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How More Than 200 Scholars Reached the Provost's Office, and Where They Went Next

Audrey Williams June

16–20 minutes

In 2011, Lauren Kay Robel had to make a critical career-related decision: Did she want to serve as Indiana University at Bloomington's interim provost?

After almost a decade as dean of the law school, Robel was open to giving the chief-academic-officer job a try. But first, Robel recalled, she needed more information about what, exactly, a provost does.



She said yes, and the job itself proved to be the best teacher.

“It was a steep learning curve — and I had been on this campus for 20-odd years,” said Robel, who earned her law degree at Indiana and then, after a two-year stint as a law clerk, started her academic career there in 1985 as an assistant professor.

She came to see that being a provost was very different from her former job. As a dean, she could call on expertise in her discipline and intimate knowledge of a single unit on campus, and could more easily build relationships, which allowed her to manage down and up. There was also a built-in cohort of people on campus doing that job — other deans — whom she could consult for advice.

Being provost, though, meant she had to be responsible for the campus beyond the law school. For example, she had to learn about the research needs of scientists and to educate herself on the undergraduate curriculum, a subject she hadn't had to think about very much in her professional life before then.

After five months as interim provost, Robel was named permanently to the post in 2012. She was, and still is, encouraged by what she says is at the core of the job. “The thing that’s wonderful about the provost position is that it really lets you be the voice for academics and academic values on a campus,” she said.

For professors who have risen through the ranks of academic administration, serving as provost lets them broaden their reach. Provosts set an institution’s academic vision, supervise deans, oversee accreditation, create strategic plans, and manage budgets, among other things. It’s also a job with cachet on campus. The provost, second in command, is widely recognized as having a job that is a steppingstone to other high-profile positions, particularly a college presidency.

In more ways than one, the provost’s role is a pivotal one, and

even more so at the sprawling academic enterprises that are the nation's top research institutions.

The job also has inherent personal and professional tensions.

The nature of provosts' work — creating an environment for scholarly and academic excellence — can make it appealing. It allows them to realize a wider impact than they'd otherwise have on an institution they care deeply about. But it's also a position that can trigger an identity crisis, which, in turn, can affect their career trajectories. While provosts can maintain ties with the ranks of the faculty, the job often leaves some of them feeling that they're on the margins of the once-familiar rhythms of academic life.

To learn more about the career paths of the people who have been chief academic officers at such campuses, *The Chronicle* collected information on 201 current and former provosts who filled that job on a permanent or interim basis at the 60 American institutions that are members of the Association of American Universities. *The Chronicle's* analysis of that data provides a snapshot of the group of provosts at some of the nation's most influential institutions over a 10-year period ending last summer.

Among the findings: Three out of four provosts were male, and the group as a whole was overwhelmingly white — a racial distribution that mirrors the faculty ranks that serve as a pipeline for the post. Roughly half of the provosts earned Ph.D.s in a STEM field, with the largest share — about 16 percent — holding a degree in engineering.

The data also speak to the clannishness that characterizes the hiring of provosts at top institutions. Nearly 180 provosts in the group earned their Ph.D. or other terminal degree from one of the 60 American AAU institutions (or one of two prestigious universities in Britain). At the top of the list was Harvard University, with 16 degrees awarded; both the current provost there, Alan M. Garber and his predecessor, Steven E. Hyman, are Harvard alums.

The clannishness takes several forms. AAU members' permanent provosts were internal hires more often than not, with nearly two-thirds of them moving into the job that way, as Robel did. And institutional roots can run deep: Roughly two dozen provosts were appointed to serve at universities where, also like Robel, they had been graduate students.

