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# The Leadership Experience of Female Chief Admissions Officers: A Phenomenological Research Study

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THE LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCE OF FEMALE CHIEF ADMISSIONS OFFICERS:  
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL RESEARCH STUDY

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A Dissertation  
Presented to  
the Graduate School of  
Clemson University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Educational Leadership

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by  
Krista L. Timney  
May 2011

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Dr. Russ Marion, Committee Chair  
Dr. Tony Cawthon  
Dr. Pam Havice  
Dr. Mindy Spearman

## ABSTRACT

College admissions is a highly-competitive, business-oriented, and collaborative profession where women continue to be underrepresented in leadership positions. A study is needed of the barriers that have the potential to hinder the advancement of women in this unique and challenging field, as well as the opportunities and approaches to leadership that may lead to their success. The southeast region of the U.S. was chosen for this study because it is an area where women have been successful in advancing into leadership roles in admissions. The primary research question was: How do female chief admissions officers describe their lived leadership experiences? The secondary research questions delved into the leadership journeys of the women and their current leadership experiences. A review of the literature identified a number of relevant studies concerning the career development and obstacles to advancement of female leaders as well as issues related to the current roles/responsibilities and challenges of chief admissions officers. The researcher conducted this review and the overall investigation with a critical and feminist theoretical orientation.

Using the methodical structure outlined by van Manen (1990), the researcher conducted a phenomenological study. Six participants from public master's and research institutions in the southeast U.S. were selected for the study through purposive sampling and then interviewed at their institutions. The data that was collected from the interviews was analyzed and coded according to a holistic and line-by-line approach (van Manen, 1990). The following eight themes emerged that described the essence of the leadership experience of the participants: (1) Entering the Profession, (2) Sucked In, (3) Mentors,

(4) Chipping Away at the Big Issues, (5) Balancing, (6) Like a Roller Coaster, (7) Leadership as a Social Process, and (8) Creating Positive Outcomes.

The findings reveal that the leadership experience of female chief admissions officers is characterized by their adaptation to elements of the traditional bureaucratic organization as well as their development of a relational style of leadership that is built upon social interaction and positive outcomes. Their experience is also impacted by relationships with mentors and the complex world of admissions in which they function. A data display was developed to illustrate the interplay between these components of the phenomenon. The researcher offered a critical and feminist interpretation of the results and presented recommendations for practice and further study that may help other women attain a presence and succeed in the male-dominated world of leadership.

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, June and Steve Timney. You have supported and encouraged me not only during this long process, but throughout my entire experience in higher education as a student and as a professional. You are, quite simply, the best people I know and I wish I was more like you. This dissertation is also dedicated to my grandmothers, Avery Hess and Genevieve Timney. I know from my genealogy research that Avery had a hard life, but I also know that when she died and my mother went through her wallet, she had kept an elementary school report card where she had attained straight A's (or close to it). She must have been so proud of this accomplishment to have carried this battered piece of paper throughout the hard times that lay ahead. My other grandmother, Genevieve, wasn't able to finish high school, but I know that she too valued education because she earned her GED much later in life. My grandmothers were amazing, strong women. They are not here to see me graduate, but I know that they would be proud.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the contributions of some individuals who gave freely of their time and effort. Without their assistance, this research project would not have been completed. First, I am grateful that I had the chance to work with Dr. Marion, my committee chair. He came to my rescue when the project was at a standstill, helped me find my direction, and guided me to the conclusion. Dr. Marion, you are a wonderful mentor who challenged me to reach for something big and kept me motivated. You are a rock star!

I am also grateful to Dr. Tony Cawthon, Dr. Pam Havice, and Dr. Mindy Spearman for serving on my committee and also helping see this project through to its completion. The suggestions that you offered throughout the process were always constructive and well-conceived and improved every aspect of the research. I hope that you feel this a dissertation with which you are proud to have your name associated. I am also indebted to Dr. Frankie Keels-Williams, my first advisor and committee chair. Although Dr. Williams left the university before I was able to complete this project, she played a major role in my choice of topic and initial conception of the research.

Finally, I am extremely indebted to and thankful for the six women who were the participants in this study. Without your time and involvement, this study would not have been possible. I feel very privileged that you have allowed me to tell your stories and try to understand and interpret what it is like for you to be a female chief admissions officer. I am in awe of what you have accomplished as leaders and as women.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, college admissions has become “a prime-time preoccupation” (Hoover, May, 2, 2008, p. B3). As competition increased among institutions to attract the most qualified applicants and meet enrollment goals, chief admissions officers began to play a more important role on their campuses (Hoover, May, 2, 2008). As a result, the nature of this position also changed. Increasingly, admissions professionals adopted the practices and language of the corporate world (Donehower, 2003; Kirp, 2003). The image of the chief admissions officer changed from gatekeeper (Johnson, 2000) to helpful counselor to aggressive marketer (Jump, 2004; Wilson, 1990). The position also became more standardized and chief admissions officers accepted new responsibilities (Hawkins & Clinedinst, 2007; Henderson, 1998; Swann, 1998). These responsibilities included serving as enrollment managers (Penn, 1999), carrying out the institutional mission (Hilton, 1997), and collaborating with financial aid offices on policy and budgetary matters (Farrell, 2008). One aspect of the profession that has not changed, however, is the lack of women in top leadership positions.

Over 20 years ago, Shere (1987) questioned why women held so few leadership positions in admissions despite having the qualifications needed to succeed. Demographic data from colleges and universities in the United States confirms that the typical chief admissions officer is still a white male. In 1995, 70% of chief admissions officers were men (McDonough & Robertson). In 2008, 60% of senior-level admissions officers were male (“*The Chronicle Survey*”). Blair (1997) indicated that differing career

paths may be an issue to women's advancement. Although female and male chief admissions directors were similar in educational preparation, women had less admissions experience and fewer years in their current positions. Women were also more likely to advance within one institution and more likely to leave admissions within five years.

### **Background of the Problem**

Despite the potential of women to succeed in leadership positions, few women have attained top administrative positions in higher education. One illustration of this phenomenon is the dominance of women in the roles of student, faculty, and staff in relation to their lower visibility in leadership positions. In 2005-2006 in the U.S., 57% of all undergraduate students were women and 58% of baccalaureate degrees were awarded to women. That same year, women earned 60% of master's degrees. Women were on par with men in attaining doctoral degrees (49%). In terms of all higher education positions, 51.5% of executive/professional/managerial staff members were women (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2007).

Despite the representation that women have attained in higher education access, degree completion, and staff positions, women continue to be underrepresented and have not received the same opportunities as men when it comes to gaining leadership positions. Recent data indicated that less than half of full-time faculty at degree granting institutions were women (41%), and only 25% of those holding full professor positions were female (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007). Among those who attained the title of president, 23% were women, but only 13.8% of presidents at doctoral institutions were female (American Council on Education, 2007). Most women advanced

to the presidency at two-year schools, liberal arts colleges, and institutions that are less prestigious academically (Lively, 2000). Additional survey data indicated that only 38% of chief academic officers were women (King & Gomez, 2008).

Some researchers have indicated the limited presence of women in leadership positions is indicative of a glass ceiling (Bain & Cummings, 2000; Davies-Netzley, 1998; Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995; Lyness & Thompson, 1997; Stroh, Brett, & Reilly, 1996). The term was first used over 20 years ago in *The Wall Street Journal* to describe unseen barriers preventing women from moving into leadership positions (Hymowitz & Schellhardt, 1986). In 1995, the Federal Glass Ceiling Commission concluded that the glass ceiling was still an appropriate metaphor as few women were in career paths leading to top management positions. In higher education, large numbers of women enroll and earn degrees at all levels. Unfortunately, women are still underrepresented in top leadership positions as well as in positions that form typical stepping stones to the top and are known as “pipeline” positions (American Council on Education, 2007; King & Gomez, 2008).

