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Women Leaders in Higher Education

I am delighted to be surrounded today by such impressive researchers and policy makers, especially since I am more of a practitioner than a scholar in the matter of women's leadership. I come from the field of the university presidency, a fraught field indeed, to share with you some observations based on empirical practice and experience of women leaders and managers in higher education. What I have to say to you can be summed up in a single sentence: the world needs infinitely more of it.

The only worldwide statistics I know of are in Mary-Louise Kearney's brilliant 2000 book, **Women, Power and the Academy**. At that time, only 7% of university presidents were women. In the past decade, in the US in particular, the ground gained has been enormous, even symbolically. Today, of the ivy league schools, half are run by women (Harvard, Princeton, Penn, Brown), so is MIT, numerous public institutions, and increasing numbers of liberal arts colleges. It is interesting to note in passing that the vast majority of these presidencies are in Northeastern blue states and California. The American Council on Education reported just last February that women make up 23 percent of college and university presidents nationwide, 29% of community college presidents, with figures rising rapidly; twenty years ago, in 1986, that figure was only 9%. Even more hopefully, a full 45% of academic vice presidencies and deanships and department chairmanships in the US are held by women—and on some campuses the percentage is significantly higher, such as my own. To me it is inevitable that this trend will snowball, and that women provosts and deans will increasingly take on presidencies, first in the US and Canada, of course, but then worldwide, especially as women's presidencies are increasingly viewed and documented as successful. The first Ivy League presidency to be held by a woman—Judith Rohdin from 1994-2004—fully transformed the presence of the University of Pennsylvania within the city of Philadelphia, and broke ground for new town/gown relations. The issue of credentials, however, appears to be crucial—I don't know of any women college presidents who did not establish first scholarly and administrative recognition for themselves. Men from other fields tend still to be imported into the college presidency. And an important caveat closes this brief introduction—representation of minorities in university presidencies lags sharply behind that of women. The ACE data shows little discernable improvement since 1986.

The presence of women on campuses as academic leaders is critical for several reasons:

1. The impact of role models cannot be underestimated. On my own campus, everyone from women students to staff members to faculty tell me how much my appointment to the presidency gave them a sense of possibility. Here it is important to say that women's leadership in business, science or the academy should be viewed on as on a spectrum, rather than as separate domains. The presence of a woman president on campus will impact the choices of women students across all disciplines and divisions. My own appointment has sparked, for example, a very public, healthy, email conversation amongst faculty about gender discrimination in hiring and promotion practices, which I intend to take seriously. The fact that our university currently has a woman president, a woman board chair, three new women board members, and a very evidently female-heavy senior staff has not gone unnoticed, and sometimes provokes uneasy jokes about the feminization of our campus. It probably says something about how busy I have been that I hadn't even noticed the powerful gender redistribution at my own university. That said, as in most liberal arts institutions, we have 67% women students—why shouldn't the administration of the university naturally reflect that that bias?
2. The reform of the academy from the perspective of gender equity is a holistic task, and women's accession to leadership cannot be separated from the support for women researchers, research on women and gender, and the daily business of simply getting one's scholarly work or teaching accomplished during the crucial early years of our children's lives. In my own case, it is nothing short of a miracle that I made it to this presidency, a miracle I attribute to the fact that I had my children relatively late in life, and therefore had the time to establish my scholarly credentials *avant la lettre*. As a single mother of a handicapped child, I am sensitive as no one else to the archetypal bad timing of the march to tenure and the biological clock. Women leaders who remember the arduousness of their graduate student lives and assistant professorships will guarantee a review of all such processes on the campuses they direct, as Shirley Tilghman has done so brilliantly during her tenure as Princeton's president. New family friendly policies, stop the clock to tenure policies, clearly published tenure standards, and support for academic couples trying to find jobs near one another are transforming the academy, and not only at wealthy private institutions.
3. The old saw is that women are "people people" and that they humanize the academy, which may or may not be true. Women have been associated with conflict resolution since the dawn of time—think of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, or the Biblical heroine Esther, or even Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* in which the hero's mother and wife dissuade him from destroying Rome. Women in academia are often represented as the peacemakers, bringing warring department or board members to consensus. I think it is worth saying that, in point of fact, it turns out, and this has been substantiated by research, that women are in fact more entrepreneuring and innovative as college presidents, take greater measured risks, and tend to move their campuses forward in more daring ways than men. " The study results did not

support the general view that women are more democratic in their leadership styles than men, or that they are more inclined to group or consensus decision-making. The researchers concluded that women were substantially more likely than male colleagues to listen to people with different opinions, as well as to encourage creative individuals with whom they disagreed. These interesting outcomes of a recent study were published in Inside Higher Ed, an online journal something like the Chronicle. Such evidence, coupled with the spectacularly successful presidencies of many women university leaders, demonstrates how important it is that women succeed to such positions of power—especially during the present crisis in higher education. Success stories are perhaps more important right now than the old, disappointing stats.

4. Great women leaders and managers are made not born, and they are sustained by mentors and by supportive peer relationships. Strong, inspiring, change-making leadership is a skill that can be learned, and I would not be where I am today without significant investment in leadership training, and without the presence in my life of both seasoned and peer women presidents with whom I can share stories from the front. Networks are training grounds, safety nets, brainstorming chambers, and occasionally trauma wards where we go to be patched up.

The American Council on Education has a brilliant women's leadership program that embeds future women leaders in the offices of women presidents across the nation. The University of Toronto has an exemplary plan, based on longitudinal research, for promoting women into positions of power within the university system. The very fine work done by UNESCO in India and Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia, Africa, and Latin America to provide leadership and management training for women should be cited here, as well as the increasing number of informal networks worldwide, mediated by technology, mentoring women's leadership. I consider it one of the major responsibilities of women presidents to provide such mentoring, as well as to contribute to worldwide efforts to provide leadership development opportunities to women.

5. Campuses thrive when their presidents make explicit commitments to diversity and equity. Without that kind of leadership from the top, we are bound to fail in our efforts. Women leaders also bear a responsibility for setting the tone on their campuses for equity standards, and for ensuring that progress is made, reported on, and celebrated. Drew Faust, Harvard's new president, has announced "addressing the gender gap" as one of her immediate goals. She has her work cut out for her. At Harvard women now make up 56% of the undergraduate population, are predicted to earn 60% of the university's MA degrees and half of its doctorates by 2010, but only 20% of full professors at Harvard are women. Women hold, on average, only 24 percent of full professorships in the US.

6. Although it is important to raise awareness, to set quotas for equity, to redress gender imbalance, and to revise our historical practices in higher education, there is nothing so compelling as witnessing someone walk the talk, that is, model new forms of consciousness and new ways of being in the world. For undergraduate and graduates alike, for staff and faculty, to watch a woman leader work through difficult issues, survive political tempests, make wise decisions consistently over time, build broad commitment to mission, create environments where safe but fierce conversations can be had about what's really going on within the institution, set free the energies of her faculty, create dynamic teams and departments, and hoist the aspirations of her community into voice, simply has no equivalent.