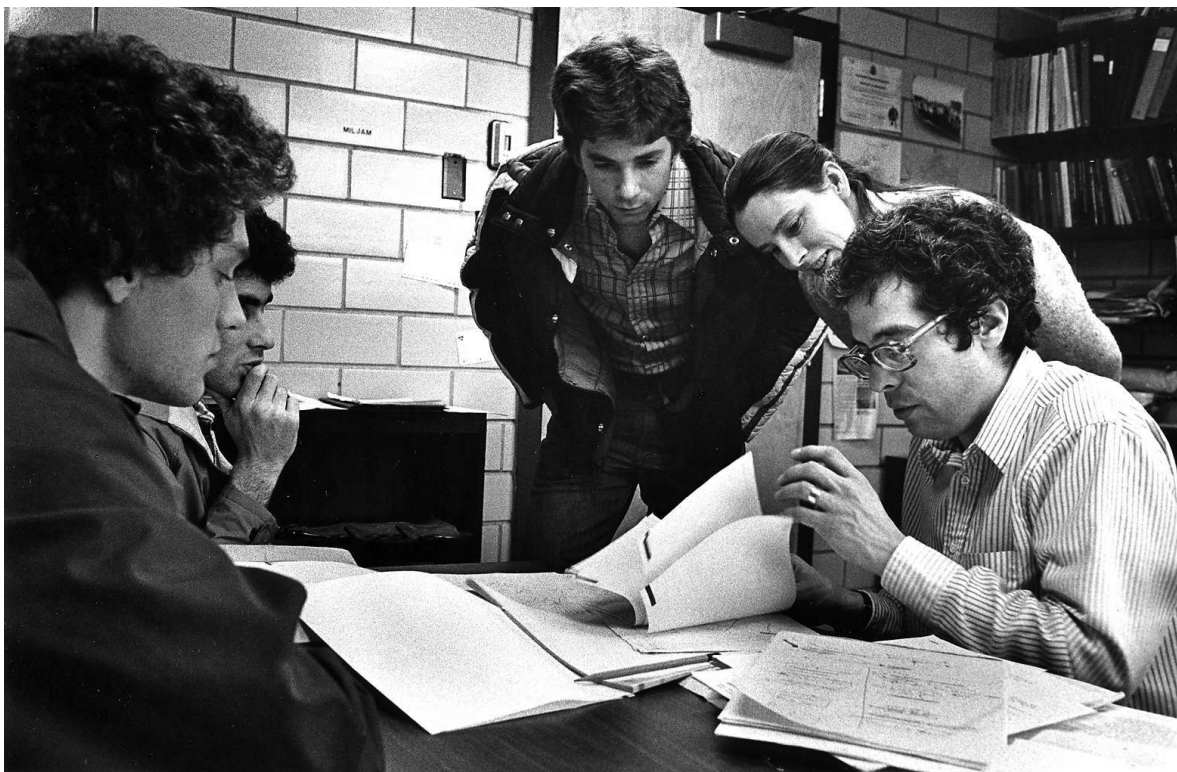
"I came to my job with a lot of credibility when it comes to my loyalty and devotion to this institution in particular," Robel said.

Her tenure as provost has already outpaced the nearly five years that *Chronicle* data show is the average for the group. She is typical in other ways, too. Her previous position was dean, and people with that title or coming from that office accounted for more than half of the provosts in the *Chronicle's* sample.

As for what comes after landing a provost job, there is no clear majority. The most-common next moves for an AAU provost — just like their colleagues at other types of institutions — fall into one of three categories. Some of them return to the faculty. Slightly fewer become college presidents. And some simply remain in the provost's office, perhaps until they retire.

No one during the past decade has served longer as an AAU-

member provost than Edward S. Macias. He stuck with the job for 25 years at Washington University in St. Louis before stepping down in 2013 and retiring from the university four years later.