As numerous researchers have focused on the lack of representation of women in leadership positions, studies have revealed a number of barriers for women seeking to advance. One obstacle women contend with is the pressure to fit their leadership styles into accepted models instead of being allowed to develop their own styles (Irby, Brown, Duffy, & Trautman, 2001; Trinidad & Normore, 2005). Traditionally, leadership studies have focused on males and the masculine perspective because women were not in leadership positions. Scholars have criticized leadership theories that fail to take into

account the female experience (Irby et al., 2001; Shakeshaft & Nowell, 1984). New leadership perspectives call for a more collaborative (Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007) and shared approach to leadership (Pearce & Conger, 2003). Approaches such as postheroic leadership (Fletcher, 2004), connective leadership theory (Lipman-Blumen, 1998), and synergistic leadership theory (Irby et al., 2001) incorporate feminine attributes and experiences. Despite these new viewpoints, Fletcher (2004) argued that the ideal of effective leadership is still that of male “heroic individualism” (p.652).

Since the masculine style of leadership is still perceived by many as ideal, women also have difficulties in gaining and keeping leadership positions because even when they prove themselves to be competent, their contributions are likely to be devalued (Fletcher, 2004). Studies have shown that perceptions about women in the workplace are slow to change. Men are still perceived as possessing the characteristics of successful managers (Duehr & Bono, 2006; Heilman, Block, Simon, & Martell, 1998; Martell, Parker, Emrich, & Crawford, 1998; Schein, 1973, 1975). Whereas men need only exhibit masculine traits to be considered effective leaders, women must demonstrate both male and female behaviors (Johnson, Murphy, Zewdie, & Reichard, 2008). Women who violate stereotypes and exhibit male behaviors are often disliked and perceived negatively (Eagly, Makhijani, & Klonsky, 1992; Forsyth, Heiney, & Wright, 1997; Heilman, Wallen, Fuchs, & Tamkins, 2004; Jago & Vroom, 1982; Rudman & Glick, 1999). Other researchers have suggested that because so few leadership positions are available to women, they will undermine their colleagues of the same gender (Kanter, 1977; Sutton & Moore, 1985; “When Sisters Turn into Saboteurs,” 2008). Finally, without having more

women in leadership positions, there seems no real chance that perceptions about gender stereotypes will change, thus ensuring the glass ceiling remains in place (Lively, 2000; Sutton & Moore, 1985).

Although perceptions can be damaging, women also continue to face problems at colleges and universities brought on by the patriarchal nature of the institutions (Aguire, 2000; Christman, 2003). Researchers have found that administrators, who are predominantly white males, have subverted hiring practices designed to be inclusive toward women (Claringboud & Knoppers, 2007; Moss & Dauntton, 2006). Biernat and Fuegen (2001) found that more difficult standards are set for female candidates in the hiring process. Studies also show that men are more integrated into the types of networks that lead to promotion and other benefits (Brass, 1985; Forret & Dougherty, 2004, Iberra, 1993). Finally, researchers have found that conflicts between women's careers and home responsibilities may serve as barriers to advancement (Armstrong, Riemenschneider, Allen, & Reid, 2007; Hochschild, 1989; Lewis & Cooper, 1987; Linehan & Walsh, 2000; Pleck, 1985).

As a result of these practices, women can be isolated and excluded to the point that they are outsiders at their own institutions (Bronstein & Farnsworth, 1998; Davies, Lubelska, & Quinn, 1994). Lower salaries indicate their marginalized status. Among full-time instructional faculty, the average woman earned approximately \$13,000 less than the typical man (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007). The same disparity holds true for leadership positions such as chief academic officer, where women earned \$11,305 less than men, and chief executive officer, where women earned \$25,375 less.



Among women who hold top positions in other administrative areas, there are also significant differences between the salaries of men and women: chief business officer, \$14,706; chief student affairs officer, \$8,710; athletics director, \$7,142; and director of alumni affairs, \$10,983, are just a few examples. Among chief admissions officers, the subject of this study, men earned \$11,784 more than women (College and University Professional Association for Human Resources, 2007).

As a profession, admissions mirrors the academic world in that although many women find employment, the majority of top administrative positions are still held by men. In 2008, 62% of the members of the National Association for College Admissions Counseling (NACAC) were women (C. Johnson, personal communication, April 3, 2008), as were 68% of the members of the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) (AACRAO, 2008). Yet, historically, women have attained leadership positions at rates disproportionately lower than men (Blair, 1997; “*The Chronicle Survey*,” 2008; Chapman & Urbach, 1984). There is an indication, however, that women have gained a strong presence in admissions leadership in at least one region of the country. Recently, 59% of admissions directors in the Southern Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (SACRAO) were female (SACRAO, n.d., “SACRAO member look-up”).

Female chief admissions officers are gaining a more visible presence in a profession that has reached a new level of popularity and standardization. However, there is a gap in the literature in terms of what is known about the leadership experience of women in admissions. To date, there has not been an in-depth study that focused on the

leadership journeys and experiences of these women (Hilton, 1997). Extant research on female chief admissions officers is dated and has centered on representation, job satisfaction, and salaries (Rickard & Clement, 1984; Shere, 1987). General scholarship on admissions professionals is also limited and has delved into roles, career paths, and job satisfaction (Hilton, 1997; Blair, 1997). As early as the 1970's, researchers have called for investigations into the continuing impact and role of women in admissions (Blair, 1997; Vinson, 1976).

### **Problem Statement**

Higher education is still a place where the glass ceiling constitutes a barrier to the advancement of women into top leadership positions (Bain & Cummings, 2000; Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995). Although women dominate in baccalaureate and master's degree attainment, they have not gained parity with men in top management positions among the faculty and administration (American Council on Education, 2007; National Center for Education Statistics, 2006). Also indicative of and contributing to this problem is the idea that women still struggle with gaining acceptance as leaders due to gender-based perceptions about leader competency (Duehr & Bono, 2006; Garcia-Retamero & Lopez-Zafra, 2006; Heilman, et al., 1998). Women face barriers in the form of gender-biased hiring practices (Biernat & Fuegen, 2001; Claringboud & Knoppers, 2007; Moss & Daunton, 2006) and exclusion from the types of networks that contribute to advancement (Brass, 1985; Foret & Dougherty, 2004; Iberra, 1993). In admissions, where women have attained a presence in leadership in at least one region of the U.S., little is known about their leadership experiences or what contributes to their success.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The field of college admissions is a highly-competitive, business-oriented, and collaborative profession where women continue to be underrepresented in leadership positions. What is needed is a study of the leadership experiences of women who have attained success as chief admissions officers, especially in a region where women hold the majority of positions. Through this research, women who aspire to similar leadership positions may gain an understanding of the barriers that have the potential to limit their advancement as well as the opportunities and approaches to leadership that may lead to success. The major purpose of this phenomenological study is to capture the essence of the leadership experience of female chief admissions officers at public institutions in the southeast region of the U.S. The researcher studied the leadership journeys and current positions that are significant components of the lived leadership experience of the women. The investigation into their leadership journeys focused on career development and obstacles to advancement. The research related to their current positions focused on roles/responsibilities and challenges.

## **Definition of Terms**

The definitions that follow involve key terms that the reader may not be familiar with and that will assist in understanding the context of the research study.

### **Terms Cited in the Literature**

- Agentic: “The agentic dimension of gender-stereotypic beliefs about personal qualities describes primarily an assertive and controlling tendency, and men are believed to manifest this tendency more strongly than women.” (Eagly, 1987, p. 16)

- Bureaucracy: According to Hall (1963), an organizational structure that is characterized by six primary dimensions: hierarchical authority, division of labor, strict rules and procedures, impersonal relations, and technical competence. These dimensions are found in a continuum that varies by organization.
- Carnegie Classification System: System for categorizing higher education institutions based on factors such as size and types of degrees awarded (The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2010).
- Communal: “The communal dimension of gender-specific beliefs primarily describes a concern with the welfare of other people, and women are believed to manifest this concern more strongly than men.” (Eagly, 1987 p. 16).
- Critical Theory: A perspective for investigating social relationships that focuses on the abuse of power and how this abuse leads to the oppression of some individuals and groups (Jermier, 1998).
- Culture: “A system of shared values (that define what is important) and norms that define appropriate attitudes and behaviors for organizational members (how to feel and behave).” (O’Reilly & Chatman, 1996, p. 160)
- Enrollment Management: A systematic set of activities designed to attract, enroll, and retain students that is often implemented through the combined efforts of admissions, financial aid, and retention offices (Penn, 1999).
- Feminism: “A movement, and a set of beliefs, that problematize gender inequality. Feminists believe that women have been subordinated through men’s greater power variously expressed in different arenas. They value women’s lives and concerns, and work to improve women’s status.” (DeVault, 1999, p.27)
- Gatekeeper: A term used to describe the role of admissions officers charged with implementing and adhering to more selective entrance requirements in response to increased applications from students and intense competition between institutions (Johnson, 2000).
- Glass Ceiling: The unseen barriers that prevent women from moving into leadership positions (Hymowitz & Schellhardt, 1986).
- Homophily: The similarity of individuals in the workplace (Appold, Siengthai, & Kasarda, 1998).
- Master’s College or University: According to the Carnegie Classification System, this type of institution awards at least 50 master’s degrees but less than 20

doctorates per year (The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2010).

