NAVIGATING THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED: EXAMINING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN ON THEIR PATHWAY TO THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE PRESIDENCY

by

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This dissertation is submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education

Ferris State University

December 2021

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative research study was to examine the lived experiences of African American women on their pathway to the community college presidency. Data was collected via demographic profile questionnaires and semi-structured WebEx interviews with five participants. Emerging themes were identified through comparative analysis of participant narratives utilizing Black Feminist Thought as a theoretical lens.

Relationship building and self-awareness were identified as common characteristics that served as positive contributors to participant pathways. Balancing family and work-life and self-doubt were identified challenges to career persistence. Participants did not speak of challenges as barriers, but rather "resiliency builders," and utilized coping mechanisms such as support systems and spirituality as they navigated their journeys. Examination of participant narratives concluded that there is no one successful pathway to the community college presidency for African American women, but rather common strategies such as professional development, intentional networking, and terminal degree attainment that aided in these women's success. Findings from this study were in line with literature that suggest Black women routinely over educate, over-prepare, and over accommodate in order to obtain senior level leadership positions in higher education. Recommendations from participant interviews revealed that African American women who aspire to be community college presidents should seek mentorship, prepare themselves educationally by earning a terminal degree, and contribute to

a pipeline of shared knowledge and resources that will result in more African American women becoming community college presidents.

KEY WORDS: Community college presidents, African American female college presidents, Women in higher education leadership, Pathway to presidency

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my late grandmother, Sandra N. Love. You loved and supported me from a young child and always told me that I would go all the way through school because “that’s what *we* do.” You were the definition of a determined woman, loving soul, and always modeled the epitome of Black excellence to all you encountered, but especially for me. I wish you could be here to see me accomplish the last of “what *we* do,” but I know that you are super proud. Until we meet again my angel.

Because of you, I did…

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to all the people in my life who have supported me through this process; without all of you I would not have been able to complete this long and meaningful journey.

To my dissertation chair: Dr. Sandy Balkema, thank you for stepping in and guiding me through this part of my educational journey. The work you do with the DCCL Program and how you effortlessly guide us through this door of educational and professional opportunity is both admirable and so appreciated

To my committee members: Dr. Adrien Bennings and Dr. Lynne Adams, thank you for serving as members on my committee and your willingness to step in and move swiftly through this process. Thank you for your thought provoking questions, suggestions, and expertise. Thank you for making my dissertation better.

To my dear Cohort 7, this has been a heck of a ride, but I wouldn't have wanted to do it with another group of people. I have learned so much from our time together and shared so many laughs and tears with you. This journey has provided me with a wonderful group of friends and network of colleagues. I can't wait to see where the rest of this life takes you all!

To my DCCL Cohort and sisters in Greekdom: Margie, Sutonia, and Felicia, there's no way I would have gotten through year one, let alone defense, without you three by my side. I love and appreciate what you all have been and will continue to be in my life.

To my sweet sweet Sorors of DST, especially my 15 Forces: Thank you for being the headache I never knew I needed and the pick-me-up along this journey when I was down. Thank you for always showing up and teaching me how to celebrate me, I love you all dearly.

To my best friend: Emily, who has been by my side every step of the way since we were teenagers. Thank you for always telling me in your own way how proud you were of me at just the right times, thank you for talking me down when I wanted to quit, and thank you for being at every single graduation, celebration, and even disappointment. My life wouldn't be what it is without my Em-J.

Lastly, to my parents: Denette and Alvin, thank you for your sacrifices. Thank you for always making my dreams come true and pushing me to take opportunities even when I didn't want to. Thank you for supporting me, guiding me, and loving me even when I was wrong. This is OUR doctorate.

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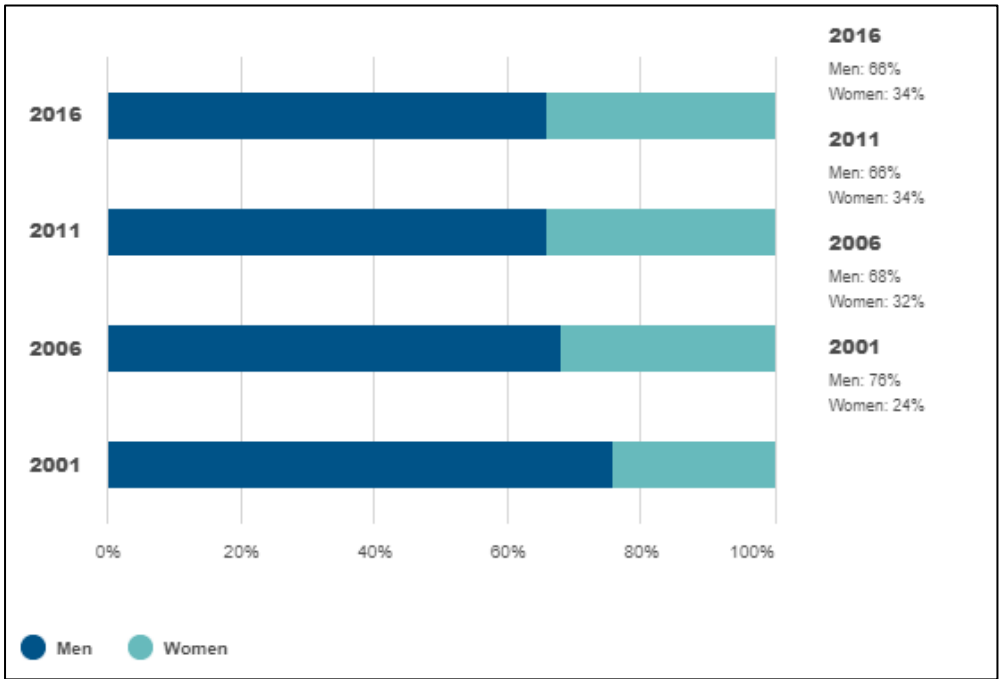
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

INTRODUCTION

For decades, African American women have been underrepresented in higher education leadership roles, specifically in the position of college president (Gagliardi et al., 2017; Jackson & Harris, 2007; Kellerman & Rhode, 2014). African American women have emerged as one of the most accomplished groups in educational attainment, comprising of over 50% of African Americans who hold terminal degrees (Lockett et al., 2017), and yet they make up less than 5% of all college presidents in the United States (Gagliardi et al., 2017). According to the American Council on Education's (ACE) (2017) most recent American College President's study, the number of female college presidents grew from 21% in 2001 to 30% in 2016, comprising 27% of community college presidents in 2001 and 36% of community college presidents in 2016. Jackson and Harris (2007) discuss the wave descriptor to quantify the growth of African American women in the college presidency from 1903 to 2002. During the first wave, from 1903-1905, Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune became the first African American woman to be appointed president of Bethune-Cookman College and remained the only African American female president until the 1950s. The second wave, from 1955 to 1970, resulted in the appointment of Dr. Willa Beatrice Player of Bennet College for Women in 1956. The third wave dates between 1970 to 1987, beginning with Dr. Marble McLean's appointment to Barba-Scotia College in 1974 and Dr. Yvonne Taylor at Wilberforce College in 1984. Following Dr. McLean's

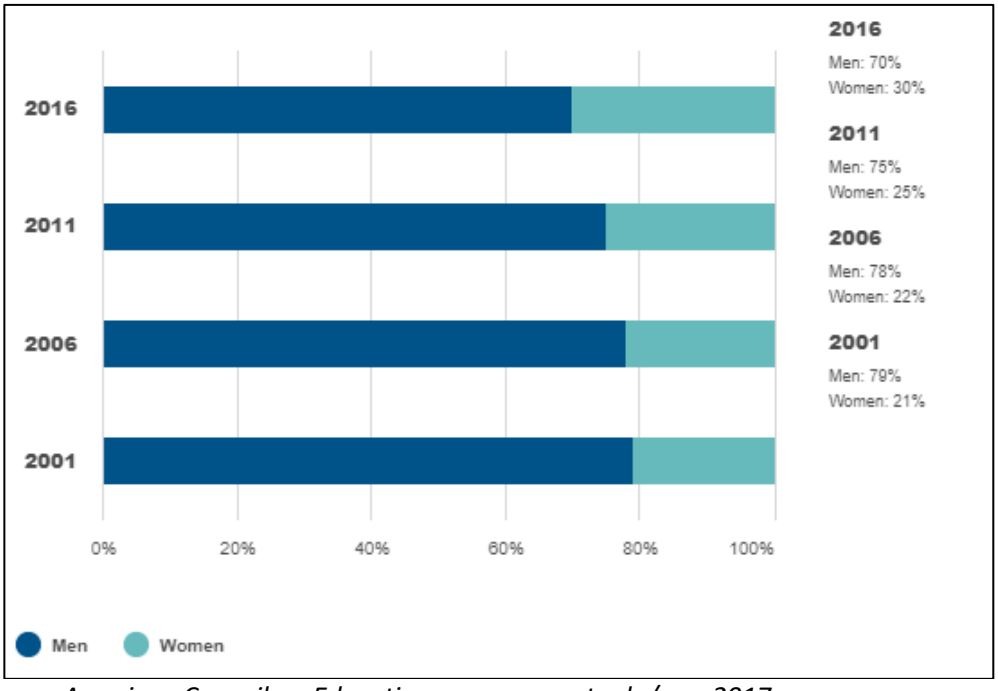
and Taylor's appointments, five additional women were appointed as presidents at two-year community and junior colleges during this period. The fourth wave, from 1987 to 1992, proved to be a time of tremendous growth for African American women as it was the first time in history that there were three or more African American women serving as presidents of four-year colleges simultaneously; all were appointed to Historically Black Colleges. Dr. Johnetta Besch Cole was appointed to Spelman University, Dr. Gloria Dean Randle to Bennet College for Women, and Dr. Niara Sudarkasa to Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. During this half-decade, several more African American females were appointed president at two-year colleges, these included Del Anderson of San Jose City Colleges, Dr. Constance Carroll of Saddleback College, Dr. Ruth Burgos-Sasser of San Antonio College, and Dr. Jerry Sue Thornton of Cuyahoga Community College (Chenoweth, 2007); however, the exact number of appointments during this time is unknown. The fifth wave occurred from 1992 to 2002. The 2000 American Council on Education President's Study reported that 38 of the 148 African American participants were women — approximately 26%, and in 2002, women represented 24% of African American presidents. Although the number of African American women holding the college presidency has slowly increased over time, based on the pool of qualified individuals available to serve in this position, this number remains inordinately low in comparison to their white and male counterparts (American Council on Education [ACE], 2017; Jackson & Harris, 2007; Townsend, 2021). The following figures display the growth of Black female community college presidents from 2001-2016 in relation to their Black male and white female and male counterparts.

Figure 1: College Presidents, by Gender: Black, Afro-Caribbean, or African American



Source: American Council on Education, www.acenet.edu/acps2017

Figure 2: College Presidents, by Gender: Caucasian, White, or White American



Source: American Council on Education, www.acenet.edu/acps2017

The number of African American women pursuing and earning graduate and professional degrees continues to rise; however, their representation in the college presidency is still far below parity. While research that focuses on the number of African American women who hold the position of college president is limited, existing literature has revealed that the majority of African American female presidents lead in the community college environment (Gagliardi et al., 2017). Thus, to better understand their significant and ground-breaking experiences while navigating the path to the position of college president, this study will focus on African American women presidents of community colleges.

BACKGROUND OF THE PROBLEM

If US higher education intends to continue to meet the needs of diverse students, it is imperative that the pathway to the college presidency for minorities, specifically African American women is examined (American Council on Education [ACE], 2017). Although there is more research emerging on minority women college and university presidents as it relates to their experiences during the presidency, along with the impact of race and gender on their leadership, there is a knowledge gap on the lived experiences of African American women specifically, including the meaning they make of how these experiences influenced their pathway to the presidency. Although Black women have progressively risen to the top of academic achievement, they continue to be underrepresented in senior leadership roles. In order to contextualize the role of African American women in higher education, an overview of the history of women in higher education outlining their ascension to the presidency and characteristics of women college presidents are useful in explaining the research problem.

Oberlin College in Oberlin, Ohio, was the first institution to admit women and men of all races in 1837 and the first institution to award degrees to African American women before the Civil War (Fletcher, 1943; Watson, 1977). Mary Jane Patterson, a teacher in the Philadelphia school system and first principal of Preparatory High School for Colored Youth, was the first African American woman to receive a bachelor's degree from Oberlin College. Sara Early, the first African American female instructor at Wilberforce University, and Mary Church Terrell, first president of the National Association for Colored Women, also received degrees from Oberlin College by the year 1889 (Davis, 2016). Although women were allowed to enroll in college, they were only permitted to study specific majors including education, nursing, and administrative assistantship, and African American women were not admitted at the same rates of African American men and white women. By 1890, only 30 African American women had college degrees, in comparison to 300 African American men and 250 white women (Faragher & Howe, 1988). These limitations on female educational attainment continued throughout the 20th century, though the number of women in higher education continued to grow (Watson, 1977).

The 1900s presented more opportunities for women in general to matriculate into higher education as a result of the establishment of a number of women's colleges (Watson, 1977). Over the next 40 years, women's enrollment continued to increase as a number of institutions amended admissions policies, and in 1940, the number of women enrolled in colleges and universities surpassed the enrollment of men (Solomon, 1985). World War II contributed to a swift decline in college enrollment for males and subsequently allowed the opportunity for women to begin to explore fields of study traditionally reserved for men such as

science and engineering (Solomon, 1985). In spite of the upward trend of women enrolling in post-secondary education, the 1950s and '60s experienced a dramatic decline of women's enrollment, due in part to the growth of the economy, which provided opportunities for women to secure paid jobs (Solomon, 1985). However, the number of co-educational institutions and growing number of community colleges resulted in more women returning to college during the 1970s (Solomon, 1985). Concurrently, Brown versus the Board of Education Supreme Court case was won, and the Higher Education Act of 1965 provided immense gains for African American women to access higher education. The Civil Rights period and Affirmative Action were also contributors to the increase of African American women's educational attainment during this time (Roebuck & Murty, 1997).

Higher Education Attainment for African American Women

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2016), 62.7% of all African American college undergraduates were women in the year 2000, and the number continued to increase, reaching 63.8% by 2008. From 1978 to 2008, African American women continued to enroll in higher education at faster rates than their male counterparts in both undergraduate and graduate sectors. As of 2016, African American students made up approximately 36% of all undergraduates, with females accounting for over half of the population. Graduate enrollment showed similar trends with African American women comprising 67.8% of African American graduate students in 2000 and 71.3% by 2010. The upward trend of black female enrollment is expected to continue well into 2025, possibly accounting for nearly 75% of the African American U.S. undergraduate and graduate student enrollment rates (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016)

According to a 2008 report by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AACU), women now comprise the majority of students earning associate, bachelors, and master's degrees across the board (King & Gomez, 2008). Of all doctoral degrees granted in the last decade, over half have been earned by women. African American women have also excelled in college degree attainment, specifically in comparison to their male counterparts. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2016), the number of African American women earning a master's degree or higher increased from 4.9% to 7.2% between the years of 2000-15. Currently, African American women hold a significant lead in master's degrees; as of 2017, there were 1,185,000 African American women who held master's degrees versus 660,000 African American men (Reis & Grady, 2018). African American women are also leading in professional degree awards at 127,000 compared to 64,000 African American men. Lastly, African American women have made a significant leap in doctoral degrees from 98,000 conferred in 2014 to 161,000 doctoral degrees currently held by African American women — compared to only 135,000 African American men with doctoral degrees (Reis & Grady, 2018).

THE IMPORTANCE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP ROLES

However, although the rate of female college presidents continues to grow slowly, the numbers do not adequately reflect the educational attainment of women in higher education, specifically African American women. According to the American Council on Education's (ACE) 2017 Presidents Report, 30% of U.S. college presidents are women. The report also revealed that although the number of women presidents has tripled since 1986, the first year the ACE President's Survey was conducted, the percentage of presidents who were women increased only 4% between 2011 and 2016. The number of women earning qualifying credentials for the

position of college president is severely underrepresented in the current population of women college presidents in the United States. Women and racial/ethnic minorities continue to be underrepresented among the presidency, with three out of every ten college presidents identifying as women and fewer than one in five (17%) identifying as racial/ethnic minorities. Although there are qualified, interested, and capable African American women in the higher education field (Grogan, 1996; McFarlin et al., 1999), few African American women hold the position of college president.

According to *Black Issues in Higher Education and Community College Week*, among the nation's 1,200 plus two-year institutions, only 64 have African American presidents, including the eleven Historically Black Institutions, and an even smaller number of this population is made up of women (Evelyn, 1998). The limited body of literature on African American female community college presidents restricts our knowledge of exactly how many there are and what their experiences and pathways have been as they navigated the journey to the community college presidency.

College presidents traditionally shape the educational philosophy, direction, and culture of their institutions (Blumenstyk, 2014). Thus, diversifying the college presidency also brings diversification of thought, innovation, and perspectives addressing the needs of an ever-changing student population, which subsequently aids colleges in navigating various challenges facing higher education including retention and affordability (Gagliardi et al., 2017; Kirwan, 2008). According to the US Census data, by 2024, 44% of college students will come from communities of color, with the greatest growth occurring in the African American and Hispanic populations (Hussar & Bailey, 2016). The college presidency has a way to go if it is to mirror the

population of students served by higher education (American Council on Education [ACE], 2017). Thus, the examination of the professional and educational pathways for African American women in the college presidency is necessary to meet the varying needs of an increasingly diverse student population.

Leadership Skills and Women Leaders

A 2003 study conducted on women college and university presidents and their leadership revealed that the three tenets of leadership most important to women presidents were competence, credibility, and communication (Wolverton et al., 2006). Because historically in the US, women have been viewed as being less capable than men to fill leadership positions, it is critical that they are competent in their position, establish and maintain a credible professional history, and communicate through oral and written language, listening, and being visible (Wolverton et al., 2006). The new demands of leadership in the higher education environment require adaptability, creativity, and responsiveness, all characteristics developed by the complex roles that many women juggle in life as primary caregivers to family members and professionals in their workplace (Bornstein, 2008). Past research has shown that women presidents to be more likely to take a situational approach to leadership. In a 2002 survey of sitting presidents on leadership, 41% of women respondents replied that they applied the style of leadership most appropriate to the situation, while only 25% of male participants indicated this flexible approach (Bornstein, 2008).

A 2018 study examining the development of leadership skills viewed as most important to women college presidents outlined three key areas of leadership development for women in or aspiring to the presidency: know the rules, hear the message, and opt in (Reis & Grady,

2018). These strategies outline how women in leadership can learn the rules to obtaining a presidency, pay attention to advice, and take advantage of opportunities that will assist in development of the aforementioned skillsets identified by women who hold presidencies.

Characteristics of African American Women Presidents

Similar to their white counterparts, African American women presidents tend to be adaptable in their leadership due to the complex roles they occupy outside of the workplace (Waring, 2003). However, research indicates that African American women place a greater emphasis on relational aspects of their leadership. A 2003 study of African American women presidents revealed that although decision-making and credibility were critical in their role, their relationship with people formed the centerpiece of their thoughts about leadership (Waring, 2003). African American women felt that they had to take more time talking with people and thinking about their presentation of self and ideas due to their gender *and* race.

Another characteristic that appears to be unique to the leadership of African American women is their utilization of "power" or authority in their positions. African American women reported re-conceptualizing power in a more supportive way to empower staff and address institutional challenges, possibly based on the everyday struggles and multiple roles that African American women experience (Wright, 2008). The skills that African American women bring to the presidency also provide special insight when relating to diverse student populations. African American female presidents have been found to bring about gender, race, and class equity by challenging issues such as favoritism, dishonesty, and corruption at all levels of their respective organizations (Wright, 2008).

Although the research surrounding the career development, progression, and leadership styles of women college presidents is growing, much of this research examines women presidents' experiences as a single group, discounting the potential impact of race, specifically for African American women (Holmes, 2008). Additionally, much of the research on African Americans in presidential roles focuses on men, subsequently the experiences of African American women as college presidents have become lost (Oikelome, 2017).

OVERVIEW TO THE STUDY

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this qualitative interpretive phenomenological research study was to examine the phenomenon of African American female community college presidents and their pathway to the college presidency. This research sought to understand the true essence of participant experiences by examining the meaning they made from their individual journeys, while also conducting analysis of shared experiences across participant narratives. For the purpose of this research, *pathway* refers to participant's educational background, social and professional affiliations, previous position held, perceived barriers, strategies employed, and any other experiences shared in participant narratives as factors that influenced their path to the position of community college president.

