

# For College Presidents, Is 70 the New 50?

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When Harvard University announced Lawrence S. Bacow as its president-in-waiting on Sunday, the institution focused heavily on his illustrious academic history, past presidential experience at Tufts University and family story as the son of immigrants.

Less discussed was Bacow's age. He's 66, about four years older than the average college president. If he stays at Harvard for 10 years -- the tenure he has previously said is about right for a president -- he will be stepping down in his mid-70s.

And Bacow is just one of several presidents in their mid- to late 60s or 70s to take prominent leadership positions at major universities in recent years. Last year, the University of California, Berkeley, named Carol Christ its next chancellor; she was 72. When E. Gordon Gee returned to West Virginia University's presidency in 2014 first as an interim and then on a permanent basis, he was entering his seventh decade. Ronald Crutcher was 68 when he was chosen to lead the University of Richmond in 2015.

These prominent older hires come as the university presidency has been graying for years, a fact often attributed to colleges and universities valuing past presidential experience over youthful ideas during trying times. It seems search teams often adhere to the adage that with age comes wisdom.

Critics might see generational attitudes at play. Remember, baby boomers have often been pigeonholed as an attention-seeking generation putting off retirement planning until absolutely necessary. So why should they be expected to eschew pinnacle career positions, even as many enter their 70s?

But other forces are likely at work. Simply put, life expectancy has risen, and many people are healthy later in life. A considerable pool of older, experienced presidents exists, and a sizable number of ex-presidents are willing to think about one more stint in a job they love: leading a college or university.

Nonetheless, advanced age can also bring a host of other considerations, even for presidents. Those issues echo past debates about mandatory retirement age for faculty members. They can be surprisingly hard for colleges and universities to address head-on.

From the presidents' perspective, age-related health issues really do exist. Presidential jobs are known to be packed with travel, stress and unforeseen challenges that take a toll on even the most resilient of leaders. From a broader point of view, older cohorts of leaders tend to be less diverse than students who are currently enrolled in college, and there are concerns that those now rising through the pipeline have had their presidential options limited by older, entrenched leaders on their second or third go-rounds.

### **Who Wants to Take a Presidency at 70?**

In light of those concerns, it's worth asking why someone who is past the traditional retirement age would even want to go back for another stay in the fishbowl of the presidency. Those who returned for presidencies while in their 60s or 70s say they did so because they are passionate about higher education -- not because they needed a job.

"Probably for each of the individuals in the jobs, there is a different backstory," said Crutcher. "But I would say to all of us, it's how we are as individuals. I'd parse it as the passion for the mission."

Crutcher did not have to take another presidency after spending 10 years leading Wheaton College in Massachusetts. He interviewed for the presidency of a symphony before realizing he didn't feel as strongly about leading such an organization as he did about the classical music it produces. Still, he did not immediately seek another university leadership position. When a search firm called about the Richmond presidency, he initially responded with a no.

In the end, he was attracted by the chance to lead a university striving for a diverse community. Richmond's student body has grown remarkably more diverse in the last decade. Its freshman class jumped from 11 percent students of color a decade ago to 38 percent this year, said Crutcher, who is the institution's first black leader.

"I saw that as a real opportunity to continue to do something I'm passionate about," he said.

Even experienced leaders can feel more comfortable in their second presidencies. Crutcher shared some insight he learned from Bacow: if, as a president, you want to be liked, buy a dog.

The lesson -- that presidents are often unpopular -- can be hard to learn in a first presidency. Experienced presidents report that it can be different the next time around.

Or, in the case of Gee, it can be different the next times around. Gee had completed six other presidencies when he was named West Virginia University's permanent leader in 2014. He's done multiple stints at the university.

He thinks serving as a president at the age of 74 allows him to try some ideas with urgency. He's cognizant of the fact that his time is limited.

"I can try it without a lot of fear about what's going to happen next," Gee said. "Obviously, I will not be going on to any kind of a next job."

Gee's return to West Virginia was about feeling a sense of purpose and possibility. Some people want to move to Florida when they hit 65 years old. Others see 70 as the new 50 and want to work as long as they feel they can do a job the way they believe it needs to be done.

"I have a particular way, in terms of energy and commitment, I want to be part of the university," Gee said. "I don't want to have to reinvent the way that I do it. I enjoy doing it the way I want to do it."