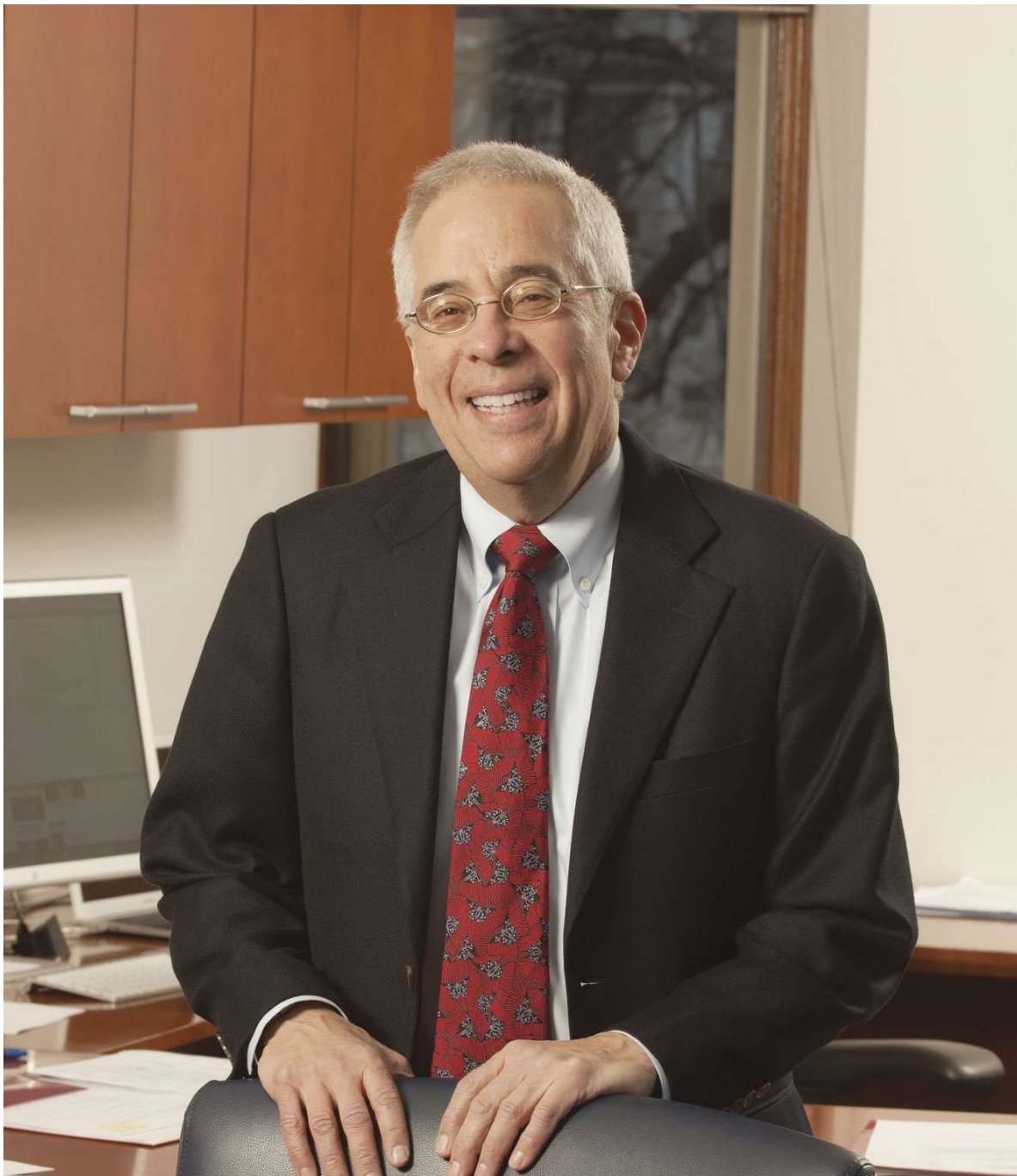
Ed Macias taught in the chemistry department at Washington U. in St. Louis (above, in 1981) before starting his 25-year stint as the university's provost. Washington U. Photographic Services Collection, Department of Special Collections

What was behind Macias' lengthy tenure in the role? "I liked very much what I was doing, and I had no real interest in being president," he said.

Macias' career path is a prime example of how the road to becoming a chief academic officer is paved with more happenstance than intention. He came to Washington U. in 1970, after graduating from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology with a Ph.D. in chemistry (a field shared by 11 AAU provosts in the group analyzed by *The Chronicle*). In the 1980s, a colleague offered him a chance to be dean of the university's summer

school, a job that would provide Macias with a broad perspective on the needs of the campus. It proved to be valuable training.

“It’s a little bit like running a university, even though it’s only two or three months and a much smaller operation,” he said of the four summers or so he served as dean. “You interact with everybody — admissions, faculty, staff, registration, the library — and you get an idea of who’s who and what they do and how to interact with them.”



A stint as department chair followed, and then came a bit of serendipity. In 1988, a former chancellor asked Macias to serve part-time as an associate provost alongside the acting provost. The plan was to tap Macias' expertise in the sciences. At first he turned down the offer, but then he changed his mind, in part out of a sense of duty.

Nine months later, in the fall of that year, Macias was named provost of the university.

"Having that nine months in the provost's office, even part-time, I could see what they did and I could see the issues," he said. "It was very valuable in that I knew the actors."

However, embracing the provost's role meant that the amount of time he had to do research shrank immensely.

"You don't have much time to really think deeply about problems the way you would normally," Macias said. "Over time you became disappointed that you can't spend the time and therefore you just can't do things at the same pace. Eventually you have to make a decision."

One decision, for AAU provosts, is to take a step even further away from the faculty. "If you're a provost at a pretty good-sized

institution, someone is thinking, 'You'd make a good president. We'd like to recruit you,' " said James Martin, a former provost and co-author of two books about the position. "There's the assumption that if you're a provost, you want to be a president."