The existing body of research on the pathway to the community college presidency for African American women is limited, and many studies examine this population in their current roles as it pertains to leadership styles and their lack of representation in leadership positions (Barsh & Cranston, 2011; Domingue, 2015; Gregg, 2004; Kouzes & Posner, 2008; Reis, 2015).

This study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the essence of the lived experience of an African American woman striving toward the community college presidency and how they make meaning based on shared experiences and outcomes. Exploring narratives of five African American women community college presidents, this study will appreciate the unique characteristics of participant's pathway to community college presidency, while also identifying common themes that emerge from their shared stories. Ultimately, the goal of this study is to expand the limited body of research that focuses on African American women community college presidents and their experiences and strategies employed while navigating the pathway to their current position. The findings from this study will also aid the higher education community as they diversify the presidency to include more African American women, identify potential barriers and necessary resources to prepare, recruit and retain African American women as college presidents. African American women aspiring to become college presidents may benefit from study findings when seeking information on the types of experiences and resources that will be advantageous as they navigate their own career pathways.

Research Questions

While more research is emerging on minority women college and university presidents regarding their experiences during the presidency and the impact of intersectionality of race and gender on their leadership (Britton, 2013; Davis & Maldonado, 2015), little literature examines the lived experience of the African American woman on her journey to the community college presidency. The number of African American women holding the position of community college president is still disproportionately low in relation to the educational attainment of African American women as it relates to their African American male, and white

male and female counterparts. As African American women continue to achieve academically and acquire graduate level degrees, it is appropriate to examine the pathways and experiences of current African American women community college presidents. This study was guided by the following overarching research focus and research questions

- What are the lived experiences of African American women on their pathway to becoming a community college president?
    - What educational experiences, including relationships and professional development opportunities, shaped their career paths?
    - How did their self-awareness and identity as a Black woman impact their leadership roles?
    - What significant obstacles did these women face and overcome in their journey to their presidential role?
    - What is considered a successful pathway to the community college presidency for African American women based on these participants' shared experiences?

Overview to the Study's Methodology

This research study used a qualitative interpretive phenomenological design to allow the researcher to explore and compare in-depth experiences of current African American women community college presidents to (1) understand how participants make meaning of their individual experiences, and (2) determine themes and commonalities across participant narratives and examine how those experiences informed their career path. Qualitative research seeks to understand an individual's experiences and how they assign meaning to these experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A qualitative study is appropriate when the goal of the research is to explain a phenomenon by relying on the perception of a person's experience in a given situation (Stake, 2010), whereas a quantitative study is appropriate when the research seeks to understand the relationship between variables (Creswell, 2003). Thus, a qualitative

method was selected for this study. Qualitative research includes various types of research designs such as basic qualitative research, case studies, grounded theory, and phenomenology. This research study utilized a phenomenological design. In qualitative research, a phenomenon is described as something that is observed to occur or exist (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In phenomenological research, the researcher attempts to comprehend the human experiences as described by those who are experiencing the phenomenon (Creswell & Garrett, 2008). The ascension of African American women to the community college presidency is the phenomena being examined in this research study.

The researcher conducted semi-structured WebEx interviews consisting of open-ended questions, utilizing probes where appropriate for participants to elaborate on responses. Participants were provided the interview questions prior to their scheduled interview time. Interviews were scheduled for 45-60 minutes, with actual interviews lasting approximately 50 minutes.

Theoretical Framework

Black Feminist Thought (BFT) is the theoretical foundation that allowed the researcher to understand and analyze experiences of African American women during their journey to the community college presidency. Black Feminist Thought was formed in 1990 by Patricia Hills-Collins as a way to provide African American women a voice by allowing them to frame their ideas and experiences in their own way. Members of oppressed groups are often placed in a situation where they are only heard if they frame their ideas and language in a way that is comfortable for the dominant group (Collins, 2000). BFT addresses the intersectionality of race

and gender for Black women by placing their experience and ideas as the center of knowledge and thus was an appropriate framework to guide this research.

Participant Selection

Participants were identified through criterion-based and snowball sampling methods. Participants had to self-identify as African American women and currently hold the title of president at a community college in the United States. Potential participants were identified by the researcher conducting an online search for individuals who met the criteria, posting a call for participants in an online professional networking group for Black women, and attending a conference for women of color in higher education. The researcher directly invited 20 potential participants via email resulting in a total of five actual participants.

Delimitations of the Study

Delimitations refer to the boundaries of a study. This study was limited to five participants, three serving as president at community colleges in Southern states and two located in the Midwest. For confidentiality purposes, exact locations are not identified. Two participants led large urban institutions, two led small rural institutions, and one was located at a midsize suburban institution. This study does not include individuals who have served in more than one presidency or longer than six years, as study participants were all serving in their first presidency and time served as president ranged from 2-6 years. Individuals leading 4-year institutions and/or did not identify as African American women were specifically not included in this study. Online versus face-to-face interviews were utilized for convenience based on the researcher's inability to travel to all locations.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

The following definitions are terms utilized throughout this study. This list is provided to avoid any misunderstanding of how the researcher is defining the following terms. Definition of institution classifications provided by The Carnegie Classification of Institutions in Higher Education.

Full Time Equivalent (FTE). Full time equivalency for the purposes of full-time enrolled students.

Small Rural Institution. A college located in and around the countryside with an FTE enrollment of 500-1,999 students.

Midsize Suburban Institution. A college located in a small city, large town, or residential area with an FTE enrollment of 2,000-4,999 students.

Large Urban Institution. A college located in major metropolitan areas with an FTE enrollment of 5,000-9,999 students.

Pathway to the Presidency. For the purposes of this study, the researcher refers to participant's educational background, social and professional affiliations, previous position held, and any other experiences shared in participant narratives as contributing factors to achieving the position of community college president, as pathways to the presidency.

*Black Feminist Thought***.** Black Feminist Thought contains observations and interpretations about African American womanhood and experiences that take into consideration both race and gender when examining the experiences of African American women (Collins, 2000).

Black/African American. This term refers to an ethnic group of Americans with total or partial ancestry from any African racial groups. Based on the literature related to this research, the terms Black and African American are used interchangeably throughout the study.

Minority. This term refers to a part of a population differing from others in some characteristics and often subjected to differential treatment. For the purposes of this study, the researcher chose to use to the term *minority* to refer to any individual with a racial identity outside of Caucasian / white.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter provided a brief overview of the history of women in higher education along with a history of African American women's educational and professional attainment in higher education, ending with a definition of key terms used throughout this study. African American women play a significant role in relating to a diverse student body, and higher education is experiencing a continuously growing diverse student population. These women have a complex history as it relates to higher education, and in order to understand the challenges and experiences specific to this group of women, this study seeks to examine the lived experiences of African American women on their journey to become a community college president. The remainder of this study will consist of four chapters. Chapter Two will provide an in-depth review of the related literature. Chapter Three will consist of the research methodology and design. Chapter Four is an analysis of the research findings and Chapter Five includes a summary of the research findings and implications for future research.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to examine the phenomenon of African American women community college presidents and their pathway to the college presidency. For the purpose of this research, *pathway to the college presidency* refers to participant's educational background, social and professional affiliations, previous positions held, perceived barriers, strategies employed, and any other experiences shared in participant narratives as contributing factors to achieving the position of community college president. The literature review focuses on African American women in higher education and the identified contributors and barriers to their ascension to senior level leadership, the effects of race and gender in leadership in higher education as it pertains to the pathway to the presidency and concludes by identifying the gaps and methodological issues in the literature.

EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN IN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

African American women continue to pursue and earn graduate and professional degrees; however, their representation in the college presidency is still lacking. According to the College and University Professional Association (CUPA) (2020), African American women are underrepresented in higher education leadership roles, specifically in the position of college president. As of 2016, only 8% of two-year institutions had African American presidents, and an

even smaller percentage of this population was made up of women (American Council on Education [ACE], 2017). Because of the limited research on African American women community college presidents our knowledge of their experiences and pathways has been restricted; thus, it is important to examine the experiences of Black women in various avenues of educational leadership.

Perceived Barriers of Black Women in Educational Leadership Roles

Higher Education Leadership

Studies conducted on African American women who hold executive leadership roles in higher education have identified contributors such as leadership styles, mentorship, and educational attainment and barriers such as stereotypes, dual bias of race and gender, and organizational structure, as factors on their journeys (Becks-Moody, 2004; Carter, & Peters, 2016; Gamble & Turner, 2015). In 2004, Becks-Moody conducted a study to explore the hardships experienced by African American women administrators in higher education and the techniques they used to help them cope with the challenges. In this study, Becks-Moody (2004) used observation and open-ended interviews with ten African American women administrators (four deans, two presidents, and four vice-presidents) at Louisiana public education institutions. From the interview responses regarding challenges associated with their professional and personal administrative experiences, ten themes were discovered (Becks-Moody, 2004). The themes included balancing family and work, sexism and racism, familial support, spirituality, networking and mentoring, confidence and competency, underrepresentation and isolation, community awareness and career satisfaction, and disrespect from subordinates and colleagues (Becks-Moody, 2004). In a study on the experiences and perceptions of barriers to the

presidency of 43 African American female college and university presidents, Jackson and Harris' (2007) findings suggested that exclusion from informal networks, lack of preparation, and lack of career goals were primary barriers. Strategies to overcome these barriers included exceeding job expectations, being visible, and developing leadership skills. Mentoring was also suggested as a way to overcome barriers.

Britton (2013) also qualitatively explored challenges African American women community college presidents experienced and the strategies they used to successfully advance in their careers. According to Britton (2013), studying these issues is important because research suggests support systems are not in place to help these women advance in their careers, which could potentially cause a decrease in the number of African American women college presidents in the future. Britton (2013) used a qualitative case study design to collect data from four African American women community college presidents regarding their perspectives of challenging experiences using semi-structured interviews, a demographic questionnaire, and field notes. The results of the study, framed upon Critical Race and Black Feminist theories, indicated that challenges African American women endure during their pathway to presidency are more related to being women than being African American (Britton, 2013). Regardless, the results suggested that African American women's career opportunities in higher education are limited, contributing to the relatively small number of African American women college presidents (Britton, 2013).

Like Britton, (2013), Gamble and Turner (2015) suggested that scant research related to the elements and career paths that help African American women in seeking senior leadership positions in educational institutions exists. Therefore, Gamble and Turner (2015) explored the

essence of attaining a leadership position in higher education using a qualitative research methodology, face-to-face, in-depth interviews, a sample of ten African American women senior leaders employed by postsecondary institutions in Georgia, and horizontalization and phenomenological reduction of data. The results of the analysis revealed ten themes: (a) deficiency in Black representation in educational institutions, (b) lack of Black mentorship, (c) influence from personal history, (d) mentorship, (e) challenges with work-life balance, (f) networking, (g) influence from managers during their career, (h) risk-taking desires, (i) solid work ethic, and (j) the perceived value and desire to leave a legacy (Gamble & Turner, 2015).

Davis and Maldonado (2015) conducted a study to investigate the intersectionality between gender and race for Black women based on perceptions of their lived experiences of leadership development. The specific purpose of their qualitative research study was to examine the implications of gender and race for Black women in higher education using a phenomenological design that captures the essence of these women's stories and shared experiences. The results of the study revealed that race and gender influenced African American women's leadership development in higher education according to five themes. The central themes that emerged from the data included unexpected sponsorship, a predestination for success, a two-fold disadvantage from gender and race, leveraging the playing field, and paying it forward through mentorship. Overall, participants reported the intersection of gender and race as an influencing factor in their career pathway and leadership development. Despite their challenges, these women succeeded in an academic environment characterized by doubt, negative assumptions, and inequity, as they were able to uphold their responsibilities while simultaneously proving their ability and worth.

Collier (2018) was specifically interested in the way African American women coped with the expectations of both Black and female marginalized existences and subsequent psychological and social hurdles in pursuing professional advancement. Using Critical Race and Black Feminist Thought theories as the framework, a case study design, and a heuristic, narratological approach, Collier recorded Black women education leaders' stories and experiences regarding maintaining their sense of self while circumnavigating the barriers, challenges, and expectations related to their role as a leader. The results of the research revealed that participants remained grounded by holding true to their self-identity, central beliefs, and values; and that success involved obtaining support systems.

According to the studies presented in this section, African American women leaders in higher education experienced challenges during their pathway to leadership and during their time as a leader. These challenges mostly related to race and gender discrimination (Collier, 2018; Davis & Maldonado, 2015). According to the literature, contributors such as having a support system, holding on to one's beliefs and value system, and mentorship could help Black women higher education leaders overcome these challenges (Becks-Moody, 2004; Britton, 2013; Collier, 2018; Davis & Maldonado, 2015)

Leadership Roles in Higher Education

Domingue (2015) conducted a phenomenological study focused on Black women college students' leadership experiences in predominantly White universities. According to this author, leadership development during education is essential because students become empowered and engaged in positive social change. However, most leadership development models do not take into consideration the way students' gender and racial identities impact

peer interactions or leadership development when implemented. To highlight notable conventions of leadership among Black women, Domingue (2015) used Black Feminist Standpoint Theory to explore Black women students' leadership experiences. The basic premise of standpoint theory is that knowledge is socially situated and influenced by noncognitive factors such as one's gender and/or socio-economic status, asserting that when individuals share a particular social status or location, they often share meaningful experiences which can generate shared knowledge about the social world (Valadez, 2001). Thus, Black Woman's Standpoint Theory is an earlier variation of Patricia Hill Collin's Black Feminist Thought, the first assertion that Black women share important experiences that have helped foster the development of a group standpoint (Collins, 1997). Black Feminist Standpoint Theory later evolved into Black Feminist Thought, which takes the Black woman's standpoint and places it as the center of knowledge when exploring the effects that the intersectionality of race and gender have on Black women's experiences (Collins, 2009).

Edwards (2016) noted the lack of research focused on career pathways of African American women, and thus, investigated the professional and educational experiences of aspiring, practicing, and former Black women superintendents using qualitative interviewing, autoethnography, and an ethnomethodology. Edwards contended that the demographics of gender and race in educational leadership are unequal to the quantity of African American women superintendents, causing issues related to career preparation, equal opportunity, and leadership development that are significant to researchers in the field, policy makers, and practitioners (Edwards, 2016). African American women's path to presidency is highly influenced by their professional experience in academia prior to their presidency (Woodard,

2009). Furthermore, Latimore (2009) found that holding multiple positions within a college or university has a significant impact on African American women's career advancement to presidency in higher education. Because experiences in non-administrative faculty positions in higher education influence Black women's pathway to presidency, it is important to gain a better understanding of the challenges these women face as faculty.

Dade et al. (2015), conducted a case study to investigate the challenges and negative repercussions that Black faculty frequently experience due to institutional racism, structural inequalities, and a lack of cultural awareness at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). The aim of this article was also to illustrate that, even in institutions with a substantial number of Black faculty, discrimination and stereotyping still exist and influence retention and promotion and create uncomfortable experiences for new Black faculty members (Dade et al., 2015). The four authors were the subjects of this collective case study and provided their narrative accounts of being Black women faculty. Dade et al. concluded that the sharing of collective experiences could help these women's voices be heard and draw attention to a call for action for equal opportunity in higher education for African American women.

Chancellor (2019) contended that African American women faculty report experiences of gender and racial discrimination in modern-day educational PWIs, subjecting them to Racial Battle Fatigue (RBF). According to Smith et al. (2007), RBF is a culmination of "social-psychological stress responses (e.g., frustration, anger, exhaustion, physical illness, psychological or emotional withdrawal, escapism, acceptance of racist attributions) associated with being a person of color and the repeated target of racism" (p. 552). Based on the notion of racial battle fatigue, Chancellor (2019) aimed to investigate the experiences of African

American women faculty and portray the higher education hardships they endure such as marginalization, discreditation of minority related research, tokenism: race or ethnic representation expectations on committees, inequalities in workload and promotion, perceptions of an affirmative action related hire, and the expectation to mentor students of the same race.

Like Dade et al. (2015), Davis and Brown (2017) and Chancellor (2019) stated that African American women faculty inevitably face several challenges as they begin their careers as junior faculty in universities. Consequently, these women experience burnout and must overcompensate to alleviate oppression related to gender and race. Therefore, the purpose of Davis and Brown's (2017) literature review was to conceptualize the challenges that numerous African American women faculty face in higher education institutions, specifically historically Black colleges and universities, by systematically reviewing 16 studies.

Davis and Brown (2017) emphasized the significance of exploring the position African American women faculty take in diversifying and changing the climate and culture of universities to enhance awareness and admission to other African American women faculty in the institution. After analyzing several studies on African American women faculty members' experiences, a noticeable concept emerged related to a number of components of marginalization experiences (Davis & Brown, 2017). It appeared that African American women faculty are repeatedly discounted on several academia levels such as credibility, teaching ability, committee contribution, credentials, and collegiality. Furthermore, the discount was demonstrated in fiscal distributions, as African American women faculty are frequently asked to perform additional tasks and take more responsibilities for reduced wages. Hence, the

inevitable discount presents twice the challenge because institutions pay less for faculty members who do more, and African American women faculty face an unfriendly campus and university climate from automatic discounting that is persistent through the university and involuntarily endorsed by students, colleagues, and higher education stakeholders (Davis & Brown, 2017).

The results from research studies focused on the experiences of Black women in educational leadership indicated that the challenges these women experience are similar across all levels of leadership and in different contexts. For example, African American women leaders in higher education, K-12 districts, and student leaders all experience challenges related to race and gender (Collier, 2018; Domingue, 2015; Edwards, 2016). Additionally, a number of similarities exist between the challenges faced by African American women faculty and African American women college presidents (Domingue, 2015; Edwards, 2016; Collier, 2018). Furthermore, the body of related research has placed extra emphasis on the personal characteristics of African American women that may or may not influence their journey to becoming college president.

CHARACTERISTICS OF WOMEN WHO BECOME COLLEGE PRESIDENTS

The following discussion presents the current demographic of women in the United States who become college presidents as well as their leadership characteristics, educational attainment, and career pathway. As research continues to gain a deeper understanding of the current and future pathways to the college presidency for African American women, it is important to understand the characteristics of women overall who are becoming college presidents.

Institution Type

Corcoran (2008) investigated the perceptions of women college presidents regarding the continuing underrepresentation of women in the college presidency and found that women held only 20% of all presidencies within four-year institutions. Similarly, King and Gomez (2008) conducted a study on characteristics of the career patterns of college presidents that subsequently revealed that only 14% of doctoral-granting institutions are led by women, and that community colleges employ a higher percentage of women administrators than four-year colleges and universities. The most recent comprehensive study of community college leadership, the American Council on Education [ACE]'s (2017) presidents' survey — a detailed survey of the demographic characteristics, career backgrounds, roles, and duties of American higher education leaders — revealed that women were most likely to lead associate degree granting institutions, followed by special focus and master's institutions and that 53% of the senior level student affairs officers at community colleges were women. Women holding presidential roles in community colleges are higher than any other institution (Peoples, 2014); however, the number of black women occupying this role is less than 3% (Britton, 2013).

Personal Demographics

The 2017 ACE president's study also found that 75% of women presidents were married, 74% had children, and 31% reported that they altered their career to care for a dependent and/or spouse. Bornstein (2008) conducted a study examining the distinct leadership qualities of women and why they could become good college leaders. The findings revealed reasons why there are few women presidents in academe such as women presidents being twice as likely as male presidents to report altering career progression for family responsibilities, which may

support findings of the dual roles that women play in their personal and professional lives such as being the sole caretakers of children, aging parents, etc. Additionally, women presidents were also more likely than men to be serving in their first presidency, which could also be attributed to the dual roles reported by a number of women presidents (Bornstein, 2008).

Leadership Characteristics

Research by the American Association of Community Colleges (2011) on effective leadership has revealed that competencies, such as collaboration, problem-solving, and communication and traits, including honesty, courage, generosity, passion, and self-discipline are characteristics associated with successful community college leadership. Kouzes and Posner's (2008) longstanding research resulting in the Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership based on individual's experiences of excellent leadership claimed that descriptors such as visionary, innovator, motivator, and empower are all characteristics associated with successful leadership. The authors asserted that leaders (1) model the way — by finding their voice and setting an example; (2) inspire a shared vision — by envisioning the future and enlisting others in a common vision; (3) challenge the process — by venturing out into the unknown and being early supporters and adapters of innovation; (4) enable others to act — by fostering collaboration and strengthening others; and (5) encourage the heart — by recognizing contributions and celebrating values and victories. The research suggests that women presidents incorporate the five practices of exemplary leadership in multiple ways, but there has also been a consensus across several studies, including Stout-Stewart (2005) and Waring (2003), that although the characteristics of women presidents do not vary significantly by

institution type (rural, urban, suburban, etc.), as it relates to the five practices, there are notable differences based on racial identity.

