Former Duke & Wellesley President, Nannerl Keohane, offers candid reflections on life, leadership, and the promising future of higher education with Frank Shushok

Frank Shushok, Jr.
Shushok: I hope you’ll indulge me with a question that I’m asking people I interview these days. I’d love to have you reflect about the ways that the 20-year-old Nannerl Keohane is different than the 35-year-old Nannerl, and now the Nannerl I’m talking with today. What are the most salient lessons growing older has taught you?

Keohane: You have to realize that I’m now 75, so when I was 20, it was 1960, and I was a senior at Wellesley, and the world was very different then. This was pre-second-wave feminism, pre-civil-rights activism, at a time when it wasn’t at all clear that women would have professions. They certainly could, and more and more women did, and we were encouraged to do that at Wellesley, but it wasn’t an expectation. In the world I grew up in, in the South, there was an expectation that you would get married and have kids, and I felt pressured by that expectation. My counsel now to my 20-year-old self is “Don’t be quite so focused on getting married and having kids. Recognize that you love learning, that you need to develop a professional dimension, and make a decision about whether or not you want to go into an academy job and get the Ph.D.”
I would give my 35-year-old self very different advice. By then, I was an ardent second-wave feminist at Stanford; I’d been deeply engaged in that cause, very happily married, and working extremely hard for tenure. I’d been engrossed in writing my book on French political thought in the 17th century. My advice to myself then would have, in fact, been the opposite: “Don’t be so caught up in your professional commitments and your passion for your book and your drive to get tenure that you fail to recognize and cherish the other relationships in your life.” I was very close to my husband and my kids, but I was not as close to friends, and I’m afraid in retrospect that I didn’t pay as much attention to my parents as I should have, or to other members of the family. So my advice would have been the opposite: “Don’t be so focused on your professional life that you fail to recognize the importance of other aspects of your life.”

I’ve certainly learned to be more patient. I think I have a broader perspective on the many ways in which life can evolve. One lesson would be for all of us to be thoughtful about the future but not try to plan it in detail, to know that many different paths will loom up for our choices. I remember a friend of mine, a political theorist, and a conversation we had when we were both teaching in the Philadelphia area. We were in our late 20s, we were having a talk about our future, and he was so sure of what he was going to do. He had his life all planned out in four- or five-year segments. I thought that this was a really different way of approaching the world. (In contrast, I didn’t have a clue what I was going to do the next year.) I think being a little bit more mindful would have been helpful to me, but trying to plan everything is elusory in the end. All kinds of turnings will come up one can’t anticipate, and you may not be open to them if you’ve tried to plan too fully. One shouldn’t waste opportunities, so we need a growing awareness of the values of multiple paths and the perspective to cherish what matters in life.

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Shushok: It’s helpful to hear you reflect about your life journey. What, if anything, would have helped you learn things that you wish you had learned earlier rather than later? Or is this the sort of learning that must come about through the natural course of growing older and gaining wisdom?

Keohane: That’s a very good question. I think much of it comes as a result of growing older and in wisdom. In retrospect, I wish I had talked more with my parents about their lives and how they made their choices—how they saw things. My mother never
reached 70; she died of cancer at a young age. But had I talked with my father, my mother-in-law, with whom I was close, and deliberately tried more often to glean their wisdom, that might have helped, but I don’t know. Sometimes you just have to learn it for yourself.

**Shushok:** You've had an impressive and dynamic career serving in higher education, including leading a renowned women's college, Wellesley, and serving as the first female president of Duke University. As you think about your career in general, and the culture of higher education in particular, how well are colleges and universities preparing women for leadership roles both inside and outside the academy? I'm also thinking about that juxtaposition that you described from your 20-year-old self and your 35-year-old self; how well are we helping women think about those really complex set of values and expectations and hopes and dreams?

**Keohane:** Women and men both need to think about complex expectations and hopes and dreams. In terms of your immediate question about leadership and how well we're doing in preparing people for it, particularly women, I think we're doing pretty well in university administration. We have quite a few women in positions of significant responsibility, in almost every level of higher education administration at many institutions, and a significant number of women deans and vice presidents and presidents, compared with many other fields. I think in that respect, higher education is doing reasonably well.