### **The Presidential Pipeline and Diversity**

Research has already noted a growing preference for older, experienced presidents. It was one of the key findings from the latest version of the American College President Study from the American Council on Education, which covered years up to 2016.

The average president was 62 years old when the study came out in June. That was 10 years older than the average president's age when the study was published for the first time 30 years ago.

A quarter of all presidents had experience in the role, ACE found. At doctorate-granting universities, like Harvard, 27 percent of presidents held a presidential or chief executive position in their most recent job -- up from 21 percent in 2011 and rebounding to about the same level seen in 2006. And 29 percent of presidents at doctorate-granting universities had held two or more presidencies during their careers, suggesting elite institutions place a premium on past presidential experience.

A preference for experienced presidents has real ramifications on diversity at the position. Older generations tended to offer fewer women and minority candidates opportunities to rise through leadership positions. As a result, colleges and universities drawn to older presidents today are hewing more closely to the model of hiring aging white men than they might otherwise.

"By prioritizing experienced presidents, colleges and universities further skew the pool of candidates toward white men, which works against efforts at diversifying the presidency," the ACE survey found.

Such a dynamic may have been on display at Harvard, at least according to conversations playing out in public this week after Bacow was announced as the university's next president. The news set off biting criticism -- not necessarily aimed at Bacow -- that Harvard had replaced its first woman president with its third president named Larry.

The ACE study contained another interesting wrinkle related to rising presidential age: college presidents are getting older largely because of growth in the numbers of the oldest presidents, those over 70. The share of presidents over age 60 held steady between 2011 and 2016 at 58 percent, while the share over age 70 more than doubled, from 5 percent to 11 percent.

In other words, the real graying hasn't been driven by presidents of Bacow's current age. It's because of presidents who are Gee's and Christ's age.

Gee thinks it is important for older presidents to mentor future leaders. But he also pointed out that the presidency isn't for everyone.

"I think we're all discovering there are not a lot of people who want to have these jobs," Gee said. "They are the best jobs in the country, but they are also very challenging. I think because of that a lot of people believe there's an easier way to make a living."

### **How Important Is Experience?**

Regardless of whether the candidate pool has evolved, many say the characteristics sought by search committees and trustees have changed.

At a time when higher ed is challenged by shifting student demographics, financial pressures, regulation and some political hostility, colleges and universities want to hire presidents who have experience. That often means interviewing and hiring candidates who are in their 60s, said Jessica Kozloff, senior consultant and former president at Academic Search.

"That old rubric of, 'You'd better get that presidency before you hit the big six-oh,' that's just gone out the window, as long as everybody's convinced this is somebody who is really coming to do the job," she said.

Sometimes, those on search committees fear older candidates are looking for a soft landing before retirement. But it's a sensitive subject, because search committees and boards of trustees try to stay as far away as possible from the possibility of being charged with age discrimination.

Concerns about a candidate's age can often be assuaged through conversations about their depth of experience, energy level or planned length of stay in a position.

Questions about health are also off-limits. Health can be addressed in contracts calling for presidents to have a physical, but a candidate can't be asked up front about their condition, said Rod McDavis, managing principal of AGB Search.

Ultimately, each board extending a hiring offer decides whether the benefits of an older, experienced president outweigh any possible drawbacks -- even if that decision isn't openly

discussed or made consciously.

“I think it’s good for higher education,” McDavis said. “I think it’s good for people who feel like they can still make contributions. Other countries across the world see the value of people who are in their 60s or 70s, and I think in America we’re just beginning to see the value.”

It should be noted that this type of conversation has played out before in higher education. When the mandatory retirement age for tenured faculty was eliminated in 1994, younger professors worried their career pathways were being blocked.

Some, however, took a longer view that may be connected to the phenomenon of older presidents today.

“It takes so long to get a Ph.D. these days -- 10 years at Columbia or Berkeley -- that people in the humanities tend to start their careers later,” Daniel Gordon, who was then a 33-year-old assistant professor of history at Harvard, told *The New York Times* in 1994, after federal law changed to stop mandating faculty retirement at 70 years old.

“For that reason, I'm glad about the change in the law, because I myself may not wish to retire when I'm 70,” Gordon said.