Gregg (2004) conducted research on the characteristics and skill sets of women higher education leaders. This author conducted a qualitative study of ten female and ten male community college presidents examining the attributes and behaviors that lead to their success. Findings revealed that women were much more likely to focus on building internal relationships within the institution itself. Although both gendered groups spoke about community, the meaning of the word was different for women and men. Gregg (2004) also found that men spoke of "community" in reference to an identifier group while women viewed community as a way to bring people together for the common good.

In a 2006 quantitative study by Stout-Stewart on women community college presidents' effective leadership patterns, race and ethnicity proved to have an effect on leadership patterns. The participants included women community college presidents whose institutions were members of the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC). Participants were asked to rate thirty items on a 10-point scale on the five practices of exemplary leadership. Participants were also asked to fill out a questionnaire. Descriptive and analytical statistics were used to analyze the data and the findings indicated that participants differed in their leadership patterns based on race/ethnicity, experience, and education.

Bornstein's (2008) research noted that, historically, women entering into the presidency would adopt the traditional male model of leadership based on a hierarchal, top-down, command-and-control paradigm, but as the number of women holding presidencies has increased enough to represent a critical mass, many have begun to lead in ways that are more

comfortable for them. Women's complex lives, both personal and professional, make them adaptable, creative, and responsive — critical skills needed in higher education leadership today. Researched conducted by Wolverton et al. (2006) that has examined female college presidents as leaders reveal that they place high importance on characteristics such as relationship building, competency, communication, cultural sensitivity, and resiliency.

Wolverton's et. al (2006) qualitative study of five women college presidents found that in order to lead effectively, women must develop and maintain credibility with all groups they encounter. Participants also shared the idea that possessing effective communication skills is essential for an effective leader. Women viewed effective communication as communicating in a variety of formats to a variety of people via oral and written language, listening, and being visible. Women college presidents identified the need to encourage the people they work with to be good communicators, take on tasks, and to actively participate in the strategic vision and goals of the organization. Several studies, in fact, by Wolverton et al. (2006), Branch-Brioso (2009), and Barsh and Cranston (2011) of women college leaders revealed that passion is a common characteristic among women college presidents. Passion was identified by these leaders as a catalyst to understand the organization and demonstrate commitment as they represent the organization to their constituents.

Research by Amey et al. (2002), Barsh and Cranston (2011), and Berkelaar, Pope, and Cox (2011) focusing on perspectives of community college leadership found that women presidents display a heightened sense of competence, credibility, and communication, in part as a result of the increased scrutiny they experience as institutional leaders and also as a nod to their strength in forming relationships within the organization.

Reis (2015) also aimed to identify and describe the leadership characteristics of women university presidents who succeeded. The author used a qualitative narrative research design, interviews, and a sample of four women presidents of research-focused universities (Reis, 2015). The results of the study revealed four central themes: university leaders portrayed personality traits related to the Big 5 Personality Inventory (i.e., extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness to experience), being a connected leader is essential to success, contract negotiation leads to leadership growth, experiencing and enduring challenges aids in leadership development and improved practice, and the path to presidency is one of risk and intuition.

Wheat and Hill (2016) sought to gain a better understanding of the composite elements that influence women's administrative experiences in higher education and to lend voice to their experiences and meaning of leadership. To do so, the authors used a qualitative research methodology, in-depth interviews, and a purposive sample of 14 women senior administrators at different universities, including deans, provosts, vice presidents, and presidents. The researchers' specific aim was to explore how women administrators' gender intersected with other relevant identity factors to influence their leadership experience, identities, and practices. A significant result of this study was that administrators did not feel gender was an explicit obstacle when attaining their administrative position; however, they perceived gender as an influencing factor with regard to leadership views, leadership styles, and family and professional role spillover. At the time of the research, the authors contended that their study was the first known study to utilize a postmodern feminist theoretical framework combined

with a pluralistic approach to leadership to explore senior women administrators' experiences as leaders of doctorate-granting universities.

Furthermore, in a 2018 study by Reis and Grady examining the development of leadership skills viewed as most important to women college presidents, study results outlined three key areas of leadership development for women in or aspiring to the presidency: know the rules, hear the message, and opt in. These strategies outline how women in leadership can learn the rules to obtaining a presidency, pay attention to advice, and take advantage of opportunities that will assist in development of the aforementioned skillsets identified by women who hold presidencies.

LEADERSHIP CHARACTERISTICS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN

Research by Waring (2003) indicates that, similar to their white counterparts, African American women presidents tend to be adaptable in their leadership because of the complex roles they occupy outside of the workplace. However, the research found that African American women place a greater emphasis on relational aspects of their leadership. Waring's study of African American women presidents revealed that although decision making and credibility were critical in their role, their relationship with people formed the centerpiece of their thoughts about leadership.

A study by Wright (2008) also examined characteristics unique to the leadership of African American women. Wright's research found that Black women's utilization of "power" or authority in their positions is re-conceptualized. African American women reported re-conceptualizing power in a more supportive way to empower staff and address institutional challenges because of the struggle of multiple roles as an African American woman in their

everyday lives. The skills that African American women bring to the presidency also provide special insight when relating to diverse student populations. Wright (2008) also found that African American female presidents have been known to bring about gender, race, and class equity by challenging issues such as favoritism, dishonesty, and corruption at all levels of their respective organizations.

Although the research surrounding the career development, progression, and leadership styles of women college presidents is growing, much of this research classifies women presidents as a single group, discounting the potential impact of race, specifically for African American women. Holmes' (2008) research on African American women faculty's experience in higher education revealed that the intersection of race and gender does, in fact, largely influence the issues that Black women address in their respective leadership roles. Much of the research on African American presidents, such as work by Berger and Guidroz (2010) and Cook and Kim (2012), places men as the universal racial subject; subsequently the experiences of African American women as college presidents becomes lost.

Oikelome (2017) used a phenomenological research design with intersectionality as the framework to investigate perceptions on the influence of gender, race, and other identities on the career pathway and experiences of six Black and seven White women presidents in higher education. The results of this study revealed that gender identity is starting to become a marginal influencing factor, yet when combined with race, tensions from intersectionality influence experiences during the pathway to presidency for Black women. Oikelome concluded that, regardless of the burdens associated with these social concepts, participants utilized several different tactics for progressing up the presidential ladder including attending

leadership development training, finding a mentor, and making sure they were a good fit for the institution.

CAREER PATHWAYS TO THE COLLEGE PRESIDENCY

The 2017 comprehensive study of college and university presidents conducted by the American Council on Education (ACE) reported that only 38% of community college presidents were women, of this group only 8% were African American (Gagliardi et al., 2017). According to the literature, the lower percentage of women presidents may result from the challenges they face. Therefore, researchers in the field, including Jackson and Harris (2007), Commodore et al. (2016), and Horn (2018), continue to explore the factors that influence women's path to higher education presidency. Because there is a significant gap between educational attainment and college presidency for African American women, it is important to gain insight into the path taken by Black women who become college presidents.

Career Pathways by Race and Gender

According to studies conducted by Springer and Clark (2007) and Lockett et al. (2017), the linear and non-linear career paths of women leaders in academia has been a research interest for some time. While some of the literature reports U.S. women had a linear path up the academic ladder, other research reports a nonlinear or informal path to academic leadership. These findings suggest there is no clear pathway to leadership. Women whose paths were non-traditional reported they were not looking for a position of leadership intentionally and were even somewhat apprehensive in taking on a leadership role. These authors contended that scholarly research has also addressed gender differences in career

paths. Specifically, they found that women were found as more likely to attain their leadership positions from lower-level managerial jobs, whereas men were more likely to attain their leadership positions from a wide range of jobs. Springer and Clark (2007) also contended that self-education is a vital factor for women during career development and the most inspiring developmental occurrences are women's personal life experiences.

Counts (2012) used a narrative design to capture the experiences of two African American women who were leaders of Southeastern universities during key sociopolitical movements occurring between the 1960s and 1980s and while technical college systems were still in development. These women shared their stories and perceptions related to the challenges they endured and opportunities they took on their pathway to leadership. Counts (2012) used a qualitative approach, interpretative paradigm, critical race theory, and Black feminist theory as the theoretical frameworks, semi-structured interviews, and narrative analysis to attain rich descriptions of lived experiences and intricate perspectives of these women. Participants in this study identified the need for more mentorship dedicated to African American women aspiring leaders as a challenge endured and taking opportunities when they are presented as a benefit during their pathways to leadership.

Like Springer and Clark (2007) and Counts (2012), Latimore (2009) sought to gain a better understanding of how U.S. African American women ascend to community college presidency. The sample for this study included eight African American women presidents employed by accredited two-year colleges. Results revealed that this demographic extensively prepared for the position by obtaining a mentor and a terminal degree and that their careers

were influenced by their knowledge and management of sexism and racism within their institutions.

Woodard (2009) explored the barriers, challenges, experiences, and role of Black women presidents in higher education, specifically focusing on the role according to the social sentient construct of "race upliftment" as adopted by 20th century African American scholars. According to the Woodard (2009), race upliftment is primarily advocated for when the president is leading a Historically Black College or University. For this study, Woodard used a qualitative research methodology, phenomenological design, in-depth interviews, and a demographic questionnaire with a sample of eight African American women presidents in higher education. According to these results, the participants' role as president influenced their role as leader, and these women based their perceptions of their role on their experiences during their pathway to presidency. Other influential factors included community, formal education and training, upbringing, and other professional experience in academia before their presidency.

Hague and Okpala (2017) investigated African American women's leadership experiences using a qualitative research design, with the aim of shedding light on the aspects that influence career growth. The authors interviewed 12 African American women chairs, presidents, vice presidents, directors, and deans who were employed by North Carolina community colleges and met inclusion criteria. Several themes emerged from the triangulated data, which related to experiences and perceptions of elements that influenced career growth. The themes that had implications for practice, policy, and leadership included establishing relationships, gender, race, networking, and leadership preparation.

POSITIVE CONTRIBUTORS TO PRESIDENTIAL CAREER PATHWAYS

In exploring African American women's paths to a college presidency, several studies indicated mentorship and leadership development as key positive contributors along their journeys.

MENTORSHIP AS A CONTRIBUTOR

Ehric et al. (2001) found that career development was directly connected to mentoring and was as a direct result of the learning that takes place during the interchange. Gardella and Haynes (2004) conducted focus groups to examine how women developed leadership skills through networks and mentoring. The study concluded that, overall, participants reported that strong relationships with women contributed to their confidence, helped them to resist prejudice and discrimination, and help them maintain their integrity and goals as they progressed in their careers.

Gibson (2006) conducted a study of nine female faculty members' mentoring experiences to determine what qualities characterized the mentoring relationship. Study results indicated that feeling a connection, being affirmed in one's beliefs, not being alone, and the navigation of politics were used to describe the benefits of the mentoring experience. Gibson's research also revealed the importance of same race and gender mentor relationships, noting that topics such as family and work life balance could not be addressed with male mentors. As a result of this research, it was concluded that that the cultivation of a mentoring culture for women, particularly black women, is necessary for successful career advancement.

Additionally, research conducted by DeLong et al. (2008) validated mentoring as an essential component for career advancement in higher education leadership.

According to research by Gamble and Turner (2015), good leadership is essential to the success of any institution, and good leadership is associated with good leadership development programs. Furthermore, Gamble and Turner (2015) contended that higher education leaders should foster learning environments that center toward diversity awareness in daily routines. These diversity-focused programs are developed to afford a wider appreciation of diversity leaders who emphasize the importance of incorporating those beliefs and values into institutional operations. This appreciation and awareness of diversity is all the more important in higher education institutions that lack African American leadership or mentorship.

Commodore et al. (2016) contended that the most coveted academic position is president. Based on this notion and the predicted high rate of retirement among Historically Black Colleges & University (HBCU) presidents, the researchers explored HBCU leaders' perceptions regarding factors that are important for aspiring HBCU presidents, such as mentoring opportunities and practices and professionalism. This study utilized a qualitative research design, interviews, and a sample of 21 practicing presidents, personnel from presidential search companies, and members of the institutional board. According to the results of the coding and qualitative analysis of transcribed interviews, self-awareness, and engaging in leadership development programs are essential factors of successful presidency in HBCUs.

Davis (2016) was also interested in diversity in leadership development programs. Specifically, Davis' (2016) study was designed to discover how the intersection of gender and race influenced factors of leadership development according to the perspectives of eight Black women who were academic or business executives. One of the aims of the study was to

discover tactics aspiring women African American leaders could use to enhance leadership development and advance their careers and transition into leadership roles.

Based on research by Hague and Okpala (2017), it is reasonable to assume that leadership development programs may pave the path toward community college leadership. In North Carolina, for example, the programs BRIDGES and the North Carolina Community College Leadership Program (NCCCLP) afford opportunities to network and provide beneficial leadership development for women aspiring to become higher education leaders. Furthermore, research has shown that professional development programs train mid-level community college managers to be more effective.

Clearly, women who aspire to become president of a college or university face numerous challenges. Several research studies by Gagliardi et al. (2017), Lockett et al. (2017), Horn (2018), and Jean Marie and Tickles (2018) have shown that women not only have difficulty navigating their career journey in academia, but also struggle with developing themselves as leaders, finding a balance between work and life, attaining a mentor, and obtaining the administrative experience they require to become president. Individually, these challenges are significant; however, each has the ability to generate further complex issues.

For example, research conducted by Horn (2018) indicates that senior academic officers and provosts are most frequently selected for university president positions, but even officers and provosts need administrative experience and often require a mentor to transition into their position. Although leadership development programs will not guarantee the attainment of presidency alone, they hold a great deal of value for one's pathway to presidency. This assertion has been supported in the literature; for instance, in Horn's study, eight out of the ten

women presidents perceived their participation in leadership development programs helped them achieve their goal of becoming president because the content, activities, connections, and literature within the programs focused on university governance.

However, leadership development in higher education is not always perceived in this light. Ford and Cavanaugh (2017) used a talent management framework to describe the steps aspiring leaders take as they progress upward in the administrative career chain. The focal point of these steps were strategies related to performance, development, recruitment, and retention. An assumption in higher education is that those who hold terminal degrees do not need leadership development because they are intelligent enough to come up with their own resources to help them succeed. Another assumption is that individuals must leave their current institution to progress to more senior leadership positions such as provost, dean, or president, which encourages perceptions that universities do not hire or promote their own.

GAPS IN THE LITERATURE

Venzant-Sampson (2017) suggested that the role of president for African American women needs to be examined further to determine a more thorough understanding of what the position of the community college presidency requires. Researchers Jean-Marie and Tickles (2018) also commented on the how the limited body of literature on African American women community college presidents restricts our knowledge of their experiences and pathways as they navigated the journey to the community college presidency. They called for further examination of presidency requirements to provide additional base knowledge for Black women who aspire to the position. Collier (2018) further suggested researchers in the future should continue to explore African American women's lived experiences of leadership in

education. Aspiring college or university presidents or higher education executive leaders may benefit from having a better understanding of what is required and expected of the individual that takes on the position.

Most of the research studies in this literature review used a qualitative methodology to explore the pathway to presidency for African American women in higher education (Latimore, 2009; Britton, 2013; Wheat & Hill, 2016; Hague & Okpala, 2017; Reis & Grady, 2018). As such, these studies were limited by the nature of qualitative research, including small sample sizes and geographic constraints and the the inability to generalize about the data to a broader population (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Wheat and Hill (2016) contended that their sample of participants from four-year colleges and universities limited their findings to women senior administrators and presidents at doctoral-granting institutions. They argued that future research should explore the influence of presidents' leadership positionality on their experiences, identities, and practices in community colleges. Hague and Okpala (2017) also posited that exploring African American women's pathway to presidency at one university system also presents a limitation. These researchers also suggested that future research should employ similar methods within community colleges to expand our awareness of variances with pathways in these environments.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter provided an overview of the related research for this study. Research solely on African American women community college presidents is limited; thus, this chapter provided a review of the literature regarding the experiences of Black women in various areas of educational leadership. In addition, a review of literature on the leadership characteristics of

African American women, career pathways, and perceived contributions and barriers in relation to their white counterparts was provided. Lastly, this chapter identified the gap in the literature to be the requirement of more research examining in-depth experiences of African American women presidents at two-year institutions during their career progression.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

INTRODUCTION

This chapter begins with a restatement of the study's purpose and research question. A rationale for the chosen research plan including the methodology, study participants, data collection procedures, method of analysis, ethical concerns, and limitations of the study are primary components of this chapter. This qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of five current African American female community college presidents on their pathway to the presidency, to gain a deeper understanding of how participant's make meaning of their experiences, if there are commonalities across participant narratives, and how these experiences impacted their pathway to the presidency.

OVERVIEW TO THE STUDY'S PURPOSE AND AIMS

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to examine the phenomenon of African American female community college presidents and their pathway to the college presidency. This research sought to understand the essence of participants' lived experiences by examining the meaning they made from their individual encounters, while also conducting analysis of shared experiences across participant narratives. For the purpose of this research, *pathway to the presidency* refers to participant's educational background, social and professional affiliations, previous position held, perceived barriers, strategies employed, and

any other experiences shared in participant narratives as factors that influenced their path to the position of community college president. This study utilized transcripts from semi-structured interviews as the primary method of data collection. Ultimately, the goal of this study is to expand the limited body of research that focuses on the essence of African American female community college presidents' experiences and inform the higher education community on potential barriers and necessary resources to prepare, recruit, and retain African American women as community college presidents.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:

- What are the lived experiences of African American women on their pathway to becoming a community college president?
    - What educational experiences, including relationships and professional development opportunities, shaped their career paths?
    - How did their self-awareness and identity as a Black woman impact their leadership roles?
    - What significant obstacles did these women face and overcome in their journey to their presidential role?
    - What is considered a successful pathway to the community college presidency for African American women based on these participant's shared experiences?

The research questions sought to examine various lived experiences of African American female community college presidents in order to (1) understand how participants make meaning of their individual experiences, and (2) determine themes and commonalities across participant narratives and examine how those experiences informed their career path.

RATIONALE FOR QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

As described by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), qualitative research seeks to describe and understand how people interpret and make meaning of their experiences and construct their worlds. They further elaborate by noting that qualitative research is an umbrella covering multiple forms of inquiry that assist in understanding and explaining the meaning of social phenomena. A qualitative study is appropriate when the goal of the research is to explain a phenomenon by relying on the perception of a person's experience in a given situation (Stake, 2010), whereas a quantitative study is appropriate when the research seeks to understand the relationship between variables (Creswell, 2003). Braun and Clarke (2013) provided a simple distinction between the two methods, stating that quantitative research uses numbers as data and analyzes them using statistical techniques and qualitative research uses words as data that can be collected and analyzed in several ways. Because the purpose of this study was to examine the experiences and perceptions of African American women as they ascended to the community college presidency, a qualitative research method was most appropriate.

PHENOMENOLOGICAL METHOD

Although to some extent the goal of all qualitative research is to uncover participants' understandings of their experiences, phenomenology involves a focus on the experience itself and how experiencing something is subsequently transformed into consciousness. Phenomenologists are not interested in modern science's efforts to categorize, simplify, and reduce phenomena to abstract laws, but rather, they are interested in the lived experiences (Van Manen, 2017). In phenomenological research, the researcher attempts to comprehend the human experiences as described by those who are experiencing the phenomenon (Creswell &

Garrett, 2008). Michael Patton (1990) identified a clear detailed explanation of the aim of phenomenological research:

> Phenomenological research is based on the assumption that there is an essence or essences to shared experiences. These essences are the core meanings mutually understood through a phenomenon commonly experienced. The experiences of different people are bracketed, analyzed, and compared to identify the essences of the phenomenon, for example the essence of loneliness, the essence of being a mother, or the essence of being a participant in a particular program. (p. 70)

This research study sought to compare the experiences of African American women community college presidents to reveal the true essence and internal structure of what African American women experience as they navigate the pathway to the presidency; thus, a phenomenological design was selected. In addition to the various types of qualitative research, there is also more than one philosophical approach to phenomenology, and findings generated from the research will depend upon the chosen philosophical approach.

Researcher as Primary Instrument

A shared characteristic of all forms of qualitative research is the researcher serving as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. Since the goal of qualitative research is to gain understanding, the human instrument is the most ideal means of doing so. The researcher can be immediately responsive and adaptive, check in with participants for clarification, and explore unusual or unanticipated responses (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). However, the human instrument also has biases and shortcomings that could have an impact on the study. As previously mentioned, the interpretive approach to phenomenology sees the researcher's presuppositions and connection to the phenomena as a valuable guide to inquiry, if they are explicitly acknowledged and a relevant theoretical framework is used to guide the

data collection and analysis (Lopez & Willis, 2004). The researcher in this study is an African American woman who has worked in the higher education sector for thirteen years, primarily in the areas of diversity and inclusion.

