home and told their wives about it.

### The Expectations

All of these women said they received warm and supportive messages as they began their presidencies. The women reported that the search committees and boards of trustees announced publicly and privately that they believed they had chosen the right persons for the presidencies. These experiences reflect a constructive change in opportunities for women at top levels of higher education. The change is comparable to what is apparent in the dramatic increase in women who are elected to office in the U.S. House of Representatives as well as the Senate. In his 1984 landmark analysis of women in Congress, Gertzog talked about the treatment of women by the men who, by number, greatly dominated Congress. In the 2nd edition of the book, Gertzog (1995) renamed the notion of treatment and talked about women’s entries into Congress as their integration. In 11 short years, they were less inclined to be passive recipients of treatment by male colleagues and became more active participants in their integration into that “man’s world,” and they helped shape that integration. Women college presidents have experienced this same shift.

The early days of presidencies for the women in this report reflected a natural kind of integration into the campus. They did not report a sense of being the outsider in the institution, being treated in any particular way by the members of the campus faculty, administration, or by the board. The gender-related expectations for women presidents were somewhat predictable, discouraging, and amusing. Four of the women described repeated instances at public events (receptions, student orientation) where their husbands or male faculty members were assumed to be the president rather than them. Nearly half of the women said people underestimated their knowledge of finance, facilities, and construction. Four reported that they received messages that were downright patronizing, “almost testing to see if I was intelligent enough to do the job.”

A common expectation about women leaders is that they may not be able to make tough decisions. None of the presidents in this report described their work in ways that sounded remotely indecisive, nor were they reluctant to make hard decisions. The women were clear that any responsible leader will find some decisions difficult, regardless of gender. Several reported having to make unpopular decisions shortly after arriving at their institutions (e.g., removing faculty, cutting positions, reducing budgets). One remarked, “I’ve followed a male in every position I’ve had, and it’s amazing some of the tough stuff that doesn’t get done. People who are conflict-adverse don’t seem to realize that you can do tough things humanely.”

These women were confident in their abilities to make hard decisions, knowing that those decisions were for the benefit of the institution. One woman spoke clearly: “I’m a good read of character.” The presidents believed that they had keen awareness of the broader impact of hard decisions (including the impact on people), so “it is a challenge not to internalize ramifications of the decisions.” One woman said that having children gave her a “good yardstick with which to measure priorities in hard decisions.” Another said that as she makes hard decisions, she tries to “look at what happens to people between the present time and the end result.”

Many presidents believed their constituents expected them to be warm, nurturing, and sensitive; and at the same time, they wanted them to be able to handle severe pressure and make hard decisions (Brown, Van Ummersen, & Sturnick, 2001). Most described themselves as being good listeners, good “people-persons,” and “humanistic,” but a few do not. One president reported that she is a “strong T (task), not F (feelings) on Myers Briggs, so my style isn’t necessarily the female style.” Another boasted, “I follow men’s examples of bluffing myself through stuff. I watch them, and it works.” She also described herself as “impersonal” about making decisions.

One participant who has written about women and leadership noted that many women are highly sensitive to unspoken cues. They have been socialized “to scan the environment constantly to see how people are reacting and feeling.” One president believed that women do have a deeper “connection to people.” She described the “motivational side” of her leadership which includes being able “to read people, empathize, communicate, be comfortable with praise and warmth.” The connection between these abilities and potential success in fund-raising was obvious.

Another significant issue is the perception that women presidents are more accessible than their male counterparts. These created serious problems for the presidents whose offices may not convey the typical “boundaries” one would expect for a CEO. “People think they can just walk into a woman’s office,” noted one president. Several described the faculty and staff popping into their offices without appointments. Another reported how “shocked” faculty members were that she sat with them at public events, but she also noted that doing this might confuse faculty about her immediate accessibility to them in other contexts.

These presidents worked hard to let people know how much they are valued. Several reserved time in their daily schedules to prepare hand written notes. Another said, “even at the point of exhaustion, I make sure people know I value them. I haven’t experienced this from men.”

Several participants believed that women have high expectations for themselves, sometimes higher than may be healthy. One said, “we’re always asking ourselves ‘am I smart enough?’ ‘am I good enough?’” One reflected, “I think what women are saying is whether they are doing enough to help their institution.” Another participant said that not only do women presidents have high goals for themselves, but they also have very high expectations for others. In her mind, this meant “when we see something that’s not right, we challenge it and change it.”

Other expectations from faculty, staff, and the public apply to both men and women, particularly the expectation that the president should be knowledgeable, fair, able to interpret the campus vision, set goals and garner support for those goals, and be present at all events. Actually, the president does not need to attend all events, just the events that critics think are important!

