

Transcription for INSIDE HIGHER ED: THE KEY



Ep. 72: Why Colleges Are Hiring More Non-White Presidents

PROVIDED BY CAPTION ACCESS
contact@captionaccess
www.captionaccess.com Mar 2022

(UPBEAT MUSIC PLAYS)

DOUG LEDERMAN:

It only took a couple of decades that colleges and universities are hiring more black and brown presidents to lead their institutions. Hello and welcome to the KEY, Inside Higher Ed's news and analysis podcast. I'm your host, Doug Lederman, Editor and Co-Founder of Inside Higher Ed, and I'm really glad you've joined us. In today's episode, we dig into data that Inside Higher Ed published last month showing a big upturn in the proportion of minority presidents and chancellors that college has hired in a year and a half after the death of George Floyd compared both to the 18 months that preceded it and to historical patterns. Better than one in three presidents hired from June 2020 through November 2021 were people of color. A full quarter were black and the proportion of LatinX presidents were appointed roughly doubled. To help understand the data and more importantly, what they mean and how much they matter, we'll hear today from two researchers and analysts who bring distinctive perspectives to a discussion of diversity and equity in higher education leadership.

Lorelle Espinosa is Program Director at the Alfred P Sloan Foundation where she focuses on grantmaking that drives evidence-based change around diversity, equity, and inclusion in STEM education. In a previous life, she oversaw research at the American Council on Education, where among other things, she was responsible for its American college presidents' survey, the best formal source of data about campus leaders. Espinosa says she's heartened by the upturn and attributed in part to institutions, boards, and search committees looking for different sets of skills and perspectives because of the demands of this moment.

LORELLE ESPINOSA:

We are seeing the pathway to the presidency change. And you also cited this in the article, the pathway typically comes out of academic leadership. It typically comes out of certain disciplines. And what your data here shows is that there's been an uptake in presidents coming out of the rank of student affairs. What are the issues we're grappling with? Crisis management, student mental health, and well-being, campus racial climate, students' success, things that people who work in student affairs are very well equipped to address.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

Joining Lorelle for today's conversation is Eddie Cole, Associate Professor of Higher Education in History at the University of California, Los Angeles. He offers some context based on his study of another moment when changes in American society led colleges to look for different types of leaders.

EDDIE COLE:

If I were to look forward from now, five years, I think a worst-case scenario will be really similar to what we saw in the 1960s. And that a lot of institutions quickly moved on from that point of emphasis that they sought on the 60s, and by the 1970s has sort of reverted back in so many ways to what they'd always done. And so worst-case scenario, in my opinion, would be five years from now we look eerily similar to how we looked 10 years ago.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

Before we hear the full conversation with Lorella Espinoza and Eddie Cole, a reminder to subscribe to

the KEY on Apple or Google Podcasts, Stitcher, Spotify, or your favorite podcast platform. Lorelle and Eddie, welcome to the KEY, and thanks for making the time to be here.

LORELLE ESPINOSA:

Thanks for having us.

EDDIE COLE:

Yeah, likewise, happy to be here.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

Both of you provided analysis that helped me try to make meaning out of these data when I published them last month, and now you've maybe had a little additional time to marinate on them. When you think about the data now, what jumps out at you as most interesting, encouraging, worrying? What do you make of them? Lorelle, maybe start with you.

LORELLE ESPINOSA:

First of all, I'm really pleased that you did this. So, thank you. Thank you from the field. This looks like good news. If this is a sign of what the presidency might look like in five or 10 years, then this is horrific. I mean, it took three decades to see the percentage of women double from 15 to 30% of presidencies, according to the most recent American Council of Education Data, which, of course, is now about six years old. So, thank you again from the field because those data are pretty old. And I remember when we worked on that at ACE when I was there leading research, we actually looked at the growth rate over time of presidents of color and concluded that it wouldn't be until 2050 that we would see a presidency that was at parity with the population, you know, back of the envelope math there. But it wasn't too encouraging. And for LatinX presidents, that would be 2060. So, really promising and I look forward to getting into the discussion about the things that also worry us. But I think on first blush I was pleased to see what you were finding.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

That's great. Eddie, what about you?

EDDIE COLE:

Yeah, you know, I echo what we just heard in the sense that it is promising. Certainly, the numbers jump out to you is sort of equates passing. But something that stood out to me more specifically, as I think as a historian of higher education, notably is context. I think you were spied on and looking at these numbers both 18 months before and 18 months after the police killing of George Floyd in Minnesota because that's just a reminder of how higher education is so deeply shaped and interwoven with society at large. And that's something important for us to remember that as boards and other governing entities select presidents to lead institutions of higher education. Those people who are on those boards are also connected to what's happening in society, and aware that their decisions have a ripple effect far beyond the walls of the campus. And so that's what stood out to me most, just sort of how there's one pivotal moment for us. And 2020 clearly has been such a sizable noticeable moment in terms of who's been selected to lead colleges and universities.

