

The American College President: 2023 Edition EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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AMERICAN COLLEGE PRESIDENT STUDY

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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One Dupont Circle NW
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Suggested citation: Melidona, Danielle, Benjamin G. Cecil, Alexander Cassell, and Hollie M. Chessman. 2023. *The American College President: 2023 Edition—Executive Summary*. Washington, DC: American Council on Education.

The American College President: 2023 Edition—Executive Summary

At a time of intensifying pressures in the midst of COVID-19, racial injustice, and other issues, American college presidents have led through it all. The data from the American College President Study (ACPS) present profiles of today's leaders. These profiles have been slowly changing, which provides a continued opportunity for higher education and its stakeholders to pursue parity and equity in the presidency. In addition to ACPS's traditional focus on presidential demographics, new data were collected this year on the ages when presidents first aspired, applied, and were appointed to their presidency. ACPS also newly highlights the myriad responsibilities that presidents balance in addition to their day-to-day jobs, including taking care of children, aging parents, and loved ones. For the first time, presidents were also asked about their own community and whether they have a support network that understands what it is like to be a president.

The American Council on Education conducts ACPS approximately every five years to better understand the leaders at the helm of higher education institutions. Over 1,000 presidents responded to the 2022 American College President Survey.

The following are key areas of opportunity for achieving parity and equity in the presidency:

The population of current presidents was still not representative of the students served.

As seen in earlier iterations of ACPS, the college presidency remains older, White, and male. The average age of presidents was 60, compared with 59.9 in 2006, and men still outnumbered women two-to-one in the presidency. In the survey, presidents of color accounted for a little over one out of four presidents, and women of color accounted for a little more than one out of every 10 presidents.¹

Table 1. College Presidents, by Age, Gender Identity, and Race and Ethnicity and Gender Distribution: Selected Years, 2006–2022

	2022	2016	2011	2006
Average Age (in Years)				
All respondents	60.0	61.7	60.7	59.9
Gender Identity (%)				
Man	66.9%	69.8%	73.6	77.0%
Woman	32.8%	30.1%	26.4%	23.0%
Nonbinary	0.0%	--	--	--
Other	0.0%	0.0%	--	--
Race and Ethnicity and Gender Distribution (%)^a				
White men	45.6%	--	--	--
White women	26.6%	--	--	--
Men of color	15.1%	--	--	--
Women of color	12.5%	--	--	--

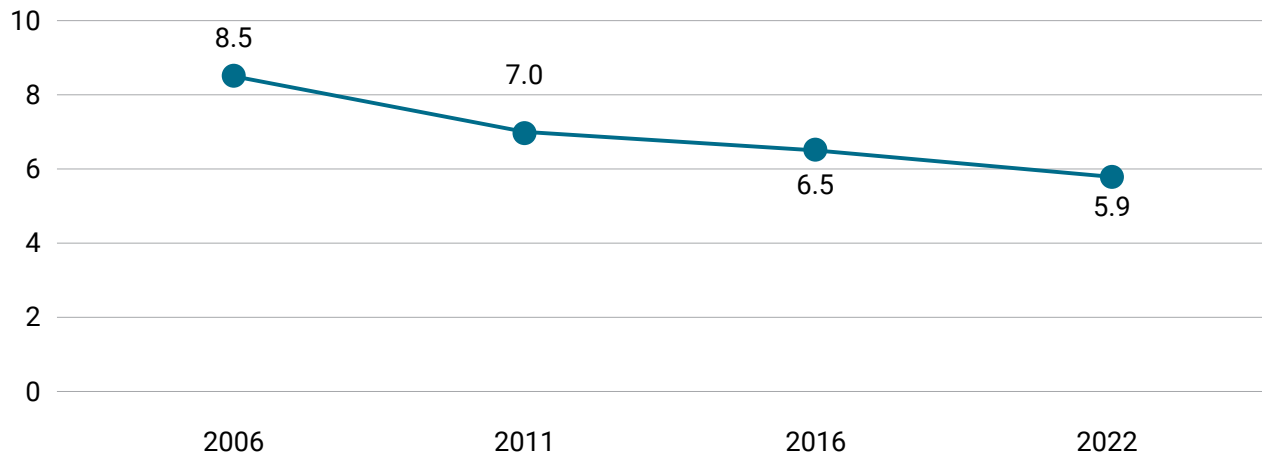
^aData collected in 2006, 2011, and 2016 cannot be directly compared with data from 2022.

¹ In general, our survey was oversampled in responses from women, and women of color in particular, given strategic efforts to engage these communities. More information related to controlling for oversampling is provided in chapter one of the full report.

Presidents were newer to their current position than in previous surveys, especially among women and presidents of color.

In 2022, presidents had been in their position an average of 5.9 years, 2.6 years less than in 2006. On average, men had been in their current position about one year more than presidents of color or women presidents.