- Network: A formal network is an organizational structure characterized by specific relationships among employees based on their positions or duties in the organization. An informal network is an underlying framework of more flexible and open relationships that can be based on professional and/or social affiliation (Iberra, 1993).
- Patriarchy: An organization distinguished by a structure of “power relations in which women’s interests are subordinated to the interests of men” (Weedon, 1997, pp. 1-2).
- Research University: According to the Carnegie Classification System, this type of institution awards at least 20 doctoral degrees per year (excluding doctoral-level degrees that qualify recipients for entry into professional practice such as M.D.) (The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2010).

### **Terms Relating to the Context of the Study**

- Admissions: The collection of processes that involve recruiting, accepting, and enrolling students in order to meet specified enrollment goals at an institution of higher education, thereby allowing the institution to fulfill its mission.
- Career Development: The combination of career patterns, levels of career success, and influence of mentoring that characterize an individual’s career journey.
- Career Pattern: An account of the positions an individual has held in his/her career, including the method of entry into the profession as well as the positions through which the individual has advanced to attain the current position.
- Career Success: High levels of workplace achievement measured in terms of income and level in the organization.
- Chief Admissions Officer: The individual primarily responsible for providing leadership and managing the daily operations of a college admissions office that is charged with attaining enrollment goals congruent with the mission of the institution. This title will be used interchangeably with the title “admissions director.”
- Female: The biological designation of gender.

- **Hiring Practices:** The combination of formal policies and informal mechanisms that impact the recruitment and selection of employees in an organizational setting.
- **Leadership Experience:** The combination of career development activities and obstacles that may contribute to and/or hinder an individual's advancement to a leadership position.
- **Marketer:** A term used to describe the role of admissions officers who have adopted business-oriented practices that revolve around determining the needs of student consumers and then developing and promoting higher education as a product to meet these needs.
- **Obstacle:** A factor that may slow the advancement of an individual into a leadership position.
- **Success:** The advancement to and continued competent execution of the position of chief admissions officer in the field of admissions.

### **Research Questions**

Due to the percentage of women holding chief admissions officer positions, the southeast region formed an appropriate setting for this study on the lived leadership experience of female directors. At the time the study was initiated, the southeast was also the area where the researcher was living and working, thus offering access to potential participants. This phenomenological study was guided by one primary research question: How do female chief admissions officers describe their lived leadership experience? In order to discover the unique perceptions that give meaning to the leadership experiences for this particular group of women (Patton, 2002), a number of secondary research questions guided the researcher: How do these women describe their leadership journeys, including their career development and obstacles to advancement? What is the nature of

their current leadership experiences in relation to their roles/responsibilities and challenges?

### **Research Method**

The researcher implemented a qualitative, phenomenological study in order to investigate the leadership experiences of female chief admissions officers. As a method of inquiry, phenomenology is suited to the proposed study as it seeks to address the question of “What is this or that kind of experience like?” (van Manen, 1990, p. 9). The participants whose experiences the study describes were members of the Southern Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (SACRAO) and were selected by purposive sampling. They worked at public institutions that hold the Carnegie Classification of master’s level or research universities. The primary source of data was in-person interviews with the participants. Data was analyzed according to the activities outlined by van Manen (1990). As the final product of the study, the researcher produced this written report with findings that provide a glimpse into what Husserl (1999) calls the “life-world” of the participants.

### **Theoretical Orientation**

Creswell (2003) noted that theory may be used in qualitative studies as a perspective “to guide the researchers as to what issues are important to examine and the people that need to be studied” (p. 131). In this investigation, critical theory provided the overall framework for the study and a feminist perspective determined the choice of participants. Critical theorists are concerned with control. They believe that in any

society, power is held by a small group of elites who benefit from the mistreatment and subjugation of those with less power (Jermier, 1998). The ruling group is able to maintain the status quo by quietly convincing the oppressed that their subordinate position is natural (Brookfield, 2005) and even desired by “clothing the iron fist of power in a velvet glove” (Jermier, 1998, p.236). Research that is critical, then, attempts to expose injustice and empower those who have been mistreated (Brookfield, 2005; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005).

Although critical theory has its roots in Marxist teachings about the mistreatment of the working class, modern scholars are also concerned with the struggles of other groups such as women (Jermier, 1998). Whereas women’s concerns have not been illuminated through traditional empirical research, Kincheloe and McLaren (2005) described “the movement of feminist theoretical concerns to the center of critical theory” (p. 314). Gilligan (1982) recognized that women experience and describe their experiences differently from men—in a different *voice* (1993). According to Grogan (2000), listening to this voice and incorporating the feminist perspective offers a means from which to understand a leadership position in its current state and re-conceptualize the position for the future. Both are goals which were compatible with the purpose of this study.

Adopting a feminist perspective ensured that the primary subject of inquiry was women and that the viewpoint of gender would be incorporated (Lengermann & Niebrugge-Brantley, 1988). Previous investigations into the experience of chief admissions officers have presented a male perspective as men have been dominant among



researchers and practitioners (“*The Chronicle Survey*,” 2008; Chapman & Urbach, 1984; Hauser and Lazarsfeld, 1964; Hilton, 1997; McDonough & Robertson, 1995; Perry, 1964; Whitmire, 1976; Vinson, 1976). However, for this study, only female chief admissions officers could describe and give voice to the experiences and perceptions that provide meaning to their unique leadership experiences. The feminist perspective merged with the critical as both approaches contributed to the researcher’s goal of improving the status and opportunities of women (Jermier, 1998; Lengermann & Niebrugge-Brantley, 1988). As does critical theory, “Feminist scholarship advocates action that results in a more equitable distribution of resources and opportunities for those who have been marginalized” (Grogan, 2000, p. 126).

### **Researcher’s Perspective**

As the researcher, I acknowledge that I am a woman who has worked in the admissions profession for eleven years and has held a number of leadership positions. My career in higher education has stretched almost 20 years. In making this disclosure, I chose to adopt the perspective that “the researcher is an author who writes from the midst of life experiences” (van Manen, 2002, p. 238). I also chose to adopt a critical and feminist stance because these approaches allow the investigator to enter into the research process with preconceived notions and values. In fact, Jermier (1998) called on critical researchers to answer the question, “Whose side are you on?” (p. 238).

I am on the side of women. I believe that, historically, women have not had the same opportunities as men to advance into leadership positions and that they continue to face obstacles that hinder their effectiveness as leaders. I also believe women possess

innate and learned capabilities that make them well-suited to adopt the collaborative, learning-oriented approach to leadership needed in today's organizations (Fletcher, 2004; Uhl-Bien, et al., 2007). Unfortunately, the rhetoric of much popular and scholarly literature continues to be that women *can* lead while the reality is that men *do* the leading. Since these views affected my initial conception of the study and continued to play a role in the data analysis and presentation of findings, I believed it was important to state them in the first chapter of this research report. Appendix A offers a more in-depth glimpse into my own personal and professional background and experience and situates them as a backdrop for the investigation.

When I initiated this study, I was interested in seeing if other women have made similar leadership journeys and faced the same types of challenges that have been a part of my leadership experience. As a woman, I also felt the need to support other women and seek information about the barriers women face in advancing to leadership positions and how these barriers can be overcome. I wanted to know specifically about the experiences of female admissions directors. How did they attain their positions? What obstacles have they faced as women? What are their days like? What has led to or hindered their success? Has working in the south impacted their advancement? Traditionally, leadership studies have focused on the masculine perspective and women leaders have been judged according to the characteristics of male leaders (Irby, et al., 2001; Shakeshaft & Nowell, 1984). However, the "iron cage" of the masculine bureaucracy may be crumbling (Marion, 2002, p. 239) as a more collaborative, interdependent style of leadership moves to the forefront (Pearce & Conger, 2003;

Fletcher, 2004; Uhl-Bien, et al., 2007). Within this world, are women still playing by men's rules or starting to make their own?

