

Voices from the Field 2024: LGBTQ+ Presidents in Higher Education



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The American Council on Education (ACE) produced the American College President Study (ACPS)—the most comprehensive, in-depth, and frequently cited source of information about the college president—and its related material, with generous support from the TIAA Institute. *The American College President: 2023 Edition* is the ninth iteration of ACPS, and the data it presents provide a comprehensive view of the demographics, challenges, and experiences of college presidents, helping all stakeholders gain a holistic understanding of higher education leadership and better reflect on ways to diversify the presidency. More information about ACPS can be found at acenet.edu/acps.

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Voices from the Field: LGBTQ+ Presidents in Higher Education

While calls to diversify the leadership pathway to the campus C-suite have been ongoing (Gasman, Abiola, and Travers 2015), appeals for specifically LGBTQ+ leadership are still relegated to the shadows in rhetorical silence (Crossman 2022; González 2021a; González 2024). The latest iteration of the American College President Study (ACPS) revealed an increase in the number of presidents and chancellors who identified as members of the LGBTQ+ community from 4.5 percent in 2016 to 6.9 percent in 2022 (Gagliardi et al. 2017, Melidona et al. 2023).

This brief extends ongoing work related to ACPS in order to amplify the voices of leaders who are often at the margins (Gray 2023; Gray, Howard, and Chessman 2018). While research has documented the experiences of leaders who challenge the traditional presidential profile of cisheterosexual White men (Burmicky 2024; Gray 2020; Muñoz 2009), there is less work available on the narratives of LGBTQ+ leaders in higher education (Crossman 2022; González 2021a; González 2021b).

Brown (2009, 68) stated that “LGBT elders historically have had to deny their sexual and gender identities [rhetorical silence] to gain access to the social and material supports available” and to survive within a cisheterogendered society. Therefore, this brief uses the term *elders* to honor its participating LGBTQ+ presidents, who are committed to shattering rhetorical silence as they live and lead while out and proud and who have a mission to elevate LGBTQ+ voices in higher education (González 2024). Recognizing these experiences can illuminate a rainbow in the presidential pipeline that can subsequently increase LGBTQ+ leadership. These conversations with five LGBTQ+ elders from varying institutional types and regional contexts can serve as critical junctures to equitably craft pathways toward the presidency, and they led to the following findings:

- **Unknown terrain to the presidency due to invisibility:** All of the elders noted that there was not an intentional pathway or pipeline provided to them early in their leadership career. They shared how the lack of visible representation in leadership communicated that such a path was not possible for them.
- **Tensions of disclosure and leadership:** The elders communicated that although they are out and proud, there are very real challenges in traversing the leadership terrain that require intentionality, strategy, and honesty. They discussed how they must often navigate the question of when to disclose when pursuing presidential roles.
- **Revamping leadership pathways:** All of the elders shared that they participated in existing leadership presidential preparation programs, (i.e., Aspen Rising Presidents Fellowship, Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities’ Leadership Academy) which aligned with findings from ACPS data. However, the elders offered insightful feedback around how those successful programs can be revamped in ways that are inclusive of LGBTQ+ leadership, such as adopting a curriculum that highlights the unique challenges and experiences LGBTQ+ leaders might face when pursuing the presidency beyond the standard preparation for the executive suite.

Leader Profiles



Raymond E. Crossman

President, Adler University

Raymond E. Crossman is an educator, social justice activist, and psychologist who is North America's longest-serving LGBTQ+ university president. Across his tenure at Adler University, the institution grew from a psychology school that enrolled fewer than 200 students to a graduate university preparing over 2,000 students in social justice practice disciplines at campuses in Chicago, Vancouver, and online. Following 21 years of service, Crossman will step down from the presidency of Adler in September 2024. He writes and teaches about leadership and diversity; his 2022 edited book, *LGBTQ Leadership in Higher Education*, is the first on this topic. He serves on several civic and professional boards, and he was recently recognized with the Amplifier Award from Chicago Public Media, the Visionary Leadership Award from Haymarket Center, and an honorary doctorate from Columbia College Chicago.



Erika Endrijonas

President, Santa Barbara City College

Erika Endrijonas became superintendent and president of Santa Barbara City College in August 2023. She previously served as superintendent and president of Pasadena City College, and she was president of Los Angeles Valley College in the Los Angeles Community College District. Prior to that, she served for five years as executive vice president of Oxnard College in the Ventura County Community College District, where she was also the chief instructional officer, the chief student services officer, and the accreditation liaison officer. Her community college experience also includes nine years as the career and technical dean at Santa Barbara City College, where she oversaw 28 departments spread across the business, technology, and health and human services divisions, in addition to the School of Culinary Arts and the Kinko's Early Learning Center. Endrijonas holds a bachelor's degree in history from California State University, Northridge (CSUN), and master's and PhD degrees in American and women's history from the University of Southern California. Endrijonas currently teaches in the educational leadership and policy studies doctoral program at CSUN. Endrijonas is an at-large representative to the Chief Executive Officers of the California Community Colleges (CEOCCC) board; past chair and current at-large member of the California Community College Athletic Association board; past co-chair of the California Community Colleges (CCC) Women's Caucus; the co-founder, past co-chair, and current treasurer of the CCC LGBTQ+ Caucus; and the co-chair of LGBTQ Leaders in Higher Education, a national organization. Endrijonas is also a member of the statewide Equal Employment Opportunity and Diversity Advisory Committee, and she served for two years on the CEOCCC's Racial Equity and Inclusion Excellence Taskforce.



