IN THESE UNCERTAIN ECONOMIC TIMES, leadership is among the most frequently used (and misused) terms in public discourse. And the vast literature on this topic certainly encompasses considerable discussion of the policies and practices that can equalize leadership opportunities for women and people of color. In reviewing the status of women in leadership positions in higher education, however, it is apparent that despite this work, women continue to be a largely untapped resource, at least in the upper echelons of administration and policymaking. For women who seek appointments as presidents, chancellors, or trustees on college and university governing boards, the glass is less than half full.

Recent critiques of the quality, cost, and structure of the academic enterprise have focused attention on the need for greater accountability by governing boards and presidents to higher education’s stakeholders, including students and their families, taxpayers, and employers. Increasing consideration is being given to the roles and responsibilities of governing boards in light of public mandates for more accountability and attention to the quality and cost of a college education. Yet only limited attention focuses on the demographic composition of boards—the gender, race, ethnicity, and social class of people selected as trustees—and the role more-diverse trustees could play in responding to mandates for increased board accountability.

In 2006, I conducted interviews with women trustees of public and private colleges and universities, eliciting insights from them about their participation on governing boards. (For a fuller discussion, see my essay “Women on Governing Boards: Why Gender Matters” in the recent book I edited, Unfinished Agendas: New and Continuing Gender Challenges in Higher Education, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008.) Although they differed in experience and outlooks, these women were unanimous in observing that gender matters on boards, as it does in almost every aspect of our lives—gender influences how we interact with others, how we set our priorities, and what we experience in the private and public spheres of our existence. Since diversity is typically part of institutions’ mission statements, I hope to initiate a dialogue among trustees on the underrepresentation of women on higher-education governing boards and what might be done to increase their numbers.

**The Status of Women Leaders**
The American Council on Education (ACE) reports that,
of 2,148 presidents responding to a 2007 survey, women accounted for less than one-fourth of all presidents (23 percent), with minority women making up only 4 percent of the total. More than twice as many women serve as presidents of community colleges (29 percent) as head doctorate-granting universities (14 percent). Women trustees also lag far behind men in their presence on governing boards. AGB’s 2004 survey of its members showed that male trustees outnumber female trustees by more than 2 to 1 in both the private and public sectors. And the proportion of women trustees is fairly similar in both sectors: 29 percent of the trustees on public boards are women, and 28 percent of the trustees on private boards are women.

The survey data also indicate a slowdown in the gains made by women on boards of trustees. In the 20 years from 1977 to 1997, women’s representation nearly doubled from 15 percent to 26 percent at independent colleges (see page 23) and from 18 percent to 29 percent at public institutions (above). However, between 1997 and 2004, the percentage of women trustees increased by only 2 percent on private boards and actually decreased by 1 percent on public boards. Data for private-sector trustees are also skewed by the fact that, on average, women account for nearly two-thirds (63 percent) of the trustees on the boards at women’s colleges. Excluding this group, women hold 27 percent of the seats on private-college boards (compared with the 29 percent on public boards).

The picture for minorities’ representation on boards is also of concern. In 2004, minority trustees accounted for 21.3 percent of all trustees on public boards, compared to 11.9 percent on private boards. African-Americans had the highest representation among minority trustees on all boards (13.6 percent public, 7.6 percent independent) compared to Latinos (3.9 percent public, 2.1 percent independent), Asian/Pacific Islanders (1.4 percent public, 1.3 percent independent), and Native Americans (1.8 percent public, .5 percent independent). This was only a 1.5-percent increase of minority trustees on private boards and 3.9-percent increase on public ones since 1997. Women of color make up only a small number of minority trustees.

Men also chair the vast majority of boards: 81 percent of the private boards and 72.7 percent of the public boards. Status hierarchies are evident in these key leadership positions: Women are more likely to chair community-college boards (30.3 percent) than comprehensive universities (25 percent) or multicampus systems (13.2 percent). As for racial and ethnic composition, more than four-fifths of both public and private board chairs are Caucasian.

Of course, the situation for women on corporate boards of directors is even more problematic. Catalyst, an organization that supports women’s representation in the corporate sector, reports that in 2005, women made up 14.7 percent of the boards of directors of Fortune 500 companies, an increase of only 1 percent over two years and 5 percent over a decade. For women of color, the organization calls the figures “abysmal,” with only 3.4 percent of the corporate directors being women of color. At this rate, it estimates that “it could take 70 years for [the total number of] women to reach parity with men on corporate boards.” A total of 53 boards (one in nine) have no women directors.