### **Conceptual Framework**

Figure 1.1 on the following page illustrates the conceptual framework for this study. The framework is organized in relation to the research questions that guided the investigation. The framework contains two major components: the leadership journey and nature of the current leadership experience. The leadership journey component contains the sub-components of career development and obstacles to advancement. The sub-components for the nature of the current leadership experience component are roles/responsibilities and challenges.

### **Limitations**

The findings of this study may be limited in a number of ways. Due to the assumptions that underlie the phenomenological research method, the narrowness of the scope of the study, and the nature of the admissions profession, the results cannot be generalized to all women leaders. The adoption of critical theory and feminist theory as the orienting frameworks also increases the subjective nature of the results. Both approaches call on the researcher to take the side of the mistreated (Jermier, 1998) and are political in nature (Morrow, 2005; Weedon, 1997). Although the phenomenological research method offered a set of steps for use in data analysis, these steps functioned more as a guide, leaving open the possibility of other interpretations when determining themes and reporting findings (van Manen, 1990, 2002). Finally, as the researcher

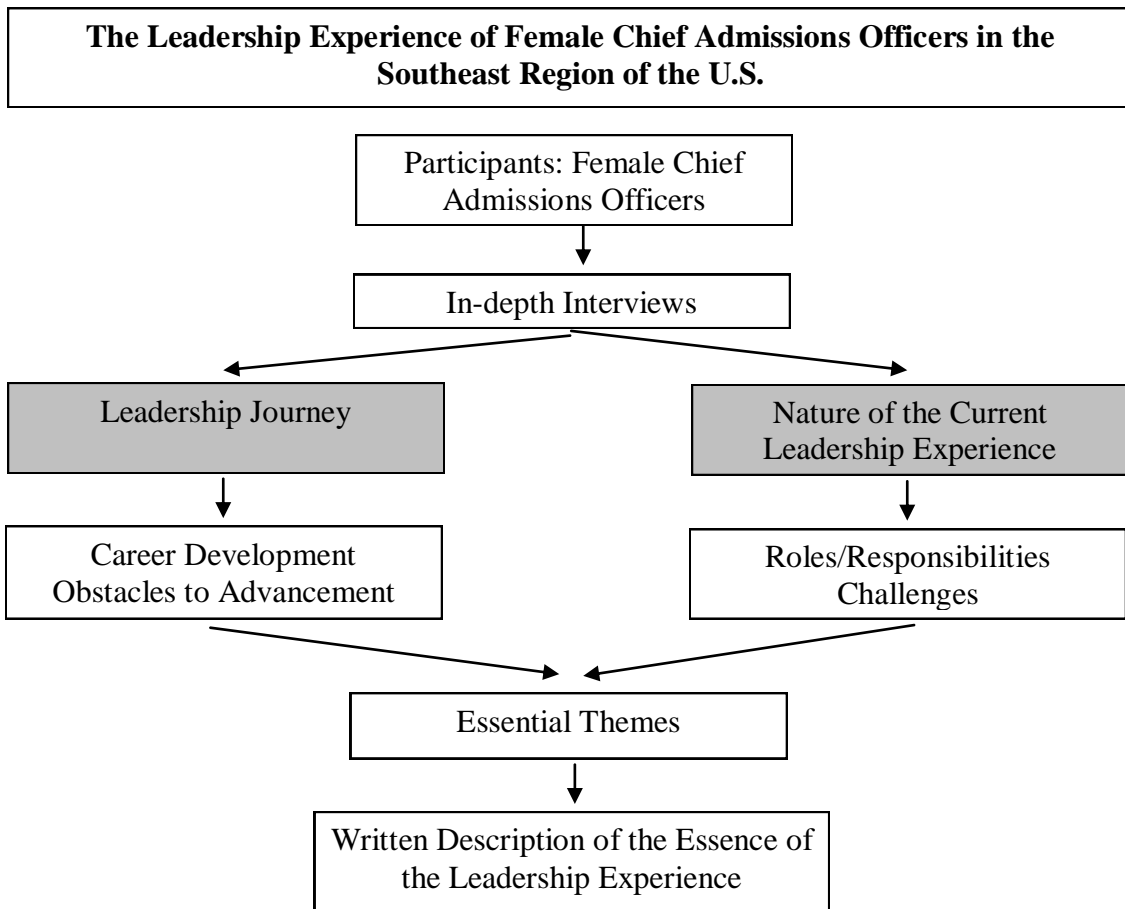


Figure 1.1. Conceptual framework for the study.

functioned as the primary instrument of data collection, there was the possibility of bias. A number of measures were utilized to ensure the credibility of the study. These measures are discussed in the “Validation of Findings” section in Chapter Three.

### **Delimitations**

The profession, gender, region, institutional affiliation, and experience of participants served as delimitations to narrow the focus of the investigation (Creswell, 2003). This qualitative, phenomenological study focused on the leadership experiences of

women in one particular profession within higher education (admissions) in one specific region of the U.S. (southeast). The study was also limited to women who were chief admissions officers at public, master's level or research institutions. No attempt was made to include men in this study. I also narrowed the scope of the research by selecting participants who had experienced one phenomenon: attaining success in an admissions profession where males dominate the top leadership positions. Through the use of the phenomenological method, I delved into the experiences that are related to attaining and succeeding in a leadership role, according to the perceptions of these women.

### **Significance of the Study**

This phenomenological study of female admissions directors contributes to the scholarship on women leaders in higher education. Most recent leadership studies on women in higher education have focused on top academic officials (presidents, vice presidents, and deans), faculty, student affairs officers, and minority women. The limited scholarship that exists on admissions professionals has not focused on women or the leadership experience of practitioners (Blair, 1997; “*The Chronicle Survey*,” 2008; Chapman & Urbach, 1984; Hauser & Lazarsfield, 1964; Hilton, 1997; McDonough & Robertson, 1995; Perry, 1964; Whitmire, 1976; Vinson, 1976). Studies such as this investigation are important because they offer benchmarks to young female professionals in terms of what to expect in their leadership journeys as well as a way to gauge future opportunities for success and advancement.

This study is also significant because it offers insight into what it means to be a successful female leader in one position in higher education. Success is defined as having

risen to and continuing to occupy the role of chief admissions officer. Higher education is an area where there is a major problem involving the advancement of women. Although women are represented in large numbers among students, faculty, and lower level administrative positions, they continue to face barriers in attaining top leadership positions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007). This study serves to offer encouragement not only to female professionals but also to students who are interested in careers in higher education and are seeking opportunities to advance. Studies have shown the importance for women of having female mentors and role models (Allen & Eby, 2004; Burke, McKeen, & McKenna, 1990; Koberg, Boss, & Goodman, 1998; Sosik & Godshalk, 2000). By answering the research questions and describing the lived leadership experiences of female admissions directors, this study offers a success story for women in higher education and provides possible role models for those who will follow.

Reducing the barriers that hinder the advancement of women into leadership positions will take nothing less than rebuilding and rethinking the entire structures of organizations (Meyerson & Fletcher, 2000). Hogue and Lord (2007) indicated that this type of change is unlikely because perceptions and organizational structures change slowly and are complex. Thus, it is difficult to identify activities that could potentially reduce gender bias or even determine if current policies are working. This research study reveals the lived leadership experiences of female chief admissions officers by delving into their leadership journeys as well as their current positions. By studying women who have succeeded in the position of chief admissions officer, their voices may serve a purpose in “transforming a patriarchal world” (Gilligan, 1982, p. xvi).