Macias says he was contacted by recruiters looking to fill a college presidency. He wasn't interested.

"I gave it some thought," he said. "But I never really wanted to do it. I really liked the job of provost because you're so close to the academic heart of the university."

Even though some provosts find long-term fulfillment in the job, a notable proportion, 20 percent, moved up to lead an institution in their next job, according to *Chronicle* data on AAU provosts.

The list includes some familiar names. W. Kent Fuchs, a former provost at Cornell University, is now president of the University of Florida. The University of Maryland's president, Wallace D. Loh, was once provost of the University of Iowa. Three former provosts at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor went on to become presidents: Martha E. Pollack is at Cornell, Philip Hanlon is at Dartmouth College, and Teresa Sullivan recently stepped down from an eight-year presidency at the University of Virginia.

Although just over 60 percent of the 41 AAU provosts who landed presidencies did so at AAU institutions, colleges outside that group were appealing destinations as well. Virginia's former provost, John D. Simon, is president of Lehigh University. Neeli Bendapudi left the University of Kansas to become president of the University of Louisville. And Iowa's former provost, P. Barry Butler, is now the head of Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University.

And sometimes they take over at the university where they served

as provost.



Satish Tripathi served as provost at the U. at Buffalo for nearly seven years, and regularly taught computer-science seminars (above). He became president of the university in 2011: "I loved the institution and thought I could make a difference being in the presidency."

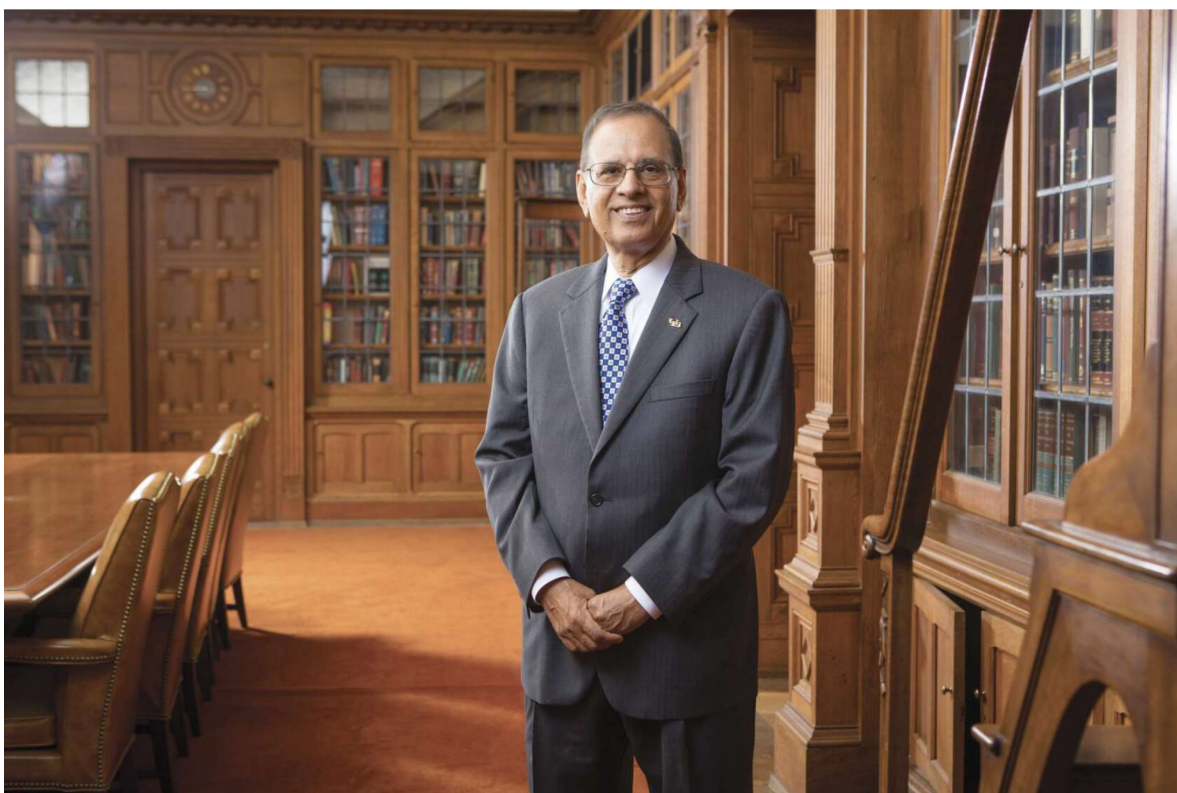
That's the case for Satish K. Tripathi, president of the University at Buffalo since 2011. He was provost there for nearly seven years before that.