Further, says Catalyst, women on boards are “significantly underrepresented as chairs of the most powerful board committees, including audit, compensation, and governance, which may exclude them from key leadership, agenda-setting, and decision-making.”

The importance of this data emerge in an analysis by Brian Pusser, Sheila Slaughter, and Scott Thomas of the interactions between corporate and university boards. They found that trustees and corporate directors hold multiple board memberships, reinforcing social and professional connections that may be tapped into by board members in choosing their successors. Although gender and race/ethnicity are not included in this analysis, it can be assumed that women are less likely to be part of such organizational networks.

**Gender and Leadership**

These data and analyses have led me to several conclusions. **Teamwork and collaboration are the dominant characteristics of effective leadership on governing boards.** Recent research on gender and leadership offers empirical evidence that governance structures can and are being reframed in terms of power-sharing, teamwork, and collaboration, rather than being authority-driven. In discussing the “new realities associated with women’s rise into elite leadership roles” in The Leadership Quarterly (2003), Alice Eagly and Linda Carli argue persuasively that, as the numbers of women in senior positions in the organizational power structure increase, leadership roles are also changing to encompass mentoring, empowerment of subordinates, and interpersonal communication skills. The result, they say, is that these complex organizations have become more equitable, less hierarchical, and more driven by outcomes than by “old-boy” networks.

The women board chairs with whom I spoke typically defined their leadership style as collaborative, saying that they were team players, consensus builders, and sounding boards for the president. They said they used their positions to develop a shared vision of the institution’s mission and goals. Those who served on public boards used more political descriptions, saying they were negotiators, problem solvers, activists, and political realists. In acknowledging that power and influence are unevenly distributed on boards and that much of the decision-making relies on the chair, the president, and the president’s senior staff, the female board chairs agreed on the importance of trust in their dealings with their fellow trustees, as well as with the president of their institutions.

**Leaders require skills enabling them to respond to the demands and challenges of institutional and external forces affecting their organizations.** The increasing intervention of federal regulators in the fiscal and academic policies of higher-education institutions has raised the stakes not only for academic leaders, but also for lay governing boards. The U.S. Department of...
Education’s Commission on the Future of Higher Education, commonly known as the Spellings Commission, heightened public attention to calls for greater accountability concerning the quality of the academic enterprise. Related challenges arise from new IRS scrutiny of not only the financial but also the operating activities of colleges and universities, including endowment spending, executive compensation, and unrelated business income. For women who have not been in the forefront of these trends, these demands represent new borderlines to be navigated.

Women who serve on both corporate and higher-education boards remark on the need for greater transparency and accountability in board governance, agreeing that federal regulations and budget problems have increased pressure on all boards to make financial and legal expertise higher priorities among their members. However, they also suggest that greater gender diversity may have the beneficial effect of increasing the number of board members interested in serving on academic-affairs committees and working on issues related to the core educational mission of the institution. Women trustees also comment on the support that women offer to presidents on quality-of-life issues such as student and faculty housing, cultural activities, and campus facilities, and their ability to serve as sounding boards for student leaders and the faculty.

Leadership development is an ongoing process and one that requires systematic planning and evaluation of outcomes. Surveys and interviews with new board members indicate that on many boards, orientation to board service is minimal or nonexistent, retreats are rarely held, and only nominal attention is given to leadership training. Among the issues raised by these circumstances are the lack of awareness among board members that gender inequalities exist, that there is a paucity of mentors to provide access to social and professional networks, and that a gap continues to exist between policies and practices in workplace structures.

Women who conduct leadership-development programs emphasize the importance of rethinking how the selection process works for obtaining trustee nominations. They identify professional organizations, political leaders, alumni/ae recommendations, and external searches for individuals with particular kinds of expertise as sources for gaining more nominations of women. Other experts call for more attention to structural barriers that exclude categories of women who have been traditionally underrepresented among trustees. Although more than one of the women I interviewed felt that “women have to prove themselves” to have a voice on boards, women who have shown themselves to be successful fund-raisers for their colleges and in their service on non-profit or university foundation boards are very much in evidence.