That is less true in some faculty departments, less true in certain disciplines than it is in the university as a whole. Sometimes it’s not at all clear why that should be so. You can understand why there may be fewer women chairing physics departments because it’s been a long, hard slog for women to be accepted as appropriate students and professors in physics. Parenthetically, one of the greatest things about being in a women's college is that no one ever said you can’t do physics, nobody said women can’t do economics. Women did everything, and it was very empowering in ways that I might not have recognized at the time. But few colleges and universities have had that commitment across the board in every discipline. It’s not just a place like physics, but also other departments like philosophy, for example, where we don’t see enough women.

**Shushok:** I want to veer off a little bit and talk about women’s colleges. The number of women’s colleges has decreased significantly over the last couple decades. What do you think are the implications?

**Keohane:** I thought about that a lot when I was president of Wellesley because one of the questions I had to answer most often is, "Are you still a girls’ school?" or "Why on earth should I go to a women's college?" I think there are very good answers, which have to do with exactly the sort of thing I was just talking about. Wellesley women did everything. There were wonderful male faculty members and some male administrators, but it was a place where women’s leadership was really taken seriously, as was women's success in every discipline.

That's very unusual. I think coeducation is a powerful model—I’ve been part of many coeducational institutions, and so have my kids. When it really works, when coeducation is truly "co," I think it can bring those benefits to both women and men. But the problem is that it's too rare for institutions to fully embrace the importance of empowerment for members of both sexes in learning. Women's colleges still do that, very powerfully.

It’s also true that women’s colleges seem less attractive to a large number of students than in the past, but at least the strongest women’s colleges like Wellesley are having a very good track record in attracting really good students. In many ways, sometimes from populations they might not have looked at so closely in the past—more students from abroad, more first-generation students, more minority students—for whom this kind of preparation is particularly powerful. As long as that’s true and as long as these women are learning from and benefitting greatly from Wellesley, I think there will still be a lot of demand, and there will still be many wonderful things we can do.
**Shushok:** As you know, About Campus is fundamentally about strengthening student learning on the college and university campus. You’ve said, “A university experience is only one portion of a long life for many women; but it is an especially powerful and formative experience, and we can hope to make a difference for women of the future by giving more careful attention to that experience.” I’m very interested in what “more careful attention” looks like. With that said, what practical ways could we strengthen and improve our educational efforts with women? And, as you referenced a moment ago, what should we be doing to prepare men differently in a changing and much more diverse workforce?

**Keohane:** My answer to this question is very much based on my experience chairing a steering committee at Princeton. If your readers are interested, it can be found online (https://www.princeton.edu/reports/2011/leadership/documents/SCUWL_Report_Final.pdf). Princeton was concerned with the differential rates at which women and men were going into leadership, and one of the spurs was when the president recognized the pattern of few women participating in freshman class officer elections. She wondered why, for example, there would be 10 candidates for president (and all male), and eight candidates for secretary-treasurer (and all female)? This was a sort of a “come-to-knowledge” moment for a lot of people on campus. So the question became broader: are men and women choosing different leadership paths and approaching leadership in significantly different ways?

We found there were statistically significant differences between the way women approached leadership and the kinds of ways they exercised leadership at Princeton, and the ways in which their male colleagues did it. To make a long story short, we found that when Princeton first admitted women back in the early 1970s, the women who were there were well aware that they were there on sufferance. Many alumni, as well as others on campus, believed women didn’t belong at Princeton. Of course, then, women felt as though they had to prove themselves. Women ran for everything, and they held a lot of crucial offices. They did really well across the board, and they did that right through the 1980s. But for some reason, beginning in the 1990s and, quite dramatically in the first 10 years of this century, women stopped putting themselves forward for leadership roles. It wasn’t just that they tried and failed; they stopped trying. In fact, Princeton had only a single woman student body president in the in the first 10 years of this century, which is incredible for a coed school.

What we found was that women, first of all, disagreed that leadership in top positions like student government is where they ought to be. They had much more interest in positions where they could make a difference, have an impact, rather than being high profile. We found that women were founding and leading organizations for all kinds of causes—protecting the environment, tutoring, and education reform. Women, in fact, were deeply engaged in leadership; they just weren’t doing the visible, old-fashioned, conventional leadership roles. There is a set of recommendations at the end of our report, but I’ll offer a few examples.