"I wasn't truly looking for a presidency, and I never made a set of plans that this is the path I'm going to follow," said Tripathi, a computer scientist. "I enjoyed being provost."

He and the previous president, John B. Simpson, arrived at the State University of New York campus the same year, 2004. Working closely with Simpson gave Tripathi firsthand insight into the president's job. They learned about the campus and its faculty together while selling a strategic plan to make interdisciplinary

research a priority. “I thought I could do it,” Tripathi said of being president.

When Simpson announced his retirement as president, Tripathi knew what he wanted to do: “I loved the institution, and thought I could make a difference being in the presidency.” So he applied for the job.



Satish Tripathi

Although the provost position would appear to be a natural launching pad to a presidency, it's not a common aspiration. According to data released five years ago from a [survey of provosts](#) conducted by the American Council on Education only about one-third planned to seek a college presidency.

“A provost is proud to say he or she still retains ties to the faculty,” said Martin, the author. “They don’t want to have to raise funds or spend a lot of time traveling off campus.”

They also may not want to be the face of the university and

responsible for government relations, athletics, and meeting with community organizations, donors, board members, and alumni. But some provosts, Martin said, may be eager to leave behind some of the academically centered aspects of their job that they find unappealing (think faculty meetings), and see becoming a college president as a welcome departure.

A handful of provosts in the group left academe behind.

When Daniel Linzer stepped down in 2017 after a decade as chief academic officer at Northwestern University, he was keenly aware that he couldn't just resume his faculty life where he'd left off. Reigniting his research agenda would be impossible to do with a shuttered lab and no active federal grants.

"I wasn't a member of the club anymore," said Linzer, who had also served five years as dean of the college of arts and sciences at Northwestern. And he had no hopes of attracting talented young people to work with him as a way to further their own careers.

As provost, Linzer liked shaping the academic enterprise at Northwestern and supporting the work of the researchers there, an impact he couldn't have as dean or individual scholar. He wondered if he could have similar influence doing some of the parts of the job that he enjoyed, but in a different context.

Linzer talked with Earl Lewis, a friend and former provost at Emory University, about Lewis's decision to run the nonprofit Andrew W. Mellon Foundation after eight years as a chief academic officer. Afterward, "I could see that kind of pathway was possible," said Linzer, a molecular biologist, who sought career advice from Macias as well.

When the Research Corporation for Science Advancement, an

Arizona-based foundation, offered Linzer a job as president and chief executive officer in 2017, he saw that path even more clearly. “I get to support bright scientists at college and universities” by awarding them funding to do research, he said, instead of having to resolve the kinds of problems that provosts are called on to fix.

For some provosts, neither continuing to advance up the ladder nor staying put feels quite right. One out of five AAU provosts eventually returns to the faculty.

Vicki L. Colvin rejoined the faculty ranks sooner than most. About six months into serving as provost at Brown University, Colvin could no longer ignore the pull she felt to focus more on her research on how nanoscale particles interact with the environment and living systems. But she knew she couldn't balance her research with the demands of being a chief academic officer. After an academic year as provost, she stepped down in 2015.



“I was in meetings a lot. I was always talking to someone,” said Colvin. “But I was still writing papers, still helping people get jobs. It became clear that it was going to be pretty much impossible to keep that up. You have to be fully available as provost.”

Colvin went to Brown in 2014 after 20 years at Rice University, where she last served as vice provost for research. That job was one that let her “do things that I thought were important for the university and still keep my identity as a scientist,” she said.

The vice-provost position, however, had its limits. Having the ability to fix structural issues that affected faculty life and the university as a whole made the provost's job appealing. Accepting the position at Brown let her make the kinds of decisions that have an impact universitywide. She created a program for entrepreneurial education, established a vice-provost-of-the-arts

position, and helped Brown cut its budget to stave off a deficit.

Yet for Colvin — a working mother of children who were in fourth grade and eighth grade when she arrived at Brown — the provost's job came at too high a cost.

“Being a provost, being an active researcher, being a mom ... I could not sleep at all, and it still wouldn't work,” she said. “It's not the person, it was the position. I didn't hate the job. I loved being provost. But I wasn't ready for that to be my last chapter.”

Dan Berrett and Julia Piper contributed to this article.