

2021 Women's Leadership Forum—Highlights

Reimagine. Seize the moment.

The TIAA Institute's fourth annual Women's Leadership Forum was a call to action for women to *reimagine* the future and seize the moment as our nation focuses on inequities spanning multiple dimensions. Participants included more than 200 women leaders in higher education, healthcare, philanthropy and business. This report contains highlights of the day's thought-provoking remarks. You can also [watch several sessions on video](#).



Imagine a future...insights and possibilities

Edie Weiner, President and CEO, The Future Hunters



Dramatic breakthroughs

Scientists have made remarkable progress in recent years, including conscious designing of the human species through genetic engineering, synthetic biology and artificial intelligence. Edie described how dramatic breakthroughs in chemistry, biology, engineering and related disciplines are making this possible—and causing colleges and universities to rethink how they teach STEM subjects. She went on to suggest that institutions offering unique configurations of multidisciplinary study may gain a competitive advantage over those that provide only traditional disciplinary studies.

Edie also advocated for a new field—the neo-humanities—to help us understand how new technologies impact humans. The neo-humanities would consider the brain-computer interface, living with artificial intelligence and technology addiction, as well as the effects of misinformation (unintentional mistakes), disinformation (deliberate fabrication) and malinformation (deliberate manipulation of information with an intent to harm).

Workforce implications

The nature of work is also changing fast—and was doing so well before the pandemic sped up the transition to remote work. Edie noted that for work that

“We all suffer from ‘educated incapacity,’ a state where we know so much about our areas of expertise that we are the last to understand just how different the future of our fields will be compared to what we’ve spent so many years learning.”

–Edie Weiner

doesn't have to be done by people in a specific place at a specific time, what employers actually need to get the work done is access to people's minds. Edie calls this move to a distributed workforce a shift from "mankind" to "mindkind," and the implications of it necessitate a complete overhaul of human resource management practices.

Cultivating leadership excellence

Thasunda Brown Duckett, President and CEO, TIAA
Renu Khator, Chancellor and President, University of Houston System/University of Houston
Waded Cruzado, President, University of Montana



Find success within yourself

What does it take for women to rise to the top of the leadership ranks? Thasunda believes it starts when women shift their mindset when thinking about their own success. "Celebrate your wins, certainly, and understand how you achieved them, but also consider your failures and let them sharpen you," she said. She believes her failures enabled her grit, so in that way they were wins too. She also learned to recognize that she is her only true competition, and to mute thoughts about whether she is worthy enough to reach her dreams.

Waded noted what she called a fraud syndrome that keeps women from recognizing they have all the skills and talent needed to succeed. "We are surrounded by opportunity," she said, "and need to be bold and sometimes a little bit naïve to say yes and seize them."

Advice for board members

Renu suggested that women who serve on boards should pose at least two well-thought-out questions at every board meeting. She also recommends they read financial statements carefully and find at least one item either to comment on or inquire about. The aim is to show that you, as a woman, are as well-versed and interested in quantitative material as in, say, personnel-related matters. Before each meeting, it's also a good idea to call the board chair and CFO to discuss the agenda or a specific item. You'll gain insights—and their attention.

Diversifying the leadership pipeline

The panelists agreed that talent is created equally, but opportunity is not. This led to a discussion on the importance of gathering data that pinpoints at a granular level where full gender and racial representation is lacking across a business or institution. Once you understand where you're falling short, you can examine your structure and processes, see how they align with your desired results, and take corrective action as needed. As you do so, monitor and measure outcomes, not just effort.

"Titles are rented, while character is an ownable asset."

—Thasunda Brown Duckett

Advancing positive change

Michelle Asha Cooper, Acting Assistant Secretary, U.S. Department of Education

Nerissa Morris, Senior Vice President & Chief Human Resources and Diversity Officer, Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center

Subha Barry, CEO, Seramount



Juggling multiple responsibilities

The arc of women's work lives and careers has long been deeply affected by systemic societal and cultural factors that work against women's success. While much legislative progress has been made in recent decades to promote fairness in the workforce, the pandemic has underlined the fragility of those gains. In the past 18 months, women—particularly women of color—have buckled under multiple burdens, from caregiving to teaching to household management, all while trying to hold down jobs.