Gender and Philanthropy
Board selection committees’ emphasis on recruiting trustees with business management, accounting, and financial expertise may subordinate women’s status on not-for-profit, as well as college and university, boards of trustees, diminishing their role as potential players in philanthropic giving. Although women make up a sizable share of members of not-for-profit boards, Nonprofit Governance Index 2007, a survey conducted by BoardSource, states that women serve most often on the boards of “smaller arts and cultural, health, human services, environmental, and educational organizations,” and that “board size and budget size” influence their selection, which tends to drop “from a high of 51 percent with budgets of less than $500,000 to a low of 33 percent for those with budgets greater than $25 million.”

An alternative viewpoint on women’s growing role in philanthropy is offered by the Business and Professional Women’s Foundation. In an online report, 101 Facts on the Status of Workingwomen, it states that the number of foundations established by women has increased from five to 90 in the past two decades, that the number of nonprofits heavily supported by women donors who back programs for women and girls has grown to more than 100, and that women account for 68 percent of all foundation program-officer positions and 52 percent of all foundation CEO positions.

Further, in the past decade, women’s philanthropy has increased by more than $15 billion annually. The New York Times also has reported that women chief investment officers now manage 20 percent of the 50 largest university endowments and foundations, overseeing an estimated $60.6 billion. These data provide concrete evidence that women are an untapped resource in educational philanthropy, with the experience and know-how to become major donors and effective trustees on college and university boards.

In her history of educational philanthropy, Andrea Walton reveals women’s tenacity, skills, and sense of mission in capitalizing on their social and intellectual networks to advance higher education, with their efforts ranging from the founding of new colleges and the reform of existing ones to the creation and dissemination of knowledge in professional and academic disciplines. As a female trustee of a private-college board told me: “Serving on this board has engaged me in philanthropy in a way I’ve never experienced. I’ve clearly given more than I ever thought I would. I’ve gained a wonderful set of friends. There’s nothing better than a set of friends committed to a common cause, and that’s really what a board is at its best.”

The Way Forward
Colleges and universities are becoming feminized—women are the majority of undergraduate and graduate students. Data from the National Center for Education Statistics also show that women are now 51 percent of all executive, administrative, and managerial employees in degree-granting institutions. This represents a 55-percent increase since 1995 in the proportion of women in this category, compared to a 16-percent increase for their male counterparts. It doesn’t take actuarial tables to realize that women at many colleges will be the majority of institutions’ alumni base in ensuing decades. Is it not appropriate that the leadership of higher-education institutions in the future come from this vast pool of potential leaders?
Gender and racial equality should extend beyond admissions, recruitment, and promotion criteria to affirmative action in the selection of lay governing boards. This is needed not for cosmetic purposes but rather to expand the expertise and perspectives available for college boards in carrying out their fiduciary, legal, and policy-making responsibilities, as well as to help convey a more accurate picture of an institution’s culture, mission, and viability in the academic marketplace.

Twenty-first century institutions require new ways of constructing leadership in theory and in practice. And since governing boards are coalitions of leaders with diverse backgrounds, interests, and expertise, the challenge becomes one of reconciling different leadership styles and skills in conducting board business. As Rita Bornstein, president emerita of Rollins College, states in a recent essay on presidential leadership, it is important to overcome gendered stereotypes, to value the diversity of leadership qualities, and to work collaboratively in attracting the best and the brightest candidates. She calls for the elevation of relational leadership skills—what the Association of Governing Boards has termed “integral leadership”—in which presidents involve their board members and faculties “in all aspects of strategic visioning, planning, and resource development.” Former Duke University president Nannerl Keohane has criticized entrenched organizational structures that constrain presidential authority, calling for collaborative and ethical leadership to address complex problems.

Women leaders offer different ways of looking at the academy and interpreting the external social, political, and economic environment. Global expansion, new technological advances, and spiraling tuition costs constitute larger challenges for part-time lay boards of trustees, many of whom find it difficult to respond to multiple demands on their time, expertise, and pocketbooks. If, as women scholars argue, gender neutrality is a form of gender bias, greater attention should be given to frameworks that accommodate gender, as well as racial and ethnic diversity, to better promote governance for the public good. A dialogue on the composition and leadership of governing boards is long overdue; trustees and those who appoint them need to revisit existing policies to assure greater gender and ethnic diversity on institutional and system-wide boards.

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**T’SHIP LINKS:** “Roadblocks on the Road to Diversity.” May/June 2002, 13–18.