

# Pedraja: Higher education must lead in gender equity

Luis G. Pedraja

Education has played a key role in the commemoration of women's history. It was the Education Task Force of the Sonoma County (California) Commission on the Status of Women that recognized the first Women's History Week celebration, back in the late seventies.

This was the beginning of an over decade-long process to eventually dedicate March as Women's History Month. A process that was driven by women who knew the importance of bringing to light the incredible contributions women have made in our history and to help empower the next generation of young women.

Today equity is the buzzword in our society; however, there is still much we need to do before we can say there is equitability between men and women, particularly in higher education. For example, did you know that women in the United States do not have the same constitutional rights that men have? As of today, states have failed to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment passed on March 22, 1972, which will extend the same constitutional rights of men to women.

Many brave women created a pathway for other women in higher education. These women advocated for the same educational opportunities as men and fought for their right to have an equitable education. They were pioneers in a time when women were banned from higher education, yet for most people their names remain elusive.

Take for example Judith Sargent Murray, born in the mid-1700s, who advocated for women's education, noting that "...women were stifled not by physical limitations but by lack of access to education."

Yet even when women were slowly making inroads into academia, they still were subjected to injustices based on their gender. In 1833, Oberlin College was renowned for its co-ed student population when it opened its doors; however, the female students were only allowed to take a preparatory course program while the male students took a traditional college degree program. Furthermore, on Mondays, female students were exempt from classes as they were expected to do male students' laundry.

Then there is Mary McLeod Bethune, born in the post-Civil War South, the daughter of enslaved people and one of 17 children, who went to college in the late 1800s and eventually became the first Black woman to serve as a college president in the early 1930s. She was a powerful women's rights and civil rights activist, who became one of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's valued advisers and the highest-ranking African American woman in government at that time.

Today, over 100 years later, gender equality is still an issue. Who can forget Malala Yousafzai, a young Pakistani woman who was shot in 2012 when she opposed the Taliban's restrictions on women gaining an education? Or Columbia University's first female president, Nemat "Minouche" Shafik, who took that institution's top leadership position after it had been in existence for 268 years.

According to a Pew Research Analysis, in 2021 U.S. women were outpacing men in obtaining bachelor's degrees (women 25 to 34 graduated with degrees 10% more than their male contemporaries obtained). Yet women are still in the minority in senior leadership roles in higher education.

A 2022 study done by the Eos Foundation, "The Women's Power Gap at Elite Universities – Scaling the Ivory Tower," found that of 130 major public and private universities, only 22% held the position of president or equivalent and that number shrank to 5% for women of color. These universities' governing boards fared equally poorly with only 26% female board chairs.

In Massachusetts, gender equity is slowly seeing positive changes, but we still have a long way to go. Women board chairs increased from 27% in 2018 to 37% in 2022, but there is still not one woman of color. In 2021, Massachusetts community colleges were leading the way in gender equity for leadership roles with 40% female presidents and 33% women of color.

Quinsigamond Community College has had two female presidents in its history and currently has two diverse women vice presidents. However, statewide you will not find a Hispanic/Latina or Indigenous woman president in our colleges or universities.

We can and we must do better. These glass ceilings should have long ago been shattered and yet too often women are still overlooked for top-tier roles in higher education. Higher education institutions must look unflinchingly at the unconscious bias that still exists for women and offer mechanisms and supports to help facilitate change. Society looks to higher education as role models, and we must do everything in our power to live up to that expectation.

I hope that next year gender disparities continue to diminish globally and nationally, and that these types of gender firsts will no longer be remarkable, they will become commonplace.

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