STUDY PARTICIPANTS

SAMPLING

Purposeful sampling, specifically snowball sampling, was used in this study and participants were matched to specified criteria. As described by Patton (1990):

> The logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. Information rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research, thus the term purposeful sampling. (p. 169)

Participants were purposefully selected because their race, gender, and current professional position qualified them to provide critical insights into the phenomenon of interest. The sample population included current community college presidents in the United States who identified as African American and female. Participants were identified through criterion-based and snowball sampling methods. Criterion-based and snowballing sampling methods were chosen due to the small number of potential research participants and the close networks among African American professionals in higher education. Criterion sampling involved the researcher identifying what attributes of the sample population were crucial to the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016); for the purposes of this study, participants had to self-identify as African American and female, and currently hold the title of president at a community college in the United States.

Snowball sampling has been noted by scholars as one of the most common forms of purposeful sampling. Snowball sampling involves locating a few key participants who easily meet established criteria and asking for referrals to other individuals who also meet the criteria (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher attended the Michigan ACE Network's 2018 annual Women of Color Collaborative Conference. This conference was attended by various women of color, predominately African American, holding senior-level leadership positions in higher education and allowed the researcher the opportunity to connect with potential research participants and network with other potential participants for the duration of the conference. Networking opportunities allowed the researcher to introduce themselves, establish rapport, and garner potential interest in the research topic. The researcher hoped that connections made during the conference would provide future opportunities to connect with potential participants who were not in attendance.

After networking with potential participants at the Women of Color Conference, conducting an online search for prospective participants who met the criteria, and posting information about the research in an online professional networking group for African American women the researcher was able to identify five current African American female community college presidents willing to serve as study participants.

Demographic Profile

The researcher used a closed-ended questionnaire method to collect demographic data from the participants prior to the study; demographic information included the participant's age, marital status, level of education, number of children, and time in presidential position.

The demographic profile questionnaire was completed by each participant prior to the scheduled interview.

Table 1. Study Participants

Pseudonym	Highest Earned Degree	Institution Type	Years in Presidency
President A	Ed.D.	Large, urban community college	6
President B	M.Ed.	Small, rural community college	2
President C	Ed.D.	Mid-sized suburban community college	2.5
President D	Ph.D.	Large, urban community college	6
President E	J.D.	Small, rural community college	4

DATA COLLECTION

Phenomenological interview was the primary method of data collection to get at the underlying structure of the meaning of an experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Thus, a phenomenological approach was most appropriate for this study as it sought to uncover the essence of the experiences of African American female community college presidents on their journey to the presidency.

In this study, the researcher conducted semi-structured WebEx interviews consisting of open-ended questions. The interviews were scheduled for 45-60 minutes, with the actual interviews lasting approximately 50 minutes.

Semi-structured interview questions were used to guide the WebEx interviews. WebEx is a video web-conferencing software that enabled the researcher to host private individual interviews. The WebEx software also enabled the researcher to record audio and video during

the interview session. The researcher chose to utilize WebEx interviews as a point of convenience to limit study participants based on location.

DATA ANALYSIS

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) describe data analysis as the process of making sense of the data that involves consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what participants have said and what the researcher has seen and read. In other words, data analysis is the process of making meaning of the data and ultimately the phenomenon of interest. This approach can be done in three essential steps according to Creswell (2003): (1) description and classification of collected data; (2) arrangement and abbreviation of data by assigning themes through a coding process; and (3) presentation of the data. This study utilized a phenomenological analysis process, specifically bracketing, and member checking techniques, described further in this chapter.

VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY

Ensuring validity and reliability in qualitative research involves conducting the investigation in an ethical manner (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Research designs are based on different assumptions about what is being investigated, and they seek to answer different questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In qualitative research, *understanding* is the primary rationale behind the investigation. Trustworthy qualitative research is consistent in data collection and uses acceptable research procedures, and the findings of the research are available for analysis by others.

In qualitative research, providing a thorough and detailed explanation of procedures and making clear how conclusions were drawn from the findings assist with establishing validity

and reliability. Validity refers to the credibility of the research. Patton (1990) states "the credibility of qualitative inquiry is especially dependent on the credibility of the researcher because the researcher is the instrument of data collection and of the analytical process" (p. 261). Reliability typically refers to the extent to which the research study can be duplicated and replicated (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). According to Guba and Lincoln (1994), reliability in qualitative research is the extent to which the findings of the study are consistent with the data collected. In this study, internal and external validity were used to enhance the credibility of the findings. Internal validity is the determination of whether the research findings match what is really there (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). There are a number of strategies for achieving internal validity; the two used in this study were member checks and bracketing of researcher's biases.

Member Checking

The idea of member checking, or respondent validation, is to solicit feedback from study participants on the translation or interpretation of their responses. Member checking is an evaluative process that involves check and balances (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this study, participants were able verify that the transcript accurately captured their lived experiences by reviewing and providing feedback of their interview transcript. The researcher also made note of responses during the interview that were not clear or required elaboration and asked participants for clarification later in the interview. The elaboration of these responses allowed the researcher to accurately report the participant's experiences.

Bracketing

Prior to conducting phenomenological interviews, the researcher explores his or her own experiences to become aware of personal prejudices, viewpoints, and assumptions that may bias the researcher's examination of the phenomena and set them aside; this process is known as *bracketing* (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Researcher Biases

Because of the characteristics of qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) discuss the importance of the researcher seeking out, acknowledging, and monitoring their biases in relation to the theoretical framework and in light of the researcher's own interest in order to make clear how they may be shaping the collection and interpretation of data. Therefore, qualitative researchers must understand how they influence the findings of a study. As previously mentioned, for this research study, the researcher used bracketing to identify and set aside her biases that could impact the research.

EXTERNAL VALIDITY

External validity is also referred to as generalizability or the extent in which the findings of one study can be applied to another. Although a small non-random purposeful sample is not widely generalizable, which is the case for this research, the most common understanding of generalizability in qualitative research is to think in terms of the reader or user of the study. The researcher ensured external validity by providing readers with detailed descriptions of the

study's sampling and selection methods and participant's journey toward the community college presidency.

Ethical Considerations

Kornbluh (2015) emphasizes the importance of the trustworthiness of the researcher to the credibility of the qualitative research. There are two traditional considerations in the ethics of qualitative research with human subjects: (1) Informed consent and (2) protecting participants from being harmed (Lockett et al., 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For the protection of participants in this study, the researcher complied with all regulations for the Ferris State University Institutional Review Board concerning the protection of human subjects (see Appendix A).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Black Feminist Thought

Black Feminist Thought (BFT) is the theoretical foundation that allowed the researcher to understand and analyze experiences of African American women during their journey to the community college presidency. Black Feminist Thought was formed in 1990 by Patricia Hills-Collins as a way to provide African American women a voice by allowing them to frame their ideas and experiences in their own way. Members of oppressed groups are often placed in a situation where they are heard only if they frame their ideas and language in a way that is comfortable for the dominant group (Collins, 2000). Historically, elite white men have controlled Western structures of knowledge validation and their interest have controlled the themes and paradigms of traditional scholarship, resulting in African American women's

experiences being distorted or excluded from what counts as knowledge (Collins, 2000). Black Feminist Thought involves making African American women the dominant group by placing their experiences and ideas at the center of analysis and comparing their experiences to one another. BFT also challenges members of other groups, such as white feminist and African American men, to investigate the similarities and differences among their own standpoint and those of African American women (Collins, 2000). Collins (2000) identified four dimensions of BFT: (1) lived experience as a criterion of meaning, (2) the use of dialogue to assess knowledge claims, (3) the ethic of caring, and (4) the ethics of personal accountability; all of which aid in helping the researcher understand the interviewee as a participant with agency and history. These four dimensions helped Black women qualitative researchers bridge the disconnect between their personal and professional lives. It also supported them in increasing their understanding of their participants' experiences particularly as it pertained to the intersections of race, class, gender, and other cultural intricacies (Clemons, 2019).

When Black Feminist Thought and qualitative research come together, they provide a methodological practice that works to increase the level of understanding among researchers and participants. How the researcher conducts fieldwork, codes the data, and builds rapport with participants is extremely important. When utilizing Black feminist thought as a methodological technique, researchers recognize this as a political stance (Clemons, 2019). There is a commitment to making sure the work is self-reflexive. Like the interpretive phenomenological approach, Black Feminist Thought embarks on the analysis of qualitative research by incorporating the researcher's perspective as valuable knowledge. Qualitative research that utilizes Black Feminist Thought as a theoretical framework is not an objective

endeavor, void of the interrelationships formed and maintained by the researchers and participants (Generett et al., 2003). Researchers must answer personally and professionally: "what's my investment in this research?" Positionality has its roots in feminist literature and allows researchers to clearly identify the lens through which they interpret the social world. Black Feminist Thought and qualitative research in education positions data analysis as a process of organizing, interpreting, and producing stories that generate reflexivity (Clemons, 2019). Thus, BFT is often a framework utilized in studies conducted about Black women by Black women.

Davis (2016) utilized Black Feminist Thought as a lens in a study examining the mentoring experiences of Black women in graduate and professional schools. Davis wrote, "the findings are central to placing Black women at the center of their own realities as students in graduate and professional schools and support the importance of mentoring among African American women as a method of empowerment and uplift in the academy" (Davis, 2016, p. 531). The connections she made between what participants shared and the distinguishing features of Black feminist thought highlight the need for more mentoring opportunities for Black women. Further, in some of her more recent work, Davis and Maldonado (2015) articulated how the conceptual underpinnings of BFT serve as a leading theoretical lens for understanding the intersections of race, gender, class, ability, sexuality, and citizenship for Black females. In a lecture given at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign entitled "Hidden in Plain Sight: The Black Woman's Blueprint for Institutional Transformation in Higher Education," Davis reminded the audience that despite Black women's high achievement, Black female collegians and academics routinely have their ways of knowing when they are devalued

as a result of the myriad of ways institutionalized oppression manifests through racism and sexism. The use of Black feminist thought helps make sense of these challenges and provides a critical record through various historical moments (Clemons, 2019).

Concepts such as Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Feminist Theory are applicable to this research but are limited in scope. CRT draws upon the lived experiences of people of color and asserts that white Americans do not respond to the needs of African Americans unless it is of benefit to white Americans (Solórzano, 1998); however, CRT excludes the concept of gender in its ideas. Feminist Theory focuses on the oppression of women and aids in the understanding of some struggles of oppression that exist within organizations (Chafetz, 2004). Feminist Theory provides insight into the female perspective of gender oppression within organizations; however, it assumes that all women exist in homogeneity and have similar struggles (Chafetz, 2004), therefore grouping African American women's experiences with the dominant female population.

Black Feminist Thought addresses the intersectionality of race and gender for African American women and strives to communicate multiple oppressions of African American women around two main ideas: (1) the experiences and oppression of African American women are different from other women and (2) commonalities and differences exist between African American women when considering religion, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status (Collins, 2000).

Black Feminist Thought was an appropriate framework to guide this research due to its ability to acknowledge that sexism, class oppression, and racism are all inextricably bound. BFT also provided room for the researcher's experiences to be used as valuable knowledge and a

method of rapport to incite open, honest, and detailed narratives from participants. Black Feminist Thought was used as a guide in structuring interview questions, as a filter to explore participant's experiences, and allowed the researcher to use Black women's experience as central knowledge, which subsequently enabled closer examination of other experiences and factors that influenced their pathway to the community college presidency.

DELIMITATIONS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

DELIMITATIONS

The small, non-random purposeful selection for the participants in this study comprises the study's main delimitations. This selection process and the sample size indicates that, while the findings of this study are not intended to be predictive for all African American women, the narratives reported here reflect the lived experiences of African American female leaders in the community college setting and, thus, provide valuable insight.

In addition, another delimitation of the study is the researcher identifying as an African American woman in higher education. A final key delimitation is the study's application of BFT to center the participants' experiences and use it as a lens for interpreting participant experiences.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter provided a description of the research methodology chosen to examine the pathway to the community college presidency for African American women. This chapter discussed the sample selection, data collection, and analysis methods. The study utilized a qualitative phenomenological design, specifically epoché and member checking techniques for

analysis. The measures taken to ensure validity and reliability were also addressed, as well as ethical concerns and limitations of the study. The following chapter will discuss the research findings in detail.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative research study was to examine the lived experiences of African American female community college presidents on their journey to the presidency. The current body of knowledge on African American female community college presidents is limited, and much of the research focuses on leadership style and lack of representation in leadership as it pertains to the target demographic (Barsh & Cranston, 2011; Domingue, 2015; Gregg, 2004; Kouzes & Posner, 2008; Reis, 2015). This study sought to understand what is considered a *successful pathway* to the community college presidency for African American women and gain a deeper understanding of the essence of participant's lived and shared experiences by comparing participant narratives.

For the purposes of this study, *pathway* refers to participant's educational background, social and professional affiliations, previous positions held, perceived barriers, strategies employed, and any other experiences shared in participant narratives as factors that influenced their path to the position of community college president. This chapter will present the findings that emerged from the data collected through interviews and demographic profile questionnaires to answer the following research questions:

- What are the lived experiences of African American women on their pathway to becoming a community college president?
    - What educational experiences, including relationships and professional development opportunities, shaped their career paths?

- How did their self-awareness and identity as a Black woman impact their leadership roles?
- What significant obstacles did these women face and overcome in their journey to their presidential role?
- What is considered a successful pathway to the community college presidency for African American women based on these participant's shared experiences?

Semi-structured WebEx interviews were conducted with all five participants. Using the list of interview questions (see Appendix B) as a guide, the researcher aimed to understand each participant's experiences as she navigated the journey to community college president. All participants were provided the interview questions prior to their scheduled interview to prepare. Interview questions were intentionally brief and open-ended to allow participants to speak freely and tell their stories. The researcher utilized probes where appropriate for participants to elaborate on their responses.

INTRODUCTION TO THE SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

The five study participants had varying experiences based on factors such as professional background, experience, and personal demographics. Each participant had varying lengths of time of experience in the role of president, but all were currently in their first presidency. Immediately prior to obtaining their presidency, four of the participants were employed in the field of higher education and the other was a practicing attorney while simultaneously serving as a member of the Board of Governors for a state college system for ten years. Of the four women who held immediate past positions in higher education, three were senior level academic officers and one held a senior position in student services. One of

the women moved through the ranks to president within one institutional college system and the other three ascended to the presidency by changing institutions.

In summary, the participants' past work history displayed an array of career pathways and represented a variety of positions within and outside of higher education. In addition to past career experiences, participants represented varying degrees of demographics relating to age, marital status, and education. Table 2 provides a summary of the characteristics provided in response to the demographic profile questionnaire. To ensure participants personally identified with the target demographic, the questionnaire contained a question regarding their identity as an African American woman.

Table 2. Participant Demographic Details

	Identify as AA Woman	Age Group	Marital Status	Highest Degree	# of Children	Years in Presidency
President A	Yes	56+	Married	Ed.D.	1	6
President B	Yes	56+	Married	M.Ed.	2	2
President C	Yes	41-55	Married	Ed.D.	0	2.5
President D	Yes	56+	Divorced	Ph.D.	1	6
President E	Yes	41-55	Married	JD	2	4

PRESIDENTIAL PROFILES

President A.

President A has served in her current role for six years. Her educational background consists of a bachelor's degree in Technical Teacher Education, a master's degree in Educational Leadership, and a Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership. President A also attended a

community college where she received an associate's degree. She is married with one adult child and is over 56 years of age.

President A shared that her journey to the presidency began with her success as a community college student. She spent 17 years at the same institution and progressed from student to student aide, part-time faculty, and then to a full-time faculty member in Computer Aided Drafting. President A became very well versed, not only in her institution, but in the structure of higher education within her state including compiled law around the structure of education and the things that impacted it. This led to President A being recruited to another state system that was highly innovative and allowed her the opportunity to partner with and receive funding from a program through the National Science Foundation (NSF), which subsequently caught the attention of the National Governor's Board, Department of Education, Department of State, and Department of Labor.

President A describes this as the time when her career *exploded,* as she was afforded the opportunity to attend and present at national and international conferences and the world "opened up to her," as she described it. This was also the point in time when she was encouraged and funded by her chancellor to earn her doctoral degree, as the majority of employees working in that system already had terminal degrees. President A shares that she was "never intending to become a college president." However, within two weeks of commencement, she was approached by a consultant for the state in which she currently serves as a community college president, resulting in her being placed in two presidential searches. Upon becoming a finalist in both searches, President A had the opportunity to select

which institution's offer she would accept and currently serves as president of her selected institution. "I started out batting a thousand!" she shared.

President A credits the networking opportunities and relationships she was able to build throughout her journey as playing significant roles in her ascension to the presidency. She explained that she felt blessed by her opportunities because she never applied to any position — her body of work and relationships afforded her the opportunity to be sought out for each role she has held. President A also acknowledged that she has a wide array of people who have, and continue to, support her throughout her journey, even when it did not seem like support. She now realizes that preparation in the form of "tough love" is still a method of support. President A acknowledges she experienced situations throughout her journey — what she refers to as "resiliency builders" — that although often planted feelings of self-doubt, taught her lessons in leadership that attribute to her success as president today.

President A firmly believes that active listening skills and networking are the most important skillsets to both aspiring and sitting presidents. Her recommendation to the higher education community is to promote and take advantage of organizations designed to professionally develop and groom future African American leaders in higher education.

PRESIDENT B.

President B has served in her role as President for two years. Her educational background consists of a bachelor's degree in Business, a minor in Economics, and a master's degree of education in Student Personnel Administration. President B is married with two adult children and is over 56 years of age.

President B identified her journey as somewhat atypical for the presidency, articulating that she certainly "worked her way up through the system." She began in the two-year college system in 1989 as a counselor on a federal Title III grant and served in the role for one year before becoming the director of Student Support Services, which was a federally grant funded program under TRIO. After serving one year as the director of Student Support Services, she then became the director of Student Services for the institution, responsible for all student services functions including admissions, financial aid, student activities, student conduct, and registration and graduation. Several years later, she was promoted to dean of Students.

President B's institution soon merged with another local community college to become a comprehensive system. Following the merger, President B became dean of Students for several campuses within the system until she became dean of Student Affairs and then campus dean; she served in that role until she applied for her current presidency. President B believes that her long-time service in an administrative role at a community college contributed to her success in ascending to the presidency because she wore multiple hats, allowing her to learn aspects from across the entire college. She gained experience in Instructional and Student Affairs as well as experience managing multimillion-dollar budgets under federal grant programming.

President B credits the culmination of experience she gained progressing through the ranks of Student Affairs that most prepared her for her presidency. She explains the breadth of experience she received by detailing various responsibilities:

> When you work in Student Affairs, you have to be well-versed in Instructional Affairs also because much of what we do kind of depends upon each other. We're kind of bookends, if you will, and so you really have to know the instructional programs, you have to know the degree plans for the courses of study, because advising also fell under

> the Student Affairs arena. So, I had to be very versed in the courses that were required for each of the majors, what students should take the prerequisites for those courses, the course outlines — all of that — because we had to advise the students.

President B also believes that the various professional networks she participated in throughout her journey, particularly executive board positions, contributed significantly to her career success. She explained that when you are selected to serve in leadership positions for professional associations, you get an opportunity to rub elbows with people you would not traditionally have the opportunity to meet. These roles not only expanded her knowledge base, but also fostered relationships with others in the field that became part of her support networks and continue to serve as sounding boards for her today. President B acknowledges that her rise to the presidency did not come without some disappointments, but she also believes that disappointments made her into a stronger administrator and leader.

President B shared that the ability to communicate effectively with others — both internal and external to the institution — and motivate them while remaining "teachable" are the most critical skillsets necessary for the presidency. Her recommendation to the higher education community is to be open and receptive to individuals who may come from different walks of life and have different backgrounds because they have value.

She stressed, noting that a majority of presidencies at higher education institutions are held by white males and that, at the time of her appointment, she was the only African American president in her entire state: "if we are going to diversify the leadership, we have to diversify the thought process when selecting the leaders."

PRESIDENT C.

President C has served as president for three and a half years. Her educational background includes a bachelor's degree of Art in Radio/TV Broadcasting, a master's in Education, and a doctorate in Educational Evaluation and Policy. President C does not have children, is married, and is 43 years of age.