## Leadership

Women presidents differ greatly in their approaches to leadership. In this report, two of the women described behaviors that suggested a somewhat impersonal and ambitious approach to the presidency. Most, however, talked about their leadership in terms of their being trusted “to articulate the aspirations of my

institution.” One reflected, “I’m almost entirely motivated by the desire to do meaningful and worthwhile work.” One said that she feels less pressure to be right than to “arrive at mutually satisfactory conclusions and decisions.”

Numerous women presidents described their strong listening abilities. If the ability to listen enhanced the president’s ability to make informed judgments, she increased her ability to serve the institution well, particularly at the beginning. Other writers argue that presidents

who work hard in the beginning to know their campuses – their histories, cultures, power centers, and so on – seem able to make a more positive impact more quickly than those presidents who feel they know exactly how to turn the institution around (Sturnick, Milley, & Tisinger, 1991, p. 79)

These same authors posit that learning the institution by listening and observing allowed the president to determine which “symbolic actions” can best unify the institution.

One essential skill in creating these mutually satisfactory conclusions is the ability to understand people. One woman described her own leadership this way: “I have an ability to hear what people are not saying at same the time as I hear what they are saying.” Another said she was “sensitive to unspoken cues.” This ability helped both consider more fully the “human implications of decisions.” People appear to want “emotional intelligence” from their presidents, as well as “academic acumen,” said one woman. This relational ability was undoubtedly a helpful element in fundraising because donors developed a relationship to the institution through the president who was attentive and responsive to them.

Most described themselves as collaborative leaders, including one woman who believes that leadership differs more among men and women than between them. In her experience, she reported, she does notice a difference in men’s and women’s comfort with collaboration and inclusion. Other writers have confirmed a high level of comfort with participation and collaboration among women leaders (Astin & Leland, 1991; Kabacoff, 2000).

Most women in this report did not rigidly differentiate between male and female leadership. Nonetheless, they made many self-observations that indicated they do believe there are a few socialized gender characteristics that give women some advantage in building good morale, enlisting support for initiatives, collaborating effectively with colleagues and board members, and fund-raising. “If you’re good, you’re good, and if you’re not good, it doesn’t matter if you’re male or female,” said one.

## Family

The statistics about marriage and children differ fairly dramatically between men and women presidents. The 2002 summary from ACE shows that 89.6% of men presidents are currently married compared to 58.9% of the women. The same report finds that 90% of the men reported having children while only 67% of the women did. Despite this fact, 25.8% of women presidents said they had altered their job circumstances for child-rearing compared to 1.9% of the men (Glazer & Raymo, 1999, p. 162-64). More than a quarter of the women reported that they had left the job market or worked part-time during the time when child-rearing was most demanding. There is no question that family issues present complications more for women presidents than for their male colleagues (Brown, Van Ummersen, & Sturnick, 2001, p. 5).

Whether women can function as presidents with children at home is a troubling issue. Only 1 of the 15 women in this report had children at home during her presidency, although about two thirds of those interviewed have grown children or stepchildren. All but two of those with children moved into presidencies after their children were grown. One specifically delayed her senior leadership roles when her children were young: “my children were first before my career, and I’m not sorry about that. But for me, it just happens

that this delay eventually ended up in a presidency.” A third of the women interviewed said that they “could not imagine” combining the job of the presidency with at-home children.

Despite their heavy professional responsibilities, these women carry significant responsibilities for family and home. Only one of these presidents had children still at home, and her spouse went back to school to prepare for a completely new, time-flexible career when he was 45 in order to provide family support around her schedule. She reported, “I haven’t done food shopping for 15 years, and it’s embarrassing to say that!” Others had husbands who took primary responsibility for elderly parents, emptying the dishwasher, and similar daily tasks. Those presidents who are single and living alone remarked that their lives were simpler because they had no one to be responsible for except themselves.

In their book, *Second Shift* (Hochschild & Machung, 2003), the authors assert that many working women complete their first shift at their paid employment and then begin a second shift at home after work. The authors noted that this phenomenon happens even in families where both partners believe they have an egalitarian approach to sharing of household responsibilities. Do women presidents work a second shift? It was not uncommon for them to do laundry on weekends, handle family gifts, pick up dry cleaning after work, and cook. One said, “it’s hard to do this job well and still handle the ordinary details of life.”

The more typical response was gratitude for the ways that their husbands were willing to negotiate “redivisions of labor.” Some presidents let their husbands know which public events are important for the husbands to attend, but they do not expect them to attend all events. Several husbands served as unpaid drivers for their president wives. One president said about her husband, “he actually likes the entertaining more than I do.” Other husbands did not.

