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### GenX Women in Higher Ed, Writing from Across the Globe

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#### By

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It is very lonely at the top and the road to the presidency is becoming less linear. The paths are also becoming more varied for those seeking to lead at that level. The traditional roadmap of faculty to department chair, to dean, then provost, then president is becoming the road less and less traveled, as surveys of provosts reveal that fewer and fewer of those in such positions aspire to become presidents. Earlier this month, the American Council on Education (ACE) held its annual conference that included a pre-conference focused on cultivating and advancing women leaders for leadership positions, not just the presidency. It was an invigorating convening that promoted, although not explicitly, Jon Wergin's concept of leadership in place. Throughout the pre-conference and the main conference, there was a recognition that the world is also changing and our sector—the higher education sector—needs to be prepared to meet the needs of our students, but also to cultivate the leadership for this new and changing world.

#### *Leadership for a Changing Country and a Changing World*

We now have four generations of employees in the workforce. On our road to becoming a plurality nation in 2060 where no single race or ethnicity will have a majority share of the population, we will become a minority-majority country. Already 14 of the country's largest cities are minority-majority. Demographers are also predicting that by 2044 we will become an Hispanic-majority country. Technology is also evolving rapidly. The needs, preferences, and facilities of Millennials and Generation Z that follows them are vastly different from those of my Generation X peers and those that precede us. Our country is changing and the world is changing!

Internationally, we have more complex conflicts than ever before. These are not self-determination pursuits with people seeking their independence from colonizing countries. Within our domestic boundaries, we continue to experience increasing racial violence and local terrorist incidents. Campus safety now accounts for a larger share of our college budgets than ever before. Food insecurity is becoming an issue of increasing concern on our campuses.

Our colleges are relying more on adjunct faculty. Our costs are rising rapidly, including healthcare. State support is declining at an unprecedented rate for those of us in the public sector. Our consumers, our students (and their parents), are seeking more than just education. They are seeking a lifestyle in college and wanting to have their individualities accommodated in ways not previously expected. (If you have not seen the documentary *Ivory Tower*, I highly recommend it). Student debt is now greater than home ownership and credit card debt.

Our students are finding their voices and exercising their freedom of speech rights and power of public advocacy with force and effectiveness that are reminiscent of the '60s. Social media has made it easier to document, publicize, and organize against injustices on- and off-campus in more effective ways than before. The context in which we are operating as higher education leaders has changed and will continue to change.

### *ACE's Moving the Needle Initiative*

In this context of change and evolution, it is timely that ACE launched its Moving the Needle initiative aimed at increasing the number of women in senior leadership roles in higher education, achieving parity with males serving in similar roles, and promoting practices to help institutions achieve their goals for senior leadership diversity on campuses.

Our country and the world are changing. We will all be depending on a much more multi-colored workforce in the years to come. The deep changes in how we think about gender, racial, and ethnic diversity should include throwing aside the “melting pot” image of dissolving our people and their differences into a single mostly white model of success. We are moving, in fact, toward a tapestry that must be woven or a mosaic that must be fitted together to make a larger working picture and we must consider what this embracing of difference means to our day-to-day practices and in our creation of more open, embracing institutions.

Our approach to achieving gender parity in senior leadership roles should include cultivation of those identified as showing promise. We cannot simply expect that populations that have not traditionally served in senior leadership roles, women and others, will come needing no support to be successful in those roles. Investing in their professional development along the way and seeing beyond corrigible flaws will be equally important to ensuring their success.

### *A Network of Support along the Way*

The pre-conference included almost exclusively ACE state Network chairs. It was an intimate group; an ideal setting for real, authentic conversation—the kind you almost never hear at large conferences among women up and down the leadership hierarchy. One of the best aspects of the pre-conference is that it brought together multiple generations of women with widely varied experiences. For Generation X women like myself, I heard of the experiences and lessons from our Baby Boomer sisters, some of whom were trailblazers in their roles and in their states. They embraced feminism and spoke with and about their courage to lead, to challenge, and to change systems that favored some, but not all, on their campuses and in higher education. It gave me courage to know that I am following in the footsteps of those women and renewed my commitment to pave the way for and to mentor the women coming up behind me.

The experiences of women leaders are different from that of male leaders. And, as one of the Baby Boomer leaders, whom I quickly grew very fond of remarked, we are not all one monolithic group either. We have different racial, ethnic, sexual and other identities and lived experiences. Our more obvious differences and exteriors may not always reveal the assets that we bring to senior roles and that make us effective. Our losses and disappointments make us stronger and more resolved to move the needle.

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