We recommended that orientation at Princeton include more participation by upper class students in order to build connections between first-year students and other members of their community. One thing we heard was that first-year students don’t have much contact at all with upper class men or women; therefore, they didn’t have a sense of the kinds of possibilities that were available to them. And that recommendation has in fact been implemented.

Perhaps the most important recommendation to them was about mentoring. The most consistent thing we learned from alumnae and current students was the importance of mentoring, meaning good advice, close connection with peers and faculty members and others who understand life at Princeton.

We also emphasized raising faculty awareness of the different ways in which men and women were leading and also making sure women felt comfortable speaking up. We discussed a number of possible leadership training programs; some of the student members of our committee went to different campuses that had leadership programs, like the one at Barnard. They found some very interesting things and came back with good advice. What’s happened since then is that
a number of programs for mentoring and support have been founded at Princeton. These have been student-led activities, which have been really important.

But in terms of the specific answer to your question, we have learned that different types of leadership are important. We learned it is not just being president of the student government that matters. Our student respondents taught us that. But we do not think this should be so heavily gendered. We believe that both women and men should learn to lead, as we called it, both "up front" and "behind the scenes." A really strong vice president or treasurer can make a big difference to an organization, and those should be roles that men seek as well as women as they prepare themselves to take on presidencies, both at Princeton and elsewhere.

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**Shushok:** Do you have some practical suggestions for how we might strengthen our leadership capacities in the academy?

**Keohane:** I get pretty idealistic, and I don’t know how pragmatic any of this can be, but I think that almost everybody, men and women, would be happier if they had more balanced lives, if they had a little bit more time to spend with kids, coach little league, or take trips that involve seeing the world. And not to be in institutions that require them to work 24/7, to be available whenever the boss needs them to be in order to prove that they are really members of the organization. They should be able to show that they are potential leadership material without having to go through the trial by fire of having to be available all the time in order to show that they are good and that they care. That’s just unhealthy in every possible way. That’s true for both women and men. I think our lives would be better all around if both men and women sought a more balanced life, with more time for family, more time for friends, more time for leisure and travel and reading and thinking, instead of being in jobs or pushing themselves to work all the time in order to prove themselves.

I realize that there are individuals, both men and women, who care so passionately about their jobs that they want to work all the time. It’s not just they are trying to become CEO, they care deeply about the work, and they want to be there tinkering with that robot or doing that experiment or whatever it is. So, it’s not as though everybody has to lead the same kind of balanced lives. How we prepare people for that is a much more complicated answer. I’m sure there are biological as well as cultural differences here between men and women, and we need to understand those much better, but I don’t think they run so deep that we couldn’t envision a world in which both men and women lead more balanced lives, even if that means something different for each individual.

**Shushok:** Since you were president of two universities, I want to come back to this idea of higher education professionals living balanced lives. What role do you think institutional leaders play in signaling permission to live in such ways?

**Keohane:** Oh, that’s a good question! I’ll take my own example. When I became president of Wellesley, I had never been an administrator of any kind before. I went directly from being a newly tenured associate professor at Stanford to being president at Wellesley, which was a huge leap in risk for me and for them. I had to take it seriously, and I was working extremely hard, but my husband had a better sense of the need for balance than I did. From the beginning, he had an arrangement with my cracker-jack executive assistant. Every semester, we would block out a weekend that he and I would go away together and another weekend when we would go away with our family. That was as high a priority as the biggest development call or the most important commitment for the college. We did it every semester, routinely, and it was important to my sanity. It made me a much better president.

I continued to do this at Duke. I don’t know how many students knew I was doing that, to your question about setting an example. I think from that perspective, it depends on the messages you send when you
give baccalaureate talks, commencement addresses, write letters to the alumni or to the faculty and, in the course of those messages, remember to weave into what you say about the importance of education and about the kinds of lives we should be envisioning and should be modeling for others. I think you just need to be aware of it and have it there in your mind so that when it becomes relevant, you are ready to talk about it appropriately and persuasively.

**Shushok:** Many of our readers are in the “trenches,” so to speak, on campuses. They are in the classroom, working in residence halls, developing policies, raising money, among many other important tasks. As you think about ways that higher education needs to change, what advice do you have for people in diverse roles who want to play a role in institutional transformation, especially related to equity, diversity, and access?

