

Entrepreneurs and Evangelists: Women Leaders Remaking Higher Education

*Remarks to Women Administrators in Higher Education
September 21, 2012*

President Patricia McGuire
Trinity Washington University

As I was preparing these remarks, my thoughts kept turning to breasts and boards. Who knew that in the Year 2012, our unending quest to find a level playing field for women would have us skirting a sandbox full of squirming children, gazing upon a tableau where an infant's hunger is sated through the most natural of all female acts while other children looked on, resentful and angry with mother professor's choice. In all the thousands of years of higher learning, since Socrates sat under that darn tree, father professor never had to make such a choice, and father, to some, still knows best.

This was no duchess thinking she was sunbathing with her husband on a private balcony exposed to the world by a creep with a long lens. A professor responding to her child's needs while giving a lecture soon learns that while the paparazzi may feed the beast to cheers and leers, a mother feeds her infant in front of her class at great risk to her academic reputation. The treachery of nipple politics upends the level playing field once more!

And then we stumbled into the rocky crags of boards gone bad, but with a gender twist we didn't see coming: Queen Bee meets Joan of Arc, women who appear to have 'made it' to the levellest of all playing fields on Mr. Jefferson's apparently well-manicured lawns quickly becoming slippery slopes of intrigue and misjudgment on a grand scale. We can look at the fascinating case of Dragas v. Sullivan as a top-level power play, but as we unpeel its myriad dimensions we discover the treachery of gender wars among ourselves. The hyper-aggressive board chair trying to prove her macho creds, the incrementalist president-as-campus-facilitator trying to care for all of her people with patience and sensitivity --- both playing into gender stereotypes, perhaps unwittingly, that might give the men who still run most things reason to pause when considering the next wave of candidates for top jobs or green jackets at Augusta.

Don't believe there's a gender issue in the UVA case? Don't be naive. We read this in the *New York Times* magazine cover story¹ about the University of Virginia power struggle:

Some of Sullivan's allies suggest, discreetly, that she didn't fit the board's image of a chief executive. She is in her 60s and has the fashion sense of an academic. In a personnel review process last year, Dragas, who is immaculately tailored, told Sullivan that she received comments from several board colleagues, questioning whether her wardrobe was occasionally too informal.

¹ Andrew Rice, "Anatomy of a Campus Coup," *The New York Times Magazine*, September 16, 2012, p. 62.

“I don’t know what the unprofessional dress was,” Sullivan said. “I do live here at the university, so when I’m working out or doing something else here, people will see me.” It’s hard to imagine anyone leveling such criticism at, say, the famously rumpled former Harvard president Larry Summers. “People are very much aware that I’m the first woman president of Virginia,” she said. “It would be naïve to think it’s not there as an issue.” Dragas calls the suggestion that she judged Sullivan by her appearance “ridiculous,” adding, “If the president had been a man, I would have conveyed the same sentiments from the board, no question about it.”

Question. About IT. Methinks Helen is too quick to dismiss the charge.

As a somewhat “famously rumpled” president myself, I well know the prejudices that people impose on their perceptions of leaders, and in particular, working in a predominantly female environment, I know well how women can be the worst critics of other women. Early in my time as Trinity’s president, a group of alumnae leaders called me to a meeting to lecture me on how I should be more polite, more soft-spoken, and less aggressive in general. Alas, their words fell on deaf ears.

I have learned that, sometimes, when we’re busy thinking that men are the problem, women turn out to be the real saboteurs.

Ironically, in her first year in office, Teresa Sullivan participated in a conference on women in higher education, and insidehighered.com provided this fascinating insight:

“Sullivan, who is still in the first year of her presidency, offered some of the most direct advice of the evening to would-be female presidents: have the last word.