Richard J. Helldobler

President, William Paterson University

Richard J. Helldobler, is the eighth president of William Paterson University in Wayne, New Jersey, one of the state's largest and most diverse public universities, which educates nearly 10,000 students through its five colleges. He assumed the presidency on July 1, 2018, after six years at Northeastern Illinois University, first as provost and vice president for academic affairs, and then as interim president. Helldobler has more than 30 years of higher education experience in a variety of academic and administrative roles, along with prestigious fellowships and other distinctions. Like many William Paterson students, Helldobler is a first-generation student of immigrant heritage, an experience which grounds his work in serving students for whom education is a means of social mobility and economic progress.



John C. Hernandez

President, Irvine Valley College

John C. Hernandez was appointed president of Irvine Valley College in July 2020. An educator with over 30 years of experience in higher education, Hernandez has been in leadership roles at both two-and four-year institutions. He previously served as president of Santiago Canyon College (SCC) for four years and, prior to that, was SCC's vice president of student services for 11 years. Hernandez also served as associate vice president and dean of Students at California Polytechnic University, Pomona, and associate dean at Santa Ana College. He serves on several statewide committees, including the Chief Executive Officers of the California Community Colleges' Affordability, Food, and Housing Access Taskforce, and he served as co-chair of the Community College League of California LGBTQ+ Caucus. As a first-generation immigrant who is the product of the California community college system, Hernandez knows firsthand how lives are transformed through education.



DeRionne P. Pollard

President, Nevada State University

DeRionne Pollard is the president of Nevada State University (NS), a public comprehensive institution awarding baccalaureate degrees in over 50 courses of study and graduate education in niche, high-demand areas of concentration. NS is one of the fastest-growing colleges in the country and is designated as a minority serving institution (MSI), Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI), and Asian American Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution (AANAPISI). Gloriously diverse, nearly half of all NS students are first-generation college students, and NS advances phenomenal teaching and superb student support to expand and diversify an educated workforce, thereby protecting social justice and economic mobility. Pollard began her tenure at NS on August 16, 2021. Pollard is the first Black female president of any Nevada System of Higher Education institution. She has held previous roles at the College of Lake County and served as president of both Montgomery College (2010–21) and Las Positas College (2008–10).

Raymond E. Crossman

President, Adler University

How did your aspirations toward the presidency begin?

Crossman: I never imagined myself being an administrator, let alone a president. I was happy as a faculty member in my discipline of clinical psychology. I taught, practiced, and consulted, and I believed I would do that for the rest of my life. I didn't see queer presidents. I didn't know that was a path that would be possible for me, so I never imagined it.

I was invited to interview for a campus leadership role in Hawaii at an institution that focused on diversity. I was invited because my scholarship is in diversity. It was very easy for me to say no to the interview because I didn't want to be an administrator. Plus, my partner at the time was going through cancer, so we weren't going to move away from his doctors. Then, a year later, my partner lived. He wasn't supposed to live. We were in that post-cancer glow, and the search failed for this position for which I'd been approached to interview. They asked me to interview again and because we were in this post-cancer glow, we said yes to the interview. I ended up getting offered the job.

Much to my surprise, I loved doing this kind of work; I had a talent for it. Psychologists, I think, are well suited to be administrators in higher education, as are reluctant or accidental administrators. After being in that position for several years, I interviewed for my current position as president at Adler University. I'm in my 21st and final year in this role, and across my time here, I've grown with the institution. I've realized how to tap my power as a queer leader.

When did you realize there would be significant barriers on your path to presidency because of your race, gender, or sexuality?

Crossman: I believe I've stood in my own way, through my internalized heterosexism, more than I have faced external barriers. Sure, I can point to one super-homophobic boss. I have typical stories about being dismissed not just because I am gay but because I am gay and [also] have the nerve to be smart and outspoken.

I believe that boards are the primary barrier to LGBTQ presidents. Their composition remains mostly straight White men, according to [the latest report](#) from the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges. A board has

to imagine how an LGBTQ person would function in the role because there are few examples, and board members have to get past their own beliefs and myths about gay people. For example, the myth that we can't talk to elderly alums or fundraise. For me, when I interviewed with a board, I had to push past my own internalized heterosexism enough to have agency to give examples in a straightforward and non-defensive way about how I've fundraised. (Sorry, bad pun.) Or to aspire to be charming with the elderly alums on the board who were interviewing me.

I brought resiliency to face these barriers. I survived physical and psychological abuse as a gay boy. That builds resiliency. The other intersectional aspect of my identity that helped me overcome barriers is that I've lived with HIV since the 1980s. I survived a time when the state turned its back on us and when I heard every day that I was going to die because I deserved to die. We fought for our lives. That built resiliency, which is a foundation for my leadership.

What do you think is the single biggest issue facing LGBTQ+ leaders today who are interested in a presidency?

Crossman: I think that there's been great progress. Queer leaders are breaking into the presidency. We've seen less progress for trans people. I don't know of any trans presidents. I fear that will be slow to change, at least in the short term, in the context of the current war on trans people.

Our barriers include those we manifest ourselves: I believe that LGBTQ people need to think of themselves in terms of their specific leadership power and talents. There's a [body

of] literature about women in leadership, about ethnicity in leadership. But there's been little focus on LGBTQ leadership. Our book [Crossman 2022] . . . was the first book on this topic in higher ed. I believe that reflects our own internalized heterosexism. Why are we not able to talk about how our identities support our leadership in the same way that our siblings within other identities do?

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Search firms understand better than they did when I first came into this role that they need to be talking about LGBTQ status as an important aspect of diversity. But search professionals and trustees [who] do not engage this reality remain a barrier.

How does being a member of the LGBTQ+ community influence your leadership?