## **Organization of the Study**

The first chapter contains the introduction, background of the problem, purpose statement, definition of terms, research questions, theoretical orientation, researcher's perspective, conceptual framework, limitations and delimitations, and significance of the study. Chapter Two presents a review of the literature that is relevant to the areas of inquiry within this particular investigation of the leadership experience. The main sections of this chapter review previous studies related to the leadership journeys and current leadership experiences of female admissions directors. The third chapter provides detailed information related to the research methodology of the study including the choice of method, selection of participants, role of the researcher, data collection and analysis, ethical considerations, and validation of findings. Chapter Four presents findings from the research study and includes the themes that emerged during the coding processes. Finally, the last chapter summarizes the findings in relation to the literature, presents a critical and feminist interpretation of the findings, and discusses recommendations for practice and future studies.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to present a review of the existing literature relevant to the research topic: the shared leadership experience of female chief admissions officers in the southeast region of the U.S. The chapter begins with an overview of critical theory and feminist theory, which served as a guide for the conception of the study and the interpretation of results. The remainder of the chapter is divided into two sections which correspond to the two secondary research questions. The first section delves into the leadership journeys of the participants and reviews the available literature on career development and obstacles faced by female leaders. The second section presents literature related to the nature of the chief admissions officer position. It covers the roles and responsibilities as well as the leadership challenges these individuals face due to factors inside and outside their institutions.

#### **Critical Theory and Feminist Theory**

This section of the literature review presents a summary of critical theory and feminist theory. These two orientations provided a framework for the choices and activities that comprised the investigation. They also served as a lens for interpreting the data to gain an understanding of the shared leadership experience of women in admissions (Creswell, 2003).



Critical theory has been misunderstood as merely a process of criticizing other research or focusing on an important issue. The approach has also been viewed as unappealing by some researchers because of its initial and continued association with Marxism and communism. In actuality, critical theory has the same goal as any theory: it describes or gives meaning to what we observe (Brookfield, 2005) and does so “in a form that makes it useful for us as the closest possible description of the facts” (Horkheimer, 1972, p. 188). The facts that concern critical theorists are power and control (Jermier, 1998; Pfeffer, 1997). There are two key ideas that inform their view: in any society, power is held and abused by a small group of individuals and there is a need to take the side of the mistreated (Jermier, 1998). Critical research, then, “can be understood best in the context of the empowerment of individuals. Inquiry that aspires to the name ‘critical’ must be connected to an attempt to confront the injustice of a particular society or public sphere in the society” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005, p. 305).

Critical theorists are concerned with the ways that individuals and organizations achieve and maintain control. Although critical theorists admit that bureaucracies have resulted in gains for society, they believe control is the primary goal of those in power (Horkheimer, 1972; Jermier, 1998; Pfeffer, 1997). Even techniques which seem designed to empower workers such as teamwork actually result in greater conformity and control (Covaleski, Dirsmith, Heian, & Samuel, 1998; Ezzamel & Willmott, 1998). As they investigate the quest for power, critical theorists make choices about methods and the role of the researcher that inform their research practice. They examine research methods to ensure they are not imposing the same control as those they seek to expose. Kincheloe

and McLaren (2005) called on researchers to step back from traditional research methods and adopt alternatives that will better allow them to understand the views and needs of those they study. In terms of the role of the researcher, those who adopt a critical stance are open about their aims to reveal oppression (Jermier, 1998; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005) and “to give voice to voices never heard before” (LeCompte, 1995, p. 101).

An important underlying assumption about critical theory is that it is continually changing to reflect new ideas and bring to light new forms of injustice (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005). The primary areas of focus for researchers have changed since Horkheimer (1972) outlined the differences between critical and traditional theory. His primary concerns at the time were the limits of empirical research and the acceptance of an oppressive existence as the natural state of affairs for the working class. The role of the critical theorist was to reveal the truth about this oppression, so men could be liberated. At no point did Horkheimer mention other groups such as women, who have now become a central focus of study (Jermier, 1998; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005)

Although critical theorists are just beginning to study the perspective of women, the female voice and experience have always been the primary concerns of feminists. The feminist perspective is a diverse one that encompasses a variety of historical periods or waves and an assortment of viewpoints on practices and policies (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). However, what these divergent views share and what indicates their compatibility with critical theory is the goal of “changing existing power relations between men and women in society” (Weedon, 1997, p. 1). Feminists bring women and

gender to the forefront by seeking explanations for why women have less power than men and how this situation can be transformed (Stacey, 1993).

Although feminist perspectives are united by a common subject and goal, there are a number of issues that continue to be debated such as whether there is a distinctive feminist method or methodology. Ramazanoglu & Holland (2003) defined method as the “techniques and procedures used for exploring social reality and producing evidence” (p. 11). Harding (1987) stated there is no clear feminist method and Reinharz (1992) indicated there are a range of appropriate methods. Methodology, on the other hand, “is concerned with procedures for making knowledge valid and authoritative” (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2003, p. 9). DeVault (1999) outlined three characteristics of feminist research practice: a focus on the perspectives of all women, the avoidance of harm and control of participants, and a goal of improving the lives of women. Within this practice, scholars are also concerned with how to define truth and validity and what kind of experience constitutes knowledge (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2003). These concerns have led many feminists to reject traditional empirical methods. Instead, feminists prefer qualitative methods of research because these methods allow for the subjectivity of the researcher and focus on the experiences of women (DeVault, 1999; Gergen, 1988; Harding, 1987).

### **Leadership Journey**

In order to gain an understanding of the leadership journeys of female chief admissions officers, two areas of leadership studies were relevant: career development and obstacles to advancement. These studies formed suitable topics of inquiry because they involved the process through which female leaders in higher education attained their

leadership positions. A review of the literature in these areas offered insight into the career development experiences of female leaders (career patterns, career success, and mentoring) as well as the obstacles that hindered their advancement (individual beliefs and unfair hiring practices).

### **Career Development**

There are a number of factors related to the career development of women leaders and chief admissions officers that have been studied and appear frequently in the literature. Of particular relevance to this study were those investigations that focused on gender and career patterns, career success, and mentoring. In relation to chief admissions officers, previous studies have collected a variety of survey data related to career development. This data included level of education, career field prior to entering admissions, number of years in admissions, and future career plans. The studies included both male and female participants. A review of the literature related to the professional development of women leaders revealed that the influence of mentoring can also be an important factor in their advancement (de Vries, Webb, & Eveline, 2006; Mainiero, Williamson, & Robinson, 1994; Ragins, Townsend, & Mattis, 1998). Although this research involved a study of female admissions directors in the southeast, comparative studies of career patterns, career success, or mentoring outcomes according to region were not located.

**Career patterns.** Due to the continued underrepresentation of women in leadership positions, research that delves into how gender may impact career development has become a “central concern” in career studies (DePater, Van Vianen, &

Bechtoldt, 2010, p. 434). One area of particular relevance to this leadership study is research on career patterns. The metaphor of the corporate ladder characterized the traditional ideal of career advancement and described a linear ascent up the institutional hierarchy (Hall, 1987). Research related to gender and career paths indicated that this vision may not be as applicable to women. A number of researchers found that women's career paths were less likely to be linear progressions. Lepine (1992) identified seven different career patterns for women. Richardson's (1996) study of male and female accountants indicated that although some women may be on a linear, fast upward track similar to that of most men, the majority of women fell into career paths that were linear (but slow), static, or downward. Huang and Sverke (2007) also found that women had diverse career patterns that were characterized by upward mobility, stability, or downward mobility. O'Neil, Bilimoria, and Saatcioglu (2004) indicated that for women, career pattern and locus of control interacted to define three specific career types that were either ordered (navigators and achievers) or emergent (accommodators). Finally, Quesenberry, Trauth, and Morgan (2006) indicated that women's career decisions were based on their status as parent or non-parent, resulting in a variety of paths with different foci and considerations. They called these paths "mommy tracks."

Data does exist for admissions personnel in relation to career patterns. The earliest studies on the chief admissions officer were published in the 1960's at a time when the position bore little resemblance to today's admissions director (Hauser & Lazarsfield, 1964; Perry, 1964). At the time, admissions was emerging as a profession and as a specialty area within higher education. These studies provided a means to

benchmark further developments in the profession by reporting on the role, status, and career patterns of admissions directors. However, the majority of survey respondents have been and continue to be overwhelmingly male (Chapman & Urbach, 1984; “*The Chronicle Survey*,” 2008). The first comprehensive studies to include representative samples of women were dissertations by Blair (1997) and Hilton (1997). Although over 60% of respondents in both studies were male, Blair’s (1997) sample included 91 women and Hilton (1997) surveyed 107 women. Blair’s (1997) study is also noteworthy as it is the only research study located that compared women with men in all areas surveyed.