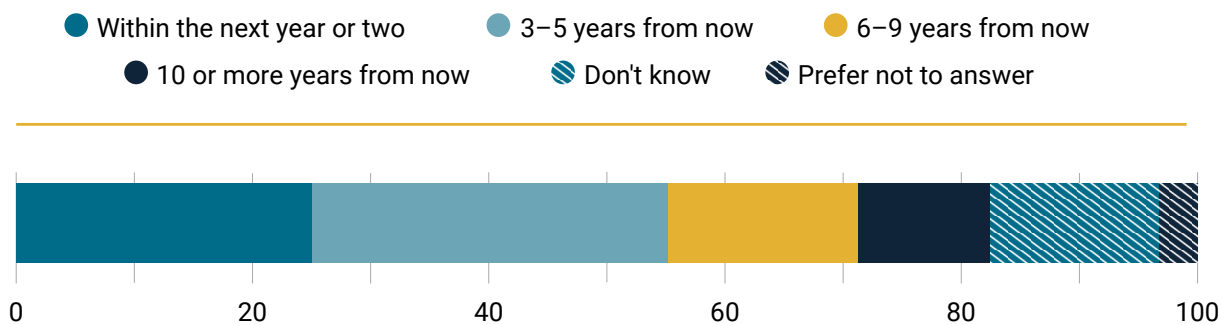
Figure 1. Average Time in Current Presidential Position, in Years: Selected Years, 2006–2022



Over half (55 percent) of presidents planned to step down from their current positions within the next five years.

Of the presidents of color who planned to step down within the next five years, nearly one in five planned to retire without seeking another position. This anticipated change in leadership, particularly among already underrepresented groups, will not only affect the diversity of the presidency, but it will also impact several hundred institutions and the many students, faculty, and staff who attend and work at them. However, these future vacancies also present an opportunity for more women and people of color to rise to the college presidency.

Figure 2. Anticipated Time Frame of Stepping Down from Current Position, Weighted: 2022



Note: Totals may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding.

Several other findings lend important insights into the American college presidency:

There were notable differences by gender in when presidents reported that they first aspired, applied, and were appointed to the presidency.

Women generally indicated that their first aspiration, application, and appointment to the presidency occurred later in life than those same milestones for men. On average, women were generally appointed within one and a half years of their first application, while men were appointed about two years later.

Table 2. Average Age of First Presidential Aspiration, Application, and Appointment, by Gender and Race and Ethnicity: 2022

Average Age (in Years)	Aspiration	Application	Appointment	Aspiration to Appointment Time Difference
Total	44.9	49.8	51.7	(+) 6.8
Men	43.6	49.0	51.0	(+) 7.4
Women	46.9	51.3	52.8	(+) 5.9
Men of color	41.5	48.4	50.4	(+) 8.9
Women of color	45.7	50.6	51.6	(+) 5.9

Note: These are averages within the sample and not weighted by Carnegie Classification.

Presidents of color generally, and women of color in particular, reported some different experiences with transparency and disclosure during the presidential search process.

Women were more likely than men to feel they did not receive a realistic assessment of the challenges facing the institution during their search process. Presidents of color were less likely than White presidents to feel that the search process provided a clear understanding of the institution or system's expectations. These data present an important opportunity for qualitative inquiry to understand why these gaps exist and how to close these gaps.

Table 3. Perception of Disclosures Within the Search Process, by Race and Ethnicity: 2022

The search process provided:	Presidents of Color	White Presidents
Realistic assessment of the current challenges facing the institution/system?	60.4%	70.8%
A full and accurate disclosure of institution/system's financial condition?	63.1%	69.2%
A clear understanding of the board's expectations?	66.4%	76.0%
A clear understanding of the institution/system expectations?	68.0%	78.8%

Note: Percentages represent those who answered "yes" to each question.

Table 4. Perception of Disclosures Within the Search Process, by Gender and Race and Ethnicity: 2022

	A realistic assessment of the current challenges facing the institution/system?	A full and accurate disclosure of the institution/system's financial condition?	A clear understanding of the board's expectations?	A clear understanding of the institution/system's expectations?
Women	63.3%	67.3%	68.7%	73.3%
Men	70.3%	67.3%	76.4%	77.5%
Women of color	53.2%	63.0%	61.5%	65.1%
Black or African American women	52.9%	58.8%	64.7%	64.7%
Hispanic or Latina women	66.7%	76.0%	65.4%	73.1%
White women	68.1%	69.2%	71.5%	76.9%

Notes: Percentages represent those who answered "yes" to each question. | Data are unweighted.

Presidents most commonly identified reaching the presidency via a faculty or academic career pathway.