As President C shared her narrative and experiences along the way, she described her entire journey as *opened doors,* and explained that her entire life came to be by doors that seemed to open continuously for her. President C did not begin her journey with a desire to work in the field of education. She completed her undergraduate studies with the intention to become a radio/TV broadcaster: "I always joke with people that I wanted to be the next Oprah Winfrey!" she explains. Upon graduation, President C obtained a position as the assistant director of Public Relations for the local hospital close to her hometown. After working at the hospital for two years, the local community college wanted to develop a communications technology program and were in search of someone with a bachelor's degree in radio/TV broadcasting, particularly a person of color. President C was hired for the position during her initial meeting with the president of the college.

President C assisted with developing the program into a workforce training program and was then moved to a faculty position as a communications instructor, and that was the point where she "really excelled" as she says. President C soon became the chair of the Fine Arts and Humanities Division and then associate dean for Academic Extension, where she was responsible for overseeing academics at all extended campus sites. After a major restructuring at the main institution due to a leadership shift, President C was asked by the interim president

to serve as interim chief academic officer during the restructuring process. Over the next five years, President C moved between serving as interim chief academic officer and serving in her newly created academic dean role until she was permanently appointed to the position of chief academic officer. After three years as chief academic officer, the president of her institution departed, and President C was then selected as president of the institution where she spent the last 22 years of her career.

President C strongly credits her faith and relationship with God along with great relationships with impactful mentors as contributors to her ascension to the presidency. President C noted that she experienced her fair share of racism and sexism as she moved along her own pathway but ultimately identified herself as her biggest obstacle. President C explained that she never thought of herself as a leader and often cared too much about what others thought. Being a life-long learner, getting comfortable with being uncomfortable, and gleaning as much as you can from others are skillsets most important to becoming and remaining a president according to President C. Her recommendation to the higher education community is that they must walk their talk:

> We've got to be willing to diversify and decide we are serious about it, and if so, we must take action and quit talking about it. It is something that is easy to say but challenging to do because diversity means different, and that difference is going to take much work.

President C acknowledges that the pathway to the community college presidency is complex, but higher education must make a commitment to diversity in order to make this position more attainable for other African American women.

PRESIDENT D.

President D has served in her role for six years. Her educational background consists of both a bachelor's and master's degree in counseling and a doctorate in Child Development. President D has one adult child, is divorced, and is over the age of 56.

President D shared that her first job after completing her undergraduate degree was at her alma matter, but that she fell into the world of higher education:

> I really didn't know that higher ed was a profession. Honestly, I like to say I didn't know what those people did around me, they were just working, and I just didn't realize it was a profession.

President D began as a University Representative; she described the position as part recruitment, part marketing, and part foundation work. She focused on bringing students of color to the campus, working with students and families to answer questions and complete paperwork, and preparing them to be successful college students. After three years, President D became an intern for a diversity program with the College Board. This position allowed her the opportunity to travel the country learning about, presenting on, and evaluating the services provided by the College Board. It was during this time that President D realized her passion for advising and counseling students and decided to obtain her master's in counseling.

Her next role was as an advisor at a mid-size university in the Center for Major Explorations, assisting students who had not yet declared a major. President D then transitioned to a faculty academic advisor where she worked with students admitted on a contingency basis and provided supportive academic services until students completed their programs. Over the next eight years, President D earned her doctorate and moved to another state where she accepted a position to create a program for students who were single parents.

President D shared that her passion laid in serving students who were single parents because that was the one population that she was unable to support in her previous work. Ultimately, President D built what became a model program and was asked to become the chair for the Diversity Department.

At the urging of her colleagues, President D applied to be the interim for an academic dean opening at her institution and was appointed. After serving in this position for over two years, the institution re-wrote the job requirements, ultimately leading to President D not meeting the criteria for the position. President D then relocated to another state and accepted a position in a community college as chief student affairs officer. After five years as chief student affairs officer, President D transitioned to another state and became the vice president at another community college for five years until she accepted the presidency at her current institution.

President D credits her early involvement in professional organizations such as Association of Women in Community Colleges (AWCC) and the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) for providing her the opportunity to meet and learn from powerful women leaders in higher education, as a major contribution to her becoming a president:

> I will honestly say that I wouldn't be a president if it weren't for those women who said "I see something in you. I'm going help you, and I'm going to kick your butt, 'til you do it."

President D firmly believes that communication, relationship building, mediation, and negotiation are key skillsets to becoming a community college president. Her recommendation to the higher education community is to put away the stereotypes and evaluate black women in the same manner as their white male counterparts — on their ability to do the job, their

credentials, and the outcomes they have been able to produce in their previous work. President D also provides recommendation to other African American women in higher education to build their own pipeline and support, uplift, and recommend one another for opportunities just as others do.

PRESIDENT E.

President E has served in her presidency for four years and her educational background includes a bachelor's degree in political science and a Juris Doctor. President E has nine-year-old twins, is married, and is 45 years of age.

President E shared that her journey to the presidency was not a traditional one by far; in fact, she began her career in the private sector as an attorney. President E ran her own firm and was appointed to the Board of Governors for the local state college system where she served for ten years. The state created a new public institution, hiring President E as a consultant in because of her engagement in policy and practices as a member of the Board of Governors. Eventually President E was appointed chief operating officer of the new institution, where she shares that she began to fall in love with the business of higher education:

> I felt like my avocations became vocations, so I began to work with search firms because they didn't want me to serve as the president of this institution because it was focused on STEM, and my background was not STEM. But because I had served in so many executive capacities, I got the bug to serve as a CEO for a college or university.

Once President E began working with a headhunter, she was approached by a Board of Trustees member at her present institution to submit her application for the presidency, for which she was selected and now currently serves.

President E believes that being a lawyer is one of the best backgrounds for a person who wants to lead a college or university, particularly in the current climate:

> I know that folks in the academy won't agree with me, but I think the analytical skills that I have as a lawyer are beneficial in understanding liabilities and the issues associated with running a business, that really are very open-air and easy access at a time when there's so much going on with security issues in our country.

In addition to her background as a lawyer, President E credits her social networks as extremely important to becoming a president in a new community. President E is a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. and the Links. She shared that they are very important to her because as a president you need communities to support your work. As a member of these social organizations, President E gained instant buy-in and support from other Black women in the community. President E was not a member of any professional higher education organizations prior to her appointment as president; however, she was highly active in organizations such as the National Bar Association and the Episcopal District of the AME Church. President E does believe that participating in higher education's organizations prior to her presidency would have been beneficial for her as she stepped into that new role.

President E urges the higher education community to really examine the data for equity issues and then take responsibility to follow up and take action steps to change the narrative such as raising the awareness among other leaders, diversifying hiring committees, and evaluating job requirements in order to widen the pool.

UNDERLYING THEMES AND INSIGHTS

The conversations with the study participants provided a wealth of information and insight into their personal and leadership journeys. While each woman's story was uniquely hers, four threads, or themes, were clearly woven through all of them.

First, all participants identified *relationships* as being key to their success and their journey. Relationships were discussed in depth throughout each interview in relation to professional and social networking, mentorship, support systems, and even their relationship with and faith in God. Relationship building emerged as an overarching theme and presented in a number of responses to various interview questions.

Second, from the participants' stories, *self-awareness* is clearly critical to leadership at the president's level. Each participant alluded to a keen sense of self-awareness and mindfulness, such as identifying their strengths, continuous mindfulness of their role as president, and understanding what they need as individuals in terms of self-care. This heightened sense of self-awareness also contributed to participant's leadership styles.

A third theme, according to participants' narratives, focused on the *barriers, challenges, and obstacles* they faced. All of the participants experienced obstacles as they navigated their way to the college presidency. Some participants discussed family challenges, while others identified obstacles in the workplace such as racism and sexism. When discussing these challenges, each participant shared various coping mechanisms utilized to ultimately overcome said obstacles such as faith, friends, and self-reflection.

And finally, the fourth theme centers on varied and extensive *experience*. There is no clear pathway to the community college presidency for African American women. As

demonstrated by this study, individuals can come from various professional backgrounds and levels of education and ascend to the presidency. What is clear is that African American women seeking to become a college president ensure that they have a wide breadth of professional experience that is transferrable to leading an institution of higher education.

The remainder of this chapter will discuss each of the key threads listed above with an analysis of participants' lived experiences and quotations from the interviews to capture the voices of this small yet significant population of college presidents.

Thread #1: Relationships as Foundation

Each participant in this study described the importance of key relationships in a variety of capacities as they shared experiences along their respective pathways. Relationship building is defined as a combination of soft skills that a person applies to connect with others and form positive relationships (Devonish & Meritus, 2020). Relationship building spans across various aspects of one's life from professional to social interactions. Successful relationship building typically encompasses interpersonal skills, verbal and non-verbal communication skills, listening skills, and networking skills. Each of the research study participants shared experiences of them utilizing one or more relationship building tactic.

When asked about advice that she would share with other black women aspiring to the community college presidency, President D emphasized the importance of building relationships and getting to know the people you encounter or those that report to you,

> get to know people. I talk to people about anything they would like to share and remember things to ask about later. It's important to show people you care; relationships are the foundation of everything we do.

President E also shared the same sentiments about relationships as she described the dynamics in her personal life:

> I have nine-year-old twins, my sister lives with us, and I have a nanny, and I am a better parent because of it. I decided to make my position a family job, and we are the leadership family because it is critical that my home life and relationships are strong and not separate from my work. We even call my husband the 1st dude!

President B also mentioned the importance of relationships when sharing her first attempt at applying to the same presidency position she currently holds and not being selected:

> The first time I applied, one of the individuals who served on the committee — I knew her — pulled me to the side and said, "I want you to know that I thought you were the most qualified individual in this process, but the committee felt that you should not advance because you didn't have a Doctoral degree."

President B shared that she would never have received that information if it were not for her relationship with an individual who happened to be serving on the committee. Throughout the interviews, participants continued to share examples of how relationships they developed along the way have and continue to play a beneficial role in their success. Though relationship building in general has served as a foundation throughout their journeys, different relationships serve various purposes in each of their lives that comprehensively make up their foundation. The participant responses support previous research that suggest that female college presidents place high importance on characteristics such as relationship building, competency, and communication (Wolverton et al., 2006).

Networking Relationships.

All five participants shared experiences describing how networking relationships contributed to their success of reaching the community college presidency. Networking proved to be extremely important to participants, particularly in regard to advancing their careers.

President A emphasized that professional networks were the platforms that afforded her the opportunities for visibility:

> I ran a National Center of Excellence (NCE) through the National Science Foundation (NSF) and that was a network that introduced me to people like the Community College Research Center (CCRC) at Columbia, and I purposely selected the CCRC to perform the qualitative research for our NCE project because they were the big hitters — and our project became so visible both nationally and internationally, and I'll never forget how that positively impacted my career.

Like President A, President B experienced the benefits of creating relationships that led to visibility and positively impacted her career progression as a member of the community college association in her state, of which she also served as president:

> I think being in a position to network was integral to me matriculating to the presidency to be quite honest with you, because when you are selected to serve in a leadership role in associations like that, you get an opportunity to rub elbows with people who you would not traditionally be able to rub elbows with. For instance, I was often called upon to represent either the association or be the subject matter expert on statewide committees, so I definitely think that my involvement and ability in those regards have been instrumental. Being able to say that you served in those leadership roles really solidifies the fact that you are ready to rise to the next level.

President D spoke to how the nature of networking in her previous profession as a lawyer carried over when she became a college president:

> I was always very active in the National Bar Association and had great relationships, and I think that was very helpful in that I knew lawyers in the community where I was appointed president, and they were very open to being supportive.

Professional networking was a reoccurring theme present in each participant's interview; they each spoke to it as a guided strategic skill that is necessary as one progresses in the field. These relationships proved to be particularly beneficial later down the line as they began applying for presidencies. Participants also shared the viewpoint that not only is it important to network within professional organizations, but to be intentional about building

relationships with those who are respected in the field and will speak to their abilities and competency in the field as well. Again, these responses from participants aligned with findings from previous research that networking is an integral part of career progression and sustainability for African American women in senior level administrative positions in higher education (Becks-Moody, 2004; Hague & Okpala, 2017).

Another topic that emerged through discussion of relationships and networking was professional development. Research has shown that professional development is one of the top contributors to Black women ascending to the college presidency, stating that it is critical for African American women to take ownership in their own professional development (Hague & Okpala, 2017). Much of the literature suggests that there is a need for more professional development programs that focus on grooming African American women for the college presidency (Davis, 2016; Ford & Cavanaugh, 2017; Gamble & Turner, 2015). Participant narratives supported findings of the importance of professional development to their own leadership and role as president. All participants shared that they have been members of organizations that provide professional development specifically for African Americans and/or women such as the President's Roundtable, HERS Institute, and the National Association of Blacks in Higher Education (NABHE). Additionally, participants noted that institutions of higher education should be more intentional about creating spaces that allow for the professional and leadership development of African American women. One participant expressed the situation this way:

> There are so many opportunities and information that often is not shared with this population regarding climbing the ladder to leadership, and I know for a fact that if programs were intentionally put in place, more of that knowledge would be shared. For example, it is not wise to just cold call/apply for presidential or senior level positions,

> but I didn't have anybody tell me that until I became a member of NABHE and learned that you want to have people that are respected in the field nominate you for presidential searches.

Mentor Relationships.

When asked about mentors, each participant viewed mentorship differently; however, what was consistent was the necessity for mentoring relationships as they navigated their pathway to presidency. According to Brown (2005), mentorship is an exchange of behaviors beneficial to both the mentor and the mentee. Research also suggests that antecedent factors such as demographics characteristics, career factors, relationship factors and types of relationships, influence the formation and maintenance of mentoring relationships. President A spoke to how she identifies her mentor relationships and the importance of having them:

> Okay, so let me just say that I have a lot of mentors. Although formal mentor/mentee relationships I have very few of, it's people that I look up to that I seek guidance from that I have my whole career, and I think it's important as a president. For example, it's important on your references that you have the diversity of people that can speak on your behalf, those people that are respected in the field. I try to make sure they're diverse in terms of male/female, minority/majority people.

Similar to President A, Presidents B and C each described mentorship playing a significant role in their journey long before they had the terminology to identify it as such. President B recalled a long-standing mentorship that continues to play a role in her life:

> The individual who served as my president for almost 30 years — who was the president of the community college I began my career, who hired me and brought me into the system in 1989 — has served as a mentor along the way, and she still is a sounding board for me to call her to ask questions about whatever I want to ask her about. She has just been phenomenal in that regard.

President C shared that mentorships have played an important role for her as well:

> Before I even realized that there was a formal name to these relationships, I've had them all along my pathway. I recall meeting an African American professor when I was a student, and I didn't say much at the time, but I remember calling my mom that night

> and saying Momma! I just saw one of the sharpest Black women I think I have ever seen in my life! And her response was for me to go to her and ask her if she would consider being my mentor. So, I took my mother's advice and went to her office, and she agreed to be my mentor, and we have become very good friends. She would invite me to her house, we went on shopping trips together, and when pursuing my master's, I leaned on her heavily for guidance and assistance due to her expertise in research. She was someone who caused me to think that what I know and what I am is not all that there is; she made me think bigger.

President C also shared other mentoring relationships that were different than that described above. When President C arrived at her current institution, she had a Caucasian male and female who were extremely helpful in guiding her. President C also shared that once appointed to the presidency, she observed a practice that has proven to be invaluable, and that was the assignment of an *executive coach:*

> It is critical — which is one of the reasons I don't mind taking time to be interviewed — because we have to be as helpful to one another as we can. That mentor has already been where you're trying to go, and they can help you navigate through those waters.

When referring to mentorship, Presidents D and E had a slightly different take. Neither of the presidents identified people as "mentors" and appeared to have a negative connotation to the word. President D shared that she does not like the word *mentor:*

> Because I think that there are so many different connotations. I like to have relationships with people who want to support and help you, and that has probably been every step of the way. Whenever I've tried to say I want a mentor, it didn't go as well, and so I just think when somebody sees something in you, I like to listen and try to move with that and go with it.

President E also shared the sentiment that she does not identify people as mentors:

> I engage people as friends and in relationships, but I can't say, oh, I need to call my mentor or so and so, so they can help me with. . . . But I think it's something I did wrong; I think it would have been helpful if I had been more purposeful about that whole concept of finding a mentor.

President E also explained that she did not intentionally seek mentorship but rather had a group of friends who supported each other through their journeys. President E went on to explain other relationships that although she did not identify as mentors, in fact had the same attributes as a mentoring relationship:

> I think that I have really good relationships with colleagues who do what I do — so, other presidents or people in higher ed — and I feel very comfortable calling them and sharing ideas and, you know, kind of strategizing about things that we should do or can do.

As evidenced above through participant responses, mentorship plays a key role in career progression and, in the terms of this research, *the pathway* to the college presidency. The literature also emphasizes that African American women have utilized mentorship as a coping mechanism for leadership challenges as well as a way to pay it forward to others (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). Participant responses indicate that mentorship can be formal or informal and play out in various ways. However, what remained consistent was the comfort and support gleaned from these relationships that are long-standing in each participant's life. These findings reinforce the research that identifies mentorship as a necessity for African American women to develop their leadership competencies (Counts, 2012).

Support Systems.

In its simplest form, a support system is defined as a network of personal and/or professional contacts that provide practical or emotional support (Merriam Webster, 2021). Each participant spoke to the various aspects of their support systems to include family, sorority sisters, friends, and like-minded colleagues. Maintaining positive support systems was an overarching theme across participant interviews and was a direct connection to coping

mechanisms identified in each interview. President A recalls a time early in her presidency in which she says she had a major realization about the reality of being a college president:

> People always aspire to it, but it is the loneliest office; it's going to be painful at times, and it is hard. For some of the decisions and things you're going to have to do for the institution that really nobody understands, you're going to need a support system.

President A is a member of the Presidents' Roundtable, an organization designed to provide African American community college presidents professional resources and mentoring opportunities while supporting the goals of the National Council on Black American Affairs (The President's Round Table, 2020). President A shared that when she faced difficult times in 2014, she did not call on her colleagues from the Presidents' Roundtable, but when she attended the annual conference, they were all right there to support her and checking to make sure she was okay. President A stated that it was then that she truly understood the value of a support system she could trust. When asked how she dealt with the difficulties in that moment, President A responded:

> Well, it was difficult. It was a lot of difficulty sleeping at night, but I had a sound support system with my foundation. The chancellor would call me every night, tell me, "Hang in there. How are you doing?" And then the Black presidents here in my state, we'd all get together if something bad happened. It's like, "Okay, we're coming over. We're bringing the liquor. We're having a fish fry." You know, and so stuff like that.

Like President A, President E found strength in her support systems through various avenues. Coming from the private sector, President E was very active in the National Bar Association and represented the 11th Episcopal District of the AME church in her own law practice, which she identified as being a strong foundation for her as she transitioned into higher education. In addition to her involvement in those organizations, President E is also a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, a historically Black Greek letter organization as well as

The Links, an international, non-for-profit corporation, established in 1946. The Links is one of the nation's oldest and largest volunteer service organizations. President E explained that social organizations are just as if not more important in regard to support because they offer a sense of community no matter where you go:

> Those social networks are very, very important, particularly if you are going to choose to be a president in a new community. I am in a sorority right now. I'm an AKA, and I'm also in the Links, and the reason those are important — and I say them first — is because you need communities to support your work. And because of those affiliations, I got instant buy-in, you know, from Black women in my community.

Organizations like the Links and Black Greek letter fraternities and sororities are international and have chapters in essentially every state in the U.S. President C is also a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. and supported the idea of the importance of a social network after being solely focused on professional networks for some time:

> The night I was named President — no, the next night — my sorority was having a function, and I was not active. I attended that function, and it reminded me of the sisterhood, and so recently I reactivated my membership because I had so many professional things going on. I needed some social type of outlet that would be supportive.

Consistent with the literature that supports the idea that Black women leaders maintain their sense of self and overcome challenges via informal support systems (Domingue, 2015; Ford & Cavanaugh, 2017; Latimore, 2009), social networks proved to be a constant support system among study participants. Whether they were members of a social networking organization or simply formed relationships with other African American women in the field, these relationships offered a space where the women felt supported and safe.

In addition to social networks, participants spoke often about familial support along their journeys. Many study participants credit their families for stepping in on their behalf for

their children as they made their way to the college presidency. President B recalled a significant moment in her career when she was not able to attend her child's middle school graduation, but her family was there to stand in the gap:

> What I did was call all of her aunts and uncles, grandparents, and I had them all front and center: "You all need to be there to support my baby." Her dad was there while I was at the other school doing graduation.

President D was divorced and became a single parent during her career journey. President D spoke in terms of her *village,* or those who rallied around her to help without her having to ask:

> I always had people at every juncture that were great people that the Lord would send to me that supported me. You know, one of the best things — when my child was in third grade, that was kind of when my career started taking off. His teacher — she was a white woman — said, "They're wanting to send you places and do things," and she said, "Let me help you. I love your son. I will help take care of him when you need to go." And I said, "Are you sure?" and she said, "Yes," and she did it. I still credit her because I always knew he was well taken care of in her house, and if they sent me here, it was okay, and he was happy. But that was the kind of support that I had.