And so it's one of those things that makes me think so much more about context, the role of higher education with society, both influencing society but also being influenced by society. Yeah.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

Yeah, no. And that's a good point. And I can see ways in which that could be both a good thing and a bad thing. Because the more it's shaped by what's happening at a given moment, it raises more questions about how permanent of change it is versus being just reactive. And we can come back to that in a minute. But maybe talk a little bit more about how what we've seen in the past, that this is either similar to or reminiscent of, or in ways maybe that it's different from what you've studied, the era you studied.

EDDIE COLE:

I spent a lot of time studying the mid-20th century, sort of 1940s through the 1960s, and the college presidency. More particularly in the college presidency in the Black Freedom Movement. So, there are a lot of parallels between what we saw in 2020 and the broader questions around racial equality in the United States. But also the same questions were being raised in the 1960s in the US as well in very, very similar ways. And we saw some parallels in terms of what universities were looking for and their college leaders. And so one thing that stands out to me when I look at the report, and the numbers that you've really so beautifully laid out for readers, is that in the 1960s it wasn't necessarily a dramatic shift in the racial demographics of college presidents. But there was a notable shift in sort of the interests and skill set of college presidents in engaging race relations in the 1960s. And so a lot of universities, you know, predominately White institutions, historically White institutions in the 1960s, started hiring presidents who had some sense or some involvement with working on issues that reached out beyond white students on campus.

And so we see a lot of that happens, especially after 1963 when you see sort of most notable moments in the civil rights movement, some of your most notable racial violent moments in the civil rights movement. From the water hoses and police in Birmingham, Alabama, to bombings and so forth. President Kennedy, John F Kennedy of the United States actually reaches out to colleges and universities and asked them to help come up with solutions, special programs that would address some of the racial ills in society. And so you saw a lot of hiring at the senior level administrators being people with skill sets that were at the time assumed to be very helpful to lead universities into this new era to where student bodies started looking different on a lot of campuses. And so all of a sudden they needed to have academic leaders who looked or at least knew how to engage across differences on college campuses. So, that's an important connection sort of see this social moment historically related to how we think makes sense of our current moment.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

Obviously, if there had been a push to try to increase the hiring of minority or black presidents back then, probably wouldn't have had a lot of luck because of some of the pool issues that we we're still talking about a little bit. But obviously, one of the heartening things, I think, is that there has been a lot of work on developing broadening the pool of potential leaders. And Lorelle, I guess coming back to you, given your history studying this kind of stuff at ACE. What do you consider to be the most significant factors that are enabling this moment? Eddie has just talked about the context, which obviously matters a lot. But what else has contributed to making it possible for there to be numbers like this starting to show up?

LORELLE ESPINOSA:

I think it's two things. So, one thing you touched on which is that there has been a tremendous amount

of effort to develop future leaders in professional associations and professional societies. And we could name a number of those programs that are seeking to do just that in various contexts within higher education. There's been a huge push, as we know, for the next tranche of leadership in two-year institutions where we're seeing some of the largest numbers of retirement and really a crisis of leadership in some of those settings. So, that's one thing. We've been preparing leaders. Really focused on preparing leaders for quite a while. And I think that's showing up here. Another thing is that we're seeing the pathway to the presidency change. And you also cited this in the article, the pathway typically comes out of academic leadership, it typically comes out of certain disciplines. And what your data here shows is that there's been an uptick in presidents coming out of the rank of Student Affairs.

You know, by the way that student affairs has the most diverse leadership in higher education when we look at the professions. We saw that in our race and ethnicity in higher education study. Also at ACE when we looked at where diversity is in the senior-most leadership position. So, if they're coming out of student affairs, it's likely that you will see a more diverse pool. But I love what Eddie said about the context of today. What are the issues we're grappling with? Crisis management, student mental health, and well-being, campus racial climate, students success. Things that people who work in student affairs are very well equipped to address. So, when you think about the boards who are hiring these presidents and thinking, what are the competencies that we want out of a president today? Like Eddie said in this moment. That makes a lot of sense that you're going to see those people show up. And they'll still do the other things, of course, financial management, fundraising, managing, you know, faculty relations, all the things that we know presidents do in their day-to-day.