“If any of you have read [Deborah Tannen](#), then you know that men interrupt women a lot,” said Sullivan, referencing the Georgetown University linguistics professor’s work, including the best-selling [You Just Don’t Understand: Women and Men in Conversation](#) (Harper Paperbacks). “You have to have the sound bite at the end of the conversation. You have to say things succinctly.”²

Now, of course, we read interviews today in which President Sullivan measures her words quite carefully, especially about her sister in the board chair. It’s not just men who can interrupt not only women’s speech, but indeed, women’s careers. Powerful women, knowing that there are only a few places available on the other side of the glass ceiling --- think about those two green jackets in Augusta and how we’re being told to be satisfied with only two --- ambitious women sometimes kick other women off the ladder in the struggle for the few prizes we might be “allowed” to achieve by the men who control the ultimate distribution of goodies. Think: [Hunger Games](#) for women provosts, presidents and board chairs.

Is that too dark? While always staking out a position as the most eternal of optimists, I have found it helpful to probe the dark sides so that I can know, realistically, what I can achieve and what I should simply leave for other, more capable women to pursue in the future.

² David Moltz, [“What Women \(Presidents\) Want.”](#) insidehighered.com, March 25, 2011.

The issues for higher education today are quite daunting for all leaders, male and female, and they demand the best talent possible. But among those issues, the presence and consequences of gender bias in academe, subtle or bold, imagined and real, continue to repress women's horizons, denying women faster advancement while robbing institutions of the possibility of more creative visionary leadership to address the call to transformation, which is our ultimate issue today.

Women aspiring to higher leadership in academe must confront the meme that declares the women's revolution to be over. Yes, it's delightful to point to Drew Faust, to uphold Amy Gutman, to celebrate Mary Sue Coleman and the other distinguished women presidents in the Ivy League and other notable universities.

But women remain a distinct minority among presidents --- about 26% according to the last ACE study of the subject --- and perhaps even more troubling, women are topping out in deans' and provosts' positions, eschewing the top spot for a healthier, more balanced life. Presidencies are increasingly viewed as impossible jobs --- I would challenge that, of course, but I understand the aversion. At the same time, the presidency is on the verge of a massive generational change ---- hundreds of presidencies will open up in the next decade. Will there be a larger pool of eager, ambitious, visionary women leaders to step up to these challenging positions?

And will the people who hire presidents be ready, willing and able to consider the bold, provocative women candidates? Women are only about 28% of university boards. Men still dominate. At a time when colleges and universities face daunting financial problems, great strategic challenges and nearly impossible legal and regulatory demands, will the men who run most boards be eager for women's leadership on campus? Are we educating them right now to be more open to and eager for women's leadership?

Higher education slouching into the middle decades of the 21st Century needs entrepreneurs, even evangelists to reshape the very bones of our institutions of learning. Will there be enough women prepared and willing to accept such daunting, exhilarating and essential leadership imperatives?

Let's consider the challenges we face as an industry. I group them under three headings:

- The Value Equation (price + outcomes = value)
- The Transformation Agenda
- The Imperative of Access

The Value Equation

Is a college degree worth the investment? I don't know about you, but I'm pretty fed up with the avalanche of arrogant, snarky articles listing the starting salaries for various majors, particularly those that rank disciplines as worthy or unworthy based on earning potential. Consider this recent item in Kiplinger.com: [“The Ten Worst College Majors for Your Career”](#) blithely trashing English, Sociology, Anthropology, Fine Arts, Philosophy and Religious Studies.

The media, in cahoots with lawmakers, appears on some days to be winning the war against intellectual growth and fulfillment as a worthy goal of higher learning. In the age of wonks, where everything worthy must have a metric, and the metrics must be capable of strict ranking, the idea of learning for the sheer pleasure of intellectual attainment is considered to be almost a criminal act. If we can't monetize the results, should we invest tax dollars, private gifts, even time in it?

When did Shakespeare become a scam?

We are in this mess largely because of the tuition price spiral --- the more our prices rise, the greater the demand for a clear relationship between financial investment and real financial return. But not every institution has skyrocketing tuition, and not all large rates of increase are about large dollar increases. The double-digit increases of headline lore are almost all in the public sector where rollbacks in state funding have driven tuition prices up to cover the gap, and even so, the actual dollar amounts are not all that shocking. But more to the point, outside of the glamorous flagships and prestigious privates, hundreds of other institutions are managing tuition prices to reduce consumer cost while improving value. We're making the value equation work quite favorably for our students through deep discounts and significantly more services.