Of the 11 married presidents in this group, five husbands retired when their spouses took these jobs, a characteristic that does not match the ACE statistics.

### Housekeeping and Other Demands

Many women considering a presidency wonder how to balance the daily work of home with the demands of the job. Most of the women interviewed in this study lived in a campus-owned residence, and basic housekeeping was provided by the institution. The community college presidents were less likely to have housing, housekeeping, and grounds work provided. The degree to which the institution paid for these services varied greatly. One president had a full-time house manager who not only handled housecleaning (with additional part-time help), but also managed all entertainment. This president could literally arrive at home 10 minutes before a major reception, and everything was in place and ready to go. Another president needed to go home to mop the floor, put table clothes on the tables, and arrange the flowers before a reception.

The majority of the women had resources between these two extremes. Most had part-time housekeepers who handled the cleaning of the home, and most campuses took care of the grounds. Some campus used their own food service to cater these events, and other times women presidents worked with outside caterers to plan menus. Much less often, the women presidents actually prepared the meals for campus events in their homes, not by choice but by necessity.

The women said that two additional services would make their jobs significantly easier. Most of the women would like to have a full-time house manager, who not only cleaned, but who was responsible for seeing what needed to be done. A house manager would plan menus, tend to decorating issues, notice when it is time to put in the screens, and work proactively to manage the property and the entertaining. The women presidents who had housekeepers say that too often they (the presidents) still carried the responsibility for making sure that all the house tasks got done, including those related to institutional entertaining, even

though they may not perform those tasks themselves. “I’d just love to have a wife, if you know what I mean” said one president.

Second, 13 wished they had a driver to take them to some, but not all, of their off-campus meetings. Numerous women described the fact that by driving themselves, they lose valuable time that could be spent on the telephone, on email, reading, and even resting. They also said that there were times they preferred to drive themselves, sometimes for the chance to be alone, handle private telephone conversations, and sometimes for the chance to turn up the radio and sing.

Why did they not seek these two extra services? To a person, they reported that the public fall out would not be worth it. To have a driver and a house manager would be perceived by some in the public as “uppity” one woman said. Another said it would “ignite a furor.”

Presidents in state institutions face especially close scrutiny about services they receive. With national media publicizing the most egregious abuses of funds by corporate executives and several university presidents, presidents face unusually high public scrutiny. One woman reported that because her public university was in a very cold northern state, she would love to have heated seats in her car, but if faculty on her unionized campus found out that a university vehicle had this luxury, “it would be all over the front page.”

For most, including those from state institutions, the actual cost was not as significant a reason for foregoing services like a house manager and driver as was public perception. Several had decreased staffing levels in their homes when they began their jobs because they thought it seemed excessive, but all reported that they would handle the situations differently once they had been in office for some time and realized their need for that support.

Several presidents have used creative ways to lessen the load of home responsibilities. One’s adult daughter handled the house manager-type duties for several years. Another moved from her own off-campus house (which she maintained herself) to a home on campus. One experienced woman president said that she handled only the “more meaningful family responsibilities” (e.g., birthday cards and gifts, special family gatherings, Sunday private dinners with her husband), and her half-time housekeeper handled the cleaning, dry cleaning, and other less personally meaningful duties.

### Advice

These women presidents received important advice when they first entered their presidencies. The advice came primarily from mentors or other presidents, most of whom were men. The women made it clear that this advice regularly guided them. It fell into several themes, none overtly related to gender. First, in a presidency, you need to be yourself. One woman said she was told “You have to live with yourself at the end of the day and feel okay with what you did; so you must be true to yourself.” For the two self-described introverts in the group, being themselves was a challenge when a social evening with the Rotary Club felt like work rather than relaxed conversation. Both of the “well-adjusted introverts” gave examples of ways they nurtured their need for privacy and quiet time through walks, reading, and solitude.

Several mentors warned how important it was that all actions be able to pass the “headline test.” If this behavior or statement appeared on the front page of the paper tomorrow, how would it reflect on the president and the institution? This was why one of the presidents, when she was seeking the senior position, used a maid service rather than a private individual so that she could never be accused of not paying someone’s social security taxes.

The women were advised to keep their own sense of priorities. One mentor said, “you can’t do it all at

once.” Another said, “you can do everything, but you can’t do everything first.” It is why another president and her husband have a “date night” each week where the restaurateurs knew to put them into a cozy corner for privacy. The delicious importance of that marital relationship led them to find space to nurture it. Other suggestions that individual women received were to a) hire people you trust; b) do not be a caretaker to someone else’s institution; c) never agree to anything on first hearing; d) remember that every sweet student and loving faculty member is a potential lawsuit; e) never lie about or misrepresent a situation; and f) stay close to your board.