In relation to career paths, the data indicated significant change over the past fifty years. In terms of entry into the director position, in 1964, over 75% of the respondents held previous positions outside the field. Ten years later, the field was becoming more specialized as 43% of admissions specialists held a previous position in admissions (Vinson, 1976). Data from the first study to focus on women and minorities in the profession indicated that although white men attained positions of admissions director equally from inside and outside their institutions, women and minority men were much more likely to be promoted from within (Rickard & Clement, 1984). Recent studies indicated that admissions continues to be a field where the attainment of one position is the most common means to advance to another (Blair, 1997; Hilton, 1997). The most common career track to the chief admissions officer position was from an assistant or associate director position (Hilton, 1997). Although few individuals attained director positions from outside the field, men were more likely to do so than women (Blair, 1997).

In terms of future career plans, the percentage of chief admissions officers planning to remain in the profession over the next five years actually decreased beginning in the 1960's, rising again to 70% in 1997 (Hauser & Lazarsfeld, 1964; Blair, 1997). One explanation for this change is the long hours, travel, and other demands that often result in high turnover (Farrell & Hoover, 2008; King & Gomez, 2008). Some researchers have argued that it may be especially difficult for women in admissions to manage career and family responsibilities (Blair, 1997; Shere, 1990). Blair (1997) found that 30% of both male and female chief admissions officers indicated they were likely or very likely to leave the field within five years.

**Career success.** Another topic in career development research that has been prevalent in recent years and is relevant to the research questions investigated in this study concerns the role of gender in career success. Kirchmeyer (1998) identified four variables that were predictors of career success: human capital, individual characteristics, interpersonal variables, and family determinants. These variables have been considered in a number of studies and are useful in understanding how men and women differ in terms of career success, which is typically measured in income and managerial level.

Human capital relates to an individual's experience, education, and other personal investments such as hours worked and involvement (centrality) in the workplace (Kirchmeyer, 1998; Ng, Eby, Sorenson, & Feldman, 2005). A number of studies indicated that these personal investments influenced career outcomes (Eddleston, Baldrige, & Veiga, 2004; Kirchmeyer, 1998; Lyness & Thompson, 2000; Melamed, 1995, 1996; Ng et al., 2005; White, 1995), especially for women, whose success

appeared to be more dependent on formal, objective factors for judging performance (Daley, 1996). Ng et al. (2005) indicated that women had to do more to succeed, and this effort often entailed working longer hours and pursuing additional education. Other research indicated that successful women worked more hours (Daley, 1996; Ng et al., 2005), had a breadth of experience (Bradley, Brown, & Dower, 2009; Lyness & Thompson, 2000; Melamed, 1995, 1996), and were well-educated (Melamed, 1995, 1996; Ng et al., 2005). Receiving developmental assignments also contributed to the success of women (Lyness & Thompson, 2000), yet women received fewer challenging assignments with high levels of responsibility than their male colleagues (De Pater, et al., 2010; Ohlott, Ruderman, & McCauley, 1994).

Another aspect of human capital that appears to play a role in how gender impacts success in the corporate world is centrality, which White (1995) defined as “the extent to which the individual sees involvement in a career as central to their adult life” (p. 12). Successful women had higher levels of work centrality (White, 1995). There was a strong negative relationship between having a family and work centrality. Individuals with family responsibilities worked fewer hours, which tended to impact women, who shouldered most responsibilities in the home (Mayrhofer, Meyer, Schiffinger, & Schmidt, 2008).

Two recent studies offered additional findings in relation to which gender benefits the most from investments in human capital. Tharanou, Lattimer, and Conroy (1994) found that human capital had a more positive impact on men's advancement than on women's. Kirchmeyer (1998) concluded that women were less likely to benefit



financially from increased work experience and company tenure. However, she offered a possible explanation that needs to be clarified by future research: “What remains unknown is whether women actually gained less knowledge and skills from the experience than did men, or simply were rewarded less for the same gains” (p. 688).

Career success can also be impacted by individual determinants such as the adoption of masculine and feminine gender roles. Although studies in this area are not as prevalent, Kirchmeyer (1998) indicated that femininity had a negative effect on women’s advancement and masculinity but had a positive effect on women’s perceptions of success. O’Neill and O’Reilly (2010) studied the cultural preferences and income levels of MBA graduates. They found that women who preferred a masculine environment at work had higher income levels than males in the early stages of their careers. Over time, however, this effect diminished and women were less successful at higher levels, perhaps because the women were working fewer hours by this time in their careers. One additional study relevant in this area is Iberra and Obodaru’s (2009) research on successful executive women. By studying 360-degree assessments, they found that the women in the study outperformed men in all areas but one that may have significantly impacted their ability to move into the highest echelons of leadership: they lacked vision.

The career success of women can also be impacted by their supportive relationships, including mentoring (Kirchmeyer, 1998). Although the next section considers the role and impact of mentoring at length, a few recent studies are insightful in this area. Daley (1996) indicated that even though women received career advice and mentoring, this support did not initiate them into the internal networks so crucial in the

hiring and promotion processes. In fact, he found that having a female supervisor actually hindered advancement. Lyness and Thompson (2000) also found that mentoring was less helpful to successful executive women. Kichmeyer (1998) reported similar findings in a study of MBA graduates at mid-career. Males and females in the study had the same levels of mentoring and inclusion in networks, but mentoring had a positive effect for men only and the effect of networks was also much stronger for men. Tharanou et al. (1994) found that career encouragement had a positive impact on the career success of women because it led to additional training and development.

Finally, researchers have considered how family determinants (marriage and children) can impact career success (Kirchmeyer, 1998). Overall, having children negatively affected the potential for women to attain leadership positions and had no impact on men's career success (Eddleston et al., 2004; Melamed, 1995; Tharanou et al., 1994). Family responsibilities made women less likely to be successful because these responsibilities caused career interruptions, which had a negative effect on advancement (Reitman & Schneer, 2005). Family responsibilities also meant women worked fewer hours and had lower degrees of work centrality, which, as was indicated, can be a key factor in the career success of women (Daley, 1996; Mayrhofer et al., 2008; Ng et al., 2005; Tharanou et al., 1994; White, 1995).

Survey data for men and women in admissions indicated that there are differences in career success related to gender. In terms of experience, Blair (1997) found that 50% of admissions directors had over 15 years of experience. Men averaged about five more years in the profession than women. The average number of years in the current position

was six, but 75% of women had been in their current positions five years or less compared to 54% of men (Blair, 1997). Educational attainment levels remained consistent over the years. The master's degree was the most common degree for chief admissions officers, although more individuals began to earn the degree in a field related to education. Less than 20% of individuals had attained a doctoral degree (Blair, 1997; Chapman & Urbach, 1984; Hauser & Lazersfeld's, 1964; Hilton, 1997; Vinson, 1976). More recently, the percentages of men and women earning all levels of degrees were similar (Blair, 1997; Hilton, 1997).

Data related to the career patterns and levels of educational attainment of admissions directors is dated. There is also a general lack of research on admissions personnel and especially on women leaders in the profession. The most recent survey of chief admissions officers was published in 2008 by *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Women formed 38.8% of respondents (179 individuals); there was no comparison data for men and women. However, this survey did not ask for information on educational attainment and future career plans. The survey indicated that current admissions directors are the most experienced they have ever been. Over 70% of the respondents had at least 10 years of admissions experience; 27% had 20 or more years of experience. In terms of the years of experience in their current positions, over half had less than five years in their current jobs; 84.1% had been in their positions less than 10 years ("*The Chronicle Survey*," 2008).

One caveat to presenting data and drawing conclusions related to career success is the difficulty of gathering regional and national data on the percentages of women who

are chief admissions officers. Available survey data revealed an underrepresentation of women (Blair, 1997; Chapman & Urbach, 1984; Hilton, 1997; McDonough & Robertson, 1995; “*The Chronicle Survey*,” 2008). However, one cannot determine if the response rates are accurate indicators of the prevalence of women in director positions or simply if more males responded to the surveys.

Attempts at gathering national and regional data related to the percentages of women in director positions for this study proved to be problematic. The national professional organizations were able to provide data on the number of female members. Overall, in 2008, 62% of the members of the National Association of College Admissions Counselors (NACAC) were women (C. Johnson, personal communication, April 3, 2008), and 68% of the members of the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) were female (AACRAO, 2008). However, data was not readily available on the numbers and percentages of chief admissions officers in the national organizations who are women.