But this is a different moment for the presidency. And I think it's showing up.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

Eddie, wondering, come back to you about exactly that point. Which is, you talked about how in the 60s we saw institutions think a little differently about the kind of skill set they wanted even if they weren't ready to or weren't able to radically change the composition of who that people were. Eddie, what are some of the other issues that you see being raised if these data bear out and colleges, universities are hiring greater proportions of Black and other historically underrepresented people as president?

EDDIE COLE:

Now, one thing that stands out to me when I think about this article that you've written is that also it is important for institutions to give these leaders the autonomy to create change. I think that's something when I think about sort of the historical trajectory of the presidency, and as we move into our current moment, is going to be essential for boards to give these leaders the opportunity to actually lead and create change, and even go through the bumps in a row that may come along with creating set change if that's the kind of change that institutions truly want. Because otherwise, we simply have the representation. Right. Sort of we get the diversity. So, to amplify representation, what we're so far short on what people, you know, we want to move into questions around actual racial equity on campuses. And that's gonna be, you know, that's the challenge for any leader. Right. Can a leader come in and take the time necessary to make observations of the campus, the organization that they're leading to actually get other leaders in place on campus that they feel can join them on board for where they want to go, and then have the actual support on board to create those changes.

And I think that is what's essential when we think about this current moment. Is not just simply hiring more presidents of color, more women across college campuses, but also giving them the autonomy to

truly create the campus environment that boards have hired them to create. And they're really campuses and why this society at large has demanded of universities, especially since the killing of George Floyd.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

So, I wanna come back to that in a minute because I think I quoted you in the story, raising a pretty significant note of caution about drawing too much heart and drawing too many conclusions about what these numbers mean until we see how lasting these changes are to see whether it's more than a token moment. So, before we get to that, though, Lorella, I wanna talk to you a little bit about some of the issues you raised when we spoke about where these hirings are taking place. So, there's been some history of much of the opportunity for minority presidents and for underrepresented presidents, including probably women, or maybe a little earlier, to be at institutions that were either struggling or not necessarily our most visible institutions a lot more at community colleges than in other sectors typically. Do you sense based on what we know and then sort of the imperfect data that I've pulled together, but maybe what you're else you're seeing on the landscape, do you have a sense that we're seeing more presidents hired across the spectrum and across the institution type?

LORELLE ESPINOSA:

Yeah. Well, your data says, yes. Yes, we are seeing that. You're right that when you looked at diversity, again, representation in the presidency, it was often more diverse at the two-year sector, the less selective sectors, certainly in minority-serving institutions, especially in HBCUs. So, when we first had a conversation about this data, of course, you know, my mind is thinking this looks great in the aggregate. What does this look like when you drill down? And I was specifically interested in numbers for doctoral-granting institutions which have long been the Whitest lead institutions of all. Right. So, I mean, again, looking at the data, we know the last time that we looked at the presidency in these institutions, 82% of the presidencies were White in these institutions. But your data is saying something very different. Your data is saying that 74% of the appointments in the years that you tracked at doctoral-granting universities were White. So, this looks promising again. I mean, I think, yeah, we've got to see.

Time will tell what will their retention look like. We also know the presidency turns over. I mean, you know, the average tenure of a president is, I think it's seven. Five to seven years, something like that. I mean, these are jobs that turn over. So, this is a moment. This looks like a good moment, but what's it gonna look like moving ahead?

DOUG LEDERMAN:

It's good time to shift to that set of questions around how should we be judging, or how should we be judging going forward? Whether this apparent upturn is real is last thing? Obviously, there's probably to some extent it does. It continue till we go past the couple of years that I looked at, that we see the numbers and the ratios continue to be different from how they've been historically. And then there is a set of questions around the extent to which these people being hired now succeed, thrive as much as their peers. And I would put an emphasis on what you just said. I think we're seeing much more generally that being a president of a college or university, I do you think there are more ways where you can run aground now than used to be the case. And it'll be interesting to see whether this set of presidents have the kind of support that enables them to at least have a comparable length of service and success rate as others. So, Eddie, I guess, as you think about it, what are some of the things that

you're looking to judge whether these presidents get the support they need, what are you gonna be looking for?

EDDIE COLE:

Now, I think you were hinting at editing your initial comment there. It is important that we think about how long they get a chance to stay in their tenure as a presidency. Do they reach the average timeframe of five to seven years? Whether something come up to where their presidency is fairly short, three to four years? Right. Short. Already short tenure in terms of how long leaders stay in these positions. Because I think part of sort of measuring what's effective and how they can sort of bring about change is do they have the sort of average length of time to even do so? An analogy that really captures this that's related to higher education is you think about sort of coaches in major sports on many of these campuses. Right. Especially revenue-generating sports like men's or women's basketball, or football of all things. Right. And does a coach have the opportunity to sort of go through the process of recruiting, hiring a staff and actually build a winning program? Or do you sort of have a sort of a short temper and say, we're not winning fast enough?

