

Chapter 1

Is It Worth It?

Critical Questions for Women Considering the Role of University President

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ABSTRACT

In the 2024 Broadway Musical “Suffs” chronicling the fight for women's suffrage, the lead character asks repeatedly throughout the show “Is It Worth It?” referring to the constant battles, roadblocks, and gaslighting that comes from trying to lead such a cause. This song is referring to a time over 100 years ago, yet it could be the modern-day anthem for women pursuing the university presidency. The landscape of higher education has transformed dramatically. Black Lives Matter, a fiercely divisive political climate, and the Israel/Palestine campus protests have all impacted the role of presidency. For women leaders, the challenges have been played out publicly in the media. This role, once seen as the pinnacle of a career, is now dictated by special interests and can now end quickly with a public shaming and defamation of character. The Presidency was once the goal for many aspiring university leaders but given the changing landscape, one has to wonder “Is it worth it?”

INTRODUCTION

In the 2024 hit Broadway Musical “Suffs” chronicling the fight for women's suffrage, the lead character playing the role of Alice Paul repeatedly asks throughout the show “Is It Worth It?” when referring to the constant battles, roadblocks, gaslighting, and personal exhaustion that comes from trying to lead such a cause.

DOI: 10.4018/979-8-3693-7748-2.ch001

This song is referring to an era over 100 years ago, yet it could be the modern-day anthem for women pursuing the university presidency.

My previous research in 2014 focused on the structural and societal barriers that women may face on the road to the university presidency. In the last ten years, we have seen an increase in women ascending to the top job and there have been major upticks in female leadership across all levels of the Carnegie classifications--from community colleges to the Ivy League. In the 2023, a record number of America's top-ranked institutions were led by a woman or person of color and six of eight of the Ivy League schools were led by a woman (Forbes, 2023).

In those same ten years (2014-2024), the landscape of higher education has transformed dramatically. Black Lives Matter, COVID-19, a fiercely divisive political climate in 2016, 2020, and 2024, and the Israel/Palestine campus protests have all impacted the role of presidency and the skills needed to acquire and maintain this position. For women leaders, the challenges have often been played out publicly in the media and one of many results of that visibility is a decreased length of service in their role as President. For both men and women, the average tenure for university presidents is shrinking, overall. In 2022 it was 5.9 years, down from 6.5 in 2016 and 8.5 years in 2008, (ACE, 2023, Deloitte, 2024). This role, once seen as the pinnacle of a career, is now a role that may be dictated by special interests, social media pressures, and (often at the most elite schools) can end with a very public shaming and defamation of character. The Presidency--once the goal for many aspiring university leaders--is now a very different type of executive role with less protection for job security and is subject to much more public criticism. Given the changing landscape, one has to wonder as suffragist Alice Paul did, "Is it worth it?"

This chapter considers three ways in which this changing landscape impacts women leaders: First, there is the *institutional* view—what is happening on college campuses and how does that impact the role of President? Secondly, there are *societal* implications—what is happening in our country and broadly the world that impacts higher education? Finally, there are the *personal* implications and impacts—how do each of these women experience the role in the context of the changing institutional and societal norms? It is through that last framework of the *personal* that this chapter will primarily focus on while being informed by the institutional and societal view, as well. The reoccurring question "Is it Worth It?" that guides this chapter.

Throughout this chapter, I share excerpts of my conversations from women presidents in 2014 as well as insight from several current and recently retired presidents in 2024. At times, I use a pseudonym for the participants and describe them/their institution broadly. At other times, I will simply share a quote given to me (with permission) from a current female President. Given the heightened scrutiny of women in these roles, I deferred to each individual leader and their comfort level with sharing their words and experiences.

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