Although AACRAO would not release data for all members, a researcher sorted membership data, searching for selected titles. This process indicated that 60% of AACRAO members who are admissions directors were female (609 of 1,027 directors) (J. Montgomery, personal communication, September 14, 2010). One explanation for the prevalence of female admissions directors in AACRAO may be that women tend to join the organization at a higher frequency than their male colleagues. However, I doubted this explanation and the accuracy of the data due to my personal experience working in the field and attending professional meetings and conferences. At these events, it is

typical to see a plethora of women in lower and mid-level positions with mostly male directors. It seems unlikely that women could have attained a majority of director positions so quickly given their history of underrepresentation. I also had concerns about the validity of the AACRAO data as a result of the process used to determine the percentage of female directors in the southeast for this study. The membership data from the regional association was hand-sorted data to determine the number and percentage of female admissions directors. This process was necessary because of the multitude, combinations, and abbreviations of titles. Thus, it would only be possible to obtain accurate data for the national organization as well by hand-sorting or being able to review all member data to select relevant titles for inclusion, neither of which was possible.

It also proved difficult to obtain data for other regions aside from the southeast due to the number, fragmentation, and membership policies of the regional organizations. There are 37 regional professional organizations that fall under the umbrella of AACRAO (2008) and 23 chartered organizations that are affiliated with NACAC (n.d.). Regional associations may be composed of individuals from one or more than a dozen states; in some areas, there is overlap. These organizations maintain their records independently, and one must be a member, paying yearly membership fees, to access member data and contact information.

**Mentoring.** Women who have succeeded and advanced into leadership positions often speak of mentors who were important to their development (Madsen, 2008). Researchers have found that there are a number of benefits for individuals engaged in a mentoring relationship. These benefits included increased self-esteem and engagement in

the workplace (Koberg, et al., 1998), increased job satisfaction (Fagenson, 1989; Koberg, Boss, Chappell, & Ringer, 1994), higher levels of career mobility and advancement (Fagenson, 1989; Scandura, 1992), increased compensation (Dreher & Cox, 1996), and reduced turnover (Koberg, et al., 1998). In light of the continued lack of representation of women in leadership positions, mentoring is especially essential for women seeking opportunities for advancement (de Vries, et al., 2006; Mainiero, et al., 1994; Ragins, et al., 1998). Unfortunately, due to a lack of women in leadership positions, many women will not experience the benefits attributed to same-sex role models in leadership positions (Lively, 2000; Ragins & Scandura, 1994).

Research related to mentoring working professionals that included gender as an independent variable falls into two groups: affects on mentor preference and affects on psychosocial and career outcomes. In terms of mentor preference, two studies that were located provided conflicting results. Burke and McKeen (1997) investigated preferences among 280 managerial women and found there were no strong preferences for a mentor of a specific gender. Women who had male mentors, however, indicated a female mentor was preferred. In a study of men and women in a formal mentoring program, there were no differences in satisfaction between men and women in terms of the gender of the mentor (Lyons & Oppler, 2004).

The largest group of studies investigating how gender impacts mentoring have focused on career and psychosocial functions (Kram, 1983). Career functions prepare individuals for advancement and include sponsorship, coaching, and exposure. Psychosocial functions relate to personal growth and development and include role

modeling, acceptance, and friendship (Kram, 1983). Levesque (2005) reported little difference in men's and women's views on important mentoring functions. Women believed championing and acceptance were more important functions than men. The remainder of this section discusses mentoring studies which considered the impact of gender and focused on career outcomes, psychosocial outcomes, or both.

A number of studies investigated the relationship of protégé gender and career outcomes. Two studies found that individuals involved in mentoring relationships had higher levels of career advancement, income, and job satisfaction (Dreher & Ash, 1990; Fagenson, 1989). There were no differences in these outcomes in relation to gender. Executive women indicated that having widespread support from a number of upper level managers was a key factor in their advancement (Mainiero, et al., 1994).

Additional studies have focused on the psychosocial functions of mentoring and investigated the impact of the composition of the mentoring dyad. Burke, McKeen, and McKenna (1990) indicated that women mentors provided more psychosocial support; this type of support was significantly more prevalent in female-female dyads. A second study indicated that the gender composition of the dyads did not affect developmental support offered (Fagenson-Eland, Baugh & Lankau, 2005). In a study of health care practitioners, male and female protégés did not differ significantly in their perceptions of psychosocial support (Koberg, et al., 1998). However, levels of psychosocial support were higher among same-sex dyads. It is noteworthy that in the study of health care workers, approximately 75% of the participants were women. In the first two studies considered,

96% of the mentors were men and 69% of the dyads were all male, respectively (Burke et al., 1990; Fagenson-Eland, et al., 2005).

The majority of studies involving gender and mentoring outcomes considered both career and psychosocial functions. Some researchers considered how the make-up of mentoring dyads affected outcome. In a study on educators, Noe (1988) indicated that cross-gendered dyads were more effective and that women utilized mentoring relationships more effectively than men. Ragins and Cotton (1999) found that same-sex and cross-gendered dyads were equally effective in providing psychosocial functions. As to career functions, although male and female mentors did not differ in the provision of career support, individuals with male mentors had higher levels of promotion and compensation. Sosik and Godshalk (2005) and Noe (1988) also examined the influence of dyad composition on protégé perceptions of mentoring functions. The researchers discovered protégés in cross-gendered dyads received greater psychosocial support and career satisfaction. The status of supervisors impacted the effectiveness of some dyads.

Two additional studies focused on career and psychosocial functions but did not consider dyad composition. Burke and McKeen (1997) studied female business graduates who showed no preference in mentor gender. Those who received high levels of career mentoring also received significant psychosocial support. Allen and Eby (2004) determined that male mentors provided more career functions and female mentors more psychosocial. Female protégés received more psychosocial mentoring than males. In a study that focused on the benefits of the mentoring relationship for the mentors, de Vries, et al. (2006) indicated that the mentors also reported substantial personal benefits and



gained an increased understanding of women's issues that could positively impact their organizations.

Although a number of researchers found significant differences in how women benefitted from or provided support in mentoring relationships, overall, research results are inconsistent. One reason why caution should also be taken in interpreting results is that there were a number of common limitations among the studies. One issue was the failure of the researchers to achieve representative samples of male and female mentors (Allen & Eby, 2004; Burke & McKeen, 1997; Noe, 1988; Sosik & Godshalk, 2005). It seems logical that researchers would be less likely to find female mentors because there are fewer women in leadership positions. Another limitation to the research was that same sex dyads tended to be overrepresented (Allen & Eby, 2004; Ragins & Cotton, 1999; Sosik & Godshalk, 2005). Finally, environmental factors may have been an issue. Studies have tended to represent either male-dominated areas such as business and technology (Burke & McKeen, 1997; Burke, et al., 1990; Fagenson-Eland, et al., 2005; Sosik & Godshalk, 2005) or primarily female professions such as education and health care (Koberg, et al., 1998; Noe, 1988).

### **Obstacles to Advancement**

Admissions has been and continues to be a male-dominated profession in terms of leadership (Blair, 1997; "The Chronicle Survey," 2008; Hilton, 1997; Shere, 1987). Higher education mirrors business, politics, and the military as being characterized by a glass ceiling that hinders the career advancement of women (Bain & Cummings, 2000; Davies-Netzley, 1998; Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995; Lyness & Thompson,

1997; Stroh, et al., 1996). Recent studies were not located on the specific obstacles that slow the advancement of women into leadership positions in admissions. However, Shere (1987) commented on the challenges women faced in the profession and Rickard and Clement (1984) discussed the lack of progress toward equity for women and minorities in the 1980's. General research on managerial women and the obstacles they face in attaining leadership positions is prevalent. This section considers two primary types of obstacles which contribute to the discussion of why women have failed to achieve representation: individual beliefs and unfair hiring practices. Individual beliefs that serve as obstacles to women's advancement include biases about what constitutes appropriate behavior for leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002) and what are appropriate choices for women in relation to family life (Marschke, Laursen, Nielsen, & Rankin, 2007). Hiring practices become obstacles to advancement when they are manipulated to benefit a dominant male culture (Marschke, et al., 2007).