When President E spoke about family, she placed significant value on having a spouse and incorporating her family into her work:

> This could be a lonely job, so it helps to have a spouse. I mean you can have friends and everything, but having a spouse helps. I think it helps with balance because this job can be 24/7, so I think having the balance of a spouse works. I think it's a team job: there have been times when I can't come, so I'll send my husband because so much of it is going to different events and doing external stuff. You know, having a spouse is helpful. I turned this job into "this is my family," and we're very open because I have younger children. I have 9-year-old twins, a boy and a girl, so it's kind of "This is Us," and we're the Leadership Family or we're the "family for the college" kind of thing.

Although President E acknowledged that were times when she wished she could be present for her children and was unable to be, she explained that she is a better parent for reaching her own personal goals:

> I have an amazing sitter, and I have a sister who help me out. I just have to kind of accept that because I think I'm a better parent because I'm a happier, more well-adjusted person because reaching these goals are important to me. And I tell women all the time, "You can do what works for you. You are the CEO of yourself and your company that you run, which is you, okay? So therefore, you make decisions that work for your mindset and what makes you happy. And then when you do that, your family is better for it." That's my deal, you know.

As the literature suggests, women leaders' intersecting identities have a strong influence on the way in which they lead, particularly regarding family and professional role spillover (Wheat & Hill, 2016). Previous research also found that African American women are extremely adaptable in their leadership because of the complex roles they occupy outside of the workplace, such as mother, spouse, and even care takers for family members (Waring, 2003). As evidenced in this study, participants were able to adapt in their professional roles while simultaneously incorporating their external roles with family, which appeared to positively impact their career progression and ascension to the college presidency. Family also appeared to assist with the sustainability of their careers by providing another level of support. Each study participant shared examples of times when various relationships proved to be beneficial as they navigated their pathways to the community college presidency. In addition to external relationships, the shared experience of a heightened sense of self-awareness appeared as a common theme among participants.

THREAD #2: SELF-AWARENESS

By definition, *self-awareness* is the conscious knowledge of one's own character, feelings, motives, and desires (Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, 2021). Internal self-awareness represents how clearly we see our own values, passions, aspirations, fit with our environment, reactions, and impact on others. External self-awareness means understanding how other

people view us based on those same factors listed above. Study participants discussed self-awareness from both internal and external aspects and the data revealed a correlation between the two.

Internal Self-Awareness

Identified Strengths. Each president discussed being aware of the skills they held most important and how they processed and provided information. Presidents A, B, D, and E all discussed communication as being the skillset they have monitored and valued most on their journey to presidency. President B shared the importance of communication:

> I think by far the most important skill set is the ability to communicate. I think that you first and foremost must be able to communicate with people in order to motivate them and to get them to see your vision and to buy into it. You've got to be able to communicate and you've got to be able to articulate what your vision is to get people to see what it is that you are trying to accomplish, I believe that I must be able to communicate orally and in writing, because that's the foundation of pretty much what I do.

Similar to President B, Presidents A and D emphasized the importance of communication and the benefits of listening. President A stated "listening and listening carefully of what people are saying to you, and not only that, comprehending what they're saying to you and then being strategic about your response and/or reaction" was instrumental as she continued her career progression. President A articulated that she realized the sheer politics she would face as an African American female president, it would be critical for her to pay close attention to what people were saying and what they *were not* saying as she maneuvered, "every word that comes out of my mouth is evaluated and reevaluated."

President D shared similar sentiments:

> Remember to always listen. Try to figure out what the person is trying to tell you, and then be able to share that with them so that they get that you understand them and that you are validating what they're saying. But you are also able to share what you are trying to say too, and you're relating back to them.

President E wrapped up thoughts on communication by sharing that communication correlates with having an ability to set a vision and being a great strategist so that you can develop a vision with the real pathway to get there. Earlier research suggests that women presidents display a heightened sense of communication and listening, stating that it is in part a result of the increased scrutiny they experience as institutional leaders (Barsh & Cranston, 2011; Berkelaar et al., 2011). The literature also noted that women viewed effective communication as using a variety of formats to connect with various audiences (Wolverton et al., 2006). As noted above, participants in this research study also identified communication and listening as critical components to their leadership and felt that they must be more intentional than their male and/or white counterparts about how what and how they communicate due to being held to a higher standard.

In addition to strong communication and listening skills, collaboration was also a strength identified among participants. Each president discussed collaboration as a necessity to effective leadership currently and as they ascended to the presidency. The ability to work collaboratively with others provided opportunities for career advancement and allowed them to create and lead effective teams as president. One president explained:

> I am not an expert in all things; therefore, it is important that I recognize and intentionally build a team of individuals who can advise me in things that are not in my area of expertise.

Another president described her experience stating:

> Had it not been for my intentional collaboration with national foundations and colleagues, I may not be sitting here talking to you today.

Some of the women explained the importance of collaboration in relation to being a Black woman in the field, such as working with white and/or male counterparts in order for their work to gain the traction they were seeking and collaborating with other Black women to support one another in their work. The research discussed African American women's utilization of *power* in their positions*,* stating that Black women have reconceptualized the idea of power in a more personal way that leads them to positions to address institutional challenges (Wright, 2008). Establishing a well-informed advisory team, working with white and/or male counterparts to become more visible, and banding together to support one another can all be considered forms of the Black woman's reconceptualization of what leveraging their power looks like in the field. Based on participant responses, the ability to communicate effectively, listen, and collaborate with others played a significant role on participant's sense of self. When discussing self-awareness as it relates to their top skill sets, participants also shared how awareness of their talents influenced their leadership styles.

Leadership Style. When asked to describe their leadership styles, the overwhelming responses were servant leadership and collaborative leadership. A servant leader's goal is to serve others, while collaborative leaders work with members across an organization to make decisions and keep the organization thriving (Archer & Cameron, 2009; Laub, 2018). The leadership philosophies that emerged in the participant narratives were consistent with participants' shared experiences throughout their respective journeys. The presidents all spoke about being from low-socioeconomic, first-generation backgrounds and how this background played a role in the way they empathized with others. One president explained:

> I just automatically go to servant leadership because I believe that, first and foremost, being able to serve in this role is a blessing, and I think that I was put here for a reason. I think that I was put here to be a blessing to others and so I don't take that lightly. I came from very humble beginnings. I was that first-generation college student. I was that economically disadvantaged student. I was that individual who was not supposed to be successful because of my background.

Participants expressed that because they had firsthand experience being underprivileged in areas of socio-economic wealth and education, they felt a need to allow others to see that they were standing *with* them versus *ahead* of them:

> I think we have to help each other, and from my perspective, I can fold up a chair and put it away just as easily as you can, and I think if we are both folding chairs and putting them away, we're going to get done a whole lot quicker!

Another president expressed:

> I never ask anybody to do anything I'm not willing to do, and I try to make sure my folks are taken care of. If they have a need, I want them to be able to take care of those needs. Approximately 85% of our college employees do not live locally, and they tend to have different experiences and are often not able to relate to the population that we serve. I believe that, as a leader, it is my job to ensure that our institution takes a good look at who we are serving and how best to do so. I also believe I have a unique perspective because I have personally been where many of our students are, meaning low-income, first generation, and navigating higher ed for the first time.

President E explained her leadership style, sharing:

> I consider myself a servant and very collaborative leader. I'm the person who is going to step in and hear from everybody and let's try to get a consensus, so it's a collaborative and consensus building leadership style for me.

Although some participants did not explicitly identify themselves as collaborative leaders, the way in which they lead reflected aspects of collaborative leadership also. One president shared the intentionality behind her never sitting at the head of the table in meetings:

> I think you can have positional power, and that will not change, but from my perspective, I am your colleague. We are here to serve our students and each other. I don't want the focus of the meeting to be on me, but rather on how we can better serve

> our students. So let's roll up our sleeves and get to work. It matters not to me where I sit.

Other participants shared similar sentiments, placing emphasis on the fact that they find great comfort and satisfaction leading from a place of democracy rather than dictatorship:

> As I stated before, I don't have all the answers, so what good would it be for me to make all the decisions? I developed an informed team around me to advise me in areas that may not necessarily be my wheelhouse, and because I pride myself on being an effective leader, I'm going to allow for them to do the job that I welcomed them to do.

Various studies examining African American women college presidents have evidenced that these women leaned toward team-based leadership styles such as servant and/or collaborative leadership due to their knowledge and management of experienced sexism and racism on their pathways toward presidency (Latimore, 2009; Woodard, 2009). When asked about their experiences with racism and sexism, President C shared:

> I would say that I've experienced my share of racism, and I have experienced my share of sexism. I think for those of us in the South, we know that that's a part of our journey, which is kind of sad to say, but it's true. We know that it's a part of our journey, and so I think that we have learned to deal with it or cope with it or how to address it and keep moving forward. But I think the beautiful part about these doors opening is that I have seen people's jaws drop because I'm in these positions sometimes. And so again, it's not a position that they would have ever seen me in, but as Ms. Seely said, "I's here!"

Another president offered insight stating:

> I'll be honest with you, there were times when I pulled back because I thought "well, maybe I don't know what I think I know," and as a result sometimes have not been as vocal because someone in the past has told me what I said or thought was not right. I've had those experiences particularly with Caucasian males, and you know, I now realize that it was either racism or sexism or both.

Black women leaders who experience bouts of racism and sexism throughout their career tend to lead with more compassion for others and, either consciously or sub-consciously, do not want others to experience a level of inferiority that they have felt in the past (Hague & Okpala,

2017). Previous research overwhelmingly suggests that Black women who ascend to senior level leadership in academia, particularly the role of president, have experienced racism and sexism along their career paths (Barsh & Cranston, 2011; Berkelaar et al., 2011; Reis, 2015; Wolverton et al., 2006). As evidenced by this study's participant narratives, the leadership styles of these women were also heavily influenced by their past experiences with racism and sexism, resulting in a heightened sense of attention to what they needed for self-care and strategies used as coping mechanisms.

Self-Care. Self-care emerged as a reoccurring theme among all participants. The presidents discussed the importance of identifying their personal needs and ensuring that those needs are being met outside of their work lives. When describing how and why they practice self-care, participants articulated that their self-care methods also served as coping mechanisms as they navigated both their pathway to the presidency and current role as president. Identified areas of self-care were traveling to places where they are not recognized as being president, being intentional about prioritizing time with family and friends, and maintaining a strong faith in God. When asked how they ensure they are taking care of self, one participant responded:

> It's important for any president, but especially for an African American president, that if you're going to be in a majority community you better figure out how you're going to take care of yourself after hours. I mean, from a social and emotional perspective, I make sure that I have time with my family and friends and that I get away, you know. There's a girls' network that I get away with occasionally. . . somewhere where I'm not identifiable.

Another participant explained:

> I have an outlet where I can let my hair down. I have a network of friends who understand and who are in the same types of positions that. . . we can get together, and we can enjoy each other's company and let our hair down. I try to have some stress

> relievers. I like to travel. My husband and I like to spend time with each other, and we like to go on cruises and do things, and I go places where I don't have to think, where I'm not the college president; I'm just a woman on vacation. I like shopping and so that's a stress reliever for me. I just find those opportunities where I can let my hair down.

According to the literature, holding true to oneself was a key contributor for Black women presidents overcoming the challenges presented to them as president, noting that, by remaining grounded by family and friends and finding time to connect with people and things they enjoy in their personal lives, Black women were able to recharge and persist through perceived barriers such as racism, sexism, and exclusion (Becks-Moody, 2004; Britton, 2013; Collier, 2018). Intentionality regarding spending time with family was another way that participants identified as a means of practicing self-care:

> I carve out one day out of every week to spend time with my husband and children in the evening, and when I say time, I mean real time. I silence email notifications and only answer my work cell if there is an emergency. On these particular days, we usually order in, watch movies, play games, or just talk about how things are going, but it is a time for me to connect with my family uninterrupted and be present for my husband and children. I find that, although I absolutely want my family to feel my presence, I think it helps me more to stay grounded and remember why I am who and where I am.

Another participant described how she visits with her parents regularly:

> Going back to the home I grew up in and spending quality time with my parents always fills my cup. It's a reminder to not forget where I came from.

Each participant alluded to the fact that their familial support systems played a tremendous role in their self-care. One president described the dynamic between her and her husband and why she ensures they have quality time:

> We work very different schedules and when I'm coming, he's going. Sometimes we may not see one another for over a week, so we have become intentional about blocking off our calendars at least twice a month just to be together. I've found that in those moments all stress and work-related anxiety just disappears. I don't think I could continue to fight the good fight without those moments.

A final component of self-care identified by participants was their faith in God. Each participant spoke of their belief in and relationship with God at some point throughout their interview. The women saw their faith in God as a way to evaluate situations, make decisions, and continue to overcome challenges. "I'll be honest, my faith in God is probably what has kept me going because there have been times I wanted to give up on this journey, but he brought me out on the other side," one president explained as she reflected on her career journey. Another president described how she reflects on her day each night and prays: "It's important for me when I lay my head on my pillow at night to have that conversation with myself and with God, 'Okay, what happened today?'" Several other presidents shared how their faith has been the most important aspect of their journeys, noting that even when they do not feel they are capable, their faith in God says otherwise:

> As a Christian, I fill myself with the Word of God, and so because I believe His truth over any fact that I think I might see. I even fight facts with truth, because while it may be a fact, that does not necessarily mean that it is true or that it is *the* truth. So, when the fact says I may not be as prepared as I feel like I should be, the truth says I can do all things. So, you know, I keep that in the forefront of my mind always.

One participant recalls a time when she was discouraged when interviewing for presidencies:

> I just felt like I was more than qualified for a number of these positions and probably more qualified than my competitors, but I just wasn't succeeding. I began wondering if there was something wrong with me, but one night as I prayed on it, I just remember him saying "my time," and that was enough for me. I had to remember that all things happen according to God's timing and will work for my good.

According to the literature, Black women in leadership roles often experience feelings of isolation, sexism, racism, and are under constant scrutiny. Studies have shown that when facing the reality of what being an African American woman serving as a college president can mean, intentional self-care is of the utmost importance (Counts, 2012; Davis & Maldonado, 2015;

Oikelome, 2017). As evidenced by participant responses, the women in this study have recognized what their self-care needs are and are especially intentional about ensuring that those needs are met.

External Self-Awareness

Mindfulness of Role. External self-awareness refers to being aware of how others view us as it relates to our values, passions, and impact on others (Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, 2021). Throughout their respective narratives, participants only spoke from an external point of self-awareness when they discussed constantly being "on" as president, regardless of where they are or what they may be doing. For example, one participant noted:

> You need to carry yourself in a professional manner at all times, and it's unfortunate, but I have embraced the fact that I am a college president everywhere I go. It's not like I can be out there in the community, and I can party with my subordinates, and I can be seen publicly drinking and intoxicated and doing inappropriate things and all of that. You have to be professional, and you have to carry yourself as though you are a role model, because that's exactly what we are.

Another participant shared these same sentiments, noting that she does not personally buy alcohol in her local stores; if she needs to purchase alcohol, she sends her husband instead. A third participant discussed her thoughts on being externally aware:

> I must always be mindful of my tone, the way I may object to something, and even how I uphold my personal values because there are many individuals watching and waiting for me to make a mistake. It is sad, but I often feel like I have to consciously make sure I am not doing anything to be perceived as *the angry Black woman,* and sometimes it doesn't matter how much I self-monitor, others will choose to paint me in that light.

One participant spoke about being externally aware of the things she can't control such as her race and gender. She recalled a time when she had been hired as new faculty at a

Predominantly White Institution, and her colleagues assumed that she was hired only because she was African American:

> I had to prove that I was qualified to teach before they would respect me. However, that was not a requirement of other new faculty members, just the Black woman. So, I taught ten times better, and went above and beyond with my coursework — all in order to prove I deserved to be there. It's not fair, but it's what we endure simply based on our identity.

Previous studies have revealed that Black women's experienced interactions with peers are often characterized by oppression, including microaggressions, silencing and negotiating voice, stereotypes, and gendered and racialized expectations of self-presentation (Domingue, 2015). As evidenced by these participants' experiences, because of the oppressive nature often associated with their identities, these women display a heightened sense of self-awareness both internally and externally.

THREAD # 3 CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS

According to the literature, Black women serving as college presidents face a plethora of challenges on their pathway to becoming president to include balancing family and work, facing sexism and racism, experiencing disrespect from colleagues, and suffering self-doubt (Becks-Moody, 2004; Britton, 2013). This section will discuss the challenges identified by study participants on their pathway to and while serving as the college president.

Family and Workplace Balance

Participants spoke about the challenges they endured while attempting to balance their work and family lives. One participant shared that her marriage ended in divorce partially due

to the stress of balancing both dynamics. Subsequently, she became a single mother and recalled some of the obstacles it presented:

> It was surely not easy trying to progress in my career and be the best mother I could be. In some ways, I felt guilty that my ex-husband and I could not work it out and my son had only one parent for a good chunk of his life. I often grappled with "am I doing the right thing here?"

Another participant recalled times she missed important events with her family because of presidential responsibilities:

> My 8th grader was graduating the same day as the college's commencement and, of course, I had to be present. It tore me up inside to miss that special moment, but luckily a host of aunts, uncles, and cousins, were there to cheer her on.

A third president described how she has accepted that she is going to miss things:

> I do it with an understanding that I'm going to miss some things. There's a recognition of my limitations but still an appreciation. Do I mess up and do some things bother me? Yes. For instance, a couple of weeks ago when I missed the fact that at [my daughter's] dance class the last week they were supposed to dress in costumes so that they could take their pictures. I sent my daughter to dance, and she didn't have her costume, and it was all traumatic because they wanted to take group shots. So, I felt really bad because I hadn't read the email that would have given me all the directions that I needed, but I have an amazing sitter and a sister who can help me out in those times.

A few other participants explained how they purposely merge their families with their work in order to meet the demands of both work and home life. One participant shared that she brings her children to almost all extra-curricular events, such as athletic games, open houses, and pancake dinner during finals time:

> My children have become so well known around campus they feel at home. I think it also helps for them to see what mommy does every day.

Consistent with the literature that addresses the challenge of work-life balance for this demographic, participants had to come to terms with the fact that because of their dual roles in

life, there will be times when they must make a choice between work and family (Berkelaar et al., 2011; Ford & Cavanaugh, 2017)

Self-Doubt

Self-doubt or Imposter Syndrome was another central theme throughout the participant narratives. Many participants mentioned that they did not initially see themselves as leaders and often struggle today with acknowledging that they have, in fact, earned and deserve to be in their respective roles. When asked about the most significant challenge she has faced, one participant responded "me":

> I'll be honest with you: I think I was my biggest obstacle because I didn't see myself in this role and so I often fought even being a leader at all. The most interesting thing is that I kept finding myself in leadership positions, but it was not until much later in life that I really acknowledged that I was a leader.

The feeling of being undeserving was common among all participants. One president recalls her thoughts as she was offered the presidency:

> I am from a very small town, with small ideals and low expectations. Are they sure they called the right number? What does a small country town girl like me have to offer an entire college? Is this real?

Another president noted that she often must remind herself of her role:

> If you would have told me 20 years ago that I would be the president of a multi-campus community college, honey, I would have laughed in your face! Not only was that not my desire, but I also never believed that I could be worthy of such a prestigious title. Every morning when I look in the mirror, I say to myself "hey girl, now you somebody's president, so act like you got some sense today!"

One participant shared that she may not be where she is today if others had not seen in her what she couldn't.

> I never understood why people would always ask me to do things. Even as a teenager, my teachers would ask me to help out in class; my soccer coach would ask me to start the team off with warmups; people would just give me responsibilities — and I didn't know why. I now realize they saw leadership qualities in me that I never did. Sometimes

> I still don't think of myself as a leader; I just like to help people, and this job is a great way to help others.

A final president summed up her experience with imposter syndrome by sharing:

> There are times when I still struggle with, you know, believing that I'm actually in this space and that I'm actually holding this position. It blows my mind at times. You have to fight hard against not feeling like you don't belong here. You're not qualified. You're not capable.

Women in leadership, particularly Black women, often experience bouts of self-doubt due to the dual points of oppression with their race and gender (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). Because Black women have historically been depicted as strong, independent, "can do it all" types of people, over time they embody the characteristics of stereotypes placed upon them. Subsequently, as Reis and Grady (2018) noted, they minimize the realm of their accomplishments because they have grown accustomed to overworking themselves to gain the same respect as their white and male counterparts. As illustrated in participant narratives, self-doubt is not uncommon in the role of president and is something that they must continually work to overcome.