### Advice to Women Considering a Presidency

Many women academics are eager to learn more about the demands of a presidency, but they are reluctant to ask anyone directly about their questions. The active women presidents in this study were also invited to share their advice with prospective presidents. The most widely repeated advice was a) to know yourself and b) to be willing to be yourself in a presidency. One summarized, “you’re a woman and don’t try to be anything different.” One woman encapsulated it concisely: “Every day, you make big and little decisions that can chip away at your moral and spiritual being if you’re not clear where your values are.” Anyone with a high need for constant approval will have difficulty in a presidency because, as one president said, “it’s not a popularity contest.” Decisions must be made that disappoint some people, and if a president needs everyone’s approval, her stress will be high.

Along with awareness of one’s own values, the participants advised new presidents not to be negative about their predecessor or to act as though nothing happened before they arrived. Effective presidents are those who, from the interview forward, acknowledge the legacy.

Second, they encouraged prospective presidents to learn as much as they can about finance, strategic budgeting, laws governing institutional accounting practices, and investments. “It’s all about money,” said one president. Several women described their own “crash courses” in finance before applying for presidencies, but most believed that they already had sufficient background in finance and budget before they began. Their challenge was demonstrating that competence to the board of trustees and senior staff.

A third important piece of advice was to work closely and respectfully with the board, keeping lines of communication open. Just as it is important to have mentors with whom one can be open about challenges, it is important to keep key board members in the loop about important issues. Sometimes a board member can be the sounding board, supporter, and translator.

Fourth, the experienced presidents said that it was essential for women to make specific plans tailored to their own values and lifestyles, to protect their time. One president described the presidency as being a job consisting of five thirds. One third involved strategic and long-range planning because “if the president doesn’t do it, it won’t get done.” The second third was “administrivia,” the daily tasks of running the institution. Presidents who were not intentional about their time use frequently ended up with operational tasks dominating their calendars. The next third was personnel work, including hiring, developing, supervising, evaluating, and mentoring. The fourth third was the “being there” third, the time it took to be present at campus events (athletic competitions, lectures, concerts, art exhibits, receptions). This third was particularly demanding at smaller colleges where many constituents wanted the president’s attendance at their own events. The fifth third was advancement and fund raising, a third that expanded in size during capital campaigns. A president with a job that has five thirds must bring clear priorities and intentionality about schedule in order to survive and thrive.

They used some fairly common techniques for managing their time, as well as some creative approaches. Several of the presidents limited the number of evenings they were available for meetings, social events, dinners with donors, and student events to three per week. One woman said, “my scheduler can put three

events on my calendar each week without asking me, but she has to ask me if she wants to schedule any more than that. And sometimes I say ‘no’.”

Half of the women said that they restricted the number of appointments they schedule because they cannot get all of their work done if they are in a steady stream of meetings. Several scheduled their vacations many months, sometimes a year, in advance so that they were firmly committed to spending that time away, relaxing and rejuvenating. If they did not plan them ahead, the time away too often got bumped aside for other obligations.

The women also stressed the importance of reserving time for whatever activity relieved stress most for them. One president said that women must be able to “shed stress” if they are serious about a presidency. The most common activities that the women in this report used to relax were described as “just simple things” like walking outdoors, biking, swimming, reading, eating out with spouses or friends, and going out of town regularly.

The women also reminded prospective presidents to think about the public attention that will be directed to their work and their personal lives, applying the “headline test” to their actions. As one president said, “we have to be aware that our personal lives move into the public eye with a presidency.” For husbands who are private and introverted, this can be a stressor. One president described her husband as “private and wonderful” and said that the public demands created some challenges for him when he needed to attend a reception but would have preferred sitting in his library, reading. One woman confessed that she needed to keep her own sense of humor under control because it was too easy for people to interpret her irreverent statements more literally than she intended.

“Hiring is the most important work,” asserted one president. Characteristics of good hires were described fairly consistently: highly competent, loyal, funny. Numerous others talked about the importance of having an office staff whose talents complement the president. To the person, they stressed the value of having a strong, trusted, likeable executive assistant in the office. One said, “I’m not right all the time, so I surround myself with people who are smart and energetic. I don’t find this threatening at all.” One president, who described herself as “weak on details,” hired not one, but two assistants. Presidents also need to assemble a strong senior staff and nurture them to work together to achieve the institution’s mission. One president organized annual retreats for her top staff, and together they developed a written covenant about ways they will advance the mission together. She said “it’s hard to live up to these covenants!”