Crossman: My gay identity is an asset for me as a leader. Being bullied as a kid and living with an outsider status wired me to look around corners, be intuitive, and reach for untried solutions. Escaping the bully, out-thinking the bully, thriving despite a bullying culture—it's led to a kind of creativity in my leadership. That's an asset. Higher education was designed for and by straight White men. Outsider leadership rethinks that paradigm, moving higher education to work for all.

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My leadership is distinctively queer, and I think it's a superpower. Not like leaping tall buildings in a single bound. Instead, I think it's my humanity, as a product of my queerness, that's my superpower.

Coming out professionally as someone living with HIV since the 1980s was also enormous for me as a leader. In the beginning of

Trump's presidency, I wrote an essay and did a media junket about living with HIV. I did it because I thought I had something to offer for that moment. I found Trump's hate speech reminiscent of the 1980s, and I wondered if many—women, immigrants, people who looked like immigrants, Muslims, and so many others—felt as I felt then. And surprisingly to me—after this disclosure in my professional life, my listening and intuition as a leader improved. That's another advantage that leaders with intersectional identities bring. We're more wired to do authentic or vulnerable leadership.

The latest iteration of ACPS revealed that LGBTQ+ leaders accounted for 6.9 percent of all college and university presidents and chancellors in 2022, an increase from 4.5 percent in 2016. How do you hope higher education leadership will change in the next decade?

Crossman: The academy needs to address the design problem of higher education, and leaders with intersectional identities provide the leadership to do so. One of my favorite Audre Lorde quotes is, "There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives." Meaning [that] there's not just one problem within higher education; it's many interrelated issues, it's systemic. I believe leaders with complex, vulnerable, and intersectional identities provide authentic leadership to meet today's challenges.

My hope is that we can operate against the playbook that hires scrubbed-up, perfect robots to be in charge of our institutions. We may think we want that. But that's not what we need.

What should presidential leadership development programs consider in order to diversify the presidency as it pertains to LGBTQ+ leaders?

Crossman: I think we should encourage aspiring leaders to think about why they want to be in one of these roles. They are demanding. You need to know that going in. I know folks, including LGBTQ folks, who have stepped into presidencies and have underestimated what impact it would have on them. Do you really want this? Why do you want it? If you're interested in kudos and gratitude, these roles do not often offer that. Making systemic change in a university can be harrowing for leaders, especially for people who themselves have experienced structural disadvantage. And especially now, because COVID[-19] changed everything—leadership is so much harder than it was before this most recent pandemic.

I believe that building relationships and networks is the value of leadership development programs. Especially for LGBTQ leaders who do not have many role models or LGBTQ peers. The content comes over time, but what is harder to find is a network with whom you have true affinity. Who are a good fit for you. With whom you can share your fears and struggles, as well as celebrate your triumphs. That kind of sharing and support cannot come on campus with your stakeholders.

Mentors are important, and I have observed that LGBTQ people have struggled to find enough agency to enlist mentors. I have consistently solicited people to be mentors who I admired but did not know. Cold calls: “I admire you; can we have breakfast?” I have been very fortunate in that I’ve gotten a yes to all those requests. A breakfast can turn into a relationship if there’s chemistry for both parties. I advise students and aspiring leaders to make this same ask. People don’t, for the most part, turn down requests like that—even though it can be scary to make such a request. People who are very successful want to share their success with others, and I’ve been fortunate enough to have some very accomplished mentors.

Erika Endrijonas

President, Santa Barbara City College

How did your aspirations towards the presidency begin?

Endrijonas: They basically began when I started here at Santa Barbara City College back in 2000 as the career and technical dean. At that time, I had been a dean at two other institutions and I really thought I’d probably be a vice president at some point. But then, the president at the time, Dr. Peter MacDougall, sent me to what is known as the Asilomar Leadership [Skills] Seminar. The conference is basically a lot of women in executive leadership roles talking about how they got to those positions. Having conversations about the ups to downs of this work, sitting at that conference in 2002, I thought to myself, “I can do that.” It had never occurred to me that I would be a president until I was at this conference. I’m very goal-oriented and one of the things is that I always figure out what my skills deficits are. What don’t I know? What do I need experience in in order to be successful?

In 2002, I told myself, “How am I going to prepare for this [presidency role]?” I was already involved in the statewide California Community College Association of Occupational Educators organization as the secretary. I stayed in that role, plus I did a couple of other roles there, and I then served in the System Advisory Committee on Curriculum that was going through some Title V changes, and I wrote some grants. So, I really tried to think about what I need to do to be a good vice president. Then, in 2009, that’s when I became the executive vice president at Oxnard College, and as executive vice president, I was the vice president of instruction, vice president of student services, and the

We need to build our own networks. In 2015, I noticed that the two most-senior LGBTQ civic leaders in Chicago, a university president and a not-for-profit CEO, were retiring at the same time. I wondered who the next generation would be, and I was startled to realize it was me and a handful of others who were the next generation, suddenly becoming Chicago’s most senior LGBTQ leaders. We convened a retirement dinner for those two elders. We asked them to share with us: How do we mentor as you did? How do we take the baton from you? How should we pass that baton to the next generation? We are responsible as LGBTQ leaders to be building a community of queer leadership.

accreditation liaison officer for the college. I was there in that role for five years. The president and I got along fine, and after the first couple of years, when we were doing my evaluation he said, “Okay, now it’s time to prepare you to be a president.” He spent the next three years really focused on [identifying] the things I needed to do to be prepared. I did some more statewide leadership; I did some national leadership; and in 2014, I landed the presidency at Los Angeles Valley College.

When did you realize there would be significant barriers on your path to presidency because of your race, gender, or sexuality?

