

Silbert keeps eye on rising tide of women running higher ed

By [Jon Chesto](#) Globe Staff,
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Few people watch the changing of the guard in the president's office at various universities as closely as **Andrea Silbert** does.

She's not angling for the gig herself. Instead, as president of the **Eos Foundation**, Silbert has become an important advocate for gender parity among top leadership positions.

The foundation's latest Women's Power Gap survey results, released last week, show encouraging trends. The percentage of the nation's 146 elite research universities (known as "R1s") where women hold the title of president, or are about to, rose to 30 percent this spring from 22 percent in 2021. Women are currently presidents or presidents-elect at six of the eight Ivy League schools, including **Harvard University**, where **Claudine Gay** will become the school's second-ever female president in a few weeks when she takes over for **Larry Bacow**. More than half of the 38 R1 university presidents appointed in the past two years have been women.



*Andrea Silbert, president of the Eos Foundation.
CHRIS MORRIS*

Among all Massachusetts colleges and universities, not just the R1s here, women represent 39 percent of presidents (up from 33 percent in 2018), and 16.5 percent are women of color. Those numbers include **Yves Salomon-Fernández**, who was named last month to lead the **Urban College of Boston**, a small nonprofit community college downtown.

But Silbert said troubling signs remain, such as the fact nearly 40 percent of R1s have never had a woman as president.

Silbert has focused most of her career on gender equity and poverty issues. Inspired by a microloan program she saw while working with a nonprofit in Brazil, she launched the nonprofit **Center for Women & Enterprise** in 1995. The organization provides a range of services to help women start and run their own businesses — from access to equity and debt financing to networking to classes and consulting. She left CWE to run for lieutenant governor in 2006, but lost to **Tim Murray**. The next year she got the call from Eos founders **Ken Nickerson** and **Kate Deyst** to run their foundation as its first president.

For her first nine years there, Silbert focused on addressing poverty issues in the Boston area. But in 2015, she became more concerned that men still primarily controlled the levers of power in Boston's business community. So she broadened the foundation's mission. Eos published its first gender equity report in 2018, looking at leadership in higher ed in Massachusetts. The foundation has also kept tabs on leaders at the state's publicly owned companies, business and civic groups, school superintendents, and government boards and commissions.

Silbert said she's encouraged by the traction she's seeing, particularly in higher ed.

"I do credit our work for highlighting this data in a way that institutions are compared to one another," Silbert said. "I think it creates a race to the top."