New study suggests women presidents influence colleges and universities to hire more female faculty members

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New study suggests colleges with female presidents are more likely than other institutions to have a greater share of humanities professors who are women.

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By

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Women leaders make a difference in terms of having more female faculty members, at least in the humanities, according to a new working paper from the Cornell Higher Education Research Institute.

Data “suggest that the gender of an institution’s president is both a large and statistically significant factor increasing the share of women in full-time, tenure-track positions” in the humanities, the paper says. “A single president who remains in office for 10 years could increase the share of full-time tenured and tenure-track faculty that is female by 36 percentage points.”

For their study, the Cornell researchers analyzed data from the American Academy of Arts and Sciences’ National Humanities Departmental Survey, in both 2008 and 2012, which provided faculty count information from 621 humanities departments at 448 institutions. They also consulted the federal Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System and looked through directories of higher education administrators and college and university websites to obtain the names and genders of the president, provost and dean at each institution from 2003-11.

The original plan was to see whether differences in faculty gender were related to administrative changes between the two survey periods, but there was too little change for any longitudinal analysis. So the researchers instead looked at whether having a female administrator in all or a portion of the four or five years preceding each wave of the humanities study correlated with an increased share of female professors.

In both survey years, the researchers found a statistically significant and positive relationship between the share of recent years that an institution had women in key leadership positions and what share of the humanities faculty were

women. The strongest effect was observed with a female president.

In a more advanced analysis of the newer data, the researchers determined there to be a likely causal relationship between having a female president and more full-time, tenure-line faculty members in the humanities -- such that having a female leader for all five previous years (versus having a male leader during that period) was associated with an increase in the share of female professors by about 18 percentage points. That's 3.6 percentage points per year or 36 percentage points over 10 years.

A similar analysis of the older data did not reveal a causal relationship, but the researchers nonetheless concluded that “the evidence suggests the gender of an institution’s president will influence the shares of female tenured and tenure-track faculty in the institution’s humanities department.”

Interestingly, another institute analysis of the relationship between administrators with humanities backgrounds and the share of humanities faculty that is tenure line or full-time versus part-time did not reveal any statistically significant relationship.

Ronald Ehrenberg, the Irving M. Ives Professor of Industrial and Labor Relations and Economics at Cornell and director of the research institute, said in an interview that the paper relates to the institute's earlier research suggesting that a critical mass of about 25 percent of board members being female also may influence the share of the faculty that is female.

The factors impacting faculty hiring decisions, specifically with regard to gender, are important, he said, “because sometimes women bring different perspectives and experiences to issues than men do.” The paper points out that while women now earn the majority of humanities doctorates, they are still relatively underrepresented in the professoriate.

The American Academy posted a write-up by Ehrenberg of both the gender and humanities background findings to its Data Forum. Robert Townsend, director of the academy’s Washington office, said his interest in factors influencing faculty hiring decisions and gender dates to his previous position as deputy director of the American Historical Association.

“There was a lot of discussion about what it would take to improve the share of women in faculty positions, and the role of administrators often came up -- both as impediments and as change agents,” Townsend said via email. The Cornell findings “seem to support those perceptions, even if further study is needed to show how the relationship works in practice.”

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