Endrijonas: The only thing about [sexuality] I ever thought about was in considering which districts where I might apply, if they were in a particular part of the state, or if I looked and saw that every single prior president was a White, cisgender, and heterosexual man. I know there are some places where I thought, “They’re not going to be ready to have a lesbian as an out president.” When I applied at LA [Los Angeles] Valley College, right before I was going for the board interview and I was actually a finalist, I remember sitting down with the president who was mentoring me and saying, “Should I say anything?” And he said, “No, it’s not going to come up. This is California.”

By far, I always knew being female was going to be more of an issue, especially being a short woman at 5’2”. Over the years, I’ve had lots of colleagues that didn’t take gender or height into consideration when offering advice. For

example, when I was at Union Institute & University, I had a personnel issue happening in my center and an administrator from another center who was 6'5", in his sixties, said to me, "Well, Erika, you know what you need to do is this," and I said, "Yeah, and you know what, you're a 6'5" man who's 20 years older than I am. You can do whatever you want. I'm 5'2" and I'm barely 34 years old. I can't do it. I'm a little short dyke. It's not happening."

So, I think I recognized early on that I am not necessarily going to be treated fairly or equitably, but it is what it is, and just try to do whatever I can to mitigate that. I need to be the best I can and live with the fact that women are held to a different standard. There have been times when I've had to call people out. There was a time here at Santa Barbara

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when I was a dean where how I spoke to people was watched like a hawk, but then a White male dean told some of my faculty to get their asses back into a training. When I went to say something to the executive vice president who supervised both of us, he said to me, "Oh, you know him, he's an artist. He gets emotional." And I said, "This is not okay! Because if I had done that, you would have

called me into your office immediately; I wouldn't have had to come here, you would have called me in and told me that I was being unprofessional, [but] he gets a pass. No!"

What do you think is the single biggest issue facing LGBTQ+ leaders today who are interested in a presidency?

Endrijonas: Trying to be a responsible leader at a time when our community is under attack and trying to balance between that this is my identity, and that I don't just have a gay agenda. You do have to be mindful to make sure that people don't misinterpret what you do, as [though] there's only one group of students or faculty or staff that you care about. However, there are still some close-minded people—and we have to make sure that LGBTQ+ students, who are most likely to experience basic needs insecurities, are supported. I always keeping mind that one part of our community that we have failed consistently is our trans students. We don't have any trans presidents that I know of. I've had to really work hard on trans athletes in my former

role as the chair of the California Community College Athletic Association Board, too.

The latest iteration of ACPS revealed that LGBTQ+ leaders accounted for 6.9 percent of all college and university presidents and chancellors in 2022, an increase from 4.5 percent in 2016. How do you hope higher education leadership will change in the next decade?

Endrijonas: We need to continue hopefully increasing these numbers for our community. When I got involved with what was then the LGBTQ Presidents in Higher Education, there were almost 100 presidents who were out, but getting them to be involved with the organization was really hard because presidents are really busy. The core group who [were] really involved had come together starting in 2010. They had seen each other at ACE meetings. They were doing all of this stuff and they were really there as a supportive group to one another. The first meeting I went to was in January of 2016. The first half of the first day everybody was sharing their experiences and there was a need for that because there the presidents needed to get support from their LGBTQ+ colleagues. The problem was that in order to keep that going, we had to keep getting more and more presidents who wanted to be involved in this as some of the original members started to retire. We started holding institutes 2015 and we were saying that we wanted to see more LGBTQ+ people in presidential roles, but we weren't doing anything to create the pipeline. At that point, we were kept it as a presidents' group that I became the co-chair of in 2017.

I served as a co-chair for six years and during that time, what was really important to me was what we were ultimately able to do—and that is change it to LGBTQ Leaders in Higher Education. It used to be that you had to be a president to be on the board or to be one of the chairs. We have to create a real pipeline, and the pipeline was never going to be created if this leadership opportunity was limited to presidents. We are being way more intentional about creating a pipeline and now leadership positions on the board include faculty and other administrators. We also offer mentoring specifically to support our LGBTQ+ presidents and aspiring leaders. In some cases, it's about a dean becoming a [vice president] and that's what they want. I think that's what I hope for: that over the next five to 10 years, we see more out LGBTQ+ people in faculty, deans, directors, provosts, vice presidents, presidents, and chancellors.

What should presidential leadership development programs consider in order to diversify the presidency as it pertains to LGBTQ+ leaders?

Endrijonas: I think what they need is to be front and center about the fact that there's a group of us. I went to the Harvard [Graduate School of Education's] Institute for Educational Management the summer between being an executive vice president and starting my presidency. And, of course, I'm out. Maybe halfway through the first week, the professor who was there to talk about presidencies kind of pulled me aside and said, "There's a group of you out there—LGBTQ+," and it was like this whole secret thing. Here we were talking about institutional and educational leadership and management and all these things, but she felt like it was something that she needed to have a private conversation with me about rather than telling the other 120 people in the room, some of whom were gay as well and aspired to be presidents. So, I think that's what we need to do; we need to include the experience of this group.

A lot of my colleagues have been challenged the most when it comes to fundraising. Because fundraisers and donors tend to be a little more on the conservative side. That's where I think you wind up going, "What do I say? What do I not say?" I've been out wherever I've been, and there are some places where that meant some donors wouldn't give money.

Richard J. Helldobler

President, William Paterson University

How did your aspirations towards the presidency begin?

Helldobler: They began for me when I became an ACE Fellow in 2005–06. What was interesting about that process is that I did self-identify as an openly gay man in my application and before I even interviewed, the director of the program pulled me in and said, "You know, while it's not impossible, it's not probable that you will get to be a president because most boards won't hire you as a gay man." At that time there was only one out president in the U.S., [and] that was [Charles R.] "Chuck" Middleton at Roosevelt University. Me being me, I was like, "Well, if he can do it, I can do it!"