Even so, higher education is losing the public relations war on the value equation.

We lack true evangelists for the worth of our enterprise. We need compelling advocates who can go well beyond wonkish talking points doing battle with other wonky slide decks to a bolder, more affirming sense of conviction that the transformative power of high intellectual attainment -- and not just acquiring mere job skills for today's occupations --- is the real purpose of a higher education.

And let's not lose sight of the fact that the increasingly loud questioning of the value of higher education comes at a time when women are the clear majority of students. We need the voices of women leaders declaiming women's absolute right to engage in transformative learning, to cultivate amazing creative genius, to indulge our imagination in order to enlarge our intellectual capacity so that we can be the agents of social improvement for generations to come even as we remain the primary bearers of culture and intellectual tradition to children. At a time when women are at the pinnacle of enrollment in higher education, why would we indulge the dumbing-down of our very purpose in higher learning to satisfy what is, in reality, a rather insidious anti-intellectual agenda at the heart of the value equation. If we can prove that higher learning is too expensive, or, more precisely, too inefficient in wonk terms, it's a rather short step to a conclusion that fewer people should indulge --- and from there to conclude, "last in, first out." You know who that will be....

The Transformation Agenda

Our second big challenge is the transformation agenda: how can we undertake the great work of institution-building anew, the innovation and transformation that are essential to ensure the vitality of our learning enterprise?

The transformation agenda is a huge opportunity for women's leadership and entrepreneurship. Consider the role that women played in building great institutions in the last century --- at least in the sector I represent, Catholic higher education, women leaders in the late 19th and early-to-mid 20th Century built extraordinary institutions. These were religious women, nuns, who, at one point were just about the only women allowed to be college presidents in this country. They were pioneers and change agents leading the way in the great revolution in women's higher education.

Higher education today could use that same kind of pioneering spirit that great women leaders brought to the first century of building institutions for women's education, but with an even more urgent sense of creating something truly new, not just derivative from the old male models. Our challenge is to create new forms of curricula and pedagogy, new delivery systems that can accommodate new populations of students --- who, by the way, will continue to be a majority of women of all ages, women with families who are working while earning degrees, women who need to access learning in 24/7 mobile environments, students who need knowledge packaged in new and more accessible ways, active learners who will conduct research and formulate their findings and deliver their work products digitally in text and audio and video and simulation and other modalities we might not even imagine today.

These are students for whom the idea of "success" cannot be measured by the outmoded concept of seat time in one place over a four to six year period --- the IPEDS graduation rate having been invented to track male Division I football players, why, for heavens sakes, do we persist in allowing it to track the majority of students who are non-traditional by so many measures, including so many women with family and work responsibilities who progress through college in vastly different patterns than your basic jocks?

We need leaders who are brash enough to challenge conventions about academic workplace roles and relationships, visionary enough to describe the future community of scholars as a culture perhaps liberated from the conventions of seven year probationary periods, of publish-or-perish rubrics, of brain-freezing committees and tyrannical departmental structures and lock-step faculty seniority systems that enervate the creative spirits of the young in pursuit of the entirely wrong kinds of rewards.

The late Yale President Bart Giamatti once wrote that academic leadership, "*...is the assertion of a vision, not simply the exercise of a style: the moral courage to assert a vision of the institution in the future and the intellectual energy to persuade the community or the culture of the wisdom and validity of the vision. It is to make the vision practicable, and compelling.*"³

Such ability to persuade the community of the wisdom of vision is essential for real institutional transformation, and women leaders should be particularly adept at such persuasion, which is an essential skill in the academic community and a hallmark of the model of transformative leadership that is often associated with the best women leaders.