Subha Barry shared the results of an early 2021 Seramount survey that found 35% of working women who are caregivers (i.e., have children under the age of 18) had considered leaving their jobs on a daily or weekly basis due to the stresses they faced. The survey also revealed the striking effects of supportive leadership: 85% of these women indicated they would be more likely to stay in their jobs if they had a supportive manager.

Promoting mental health

Nerissa described her efforts to address the mental health needs of her workforce, which has been deeply affected by the demands of the pandemic. Her health system has formed an employee resource group focused on destigmatizing mental health issues, particularly for communities of color. They are offering peer-to-peer coaching and consultation services, aiming to have help available in the moment it's needed. Further, she's conducting ongoing employee surveys that include specific questions about burnout and emotional drain, and responses guide where her HR team devotes energy and resources.

Michelle's thoughts on leadership reflected Nerissa's, as she described a feminine style of leadership that's collaborative, compassionate and empathetic. Michelle believes this sort of leadership is being more widely practiced today than in the past, but still not enough. She encouraged women to be authentic leaders, to own their leadership style, and, importantly, to be comfortable and confident about it. "Know that your experiences are valuable and valid," she said.

"A lot has changed over the past year, but getting back to 'normal' probably isn't the right goal, because normal actually didn't work that well for everyone. We need to rethink our college classrooms, and what our campuses should be. We need to reimagine our present and our future."

—Michelle Asha Cooper

Inspiration and wisdom

Ruth J. Simmons, President, Prairie View A&M University



Reflections on leadership excellence

Before taking the helm at Prairie View in 2017, Ruth Simmons served as president of Brown University for 11 years and president of Smith College for six years. When considering what it takes to succeed as a leader, she named four key attributes:

1. Self-awareness. In Ruth's case, equality was her animating force. "Watching my parents live a life without opportunity, seeing them toil without material comfort, and appreciating their dignity and humanity in the face of such abuse, shaped my worldview. Even as I saw them being held back and denigrated on the basis of their race, I knew from the earliest age that such treatment was unjust and immoral, and that I needed to have a role in not allowing the same thing to happen to others."

2. Commitment to values. Ruth sought to ensure that truths concerning diversity, equity and inclusion would remain prominent in her work, wherever her career took her. True to that commitment, early in her presidency at Brown she established a steering committee charged with developing a full account of the university's entanglement in the transatlantic slave trade. The committee's 2006 report, *Slavery and Justice*, helped the university and its students reconcile this painful legacy.

3. Concern for others. At its root, concern for others is an acknowledgment that we all share the human condition. When leaders have this concern, they acquire attributes that reinforce leadership excellence, such as a respect for the diversity of humanity, a vigorous openness to differences of opinion, a willingness to work through disagreements in a respectful way, and a desire to include people at the margins.

4. Doing what's right, despite the personal cost. To Ruth, truth-telling is the key to adhering to what is right and just. She believes that no matter how painful or

disturbing, we cannot make progress if we do not fully examine the problems we face. Stories now being told about racism in our country need to be told, and they need to be heard. Deniers will counter these stories with untruths and misrepresentations, but we must persist in telling the truth.

Ruth J. Simmons Center for Race and Justice

Earlier in 2021, Prairie View opened the [Ruth J. Simmons Center for Race and Justice](#). The Center's mission is to address the persistent inequities caused by racism, and to propose policies and practices to help eliminate those inequities. Ruth is hopeful that through the work of the Center, students will gain a better understanding of who they are and what they need to accomplish to advance racial justice.

“Fighting racism and discrimination and upholding justice must always be among our highest callings.”

—Ruth J. Simmons

Conclusion

The TIAA Institute's hope is that the WLF community—including those who attended the Forum and our readers too—are empowered to create a better future not only for themselves, but one where all women have the opportunity to thrive, reach their full potential, and achieve financial wellness and security along the way.

[Videos](#) of several of the WLF sessions are available on the TIAA Institute's website, and the Forum program—including the agenda and speakers' biographies—is available on the [2021 Women's Leadership Forum home page](#).

About the TIAA Institute

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