Finally, they advised women who are applying for presidencies to do their homework before preparing the application and even more intensely if they are invited for interviews. One woman who was a distant third candidate for a position prepared intensely for the interview by reading newspaper archives, old state records, etc. Members of the search committee said, “We learned a lot of things about our campus we didn’t know before.” She got the job. Search firms estimate that it takes an average of 11 to 13 active applications before their clients secure presidencies. The presidents encouraged women to spend their time at incremental levels of responsibility and to be resilient in the application process.

### Feelings about Their Jobs

Would these presidents, knowing what they know after they spent time in the office, do it again? “Absolutely!” said more than half of them, and all of them responded that they definitely would do it again. Some said they would even do it sooner.

Although several described the presidency as a job where “the highs are higher and the lows lower” than any other jobs they have experienced, they appreciated the opportunity to “build a common vision and tell the story of the institution.” One observed, realistically, that “everything that makes a university a plus is

what makes it a negative.” Interpreting processes that seem like negatives to board members (like the slow pace of faculty governance) was a responsibility of the president. These presidents were happy to embrace those challenges.

Only two of the presidents talked about their satisfaction in terms of the financial and prestige-oriented benefits of the position. More typically, the women presidents reflected on satisfaction they received from the knowledge that they are leaving a legacy that helps students. One reflected, “I’m leaving a legacy, something that will endure; and I love being so fully engaged in ways that challenge and expand me. I just love it.” Another said, “It’s been an amazing opportunity to build an institution and make it better for our students. It’s compelling to be part of that.” Another said she was grateful to leave a legacy that “opens doors for people.”

Their enthusiasm for their work was not unrealistic, however. Several presidents shared the experience of the one who said, “I wish I had more time. Sometimes I feel overwhelmed because I think I need to do so much, and I don’t take time to focus, read, or exercise.” Another said that the hardest challenge is to find renewal so that she can stay vital. A president added that she believes presidents must take their work seriously, “...but not themselves. We have to take care of ourselves because if we don’t, there’s nothing left to attend to others or do the work you have to do...we must be very deliberate about how we spend our time.”

One president spoke of her frustration when her position “silences” her on issues she believes extremely important. If she expressed strong opinions on a controversial political issue, her voice sounded like it was the voice of the university. For her, the most troubling part of the job was her loss of freedom as a citizen to speak out on issues that were important to her and, in some cases, to higher education policy. Her imperfect solution has been to share her concerns with branches of campuses where others can pick up the issue and speak out. Her frustration, though, is intense.

In addition to the sense of leaving a positive legacy, the presidents described the gratification they received from doing challenging and meaningful work. One president, who had served for nearly a decade at her institution, said, “it’s an absolutely wonderful job...intellectually interesting...my public touch becomes connected to a deep sense of academic values so I can convey the integrity of the institution to others.”

Another said that she found great satisfaction in “raising money to do important work.” The sense of responsibility that accompanied this work warrants careful reflection because, as one president said, “The realization that an institution cannot rise any higher than my intellect and character is scary.” The meaningful nature of the work made the weight of the responsibility worth the effort: “You can really make a contribution in a presidency. You get to work with smart, creative people in an organization that’s vibrant and pulsating with students.”

## Summary

The U.S. college and university presidency is a complex position that requires an exceptional combination of expertise, life balance, and leadership. Women face a distinctive set of challenges as they blend the responsibilities of leadership with responsibilities, both real and perceived, for themselves and their families. These interviews with women presidents give an engaging and candid snapshot of what the presidency is like for women. They were, to the person, encouraging of other women to consider the presidency; and they provided extensive and varied advice – some inspirational and some practical – for why and how women can become presidents.

One president observed that “there are more opportunities to lead than there are people capable of doing a good job at it.” For women considering a presidency but unsure about their abilities or the demands of the

job, the big step is finding the “courage of action to apply ...the rest you can learn.”

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Jo Young Switzer, (Ph.D., University of Kansas, 1980), currently serves president at Manchester College in Indiana where she is also a professor of communication. She taught at Indiana University Purdue University Fort Wayne for nine years before becoming vice president and dean for academic affairs at Manchester in 1993. She has chaired the Council of Independent Chief Academic Officers Task Force and serves as consultant-evaluator for the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association. She was a member of the Academic Advisory Council for Brethren Colleges Abroad (BCA), a study abroad consortium headquartered in Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania. She co-authored a textbook, *Interviewing Art and Skill*, and is the author of numerous publications and academic presentations. She completed this research project during a sabbatical leave in the 2003-04 academic year.

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