And I think the same analogy is applicable to college presidents. And since their three, four years for the kind of changes that society is demanding of us, it's probably not gonna be long enough for President to do so to create those changes. But if a president has sort of the five to seven-year timeframe, which is average or longer, I think you can sort of step back and say, OK, here's a presidency that we can take a full snapshot of and then we can assess more accurately what they were able to accomplish. So, that's one thing that was standing out to me. And then I think another question about some of these presidents who have been hired into positions is what kind of situation they're coming into. Right. And I think is one thing to sort of celebrate more representation in leadership. But it's also we got to be honest about sort of what campus crises of scandals have been happening at a particular university. And then are they hiring their first minoritized identity president on campus?

And that's important to remember as well because that also shapes where the starting point of their presidency is for someone. Are they sort of trying to clean up and recover with a previous administration head and then start with what they're trying to do or do they get to come in on open up?

DOUG LEDERMAN:

That coach analogy is one that I used in thinking about the hiring of these folks because it used to be backward in a couple decades ago when I was covering college sports pretty closely. That pretty much the only time you would see a black coach get hired in football and men's basketball was when the team went two in 11 the previous year. And the place, the leaders either said, "Ah, what the heck? We might as well try this. It can't hurt." Only being hired into places that had been struggling and that may have been close to impossible to succeed in. And I think that's where some of the stuff we're always talking about where we're seeing minority presidents hired to places like Rice and Colorado College, and other places that are sort of highly selective and pretty successful. By a lot of ways, we've deemed those institutions to be. Seems to be breaking that pattern a little bit. Lorelle, what's your sense of how we're gonna be able to judge what we should be looking at to be judging the success of these presidents and whether there we get to true equity as opposed to just increased representation.

LORELLE ESPINOSA:

Time will tell. I think time is the ultimate revealer here in terms of success because it will tell us about retention, it will tell us about a continued trend, hopefully, like this trend that you've picked up, is going

to tell us about the kind of change that Eddie is talking about, which does take time. At Sloan, we're thinking a lot about systemic change. I mean, this is a conversation in higher education that has been a long time coming. That you can't make true change without a systems-level approach. And one part of that approach, one of many parts is leadership. You absolutely cannot reach racial equity if you don't have a leadership that looks like the student population, which is by now well over half students of color. It's just not possible. Right. And you can go to any sector of society and raise this issue and people will agree with you. I mean, why are we having this conversation, of course, at the NFL or in Fortune 500? I mean, we've been saying for a long time us and other sectors of society.

Leadership matters and representation matters. Like Edie said, it's, and like you alluded to a moment ago, not only about representation, it's about seeing these individuals thrive. And I'm really glad that we've talked about that because this is a hard job. It's getting harder and any one person is not gonna walk in this door knowing how to do everything. You know, just as we said, the student affairs folks walk in having a better handle on some of the student issues, like mental health or students support systems in that way. They're not gonna have a strong track record. In some of the more academic environments we are working with faculty, and in an academic setting, the way that a provost does. You know, no matter what we have to take more seriously professional development for these folk. Higher education has done a really poor job of providing professional development for its own. Ironically, we're educators but we don't educate ourselves very well. So, that has to be something that these boards and the presidents themselves take really, really seriously as their own development.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

I wanted to ask both of you how you think about the agendas for this increasingly diverse group of candidates. And it's probably dangerous to try and think about them as a group because they're all individuals. But if we're seeing more presidents hired who come from backgrounds that are different from what we've seen before. And I talked about this a little bit with some of the Presidents I spoke to who were new in these roles, about whether they were gonna be expected to take up issues related to race and equity more so than white presidents would. Whether that's an opportunity for them a burden for them. Do you think that this group of presidents is likely to come in with agendas that are meaningfully different from a comparable group of White presidents, either would do or has historically done?

EDDIE COLE:

I've got a lot of thoughts about that. Studying the presidency again historically over multiple decades. And frankly, I don't think a president who is sort of what we call an underrepresented background is going to have an agenda dramatically different than previous presidents. I actually don't think that's the case. And I'm actually OK with that because history suggests that simply them doing what they do already as an academic leader, they just bring a different perspective to those conversations. Right. When you think about sort of the list of racial incidents on college campuses, they happen within sort of the natural progression of what happens on campus every day, something was said in a faculty meeting, something that happened in classrooms. Some students did something at a party or this happened at a sporting event. It's just a matter of not that you have to have a different agenda to say, here's how we're gonna have meaningful engagement going to sporting events, is a matter of having leaders on campus that understand how to engage those issues differently.