Resiliency

Resilience refers to the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or significant sources of stress (American Psychological Association, 2020). Resiliency emerged as a theme across participant narratives as they described experiences on their pathway to the presidency; in fact, the women often referred to resiliency when answering questions related to their challenges and obstacles faced throughout their journeys. "Resiliency" was frequently used as a replacement for the terms "challenge" and/or "barrier." Participants seemed to prefer to refer to barriers as resiliency builders.

According to the literature, a common misconception regarding resilience is that resilient people won't experience difficulty or distress, when in fact, the road to resilience is likely to involve considerable emotional distress (American Psychological Association, 2020). However, participants in this study often used the term "resilience" to negate the emotional impact that challenging experiences may have caused them; therefore, this theme and their responses are grouped with challenges and barriers.

When asked if they had experiences that presented obstacles on the pathway to the presidency, one president responded:

> No, because I look back at it and I think — no, because eventually I was successful, right? And I think that, you know, it's about resiliency and overcoming.

When prompted for additional elaboration on her use of the term "resiliency," the president proceeded to share her experience of having an African American woman as a supervisor and constantly feeling targeted by her. Another president referenced the fact that she does not have an earned doctoral degree and shared situations she experienced related to that fact:

> I mentioned previously that I applied to this presidency before and was not selected because I did not have an earned doctorate, despite being the most qualified experience-wise. So, I do think that in many instances not having a doctorate can be viewed as an obstacle, but for me it has toughened my skin and just made me work harder for what I want, and now I'm the president.

Another participant recalled working with a white male faculty member who would proofread colleagues' emails for errors:

> He would print people's emails, correct them, and send them back to you. Now of course being the president, I didn't think it would be done to me, but low and behold he did! I believe that because I was a Black woman, he felt empowered to address me in such a manner. At first, I was stunned, but I had to remember: This is not the first time someone has tried it, and it certainly won't be the last.

President D described a time when she was asked to return to a previous institution to serve as in an interim dean position:

> The president told me she wanted me to be that dean. She didn't want an interim; she didn't want anybody holding the seat. And so she challenged me, and I started creating programs. I started doing the things that the faculty hadn't been evaluating in a few years. I started evaluating the faculty. I did everything that the dean was supposed to do. And at the end of that, through a technicality, they said that they set up the new job description: They set up their new credentials that made me ineligible to apply for the position. I believe it was intentional, but they didn't break me; it was just another experience to prepare me for the next position.

As demonstrated in the narratives, the participants described their experiences using the term "resilience" as a way circumnavigate the emotional distress that these experiences may have inflicted. The narratives included only minimal acknowledgement of feelings of hurt, sadness, or pain inflicted by various experiences. There seemed to be a conscious effort on participants' behalf to not appear vulnerable and to place emphasis on the experience's result in building their resilience.

This behavior reflects characteristics of the *Superwoman Schema*, a concept initially developed to examine biopsychosocial factors that influence African American women's health; however, this concept can also be useful in understanding the narratives collected for this research study. First, according to Woods-Giscombé (2018), the five elements of Superwoman Schema include the (1) obligation to manifest strength, (2) obligation to suppress emotions, (3) resistance to being vulnerable or dependent, (4) determination to succeed despite limited resources, and (5) obligation to help others. For this study, when asked to identify obstacles or challenges, often participants would not refer to them as such, but instead described them as situations that "built resiliency," or the participants did not identify or describe challenges negatively, but instead portrayed these experiences as triumphs.

Historically, life experiences of African American women have been riddled with an accumulation of racial and gender inequality, including social, political, and economic exclusion. Thus, in living with and facing these inequities, the women often develop a learned false sense of strength and feel an obligation to always present an in-control image (Woods-Giscombé, 2018). This study's participant transcripts reflected this same focus on strength and perseverance, providing clear evidence of some — or all — of the components of Superwoman Schema in their telling of their lived experiences.

Coping Mechanisms

As noted at the start of this chapter, the study participants' coping mechanisms emerged as they discussed the various aspects of their internal self-awareness. For example, participants overwhelmingly identified servant leadership as their leadership style; subsequently, given that servant leadership primarily focuses on giving of oneself, they also shared examples of how they ensure they are taking care of themselves in the process. The women identified self-care, faith/religion, and self-reflection as strategies they employ to assist in navigating the complex career path to and serving as the college president.

Practicing self-care emerged throughout participant narratives at various points throughout the interviews. Participants discussed the importance of realizing what helps them reset, and then being intentional about engaging in those activities. One participant explained it this way:

> I cannot stress enough the importance of finding your way to refuel. This can be a lonely and thankless job at times, and you've got to be able to bounce back from so many things. I love the water; I feel rejuvenated after spending some solo time near a nice body of water, and if I can't get to one, heck, I'll go swimming! But it helps me think, clear my head, and ready myself to face the next challenge.

Another president shared self-care practices that work for her:

> When I look good, I feel good. So, I make it my business to get my hair, nails, feet, and whatever else done every two weeks. When I present my best self externally, I feel like it allows my best self internally to shine through.

Other presidents discussed self-care from a mental health aspect, sharing that they have regular sessions with a mental health professional:

> That one hour a week or each month really helps me. I think it's important to have a release, to talk to someone who can be objective, and just let it out in a safe space. I really wish there wasn't such a stigma around therapy, particularly in the Black community. I tell people all the time: it's not for crazy; it's so that you don't go crazy!

Previous research suggests that this demographic of women employ a number of strategies to cope with challenges and practicing self-care is a reoccurring theme in both previous studies and this study's participant narratives (Britton, 2013; Collier, 2018; Gamble & Turner, 2015; Jackson & Harris, 2007).

Study participants referenced their faith and spirituality as they discussed navigating challenges. One president explained how she leans on her faith in God during difficult times:

> I have learned not to lean on my own understanding but trust his word and his timing. He's brought me this far, and I know he wouldn't bring me to anything he couldn't see me through. I think that is the primary reason I've gotten so good at not stressing, I just say — even to some of my colleagues at times —"God's got it."

Another president shared:

> Sometimes I just have to stop in the middle of whatever I'm doing and say a quick prayer, you know, "Lord be a fence!" I know he might get tired of me because I'm always on his line — in the car, before, during, and after some meetings!

Consistent with results from similar research studies, these women identified their faith as an essential factor to successful leadership and career advancement (Counts, 2012).

Lastly, self-reflection emerged as a reoccurring theme when discussing how participants handle the sometimes-overwhelming amount of stress that leadership in academia can bring. The women discussed the importance of being happy with themselves at the end of each day. One president noted:

> I think self-reflection is an often-underutilized tool. At the end of each day when my head hits the pillow, it's my time to think through my actions and decisions that day. Am I happy with the outcomes? Is there something I could have done differently? How will I be better tomorrow?

Other presidents explained how they incorporate opportunities for self-reflection throughout their work. Two presidents discussed including their own self-reflection in employee evaluations:

> I always ask my team if there is anything they need that they feel like they are not receiving. I also ask if they have any suggestions as we move forward. I like to think that I have cultivated an environment where my staff can be honest about those things, but I also have a suggestion box on my assistant's desk that people can anonymously contribute to. I take that information and reflect on how I have approached certain things and what I can do for a more successful approach.

> I find that if you simply listen, you can learn a lot about yourself. But you have to remain teachable and open to feedback, which is certainly not the easiest thing to do. However, I have gotten some pretty good ideas by listening to my employees and reflecting on how I am contributing to particular situations.

Self-reflection is a common practice among effective women leaders; it demonstrates a willingness and openness to feedback and room for growth (Ford & Cavanaugh, 2017). The participant narratives from this study also indicated clearly that these women have found self-reflection to be both a way to navigate challenges and also to sharpen their leadership abilities.

THREAD #4 PATHWAYS TO PRESIDENCY

One of the research questions that this study sought to answer was focused on the components of the participants' successful pathway to the community college presidency. While the participants' demographic data revealed that there is no single successful pathway to the community college presidency, common components and action steps clearly aided all of these women in their journey to the role of president. Participants came from various professional and educational backgrounds; however, their consistent recommendations for others who desire a similar outcome were (1) obtain a terminal degree, (2) ensure visibility by networking with those who are well known in the field, and (3) take advantage of professional development opportunities.

Education

When asked what they would recommend for aspiring African American women college presidents, all five participants spoke to earning a terminal degree.

> You should certainly prepare yourself educationally for whatever role you aspire to. That may sound funny coming from me since I don't have a terminal degree, but it I believe it may have kept a couple of doors from opening for me at some points.
>
> I would say, first of all, complete your degree, because we have more hurdles than most. Some people can get into a presidency without their degree, but if you lose that presidency and you don't have your degree, you're cooked. Okay?
>
> You've got to get that doctorate if you're going to be a president. In my experience, faculty will respect you, and you'll get a lot further by having a terminal degree.
>
> I would say that you should earn your Ph.D. I mean, particularly if you are aspiring [to a presidency]. Go ahead and get the pedigree because you know people want you to have it.
>
> Get the doctorate — just do it.

Research supports their advice, indicating that Black women who do not obtain a terminal degree are less likely to be selected for presidential positions in comparison to their white and male counterparts without terminal degrees (Gagliardi et al., 2017; Lockett et al., 2017; Woodard, 2009). African American women constantly deal with the challenges that come along with being both Black and female in leadership.

Visibility

High visibility was another recommendation that study participants shared regarding the pathway to a community college presidency for Black women. According to the literature, being visible has been a key factor in the success of many African American women presidents (Carter & Peters, 2016; Jackson & Harris, 2007). Participants in this research study shared that ensuring visibility was a contributing factor to their success as well. One participant noted:

> You have to be visible — not necessarily showy — but give people the opportunity to see what it is that you're able to do. Your body of work will speak for itself and in my experience, they will end up coming to you.

The study participants shared different aspects of visibility. While some presidents were intentional about selecting partners in academia to collaborate with who were well respected, others sought to secure a seat on advisory boards, whether academic or community based. One president explained her strategies to get connected and become visible:

> While running a program for the National Science Foundation (NSF), I was intentional about suggesting that we have the Community College Research Center (CCRC) partner with our project because I knew it would be visible nationally and internationally, and it was. My name was associated with that project, and people were able to see the caliber of work that I produce.

Another president shared how her involvement with established networks has afforded her opportunities:

> The President' Round Table is an organization of African American presidents that provides professional development and mentorship to presidents. Since I became a member of this organization, it has really expanded my opportunities for engagement across the board. You meet so many people who are connected to others, established, and well respected in our field.

President A recalls when she attended the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) Conference with her mentor, and she encouraged her to step into the spotlight:

> I'll never forget her saying "okay, now this is where it happens. We're going to walk in this room, and you're going to work the room. I'm going to be watching you and then we'll talk about it." She wanted to see how I interacted and engaged with all of these people. It was the best challenge I've ever been given.

Because African American women are not as likely to be selected for high profile positions and/or opportunities, it has become the responsibility of the Black woman to prepare herself for the roles she aspires to. Strategically aligning herself with the right people and places has become a best practice for career advancement among Black women in higher education (Archer & Cameron, 2009).

Professional Development

Professional development was the final similarity across all participant narratives describing their pathway to the presidency. Research has shown that it is critical that African American women take ownership of their professional development (Hague & Okpala, 2017). There are various opportunities for leadership development and training, and it is recommended that those with the desire to become leaders should engage and invest in them (Hague & Okpala, 2017). The presidents in this study discussed how professional development has been influential on their rise to the presidency:

> I think that probably one of the best secret gems is the Lakin Institute, which is run through the President's Round Table. People, such as I, who went through the Lakin Institute have the highest success rate for placed African American presidents.

The Thomas Lakin Institute for Mentored Leadership is designed to prepare senior-level executives for positions as community college chief executive officers and has graduated the highest number of African Americans who have gone on to CEO positions over any other leadership institute in the US. Over 25% of current African American community college presidents are alumni of the Lakin Institute (The President's Round Table, 2020).

Another president shared what she felt is the most valuable part of professional development:

> I have always maintained membership in various professional organizations related to my area of expertise. I was a member of the Deans of Student Affairs Association and the Southern Association of Financial Aid, just to name a few. Working in student affairs, I knew it is critical that you wear different hats, and these associations helped me be well versed in different areas on the student affairs side. I learned so much and eventually became either an e-board member or president of these associations — which I know for a fact, worked in my favor in presidential searches.

Professional development, though, does not always present as an established organization or group, it may come in the form of one-on-one opportunities, or simply the act of stepping outside of one's comfort zone. A third president echoed these sentiments regarding an experience that she identified as unconventional professional development:

> When I got to my next college, I found that I had an excellent president who pushed me and gave me roles that I probably was not qualified for or prepared to do so that I could learn them. I called this my three-year professional development experience that prepared me for a community college presidency — it gave me the real confidence that this is something I could do!

Whether in the form of institutes, organizations, or merely learning and working in areas outside of ones' expertise, professional development has been identified as a key influencer to

the successful transition to president for Black women (Davis, 2016). Gaining professional experience at local, state, and national levels has served as a contributor to successfully navigating the pathway to presidency for participants of this research study.

SUMMARY OF KEY RESEARCH THREADS

Based on the lived experiences of these five African American female community college presidents, building and maintaining relationships, practicing self-awareness both internally and externally, and recognizing challenges were all common themes across their pathways to the presidency. Although each president had different experiences as they navigated their career journey, these themes were present along their individual paths in some way. Overall, there was no one pathway toward becoming a community college president for Black women, but instead a combination of education, experiences, skillsets, and supports that aided in these women's success.

Although each participant had her own unique journey to the presidency, several similarities appeared across participant narratives that emerged as themes or "threads" in this study. These women all identified *relationships* as a main factor throughout their journey and the foundation to the work that they have been able to accomplish thus far. Each woman spoke to developing a heightened sense of *self-awareness* that resulted in their ability to identify the key skills and strengths that have made them successful as presidents. This sense of self-awareness also provided participants with the ability to identify their own *self-care* needs and ensure that they are being mindful of their own well-being. Identified challenges included balancing family and work life and overcoming self-doubt. Participants also spoke to *challenges* and/or barriers experienced throughout their pathway, and some spoke to current challenges.

One common characteristic among all the women was the way in which they described the barriers they faced, tending to paint them in a light of triumphs versus challenges. This behavior mimicked components of the Superwoman Schema, where Black women feel an obligation to appear strong, have it all together, and resist vulnerability.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter began with an overview of each president's individual profile and provided the results of the data analysis. The findings from this study examined the experiences of five African American female community college presidents as they related to their own career pathway, including those they encountered on their journey, as well as those they face every day they serve as college president.

The chapter concluded with identifying key characteristics that should be present for one who aspires to become a community college president. Though everyone's journey will look different, participants agreed that completing a terminal degree, aligning oneself with the right people and places to become highly visible in academia, and intentionally taking advantage of professional development opportunities are all critical action steps on the pathway to the community college presidency for African American women.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

INTRODUCTION

This chapter consists of the summary, conclusions, and recommendations for this study. This chapter includes a discussion of the use of Black Feminist Thought as a theoretical framework, the key findings of the study, the implications for African American women aspiring to become community college presidents, and recommendations for future research. The contributions of all women in higher education have steadily increased over the years globally; however, Black women leaders' contributions in higher education have remained marginalized (Parker, 2015). Although Black women have progressively risen to the top of academic achievement, they continue to be underrepresented in senior leadership roles, specifically the role of college president (Gagliardi et al., 2017). Because the role of community college president serves as influential to campuses in areas of leadership, strategic planning, and institutional goals and priorities, closely examining the experiences of Black women who obtain these positions could encourage the higher education community to diversify the pipeline to higher education leadership, specifically community college presidency and increase the number of African American women in this position.

The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of African American women as they navigated the pathway to community college president. Data were collected in

this study from five current female African American community college presidents to answer the following central research question and sub questions:

- What are the lived experiences of African American women on their pathway to becoming a community college president?
    - What educational experiences, including relationships and professional development opportunities, shaped their career paths?
    - How did their self-awareness and identity as a Black woman impact their leadership roles?
    - What significant obstacles did these women face and overcome in their journey to their presidential role?
    - What is considered a successful pathway to the community college presidency for African American women based on these participant's shared experiences?

The participants in this study each answered questions from a demographic profile questionnaire and semi-structured WebEx interviews that were developed based on the research questions. The data collected about these women's experiences are meant to assist other African American women who may be considering a community college presidency and inform the higher education community of the challenges, barriers, and positive contributors to Black women's experiences in order to create a more diverse pipeline to leadership. Black Feminist Thought was used as the theoretical framework in formulating the research questions and analyzing participant narratives.

BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT

Black Feminist Thought (BFT) was formed in 1990 by Patricia Hills-Collins to provide African American women a voice by allowing them to frame their ideas and experiences in their own way. Members of oppressed groups are often placed in a situation where they are only heard if they frame their ideas and language in a way that is comfortable for the dominant

group (Collins, 2000). Historically, elite white men have controlled Western structures of knowledge validation and their interest have controlled the themes and paradigms of traditional scholarship, resulting in African American women's experiences being distorted or excluded from what counts as knowledge (Collins, 2000). Black Feminist Thought involves making African American women the dominant group by placing their experiences and ideas at the center of analysis and comparing their experiences to one another and, thus, was an appropriate framework to guide this research. Core dimensions of Black Feminist Thought include *lived experience as criterion of meaning* and *the use of dialogue to assess knowledge claims* (Collins, 2000).

Each president shared their own unique experiences; however, there were several similarities across participant narratives. By considering lived experience as the criterion of meaning, the research identified commonalities, such as the way participants utilized relationships and self-awareness as positive contributors on their journeys. The research also identified a common characteristic across interviews with the way in which participants discussed their experiences with challenges and barriers. Each woman described experiences that clearly articulated a challenge and/or barrier as they navigated their pathways; however, they spoke of them as "resiliency builders" and never acknowledged feelings of being excluded or targeted. Each participant identified these experiences as triumphs and detailed how they were not challenged, but instead learned to be resilient as a result of the experiences. By using Black Feminist Thought as the theoretical framework for this research, the study was able to deduce this information as central knowledge for Black women in this demographic. The use of dialogue to assess knowledge implies conversation between two subjects and that this

humanizing speech challenges and resist white and/or solely feminist domination (Collins, 2000). Thus, this dimension of BFT helped formulate intentional open-ended interview questions that allowed participants to tell their stories, providing generous amounts of rich narrative to be analyzed for emerging themes and constant comparative analysis. The centralization of Black female voices and examining their experiences through the intersectionality of race and gender made it an appropriate lens for this study.

KEY FINDINGS

The following key-findings will be discussed in their relation to the research sub questions.

RESEARCH SUB-QUESTION 1: FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Research sub-questions one was, "what educational experiences, including relationships and professional development opportunities, shaped their career paths?" When examining participant narratives, it was clear that relationships served as a foundation for many of the positive contributors to participant's success. Each woman discussed the importance of networking relationships and aligning themselves with the right people to ensure they were presented with and accepted opportunities when available. One president discussed her intentionality behind aligning with the Community College Research Center (CCRC) for an innovative project, while another shared her experiences serving on state and local executive boards. The overwhelming sentiments were that it is of the utmost importance for Black women aspiring to a community college presidency or other senior-level leadership to form intentional networking relationships with others in the field, particularly those who are well

respected and will speak to their body of work and capabilities. Participants stressed that career advancement can rely heavily upon who you know and, thus, one must be strategic about how you form professional relationships. Professional development was often coupled in the conversation regarding professional networking. Each president outlined specific professional development opportunities that have proved beneficial for them over the years such as the Lakin Institute, The President's Round Table, the HERS Institute, and remaining affiliated with organizations such as The American Association of Blacks in Higher Education (AABHE).

Mentorship was discussed as an important relationship aspect for these women; even participants who were opposed to the term discussed situations that quantified as mentoring relationships. Although each participant viewed mentorship differently, there was a consensus that there is a necessity for mentorship along this journey to the presidency. Mentorship was discussed in the form of relationships with colleagues who hold similar positions and provide support, individuals who have provided opportunities for participants, and others who have provided guidance along the way.

Several participants also mentioned the importance of a diversity of mentors, explaining that, as a Black woman, you should not only have Black women mentors because mentors of different backgrounds serve different purposes. This was clear as participants shared how white males have contributed to their development by providing insight that they may not otherwise have gained from their own cultural perspective. This topic relates to the literature that discusses characteristics of the glass ceiling for Black women, stating that this demographic is

often excluded from activities, information, and/or opportunities that others — such as their white male counterparts — are privy to in the workplace.