It was really after the ACE fellowship that I thought the presidency was something I was interested in doing. Until that point, I never really was intentional about my career. I

Leadership programs need to basically bring us out of the closet and stop acting like we're this little shadow group of people, secret shame—we're not! We're right there, front and center; we are here! Include us in mainstream kinds of programs to let you know how you can support us. I just think that leadership

development programs need to stop being so conservative and thinking that there's a problem with our community, especially in four-year searches where search consultants have a huge role. They're gatekeepers. There are just different ways of being out there and leadership looks very different depending on who you are, and we need to embrace all kinds of leadership rather than ascribing to this is good and this is bad—because we know that if we continue to go down that path, the only thing that will be ascribed as good is this gendered White male leadership, which isn't exactly where we need to be as a multicultural society.

Leadership programs need to basically bring us out of the closet and stop acting like we're this little shadow group of people, secret shame—we're not!

had an opportunity to be the department chair but I didn't seek it out. I had an opportunity to be a dean, but I didn't seek it out. I always approached both of those opportunities as, "Let me try it out and see if I like it and if I don't, I can always go back to faculty." I enjoyed my faculty life as a director and a choreographer. But it was after the fellowship that I thought, "Okay, now, if you're going to do it, you have to be intentional about it."

When did you realize there would be significant barriers on your path to presidency because of your race, gender, or sexuality?

Helldobler: Navigating sexuality and gender might cause significant barriers toward the path to the presidency. It was what I refer to as a wake-up moment for me because when

you're in the arts, being LGBTQ+ is more accepted. When I started moving into administration, I encountered situations where sexuality and gender were solely defined as straight. For example, at one institution an annual scholarship gala was held and I was asked a series of questions, like: "You're going [to] go to the gala, right?" and "You're going to bring your partner?" and "Are you going to dance with your partner? And if there's a slow dance, are you going to dance with your partner?" Those are work situations that straight folks just do not have to think about, they just don't have to think about slow dancing with their partners. I think when queer presidents show up partnered, that in itself is beginning to queer the presidency.

It really took me a while to think about my identity outside of an artistic community in ways that the job is really built for a heterosexual couple. I can speak to that, the heteronormativity of the presidency. I became a dean young; I was like, 38 or 39. My identity was so just rooted in who I was as a gay man and never questioned within the artistic community. But when I was faced with these systems that

So if it meant that I couldn't be with my partner at a gala and I couldn't dance with my partner at a gala, then this wasn't the job for me.

were really built for straight America, it was challenging. I'm a firm believer that you can't do these jobs unless you are your authentic self. So if it meant that I couldn't be with my partner at a gala and I couldn't dance with my partner at a gala, then this wasn't the job for me. It wasn't the path that I was going to go down. Some eyebrows raised, but you know it all worked out.

When you move into these positions it gives you the power to redefine the position. It's about moving forward, and how do you move forward into that space and redefine the position based on your authentic self? Every president does it, but for gay leadership and queer leadership, it's about identity as opposed to style.

The latest iteration of ACPS revealed that LGBTQ+ leaders accounted for 6.9 percent of all college and university presidents and chancellors in 2022, an increase from 4.5 percent in 2016. How do you hope higher education leadership will change in the next decade?

Helldobler: I will say probably in the next 10 years, that number will be around 15 percent. We have to break the

glass ceiling, around one of the major Ivies. We got The Ohio State University, with Kristina [M.] Johnson. Finally, one of the Big Ten schools! We got one of those and we have some regional publics and some privates. But in 2005–06, the presidencies that we were getting were at institutions that were struggling to survive. It was the place that nobody thought could be fixed, but yet they were willing to hire a gay president to come in and usually we were successful. That's not happening as much anymore. But we still haven't gotten a Stanford or a Princeton. I think once we move into that institutional profile and once we get the first trans or queer-gendered person into the presidency, then I think that will be the next plexiglass ceiling we will have broken for our community!

What should presidential leadership development programs consider in order to diversify the presidency as it pertains to LGBTQ+ leaders?

Helldobler: I think they are trying to be intentional in presenting same-sex couples in partner programs that allow people to understand the way the presidency is structured from a heteronormative perspective. But I also think women are our great allies in this journey because they're redefining the presidency, because not only is it heteronormative, it's male-gendered. Every time a woman president is appointed, the LGBTQ+ community should be waving the rainbow flag, because it changes the male-dominant construct of how the college presidency is structured.

Here are a few examples of just how assumptive it is that the presidency is structured for a same-sex couple. I was invited to interview for a presidency in western New York. They asked for partners to join the candidates if they wished. The interviews would strictly be with the candidates, but partners could get to know the area and would be part of the process in social settings. I asked if my partner would have to make a presentation and was told no. As we were getting ready to sit down to a joint dinner between the university and foundation board members, the chair of the search approaches us and says, "They would like both of you to make opening remarks." My partner, who was told there would be no presentation, said to me, "What should I say?" I replied, "I don't know, but I will go second."

They arranged for a meeting with the local superintendent of public schools, as my partner is an assistant principal. When he walked into the meeting the response was, "Wait a minute, I thought the person interviewing for the presidency was a guy?"

And finally, in an open forum for community members, they asked my partner to sit off to the side as the questions would be directed to me. An elderly judge pointed to me and said, “I know what you are going to do, but what (pointing at my partner) are you going to do?” This merely illustrates how the presidency is gendered toward a straight couple—and perhaps more distressing is that, even with a heterosexual couple, the spouse of the president is expected to offer their services for free.

These are the sort of things that leadership programs should be thinking about as they’re talking to queer leadership and nurturing queer leaders. Helping people understand

John C. Hernandez

President, Irvine Valley College

How did your aspirations towards the presidency begin?

