

## Presidential Farewell

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**BY MORGAN BRINLEE**

Janet Holmgren looks at the close of her 20-year tenure as president of Oakland's [Mills College](#) not as an ending but as the turning of a page, the beginning of a new chapter.

During her presidency Holmgren has driven Mills to become a leader in women's higher education and one of the most respected women's colleges in the country. Appointed in 1991 she has a lengthy list of achievements under her belt. Among them is record breaking increases in enrollment and fundraising, the creation of the Lorry I. Lokey Graduate School of Business, and the introduction of an innovative new degree program that enables students to earn both a bachelor's and master's degree in five years.

Although she hands over the reins at Mills to her successor, Alecia A. DeCoudreaux, on July 1, Holmgren is dedicated to continuing to be a force of advocacy and leadership in the field of higher education. We sat down with Holmgren to reflect on her time at Mills and her plans for the next chapter in her life.

**How much has changed in women's education since you began your tenure as president of Mills College?**

Since I became president of Mills 20 years ago, women have become the majority of students in all of higher education throughout the country. While the number of women's colleges has gotten smaller, the numbers of women in higher education has grown quite dramatically. I now think there is a greater interest and focus on educating women across the board, and I think women's colleges were ahead of the curve in that regard and are setting some really good models for the education of women that are now being readily accepted beyond the boundaries of women's colleges.

**You began your tenure as president following the student strike that overturned the college's decision to introduce a coeducational undergraduate program. What was that like?**

I came about a year after that strike had taken place, but it was my job to really refocus the college on its core mission of educating women and consider how we might build the very best programs, both undergraduate and graduate. There was a lot of unrest and uncertainty still in 1991 and 1992 when I started. I found it was a very challenging time and it was also exciting because Mills has always been, and continues to be, cutting edge and risk taking. We had to do a bit of reinventing ourselves and articulating what it might look like to have a women's college that was rethought and restructured for the 21st century.

**Tell me about one of your favorite memories of being president at Mills College.**

Well I have so many. I have to say very often it has been a moment of connection with a student or alumna. One of my very favorite memories came in 2001 when a very fine graduating senior, who has gone on to become a really renown violinist, was getting her award for four years of excellent soccer playing [and] decided to celebrate her time as an athlete by serenading her team with Bach. [She] got her violin out and played at our athletic award banquet, which to me was the quintessential example of a Mills woman: a scholar, a creative person, an athlete, and someone who cared enough about her classmates to really give back her greatest gift. That is the kind of moment that is really thrilling to me.

**Is there anything specific that you hope to accomplish after your presidency?**

Oh definitely. I think this is going to be what I would call a third act for me. I'm looking forward to several paths. One is I want to do a great deal of writing about education and about educational policy and about women in leadership across the sectors. I also really want to put my shoulder to the wheel of educational reform and find ways to help those in the Bay Area and in the nation to improve the quality of education across the board. I'm not sure where that will take me. I look forward to being back in the classroom and I also look forward to being engaged in writing and speaking and helping to develop new directions for educational enterprises in this country.

**Throughout your time at Mills you've been very active in the Oakland community. What role do you feel university presidents should play in the surrounding communities and how important do you think it is for universities to create strong relationships with the communities they reside in?**

I think it's absolutely critical. I think first of all colleges and universities are large employers and they are large players in their communities. They have to really be aware of the challenges and the successes of the community. I also think that this is the way that really strong connections for our students can be developed. It's a two-way street and I am a very big believer in civic engagement. It's important that people see us as a resource, as one of the strengths of the Oakland community and of the East Bay.

**What is your opinion on the rising cost of higher education and how it is beginning to affect students?**

There are a lot of mythologies about higher education. Yes, there is a price tag that does seem to be rising but there's also a rising tide of financial aid and support for students. I think we need to do some demystifying about the costs and also the benefits to students to take on some of the burden of their education. After all, the money that you invest in an education is investing in yourself and in your lifetime of growth, so it's a very good investment. I do think we should really explain how these costs come about and how the funding itself is available to students. We don't do a good job of that now. That's going to be one of my next jobs.

*The Mills community will honor President Holmgren and her 20-year legacy with a special honorary degree at the commencement ceremony on May 14.*

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