**Individual beliefs.** Researchers have investigated barriers to women seeking leadership positions involving gender-biased beliefs or stereotypes. According to Eagly and Karau's (2002) role congruity theory, stereotypes contribute to two distinct forms of prejudice toward women leaders. Prejudice occurs when women are not viewed as potential leaders because the qualities attributed to successful leaders are masculine. Prejudice also occurs when women leaders are considered less effective because they engage in more masculine leadership behaviors. The first type of prejudice involves descriptive gender norms; the second is a result of injunctive norms.

Beginning with Schein's work in the 1970's, numerous researchers have found a discrepancy between perceptions of women and successful managers. Surveying first male middle managers (Schein, 1973) and then female (Schein, 1975), Schein found that characteristics of successful managers were typically attributed to men and not women. Schein's research was duplicated with similar results (Heilman, et al., 1989). More recently, Duehr and Bono (2006) surveyed managers and college students and found a significant correlation between perceptions of successful middle managers and women by male and female managers; the views of male college students had changed very little. Martell, Parker, Emrich, and Crawford (1998) studied the perceptions of male executives toward their female counterparts. Both men and successful male managers were perceived to have more of the qualities attributed to individuals who are successful in leadership positions than women or successful women managers.

Two additional studies which gauged perceptions toward women in the corporate world are also noteworthy due to their scale and comprehensiveness. Bowman, Worthy, and Greyser (1965) surveyed 2,000 executives to report on their attitudes regarding women in business. The researchers found that most male executives were strongly anti-female or indifferent. Men and women felt that women had moderate but unequal opportunity for advancement. Very few men indicated they would feel comfortable working for a woman, and half of the men and 79% of the women felt females were "temperamentally unfit for management" (p. 28). When the study was replicated in 1985 by Sutton and Moore, the outcomes indicated continuing negative attitudes toward women in the corporate workplace. More than half of those surveyed still believed

women will never be accepted in business. However, most men and women were in favor of women taking on managerial positions.

The second type of prejudice which may contribute to the lack of advancement of women into leadership positions, as well as their limited success in these roles, involves norms about actual performance. Studies in this area examined whether women leaders were viewed less favorably than men if they engaged in agentic, masculine behavior. This behavior may be viewed as undesirable and incongruent with the stereotypical social, nurturing female (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Some studies found that women were perceived as becoming more masculine (Brenner & Greenhaus, 1979; Diekmann & Eagly, 2000; Twenge, 1997). However, perception does not indicate acceptance, and women who act in ways that are inconsistent with feminine norms face negative consequences.

Researchers found that women who exhibited more agentic leadership behavior were evaluated negatively (Eagly, et al., 1992; Jago & Vroom, 1982), deemed less effective (Rojahn & Willemssen, 1992), considered less social (Forsythe, et al., 1997; Rudman & Glick, 1999), and viewed as less influential and likeable (Carli, LaFleur & Loeber, 1995). Women who succeeded in male-oriented tasks and environments were often disliked (Garcia-Retamero & Lopez-Zafra, 2006; Heilman, et al., 2004). Johnson et al. (2008) found that in order to be considered effective, female leaders must be perceived as both sensitive and strong, possessing both agentic and communal characteristics. There are indications that these issues surface with initial hiring decisions. Gorman (2005) and Hareli, Klang, and Hess (2008) found women were less likely to be hired when the job

included stereotypical male criteria and when the women had never held a gender-atypical position.

There are signs that women are becoming more accepted in managerial roles. However, studies also indicate that women who violate norms for femininity can expect negative consequences. One caution which should be taken in interpreting the literature is that many of the studies related to perceptions of actual leader behavior involved college students (Carli, et al., 1995; Diekmann & Eagly, 2000; Forsythe, et al., 1997; Rojahn & Willemsen, 1992; Rudman & Glick, 1999; Twenge, 1997). Undergraduates are likely to have had little or no professional work or managerial experience and, as a result, may have less experience with women managers. Duehr and Bono's (2006) research is the only study that included both student and managerial respondents and considered factors that may have accounted for the different perceptions of the two groups.

A second barrier or obstacle to women who wish to attain and succeed in leadership positions involves individual beliefs about personal choices, primarily those related to managing work and family commitments. Eagly (2007) cited the pressure of family responsibilities as a primary cause of the lack of advancement for women. Women interrupt their careers and work fewer hours due to work-family conflicts. Marschke, et al. (2007) found that women chose professions that were less demanding because these jobs allowed them to take time off to raise children and tend to family responsibilities.

Studies have shown women continue to bear most of the burden for managing a household and caring for children (Hochschild, 1989; Lewis & Cooper, 1987; Pleck, 1985). Less time spent at work for women can translate into lower rates of advancement

and lower salaries than those of their male co-workers (Eagly, 2007). According to a study by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (2003), marriage and parenthood contributed to lower wages for women as they chose their families over advancement. Researchers have also found that work-family conflicts hindered advancement and increased turnover (Armstrong, et al., 2007; Linehan & Walsh, 2000). Loder (2005) indicated that women are forced to develop coping strategies to survive professionally and keep families and relationships intact.

A number of studies on admissions personnel indicated that family responsibilities may form a significant barrier to women seeking to advance into leadership positions. Shere's (1990) study and *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (2008) both cited the heavy time commitment required of admissions staff. Shere (1990) found that 60% of women felt their career and home responsibilities conflicted and noted the high numbers of unmarried respondents. Blair (1997) also indicated that more female chief admissions officers were single or divorced than their male colleagues.

**Hiring practices.** Another reason for the continued underrepresentation of women in leadership positions involves biased hiring practices. The culture of male dominance and privilege that pervades many institutions, including higher education, has been a particular target of those seeking answers to why women do not advance into leadership positions (Acker, 2006; Bierma, 1996; Itzin, 1995; Lyness & Thompson, 2000). The male majority has become adept at using hiring practices to subvert the advancement of women and maintain their own dominance (Marschke, et al., 2007).

Organizational homophily may also function to benefit and maintain the male majority of the “old boy network” (Davies-Netzley, 1998).

Researchers have investigated hiring practices as a means to explain the lack of progress for women in gaining leadership positions. Affirmative action and other formalized policies exist to encourage the consideration of women and minorities for management positions. However, research confirms that formal policies are often disregarded. Claringbould and Knoppers’ (2007) study of selection practices for national sports boards revealed that men maintained majorities on the boards by ignoring affirmative action policies and selecting individuals they judged as fit candidates. In their study of hiring practices at a higher education institution, Moss and Daunton (2006) found that transformational-oriented job selection criteria were ignored by male administrators who tended to hire more transactional males. Thus, as Ridgeway (2007) indicated, it is often the informal mechanisms in organizations that hinder women and subvert fair hiring practices.

Women aspiring to leadership positions in a male-dominated culture may also find they are barred from their goals because of homophily. Studies have shown that those who make hiring decisions tend to choose individuals of their own gender (Claringbould & Knoppers, 2007; Foster, Dingman, Muscolino, & Jankowski, 1996; Gorman, 2005; Moss & Daunton, 2006). Appold, et al. (1998) summarized the motives behind this practice as ranging from attempts to exclude lower status individuals from positions of power to easing communication between like individuals. In response, some higher education researchers have investigated the conditions that can increase the

likelihood of women being hired. Konrad and Pfeffer (1991) and Kulis (1997) found that women were more likely to be hired when the previous job holder was a woman and when there were high proportions of female students and administrators on campus.

### **Nature of the Current Leadership Experience**

Previous studies related to the career development and obstacles faced by women leaders provide background information for this study on the leadership experiences of female chief admissions officers. An additional source of information that is relevant is research concerning the day-to-day realities of the women's current positions. This section of the literature review focuses on two areas related to the chief admissions officer position and the current leadership experiences of the women: their roles and responsibilities and their leadership challenges. Both internal and external challenges are described. Internal challenges include the constraints of organizational structure, informal networks, and personnel issues. The following external constraints also pose challenges for admissions directors: financial aid availability, access and equity, campus safety issues, early decision, standardized testing, and ethical issues related to commercialization. Although comparative regional studies were not available in relation to the leadership journey, there is literature on this aspect of the leadership experience that allows for a consideration of the south in relation to other areas of the U.S.

### **Roles and Responsibilities**

Writings by admissions professionals offer a broad view of how the role of the chief admissions officer has evolved to the present. