

Is This an Impossible Job?

Meeting the daunting challenges of today's college presidency



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THE GANTLET OF CHALLENGES facing college leaders prompts a reasonable question: Has the college presidency become an impossible job?

“I would say yes and no. On the one hand,” says Michael Whelan, president of Wheaton College, in Massachusetts, “it’s not impossible or no one would do it. And yet I think it’s become more complicated, more layered, the necessity of being omnipresent, of responding in a timely way ... Communication is so central.”

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Is a college presidency today harder than ever? “I imagine that depends on your point of comparison,” says Beverly Daniel Tatum, interim president of Mount Holyoke College and a president emerita of Spelman College.

“Mary Lyon, the founder of Mount Holyoke College, was creating an institution for women in 1837 at a time when the very idea of higher education for women was revolutionary,” Tatum says. “The founders of Spelman College were two white women from Massachusetts building an institution for Black women in Atlanta in 1881, less than 20 years after the end of the Civil War. In both cases, resources were scarce, naysayers were many. Difficult does not mean impossible.”

The challenge matrix doesn’t scare confident presidents. It inspires them.