**Keohane:** In my book, *Thinking about Leadership*, I define leadership as follows: “Leaders define or clarify goals for a group of individuals, and bring together the energies of members of that group to pursue those goals.” Clarifying and defining are both important. Clarifying can be working within a group, by making good suggestions—a very low-key leadership. Defining can be “These are the goals”—a military command leadership—“This is what you must do, go and do it.” So the definition encompasses both soft and hard leadership, so to speak, but mobilizing energies or bringing people together is at least as important as clarifying the goals. I emphasize throughout the book how crucial it is to engage people in collaboration and consultation, and then be willing to make a firm decision. You can’t consult forever, but if you don’t consult at all you’re almost bound to make a much less significantly good decision than if you do consult.

So, against that background, I think for people in diverse roles, there is a need to look to your potential peers and allies, to people who will share your views. Think about what it is that the people to whom you report value and how you can help move the needle here so they will be more likely to value some of the things you know to be important.

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I was thinking back to the very early days of Wellesley College—this I am not recommending, but it’s an example of how this can work if it’s done in a direct way. It was the early 20th century, when Wellesley was recruiting and beginning to admit African American students, not many, but enough so that they were significant parts of each student residence. Wellesley also had at that time a requirement that, in your freshman year, you would spend two weeks at one table with one group of people in your dorm, then you would move on and have dinner with another group of people, and so forth, until you’d had dinner with whoever you wanted to.

There was a woman from the Deep South who came to Wellesley, Virginia Foster was her name, and...
during the second period, she was seated at the table with an African American woman. She was shocked, and she went to see her housemother and she said, “I can’t possibly have dinner with her. My father would be completely shocked. I must be excused from this requirement.”

The housemistress said, “Well, Miss Foster, either you can obey Wellesley’s rules and have dinner at the table to which you are assigned, or you may pack up and leave.” So, she swallowed her concern, and she had dinner as she was told, and over time, she became a very dedicated supporter of civil rights and one of the major civil rights leaders under the name of Virginia Foster Durr, her married name. If it hadn’t been for that requirement at Wellesley, I wonder whether the outcomes would have been the same.

I’m not advocating that we have people seated by assignment at dinner, but finding ways in which people will indeed interact, and not just be names on a list from diverse backgrounds, is an important part of what education means.

**Shushok:** Here’s my last question for you. What else is capturing your thinking and imagination these days? This is your chance to say anything to About Campus readers who are working in colleges and universities across the country, community colleges, public four-year research universities, small private liberal arts colleges, who are trying to make a difference in higher education for the world. We’d just love to hear your musings about that. As you consider About Campus readers, what else might you want to share?

**Keohane:** My basic message is we are very lucky to be working in higher education, in whatever part of higher education we are, in terms of the values we promote and share, and the tradition of learning and commitment to shaping people wisely that we inherit and are responsible for carrying forward. I think the diversity of types of institutions in our country is a great advantage; it always has been, and we need to protect it at a time when there are various pressures—financial and otherwise—that bring some of us under fire.

The bottom line for me is that we should be bullish about the future of higher education. There are recurrent dire predictions about our imminent demise, how we’re all about to vanish into a world of cyberspace or something. Of course, online education can be valuable, but I’m confident that over time we will find much of our education involves what we call “bricks and clicks,” both face-to-face education and online education. Most of all, we can be optimistic because universities have been through hard times before and amazingly are almost uniquely durable institutions. The universities, colleges, community colleges find ways to cope, and although the threats are significant, I’m optimistic that we will face them as we have in the past.

The real bottom line for me is creative leadership at all levels of the institution, recognizing the dilemmas but not being overwhelmed by them, or getting into such a pessimistic mode that you just hunker down. Creative leadership is going to be one of the crucial things that make it possible for us to deal with these challenges and continue with the great traditions that we carry on.

Now I know I sound idealistic, but I know the kinds of challenges people face—financial pressures, adjunct teaching, having to close down classes, having large classes, wishing we had better support from both the public and the private—I know all those things, and I know that they are fiercely difficult to work our way through. But I’m optimistic that we can do it. That would be my message.

**Shushok:** Nan, thank you for being so generous with your time, and thank you for the career you lived and the way that you made a difference in higher education. You’ve been quite insightful, and I know About Campus readers will be thrilled to learn from your wisdom. It’s been an honor to talk to you.

**Keohane:** Thank you for giving me the chance to reflect on these important questions, and good luck to you and your readers!