Hernandez: Well, frankly, there wasn’t an aspiration to become a president for most of my career. I knew at some point that I was shifting [away] from a counseling role to an administrative role. Even once I made that decision and pursued a doctoral study program, I assumed I would perhaps become a dean and then maybe someday a vice president. To be really honest with you, the college presidency was never something that I aspired to—and I guess I need to think a little bit critically about that in terms of [asking] why not. Mostly because it seemed so out of reach. It wasn’t until I became a vice president of student services at a community college that I started having people reaching out, you know, headhunters. However, I didn’t see as many [leaders] who identified as LGBTQ+ and who were openly embracing that they were LGBTQ+.

When did you realize there would be significant barriers on your path to presidency because of your race, gender, or sexuality?

Hernandez: As I think about the wholeness of who I am and my multiple identities, how those intersect, and how I bring that with me into the spaces I enter—I will say that because I didn’t come out until I was 26 and I was closeted for so many years that even after coming out and for the longest [time] I felt at home, a greater connectedness, in spaces that spoke to my Latinoness, my ethnic and heritage cultural background. Being a member of the LGBTQ+ community for the longest [time], I never denied aspects of who I was but in terms of which identities were more [at]

how to talk about sexuality and gender identity and where heterosexual assumptions might surprise them in the course of an interview. I don’t wear my sexual identity on my sleeve, but I contextualize it. I talk about my partner if the subject of partners come up but don’t offer it up unless appropriate. So I think helping future out presidents navigate those situation is key to increasing our numbers.

Where leadership programs fall short is there is no talk about the governing board piece. How do governing boards think about queer leadership? How do they support queer leadership? How does that have to be different from supporting straight leadership?

the forefront or that I felt like I connected to most was my cultural ethnic background.

I don’t want [to] make it sound like toward the end of my career I finally fully embraced [myself] but it feels that way sometimes, because even in the conversations and the questions I’ve had to ground it back to my LGBTQ+ identity as opposed to the inclination to steer left and go to my ethnic cultural heritage. It’s helpful for me to reflect and ground again the fullness of who I am, as opposed to one or the other.

Being a member of the LGBTQ+ community for the longest [time], I never denied aspects of who I was but in terms of which identities were more [at] the forefront or that I felt like I connected to most was my cultural ethnic background.

Even in my early attempts at interviewing for [presidencies], a mentor who is a retired chancellor advised me against outing myself in the interview process. But I have been very congruent, probably since my first management position way back in 1998, when I finished my doctoral studies at [University of] Maryland that either in the final interview or when I was offered the position that I made it a point to bring that [LGBTQ+ identity] to light because it was important to me from the get-go not to have people make assumptions for me, to be able to empower myself to navigate that conversation.

The latest iteration of ACPS revealed that LGBTQ+ leaders accounted for 6.9 percent of all college and university presidents and chancellors in 2022, an increase from 4.5 percent in 2016. How do you hope higher education leadership will change in the next decade?

Hernandez: Whenever there's growth, it shows progress. But it feels so minuscule in comparison because when you translate that percentage to how many actual presidents out of how many higher education institutions, it's dismal, right? I was participating in [an] interview for [a] dissertation study focused on LGBTQ+ leaders of color within the California Community College system and they asked me who else I knew [who] could participate, to snowball sample. I started throwing [out] people's names and there were, like, five I thought of, and four out of the five I thought of were already in that doctoral candidate's interview schedule. It made me realize how small that number really was out of 116 community colleges. We've been saying this for so long, and it's true of our faculty, our leadership, and executive leadership roles [that they] are not anywhere close to reflective of the demographics, at least in California. I'm just going to focus on it there as opposed to nationally. I'm confident that there is a critical mass of LGBTQ+ professionals within our system. So is administration out of reach? Not necessarily. These are tough gigs, and my aha moment wasn't until I had a place and a voice at the table—I use that metaphor so much. It was based on seeing the power dynamics and the influence that you have when you have a seat and a voice at the table. You need both, so how do we create opportunities like that? But it wasn't until I was in that role and saw firsthand where we can make transformational change at a macro level.

I think part of it is creating that type of awareness and opportunity to motivate and guide future leaders. Hopefully, also seeing individuals who are in those roles because that's always been so important. Early on in my profession and even as an undergraduate student, I didn't see a whole lot of people that look[ed] like me in those leadership roles. That level of visibility and representation, I know, is beyond symbolic. But again, had I experienced those things sooner, I may have come to the conclusion sooner than I did. Demystifying what that job in that role is, while also being very clear about the competing demands, multiple stakeholders and the environments in which you must be effective to lead. It's going to require some real concerted efforts in breaking whatever glass ceiling or barriers people

still perceive these roles to [have] or how those doors aren't open for [LGBTQ+ people of color].

How does being a member of the LGBTQ+ community influence your leadership?

Hernandez: My own lived experience influences and shapes how I lead from just an understanding of things that I have encountered, things that I've experienced. Maybe an additional amount of understanding and empathy for individuals that have come from similar backgrounds is always present in the back of my mind. People see you as a spokesperson or a voice for our communities and [there's a] sense of responsibility that comes with that. I know [from] the conversations that we have in these leadership roles the importance of transforming our institutions so that they're designed for success [and] value the assets our students bring with them. It's easier said than done in practice. Yet if there is something that the disaggregation of data has informed us, [it's] that we are certainly leaving many students behind. It just becomes part of how you view things, the lens of it: How does this impact students? Not just all students, but what students are impacted the greatest and which ones are negatively being impacted? How do we address that? So in some ways it helps shape the questions, the narrative, the conversation. Certainly there's an appreciation from my own experiences. It is at the forefront to help me think about it from a firsthand experience but at the same time not to let that be the only guide—but to really focus on questions that we ask and the ways we reframe things in a deeper understanding of the ways in which, sometimes, unintentionally, we're creating barriers for students, whether it's in our policies, in the language that we use; we can go on and on. I think [LGBTQ+ identity] helps me to lead with greater compassion and understanding, at least I'd like to think that.