And honestly, maybe from a personal perspective, that's all that a college president from these new backgrounds. So, if you say, and I like using new backgrounds because historically this hasn't been the case. All we need these presidents to do is going to be themselves within their usual academic skill set. So, I don't expect to see new agendas that directly targeted toward sort of racial equity on campus that do this or do that. It's a matter of the same agendas that we've always had. Campuses' leaders have always been OK saying, "We have to have better representation in the faculty we hire. We have to do better in who we recruit on campus." They haven't been effective at it. But that's been on one agenda. And I would think they'd say a black college president would come in and say, "I've got a different perspective, perhaps, potentially on how to approach recruiting more faculty and recruiting more students." And so forth.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

Lorelle, how do you come at that?

LORELLE ESPINOSA:

I'm just thinking a lot about fit. If you are a blackbird, or LatinX, or indigenous, or any other president of color who does wanna have that kind of change, who does wanna come in with that agenda, then you better make sure that your institution is ready for it the way that Eddie mentioned earlier. And the search firm should also be really attuned to this and not set people up for failure because their agendas don't match what the institution is seeking or what the board is seeking. And so fit is so important. I mean, just like anything, just like any relationship, right, or any job, fit is so important. This is really on both parties that prospective presidents come in and ask the right questions and have a deep understanding of how they fit and that the board's, you know, the people hiring and the search firms also get to that. Because, yeah, we'd certainly don't want to see anyone set up for failure in this regard.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

From the two of your perspectives, what are the best and worst-case scenarios here? Let's say we convene back here in three or five years, what is the upside of what we might see with these leaders in their colleges? And what would be most worrying if it were to unfold in a particular way? Eddie, do you have thoughts on that?

EDDIE COLE:

I would, again, lean on history because I think part of this is understanding the trend of higher education over time. And we saw this moment before, as I mentioned earlier in the mid-1960s to where there was an emphasis on who was leading institutions and how they get engaged these issues. And so for me, if I were to look forward from now, five years, I think a worst-case scenario will be really similar to what we saw in the 1960s in that learning institutions quickly moved on from that point of emphasis that they sought on the 60s. And by the 1970s has sort of reverted back in so many ways to what they've always done. So, the worst-case scenario, in my opinion, would be five years from now we look eerily similar to how we looked 10 years ago. Right. That the numbers shift and leadership is just about the same. That's sort of a worst-case scenario. But if I were to be optimistic in this conversation and looking forward, I would just hope to see the trend continue. And so we see percentages increase the way wisely said that if we can get the leadership to start reflecting the student bodies, or even more so reflecting society at large, I mean, that in a lot of ways is sort of the university dream come true across all levels of higher education from the two-year colleges and four-year institutions, to have representation that truly does represent what the student body looks like.

LORELLE ESPINOSA:

I think Eddie said it really well. Those are precisely what I was thinking in terms of worst. And best, I'll say on the worst side, it would be even more harmful if there was a takeaway from the field that we tried this and it didn't work or we weren't ready. So, let's just keep our finger on the pause button. That people who are not interested in seeing diversity at the top use this as an example of failure, and it's just not worth it to take that risk, etc. So, that would even be like insult to injury in that case. But yes, best case would be that these trends keep going the way that you have found them, and that we see change agents at the top that we start to see campuses that not only have leadership that reflects our student bodies but are taking the issue of racial equity and all forms of other equity very seriously precisely because we have diverse perspectives at the top, as Eddie said. That would be truly amazing.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

Thanks to Eddie Cole of UCLA, and Lorelle Espinosa of the Sloan Foundation for their perspective and insights on my little research project on what appears to be increased diversity among college presidents. It'll be a while before we know whether this emergent trend lasts, how those hired during this stretch fair, and what they'll be able to accomplish. We at Inside Higher Ed and the KEY we'll keep an eye on this as we try to deal with all the important issues in higher education. If you have topics you think we should be exploring, please reach out to me on our website or through social media to put a bug in my ear, or you might run into me at a conference as I'm about to get back out on the road again. If you'll be at the American Council on Education Conference in San Diego, March 5th to seventh, or South by Southwest EDU and Austin, March 7th to ninth, don't hesitate to reach out. Until then, stay well and stay safe. (UPBEAT MUSIC PLAYS)