Relationships were also discussed from an aspect of support systems. Support systems were identified as any network of social or family relationships that provided practical or emotional support along their respective journeys. Many of the women were either affiliated with a Historically Black Greek letter sorority or another social network of friends that provided an outlet and source of support, and/or discussed their relationships with family. Some of the women shared the influential roles their spouses have played as they navigated this journey, and others spoke about other family members who have stood in the gap, supporting them and their children while they have struggled with work-life balance. Participants noted the difficulty in navigating both the pathway to presidency and occupying the role, and, thus, spoke of the importance of having people to support them outside of their work environment.

While the participants' conversations and experiences covered a wide range of topics and components of the presidency, a few significant aspects of the pathway and presidency were not discussed by participants at all, including the role and relationship between the president and the board of trustees. While this is clearly a critical dynamic for presidents and given that the literature and this research suggests that Black women are subject to more scrutiny in leadership roles within academia than their white and male counterparts, the dynamics experienced by Black women in this area could be explored further to provide additional insight into the lived experiences of this population.

The subject of onboarding and orientation to their presidential role also was not mentioned by participants during their interviews. One president did share that she was

assigned a presidential mentor upon accepting the presidency and she referred to it as her "three-year professional development experience"; however, except for this one comment, this topic was not discussed by the other participants. Although important, these topics may not have arisen because the interview questions directed the participants to focus primarily on their experiences and their pathway to presidency.

Although the women had very different individual experiences, participants agreed that obtaining a terminal degree, intentional networking and professional development, relationship building, and some form of support outside of the work environment played key roles in shaping their career paths. The women identified with these topics differently, but the essence remained the same: African American women must build their pathways by incorporating these key elements.

Research Sub-Question 2: Findings and Conclusions

Research sub-question two was, "how did their self-awareness and identity as a Black woman impact their leadership roles?" Participants discussed self-awareness regarding their strengths, leadership style, and how they practiced their own self-care.

When identifying their strengths, communication rose as a top skillset and strength discussed by all participants. The women felt that because of the increased scrutiny of being a Black woman in leadership, they had to master the art of communication, including listening skills. One president discussed the importance of both oral and written communication to share and get others to buy in to her vision. Other participants shared how when communicating with others, it is equally important to listen and listen carefully. Several participants alluded to the importance of being able to read between the lines of what others are *not* saying, expressing

that, because of racism and sexism in academia, Black women must often read people and situations in order to effectively navigate the politics of higher education. The other strength and skillset identified by participants was collaboration. The presidents felt that, as Black women, the need for and importance of collaboration was magnified. The women felt that they had sometimes had to partner with white and/or male colleagues early in their careers in order for their work to gain recognition. Participants also agreed that as Black women, it is paramount that they work together to support one another in the field. These findings supported the literature that suggested that Black women have reconceptualized their power in order to make initially oppressive systems work in their favor (Wright, 2008).

The default leadership styles that these presidents discussed was also aligned with the experiences they described throughout their journeys and once they reached the presidency. Each participant spoke to servant leadership and the way in which their experiences being a Black woman in academia contributed to this leadership style. Most of the women shared experiences of being from low-socio economic backgrounds and from demographics that were not traditionally expected to succeed. Because Black women are inherently nurturing and family oriented, it is logical that these women would gravitate toward a leadership style that is more collaborative. Servant leadership is also in line with the dual roles that African American women often balance such as spouse, parent, and caregiver to other family members.

Given the nature of participants' strengths and leadership styles, which encompass a tremendous amount of giving of themselves, it was refreshing to hear them discuss how they practice self-care. Because of the challenges that can accompany the role of president, participants stressed the urgency of practicing self-care. The women discussed the constant

mindfulness they must have as president, even so far as monitoring what they purchase in local grocery stores and whom they associate with. Traveling to places where they are unidentifiable was consistent across the board in self-care practices. Having the opportunity to relax and "let their hair down," as several presidents referred to it, seemed to be a necessity for the women. In addition to "getting away," having a network of friends and family that they can openly and freely share their experiences with was paramount. Because Black women experience bouts of racism and sexism throughout their lives, having feelings validated by others who share similar experiences has become a common coping mechanism. A final self-care technique that emerged was spirituality and maintaining their faith in God. Each woman spoke to their faith at some point during their interview and the common theme was that they saw their faith as a channel for making decisions, evaluating situations, and continuously overcoming challenges. Some participants spoke about how they pray for guidance in the workplace, while others shared how their trust in God's plan has sustained them in times of doubt.

It was clear from the participants' narratives about their journeys that their identities as Black women significantly influenced their leadership. Personal backgrounds contributed greatly to how these women interacted with their environments, including their leadership styles and self-awareness. The intersectionality of race and gender continues to result in an environment of increased scrutiny, inequitable treatment, and the constant need to meet and exceed race specific standards for Black women.

Research Sub-Question 3: Findings and Conclusions

Research sub-question three was, "what significant obstacles did these women face and overcome in their journey to their presidential role?" Participant narratives aligned with much

of the research that states that Black women experience challenges and barriers on their pathway to presidency such as balancing family and work, sexism and racism, disrespect from colleagues, and self-doubt (Becks-Moody, 2004; Britton, 2013).

Self-doubt was a consistent theme identified by participants in this research study. The presidents all spoke to experiencing feelings of self-doubt both on their pathway and after becoming president. Participants shared that they often did not see themselves in leadership roles, and that it was others who recognized their abilities and encouraged them to take on more progressively responsible positions. The women also shared that they must fight hard every day against feeling that they don't belong in their role. A deeper analysis of the participant narratives indicated that these feelings seemed to stem primarily from experiences prior to their entry into academic careers. Research participants shared throughout their interviews that they were from backgrounds that were not "supposed to succeed," and that they did not see people like themselves reflected in leadership positions. Representation in leadership is a challenge that Black women continue to face and this clearly contributes to feelings of doubt for those who attain leadership roles, as they are often either the only Black leader or one of very few. Self-doubt was an obstacle that all the participants referenced as being their most significant challenge, stating that they all saw themselves as their greatest obstacle, but, once they believed in themselves, it became more difficult for others to instill doubt in them.

Although the women agreed upon self-doubt as a significant challenge, what stood out most in this section was the way in which the presidents discussed challenges and barriers presented by others. Participant narratives clearly outlined situations in which they

experienced challenges such as (1) being the most qualified for a presidency based on experiences, but not being offered the position for lack of a terminal degree, (2) holding an interim position for an extended amount of time and then being written out of the job description based on qualifications, and (3) even being challenged by colleagues at the start of a new position and having to "prove" that they were qualified before gaining the respect of colleagues. One president recalled her experience when she first began her presidency, sharing that faculty protested her arrival and proceeded to take actions such as accusing her of embezzling money, hiring a private investigator, making false claims of plagiarism in her dissertation, and secretly recording her during a meeting and then releasing misleading commercials that contained her voice. Each president attributed these experiences to being African American, female, or both, but did not acknowledge feelings of isolation and exclusion that these situations commonly impart; instead, they spoke to these experiences in the form of "resiliency builders."

When asked to share their experiences with obstacles and barriers along their journey, participants were hesitant to respond. One president asked for the question to be rephrased to "what situations have you experienced that have helped build resiliency," prior to providing an answer. This approach was significant for two reasons: first, previous literature and research studies conclude that these experiences have a significant impact on the number of Black women who ascend to positions such as the presidency and, second, as a Black woman, this researcher, too, has experienced similar situations and recalls the hurt and disappointment that they can bring. Examining this tendency further led me to discover that this line of behavior and attitude toward instances of racism and sexism are in line with research on the Super Woman

Schema. The Super Woman Schema is a concept initially developed to examine biopsychosocial factors that influence African American women's health; however, this concept can also be useful in understanding the narratives collected for this research study. First, according to Woods-Giscombé (2018), the five elements of Superwoman Schema include the (1) obligation to manifest strength, (2) obligation to suppress emotions, (3) resistance to being vulnerable or dependent, (4) determination to succeed despite limited resources, and (5) obligation to help others.

In this study, each participant portrayed their experiences as "triumphs" and detailed how they were not "challenged" but instead learned to be "resilient" because of these experiences. When the women discussed other areas of challenges and barriers such as balancing family and work life, they shared similar experiences with having to choose between family and work at times, but even then, they ended their comments with an emphasis on how they *overcame* this issue by incorporating their families into their work or adjusting their schedules to ensure that they had time with family. Overall, these challenges were not discussed as obstacles either; it was as if the participants were explaining how they *conquered* a situation rather than what it was like to endure it.

Black women's longstanding history of overcoming points of oppression, such as racism and sexism, appears to have a significant influence on how they make meaning of their experiences. Based on outcomes from previous research and this study, it is clear that Black women begin to develop strategies to overcome obstacles early in life that they carry over into their academic and professional worlds. As a result of this early development of coping mechanisms, Black women often condition themselves to omit their own feelings in an effort to

appear strong to others and to achieve in spite of any obstacles they may face. This approach may also be a contributor to the way in which they process the feelings that accompany experiences related to racism and sexism. This researcher believes that further research into how Black women's past experiences with racism and sexism affects the way they make meaning of obstacles they face in their academic and professional lives could provide better insight into the Super Woman Schema for Black women.

Research Sub-Question 4: Findings and Conclusions

Research sub-question four was, "what is considered a successful pathway to the community college presidency for African American women based on these participant's shared experiences?" As evidenced by the analysis of participant narratives and responses to the demographic profile questionnaire, there is no one pathway to the community college presidency for African American women. Although the number of participants in this study was small, they were representative of a wide range of backgrounds and pathways to the presidency. Participants came from various academic and professional backgrounds both within and outside of academia. While the women each had their own unique journeys, this study was able to identify common practices and strategies utilized throughout their career progression that positively contributed to their ascension to the community college presidency.

All participants agreed that earning a terminal degree is necessary for Black women who aspire to the presidency. Though one participant did not have a terminal degree, and another held a terminal degree outside of academia, the women felt that having a doctorate increases chances to progress to senior level positions for Black women. The presidents shared that because Black women are often held to unfairly higher standards than their white and male

counterparts, it is paramount that they meet the highest professional and academic qualifications. During the interviews, one president discussed how she was not offered her presidency when she initially applied because she did not have a terminal degree, although she was the most qualified experience-wise for the job. She was, however, offered the position a few years later when she applied after the previous white male selected did not work out well for the institution. Several participants discussed how white males in academia are often promoted to leadership positions without meeting the desired academic and/or professional qualifications; thus, they ensure that they are over-qualified in order to obtain desired roles.

Ensuring visibility was another key contributing factor to participants' success as they navigated their way to the presidency. Each president expressed that ensuring that their body of work and abilities were visible to the field was critical to their career progression. The women achieved visibility in many ways, including collaborating with well-known and widely respected organizations such as the National Science Foundation and Community College Research Center, joining statewide and national boards, and presenting at largely attended conferences. One president shared how she created an innovative program for students with children at a community college, which became widely recognized across the state and largely contributed to her receiving a vice presidency. Participants felt that it was their responsibility to ensure that they were recognized for their contributions to the field and took ownership of how their body of work was presented and accessible to others. A final strategy utilized by each study participant in navigating their pathway to the presidency was professional development. Opportunities that provide leadership development and training, detailed earlier in this chapter, proved to be an effective tool for these women.

Based on the findings of this research, African American women who serve as community college presidents come from various academic and professional backgrounds and have a diverse array of social and professional affiliations. However, what was agreed upon by all participants is that key factors such as earning terminal degrees, maintaining high visibility, and maximizing professional development opportunities are paramount to successfully navigating a pathway to the community college presidency for African American women.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This research study examined Black women's experiences as they navigated their way to the community college presidency by centering Black female voices as knowledge and identifying commonalities across participant narratives. The study identified key contributors that positively impacted participant experiences as well as challenges to persistence and strategies employed to ascend to the role of community college president. Thus, this study contributes to the scholarly research and literature in higher education on the experiences of African American women as they progress to the community college presidency.

This study provides opportunities for future research in several areas. First, an in-depth analysis of African American female community college presidents' experiences upon entering the role would be valuable. The literature discussed the impact that Black female presidents have on the institution stating that they often bring about gender, class, and race equity by challenging issues such as favoritism, dishonesty, and corruption (Wright, 2008). Study participants provided in-depth narratives about the importance of relationship building along their pathway but did not speak to relationships in their role as president such as with the Board of Trustees and onboarding experiences. A deeper look into the leadership of Black

female college presidents, to include their experiences with the Board and other key stakeholders, could provide further insight on the expectations placed upon them and how they influence change. This research could also provide aspiring Black female presidents the information necessary to shed light on what they might expect and ensure that they are properly prepared with necessary leadership skills to be an effective community college president. This research could also assist the field of higher education in providing meaningful leadership development for potential Black women executives and examining their own engagement practices in relation to African American female leaders.

Future research studies examining African American female college president's experiences that lead four-year institutions could provide a comparison of career experiences between presidents of community colleges and four-year institutions. Particularly, additional research could uncover whether the same preparation is necessary for Black women who lead four-year intuitions as those who lead community colleges. It is possible that these women may have similar experiences that impact their pathway to the presidency; however, researching their specific journeys could help other African American women who desire to become college presidents make informed decisions regarding their career paths.

Finally, other studies might further explore the Superwoman Schema in relation to the way they handle challenges and barriers. The literature suggests that, despite Black women's high achievement, Black female collegians and academics routinely have their ways of knowing when they are devalued as a result of the myriad of ways institutionalized oppression manifests through racism and sexism (Davis, 2016). It was clear that the women in this study did not discuss challenges in a way that acknowledged feelings of being devalued due to racism and

sexism. As previously mentioned, participants described challenges as situations that built resiliency and did not allude to being negatively impacted by them. This research indicates that this behavior may stem from the women's backgrounds of being Black and female, which placed them at an initial disadvantage and resulted in resiliency building early in life. However, to determine whether an individual's background has any correlation to the meaning they make of experiences resulting from sexism and racism, future research studies could explore the dimensions of Superwoman Schema and how this population mentally and emotionally processes challenges.

DELIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Although this study presents important findings on experiences on the pathway to community college presidency for African American women, it is limited in scope. First, this research focused solely on African American women at community colleges. This study does not examine whether experiences of presidents leading other types of institutions would be similar. Although more Black women lead community colleges than other types of higher education institutions, the experiences detailed here may not be reflective of all Black women's experiences navigating the path to a presidency. Differences may exist between community college presidents versus those who become president of a four-year institution.

Second, the number of research participants in this study was small. Based on the method for this study and the number of women who were able to be identified, the sample size offered a reasonable approach; however, a larger sample could provide even further insight into these experiences and be more generalizable.

Finally, the study interviews were conducted using WebEx Video. Although the researcher had the opportunity to see the participants using this medium, analysis focused on the written interview transcripts and the written responses to questionnaires. The study did not provide opportunities to observe the women in their environment as president, nor was there an opportunity for in-person discussion that was not being recorded. Both of these methods might have impacted how candid participants were in their responses. In addition, physical observation would have provided another dataset, providing richer data and validation of the research findings.

RESEARCHER'S REFLECTION

This research was personal for me as a Black woman in higher education because I have personally experienced bouts of sexism and racism. Earning my doctoral degree is not just a personal goal, but something I view as necessary if I desire to progress to senior level leadership. This process was emotionally gratifying for me for many reasons but primarily because it validated some of my experiences and provided a framework for myself and others who may aspire to a community college presidency someday. I would like to thank all the participants for their transparency and willingness to share their stories. Lastly, I want my grandmother, Sandra N. Love, to know that I now understand what you meant by "that's just what we do!"

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Although the number of African American women who become community college presidents is slowly increasing, it is important to examine their lived experiences as they

navigate their pathway to discover what positive contributors — as well as challenges and barriers — they have encountered and how they have successfully navigated their journey. If community colleges seek to continue to work toward representation in leadership being reflective of the populations they serve, it is important that they understand the experiences and needs of diverse leaders, particularly African American women. This was a key goal of this study.

This chapter summarized the findings to the main research question: What are the lived experiences of African American women on their pathway to the community college presidency? The method for answering this question was to identify the key positive contributors to their success, challenges and barriers, and strategies they used to ultimately attain the position of community college president. Participants identified terminal degree attainment, relationships, and self-awareness as characteristics that positively impacted their career progression. The women in this study acknowledged self-doubt as an obstacle but did not identify external experiences with issues of racism and sexism as challenges. Participants also identified the components of their self-awareness as coping mechanisms, such as having a support system, traveling to places where they are not identified as president, and maintaining their faith in God.

It is the researcher's hope that the findings from this study will provide insight to aspiring African American female community college presidents on career preparation and what they can potentially expect as they navigate their career journey. This research is also intended to inform the higher education community on what is necessary in order to provide African American women with leadership development and to diversify the pipeline to senior

level leadership. The findings from this research study are evidence that there are commonly utilized strategies that assist in the career and leadership development of African American female community college presidents. As research continues to emerge on the experiences of this population, hopefully it will no longer be the road less traveled.

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APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL

FERRIS STATE UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD FOR HUMAN SUBJECT RESEARCH
1010 Campus Drive FLITE 410 Big Rapids, MI 49307 | (231) 591-2553 | www.ferris.edu/irb

Date: December 4, 2018

To: Rita Walters, Danyelle Gregory, and Sandra Balkema
From: Gregory Wellman, R.Ph, Ph.D, IRB Chair
Re: IRB Application *IRB-FY18-19-95 Pathway to College Presidency for African American Women*

The Ferris State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application for using human subjects in the study, " *Pathway to College Presidency for African American Women" (IRB-FY18-19-95)* and Approved this project under Federal Regulations Expedited Review 6. Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes. 7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Approval has an expiration date of one year from the date of this letter **. As such, you may collect data according to the procedures outlined in your application until December 4, 2019 .** Should additional time be needed to conduct your approved study, a request for extension must be submitted to the IRB a month prior to its expiration.

Your protocol has been assigned project number IRB-FY18-19-95. Approval mandates that you follow all University policy and procedures, in addition to applicable governmental regulations. Approval applies only to the activities described in the protocol submission; should revisions need to be made, all materials must be reviewed and approved by the IRB prior to initiation. In addition, the IRB must be made aware of any serious and unexpected and/or unanticipated adverse events as well as complaints and non-compliance issues.

Understand that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the study and participant rights with assurance of participant understanding, followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the study via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require each participant receive a copy of the signed consent document and investigators maintain consent records for a minimum of three years.

As mandated by Title 45 Code of Federal Regulations, Part 46 (45 CFR 46) the IRB requires submission of annual reviews during the life of the research project and a Final Report Form upon study completion. Thank you for your compliance with these guidelines and best wishes for a successful research endeavor. Please let us know if the IRB can be of any future assistance.

Regards,

Gregory Wellman, R.Ph, Ph.D, IRB Chair
Ferris State University Institutional Review Board

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Questions

1. Can you tell me about how you came to be a community college president?
    a. Was there a specific time or experience during your journey that you would identify as more significant or a *turning point* in your career?
2. Did you participate in any social and/or professional networks prior to becoming a community college president?
    a. What role did these networks play in your career journey?
3. Did you have any experience/s that you feel presented obstacles to reaching the presidency?
    a. If so, could you tell me more about the experience/s?
    b. How did you overcome these obstacles?
4. Was mentorship a component on your journey to the community college presidency?
    a. How did the presence or absence of mentorship impact your career progression?
5. How would you describe your leadership? (Leadership philosophy?)
6. In your opinion, what skills are most important in reaching the presidency?
    a. What strategies did you use to ensure your competence in these areas?
7. What suggestions would you give to an African American woman aspiring to the community college presidency?
8. Based on your experiences, what recommendations would you make to the higher education community to increase opportunities for Black women seeking a college presidency or other senior level leadership positions?
9. Educational background – degree discipline (if not answered)
10. What role has your identity (AA Woman) played in your education/career progression? Challenges? Benefits?
11. Demographic Profile Questions: When were you married and had children in relation to your career timeline?
    a. Does being a married woman play any role in your professional life?
12. Is there anything additional that we have not covered that you would like to share?

Demographic Profile Questions

1. Do you identify as African American & Female?
    a. Yes
    b. No
2. Age Group
    a. 25 – 40 yrs.
    b. 41 – 55 yrs.
    c. 56+
3. Marital Status
    a. Married
    b. Single, never married
    c. Divorced
    d. Separated
    e. Widowed
4. Highest Degree Earned
    a. Bachelor degree
    b. Master's Degree
    c. Professional/Terminal Degree
5. Number of Children
    a. 0
    b. 1 - 3
    c. 4 - 6
    d. More than 6
6. Time as President
    a. 1 – 3 yrs.
    b. 4 – 7 yrs.
    c. More than 7 years