



Brian Taylor for The Chronicle

In the past year, national discussions about glass ceilings in politics and in the board room, and sexist news coverage of the Olympics, have brought the subject of gender equity to the forefront of the American consciousness in compelling ways. Higher-education institutions are no strangers to the issue, as they struggle to meet their own aggressive gender-equity goals.

With women making up only about 26 percent of all college and university presidents, there's a lot of ground to cover. But in the **Minnesota State system**, we think we may have identified the secret sauce. The recent addition of seven new presidents has resulted in almost 50 percent of our presidents' being female — 14 out of 30.

In addition, the presidents of all the colleges and universities have elected four women to represent them on the executive committee of the Minnesota State Leadership Council, a body consisting of all the campus presidents as well as the chancellor's cabinet.

Minnesota State is making similar strides in diversifying the racial makeup of its presidents as well. Thirty percent are members of a racial or ethnic minority group, which compares favorably with the American Council on Education's national finding of 13 percent.

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That progress is the result of a deep and abiding organizational commitment to equity and inclusion that serves as the foundation for a multilayered strategy for developing, recruiting, and retaining diverse leaders in an effort to better serve our nearly 400,000 students. This effort includes:

**Leadership Development.** We have developed an 18-month academy designed to nurture leadership talent among department and faculty deans, human-resource directors, business managers, and chief financial officers, as well as faculty and staff members who aspire to future leadership positions.

**Recruitment.** Presidential searches are conducted by internal committees and consultants who understand our deep commitment to diversity and inclusion. Minnesota State trains members of presidential-search committee about how [unconscious bias](#) can affect decision making. And the search-committee chair receives additional training to further ensure that the search is fair. With that training, committees build diverse candidate pools from which to choose.

**Mentoring.** Once new presidents have been appointed, they are assigned a peer mentor from within the ranks of our presidents. The mentor relationship offers the new president someone who can informally help with advice, gut-checks, and context. Many of the mentor relationships go on for years, as the benefits are so valued by both the mentor and the mentee.

**Onboarding.** All new presidents attend a two-day "boot camp," along with their mentors, to learn [everything they will need to know](#) to get started. This extensive training creates collegiality among new presidents and helps them to begin adding value the minute they start their jobs in their campus communities.

**Coaching.** During our presidents' first year, an independent, objective leadership coach is provided for added guidance and counsel. In addition, at the end of the presidents' second year, they have the opportunity to receive 360-degree feedback, administered by a leadership coach, which allows the presidents to understand how they are perceived, where they have development opportunities, and what they are doing well.

Any change in the makeup of a leadership team brings an evolution in how a group interacts, and our group of presidents is no different. While this gender balance is new, we are seeing a shift: Just a few years ago our leadership culture encouraged individuals to come to the leadership council with fully developed recommendations. Now the culture of this more-diverse group of presidents encourages more collaboration to identify solutions together, and we believe better outcomes are achieved through further debate and robust participation by the larger group.

We're excited about how our culture is evolving because we believe an added benefit of the collective group is that we will become even more supportive of our "system-ness," which ultimately improves the students' experience as they navigate their postsecondary journey.

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But the benefit of more women in leadership roles that we find the most exciting, from a personal point of view, is how we are inspiring other women of all ages. Young women ask us questions about what it takes to be a leader, what we find most challenging, and how we got to the place we are. These are questions most people don't consider

asking white male leaders. We also have been told by older women that we embody their aspirations for their children and their grandchildren.

Another example occurred recently when one of our college presidents invited two female presidents from minority backgrounds to speak at a "Women on Wednesdays" lunch-and-learn event for staff members and students. The event served as an inspiration for at least one student: She told her college president that seeing those two women speak had inspired her to look into what it would take for her to become a college president one day.

And isn't that what we're really all trying to do? Inspire our students to dream beyond the future they thought they had, no matter who they are or where they come from. When our places of higher learning truly reflect the diversity of our students, they can more effectively imagine and realize their potential.

*Anne Blackhurst is president of Minnesota State University at Moorhead, Joyce Ester is president of Normandale Community College, Connie Gores is president of Southwest Minnesota State University, and Barbara McDonald is president of North Hennepin Community College.*

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