What should presidential leadership development programs consider in order to diversify the presidency as it pertains to LGBTQ+ leaders?

Hernandez: I think there are two types [of programs] that are needed; one that is focused by affinity, for aspiring executive leader roles for LGBTQ+ professionals. And then there's how we create space in those [programs] that are already well established (i.e., Aspen [Rising Presidents Fellowship], HACU [Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities' Leadership Academy], or NCCCHC [National Community College Hispanic Council's Leadership Fellows

Program]. The [NCHCC program] provides leadership for [Latino professionals]. [NCCHC is] good on LinkedIn—every time someone gets a promotion, they put a picture of the person and say the role they achieved. Talk about branding—their program [is] excellent! How are they incorporating multiple identities and incorporating that into their leadership programs? That’s not to say there can be another one created, but why not take the existing programs that have been so successful over the years, [which] may not be intentionally creating space for individuals who are LGBTQ+ to talk about the opportunities and the challenges of leading authentically? But I think there’s value to do both.

DeRionne P. Pollard

President, Nevada State University

How did your aspirations towards the presidency begin?

Pollard: I never had aspirations for the presidency. As a first-generation college student, I grew up on the South Side of Chicago and just wanted to be able to have a job where I could pay for my funeral and to be able to know that I made somewhat of an impact. The fact that I moved into undergraduate and finished that and finished a master’s degree, and then went to teach at a community college! I was amazed by that and thought, “I have reached the pinnacle of what my life was going to be,” which is an interesting perspective. I was probably 25. I was now a tenure track faculty member at a community college teaching English and it was kind of amazing in a way that I hadn’t even imagined.

I moved in a couple of years after being there to somehow serve as a coordinator of the professional development center. I had stepped into this coordinator role and then the provost and vice president, an older White man who I love tremendously, walked up to me after I did a presentation in front of our part-time faculty and said, “DeRionne, you’re going to be a college president one day. We need to figure out that pathway.” I just looked at him and said, “I just want to get tenure.” He said, “You’re going to get tenure, that’s not a problem, we need to figure out what that [presidential] pathway is going to look like for you.” So he took an active interest in my life. He

I believe in the higher calling of what higher education should be about.

I think the literature and work you’ve done and others are doing can also help inspire people to think more broadly about where they can have the greatest impact in these positions in these roles. I know for a fact I would have benefited tremendously if I had an opportunity like that [leadership institute]. So when you think about how you impact existing practices and programs, to me, that would be like an ideal place to begin, because you’re not having to launch something. It’s hopefully individuals in those roles that can be more intentional about how they do that in those already existing programs.

said, “The first thing you have to do is go get your doctorate.” I thought, “What! I’ve got more education than everybody in my family and you want me to go get a doctorate degree!” I did my doctorate at Loyola University Chicago and at that time I was on this interesting pathway of understanding how higher education worked. I then moved from my faculty role more formally into a dean’s job and then into an assistant vice president role in academic affairs. I became a part of the institution’s succession plan, as both the provost and the president were retiring within a certain amount of time. They had this whole master plan where another assistant vice president was going to step in and then she was retiring. So I would be stepping into the assistant vice presidency and then [the] provost role after a couple of years. I got the doctorate and probably not too long after, I interviewed for the job and accepted it. I will tell you that was probably the first time I thought, “Okay, you’re probably going to be a college president one day.”

I have never been intentional about the presidency. I think a lot of people chase the presidency. I’ve seen that and they get caught up in the noun and not the verb (English professor here). They get caught up in being a president and all the trappings that can come with that versus being caught up in the work of leading—that for me is what I have tried to do. When I have stepped into these spaces and places, I’ve been very fortunate to have had mentors who saw capacity in me and invested in me. I’ve had truth tellers in my life who helped me, you know, round out the rough edges where they may have seen. I’ve had a lot of audacious belief that I could do the work and I had grit. I’m a hard worker, and

I never take myself that seriously. I take the work seriously, but I don't take myself seriously and I think that's what allowed me to step into these spaces and hopefully impact the organizations of which I've been a part.

How have you navigated your leadership trajectory given your race and/or gender and/or sexuality?

Pollard: I never internalize that and I think this is a difference. I've never had fear or concern about my ability to do the job. Now, y'all may not be ready for me to show up in this space—but that's on you, that's not me. So when I am literally composing [my letter of reference] for the presidencies that I've been in, you will see I'm unapologetic in showing up as who I am. I talk about the love of my life, my wife that I've been with for 34 years. I talk about this glorious boy that we get to raise together that we adopt[ed]. I talk about the fact that I believe in family life, home balance.

I particularly have high expectations. I believe in the higher calling of what higher education should be about. I'm very clear and articulate that I know where my strengths are and I know where my weaknesses are, and I'm also intentional

I want to make sure that when I'm no longer here there can be two more seats at the table, three more, four more.

about the spaces that I apply to go into. So you're not going to see me applying for a job in Wyoming right now. You're not going to see me applying for a job in Florida, Texas, Alabama, you name it. There's just a list of places where I'm not going to go. I know where I can show up and I know where I'm willing to show up and I also know where I'm going to be "first."

I was prepared to accept that mantle when I was the president of Las Positas College. I was the first person who identifies as LGBTQ+ to serve in that role. When I went to Montgomery College, I was the first woman of color and first LGBTQ+ person to be in that role. Then I came to Nevada State, and I'm the first woman of color for any institution of higher education in the state of Nevada and I'm the first LGBTQ+ person, so I knew that [before taking the position].