The problem with transformative leadership, of course, is that some people who prefer the old command-and-control military model think that leaders who take the time to cajole and persuade

³ A. Bartlett Giamatti, *A Free and Ordered Space: The Real World of the University* (New York: Norton, 1990)

are weak and unable to move the agenda. Because some women see this as a threat to their advancement into top leadership positions, they either opt out or go into overdrive to prove their macho. Consider, again, the UVA situation. The *New York Times Magazine* cover story offers this glimpse:

“Sullivan’s opponents on the board....saw themselves in a courageous light. “The easiest thing for us to do as a board would have been to punt,” Kington told me. “It’s a larger issue that we’re dealing with as a society: Do you advance into the field and meet challenges, or wait for them to find you?” They looked at Sullivan, with her talk of “buy-in” and “stakeholders,” and saw a bureaucrat captive to an entrenched faculty.”⁴

They saw a woman who they decided was insufficiently commanding, which, in their mind, was essential to the change agenda.

What they missed, of course, is Giamatti’s idea of persuasion. Change might be imposed, but real leadership knows that enduring transformation is only possible by persuading the community of the wisdom of the vision, and getting the community to embrace the change as if it were their own idea.

The Access Imperative

Access to higher education was surely one of the great drivers of improved opportunities for women in the last century. From the early successes of the graduates of women’s colleges to the triumph of Title IX to the emergence of women as the majority population in universities, the march of progress for women in higher education has been quite remarkable.

And yet, we know that this great social movement has not been equally available to all women. Ironically, in the last five years, even as we’ve begun to see more African American and Latina students --- women of color in increasingly large numbers --- coming into higher education, we’ve heard the mounting drumbeat about reduced access, questions about the worth of a college degree, and even the efforts of a few very wealthy people to discourage students to from attending college at all.

We need women leaders in higher education, today and in the future, to lift as we climb, not only opening more opportunities for women in faculty and administrative positions, but perhaps even more urgently, to ensure that the access imperative for higher education is fulfilled with increasing opportunities for new generations of women students, to guard against the diminution of those opportunities because of a loss of public will, a reduction in the federal investment in higher education, a retrenchment by institutions on the open doors that made the great first waves of women’s academic success possible.

One of the reasons why I’m so proud of Trinity today is because we were able to take this great, historic women’s college and remake it in ways that are completely faithful to the founding vision of the religious women who sacrificed so much to establish and support Trinity for her first century. When we were faced with the intransigent imperative to change or die in the late

⁴ Rice, *ibid.*, p. 62.

1980s, we took a look around us and --- with the clarion call of the nuns ringing in our ears --- we realized that although our historic population of predominantly white, Catholic women now had other collegiate opportunities, millions of women were at our doorstep whose opportunities were far narrower, if they existed at all.

From a low point of about 280 traditional-aged students in 1989, Trinity today enrolls more than 1,000 young women in our women's college, and more than 2,700 students in total in our university --- we include a few men in that total, since our professional schools are coeducational, and we've been able to prove the point that a women's college can be very inclusive, a departure from the exclusive, isolated model of the past.

Most important, our students are more than 90% Black and Hispanic, many from immigrant backgrounds, mostly very low income with 70% eligible for Pell Grants.

We're not alone. Many smaller, private institutions --- especially those with religious heritage -- - have become gateways for transformation for previously marginalized populations, and women are often in the lead in making those changes happen.

Women sometimes find a dilemma in this phenomenon. I think the suspicion is true that women, like people of color, are often "allowed" to be in charge when things are a mess --- in less overtly important institutions, or those with substantial financial challenges, quite often those without football teams! Sometimes, women may not necessarily want to take on those challenges, perhaps not wanting to take 'second best' or not wanting to absorb the considerable risk of failure.

Let's not be so shy, my sisters. The courage to lead is not just about our own personal advancement, but in fact, the real power of transformation that we can help to make possible in the lives of other women. To make a real difference not only now, but even more so in the future of higher education, women cannot indulge in too much self-absorption about the more ephemeral issues of status and prestige. The women students who need your leadership the most will, quite likely, be moving by the thousands into institutions that may not be on the top of the heap by traditional rankings or indicia of prestige or bowl game invitations or final four berths, but these are the very institutions doing the most powerful, most interesting, most transformative and fulfilling work in higher education in America.

May we, the leaders of higher education today, empower the new generations of women leaders who will be evangelists and entrepreneurs leading such institutions for decades to come.