

AALS Study Explores the Experiences and Challenges of Women Attorneys in Higher Education Leadership

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EINPresswire.com/ -- Despite an increase in lawyers serving as leaders in higher education, women attorneys remain underrepresented in senior leadership roles according to a new report released today by the Association of American Law Schools (AALS). Available on the AALS

website, [Women Attorneys in Higher Education Leadership](#) explores the experiences, career pathways, and obstacles faced by women attorneys who serve or have previously served as college and university presidents, provosts, and deans.

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The report is co-authored by Katie Kempner, AALS Associate Director of Research and Data Analytics and [Kate Schaffzin](#), Director of the Institute for Professional Leadership and Douglas A. Blaze Distinguished Professor of Law at the University of Tennessee Winston College of Law.

“This study brings to light the varied experiences of women attorneys who lead our higher education institutions,” said Kempner. “By identifying both the strengths these leaders bring and the obstacles they face, our findings will further enable institutions to adopt concrete policies that help remove barriers and strengthen leadership pathways.”

“My experiences as a dean influenced me to look deeper at the challenges faced by women attorneys even at the highest levels of academic leadership,” said Schaffzin, who led the University of Memphis Cecil C. Humphreys School of Law as dean from 2018 to 2024. “I hope this study helps highlight the courage and strength of women leaders, share their strategies for success, and encourage institutions to better support and develop networks to improve the pathways to leadership.”

The study is based on a national survey of 121 former and current women college presidents, provosts, and law school deans, as well as a focus group of seven law school deans. Among the

key findings in the report:

* Common qualities: Good judgment (69.8 percent), integrity (61.2 percent), hard work (56.9 percent), and emotional intelligence (54.3 percent) were selected by most of the respondents as attributes most helpful to their success as a leader.

* Support networks matter for women leaders: 76.7 percent reported having a mentor or champion; 77.4 percent said at least one colleague or supervisor helped advance their careers.

* The compensation landscape is improving: 61.1 percent of current leaders reported earning more than their male predecessors, though responses in the focus group suggest this reflects intense negotiation rather than transparent parity.

* Increased focus on appearance: 73.7 percent pay more attention now than prior to obtaining a leadership position and 78.9 percent said they pay more attention to appearance than their male peers.

* Gender bias experiences: 74.8 percent of respondents reported that they had experienced gender bias in their current or most recent role.

* Gender-based marginalization and underestimation is widely reported: 71.9 percent of respondents agreed that people were/are surprised to see someone like them succeed in a higher education leadership role.

The report also details several recommendations to improve the representation of women in higher education leadership, including: benchmarking to measure progress over time; institutions supporting mentoring and professional development targeted towards leadership pathways, and; universities developing transparent compensation practices to reduce reliance on negotiation for pay equity.

“Examining the environment for women attorneys in higher education leadership reveals both the obstacles they face and the strengths they bring to our law schools, colleges, and universities,” said Kellye Y. Testy, AALS Executive Director and Chief Executive Officer. “Through



this first study representing a new collaborative model for AALS—partnering with scholars at law schools in key areas—we produce rigorous, evidence-based research that informs practical strategies to expand and support pathways to leadership.”

Findings from the report will be presented in an AALS webinar on November 18, 2025 at 3 pm, Eastern/12 pm, Pacific, and at an AALS Annual Meeting session in New Orleans on January 7, 2026.

About AALS

The Association of American Law Schools (AALS), founded in 1900, is a nonprofit association of 174 member and 19 fee-paid law schools. Its members enroll most of the nation’s law students and produce the majority of the country’s lawyers and judges, as well as many of its lawmakers. The mission of AALS is to improve and advance legal education. AALS carries out its mission by promoting the core values of excellence in teaching and scholarship, academic freedom, and diversity, including diversity of backgrounds and viewpoints, while seeking to foster justice, and to serve our many communities—local, national, and international. In support of its mission, AALS serves as both the institutional membership organization for law schools, and as the learned society for law faculty.

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