I realized it but I never internalized it as anything other than an asset, and I think there's a difference. When I see people internalize it as a challenge, they operate from a place of fear—[they have an] unwillingness to shine bright and to

show who they are. I do believe that's a distinctive part of how I've been able to show up. My sexuality is none of your business. So I've never internalized the fear of others about it. That's your issue, not mine.

The latest iteration of ACPS revealed that LGBTQ+ leaders accounted for 6.9 percent of all college and university presidents and chancellors in 2022, an increase from 4.5 percent in 2016. How do you hope higher education leadership will change in the next decade?

Pollard: I think if you'd asked me before—a year and a half ago—I would have said double. I would have loved to see that number double, because I do think—with the awareness and what your generation is doing, and making people aware of sexuality as this continuum and honoring fluidness and honoring that there are not these binary ways in which people have to think about themselves—I think the sheer numbers will force that to change itself.

However, will they be able to and encouraged to step into roles where they are leaders of organizations in this moment? I worry about that. I have a friend of mine applying to transition out of her current role and we're talking about where to apply. She's not going where she may have considered before. She's not going to apply for a job in Florida. She's not going to apply in Texas. She's not going to apply in Iowa. She's not going to apply to Arkansas. You rule out Georgia. So she just makes her way. There may be more people who identify on the spectrum of sexuality and are prepared and interested—hungry to step into these leadership roles! Yet, there will be fewer spaces where they will feel comfortable or where boards or chancellors will feel prepared and capable of hiring them, and that's a sad thing.

The backlash around these issues are not just going to affect hiring of folks of color and who identify as LGBTQ+, women or anything. It also affects the leadership pipeline. That's going to be the damage. It's going to take years for that to happen, and we're going to see this kind of revival where the gains we are making—gains around diversifying the presidency—I suspect we're going to lose those gains.

How does being a member of the LGBTQ+ community influence your leadership?

Pollard: I think it helps me very deliberately understand otherness. It requires me to think differently about . . . intentionality not to be made invisible or rendered mute, because I know that I sit in spaces and places where there aren't enough of me around. I want to make sure that when I'm no longer here there can be two more seats at the table, three more, four more. I know that's important, and I'm much more intentional around using my power and influence in ways to help ground the decision-making of my institution. Who's not at the table? How did this decision get made? Can someone change the way their name is shown in the system? We can't do that? Why can't we?

Sometimes it's being willing to ask the questions that others are unwilling to ask. That's how it is. I understand what it feels like to be minoritized two, three, four times over. It is a part of who I am and yet it's not even conscious. It's just who I am and I know that my colleagues will say, "Don't bring this to DeRionne unless we thought about it in these ways of 'Who's at the table? Who's not at the table? Who has power and is it being redistributed? Are we thinking about injustice as it relates to policy? How does policy codify our own biases?'" They know that. I know because I am a Black woman who's in a same-sex relationship, who's a certain age in her life right now, who's a parent. I don't get a pass and they don't get a pass when they come to me, because they know I'm going to ask those types of questions and I'm equally committed to making sure that other folks within the organization are seen who identify these ways. You don't get to render them invisible or mute. It is just the way I view the world, and that's important.

What should presidential leadership development programs consider in order to diversify the presidency as it pertains to LGBTQ+ leaders?

Pollard: We know that language holds power and importance; it defines who people are. How things are written when you are advertising or putting your program together to say, "This leadership program is intentionally inclusive. This leadership program wants to make sure that all voices are seen and heard. This leadership program wants to change representation and the lack thereof." I'd love writing that speaks to what I believe: "We hold these truths to be self-evident." I would love to see leadership programs actually use language that talks about their belief structure, because if it talks about that belief structure and

if they're talking about inclusion (and not acceptance but inclusion, there's a difference there) And to actually be thoughtful about how they recruit people to participate in these programs. We can't go the traditional routes or say that folks need to have these sets of traditional experiences and look [a certain] way. You [as a prospective leader] need to understand what that means and also know the consequences if you show up someplace and you're not presenting in a way that they think they're expecting to see.

I think about most of these mentoring programs, leadership development programs—they pair you with mentors. I think about who they asked to be mentors. I had the pleasure of being a mentor for many years in a highly regarded leadership program, and inevitably I mentored formally or informally nearly all of the queer, many of the Black, many of the [mentees from historically minoritized populations]. It was important, and [mentees] asked me questions they probably wouldn't ask somebody else. To this day I continue [to] receive calls from mentees who say, "I'm in the search for this position. When should I disclose?" And we had a great conversation about what the search was doing and not doing, and what the board member was doing. That's a part of those dynamics of understanding the lived experience and getting those mentors in there.

I think also helping folks be prepared for how to write their materials, how to interview, and how they show up in those spaces when they are applying for presidencies [is essential]. We have to stop letting these leadership development programs be primarily philosophical and conceptual and absent of the pragmatic realities of the work. My critique always is that it's great to talk about a student success agenda, to talk about building partnerships and collaborations, and [to] talk about transfer and all that. But what happens when you get your first vote of no confidence? What happens when you walk into an organization where the budget is screwed up? What happens when you walk in [and] a donor tells you, "I'm not going to donate anymore because you hired a lesbian as a president?" You are going to have these kinds of very real-world pragmatic experiences that are not just about, here are the reasons for an intrusive student success agenda and how to develop a compelling case for it. That's all great until the board tells you, "No, we don't believe in inclusion. We don't want to see disaggregated data. We don't believe that Black lives matter, and we only believe all lives matter." We don't want to talk about that, [but] that to me is an essential component. We need to have much more nuanced leadership development programs.

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