More than half of presidents arrived to the presidency through the traditional faculty or academic pathway, and White women and women of color were more likely than White men and men of color to have arrived via this pathway to the presidency. However, the data also showed an increase in presidents who approached the presidency through alternatives outside the traditional pathway. There may be underutilized potential to diversify the presidency with career campus administrators and individuals from the public, business, and nonprofit sectors.

Figure 3. Career Paths of Presidents, by Carnegie Classification, Weighted: 2022

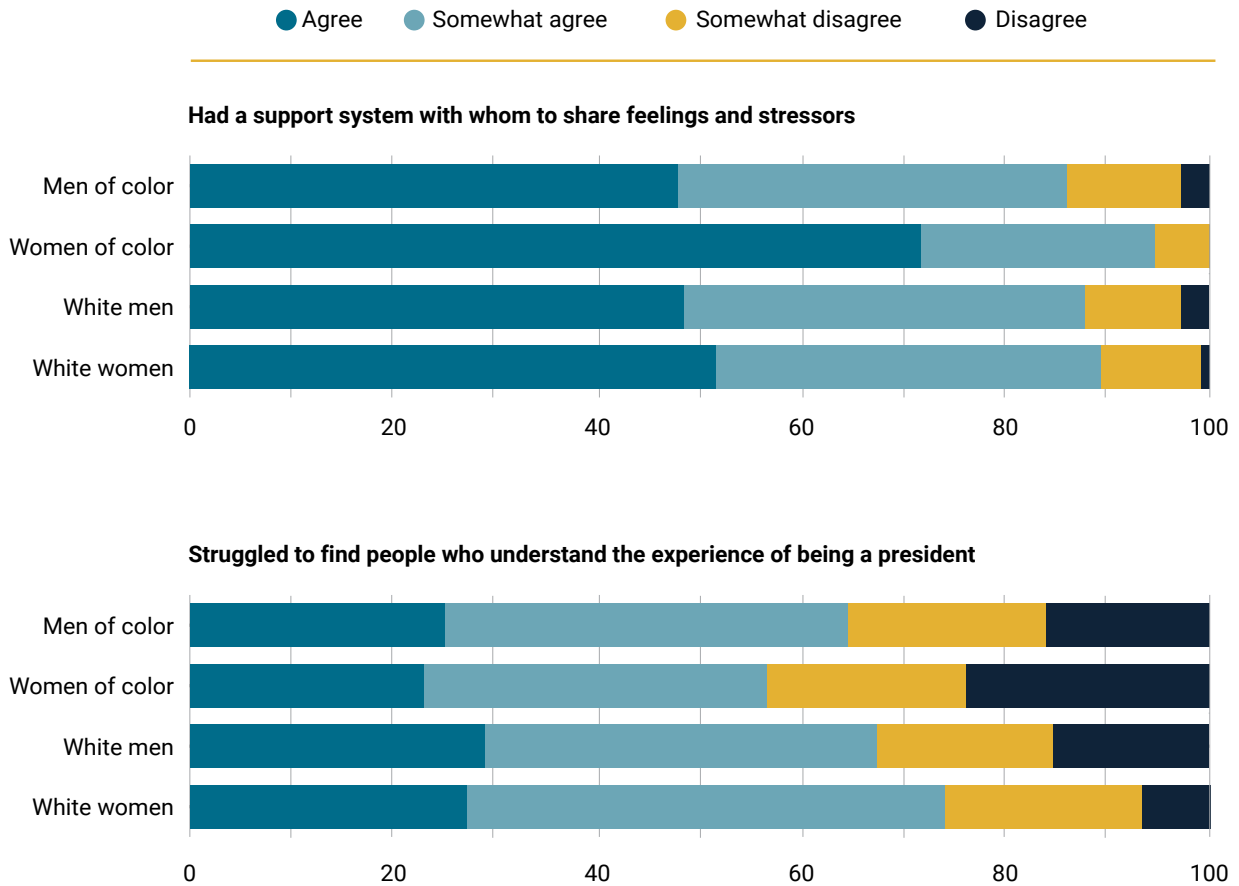


Note: Totals may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding.

Presidents indicated they have support networks, but more could be done.

While the majority of presidents agreed that they have a support system with which they share their feelings, some presidents indicated that they struggle to find people who understand the experience of being a president. These data highlight an opportunity for associations, professional organizations, and current and former presidents to provide support networks for presidents who may struggle to find shared understanding of their experiences.

Figure 4. Support Systems for Presidents of Color Compared with White Presidents: 2022



Notes: Data are unweighted. | Totals may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding.

These points are just a few salient findings that should call those within and around higher education to action. The complex issues facing colleges and universities today need diverse, informed, and well-supported leaders to address the changes and developments of tomorrow. Current leaders, administrators, search consultants and committees, boards, and other stakeholders all have a role in ensuring capable presidential leadership throughout higher education—both now and in the future.



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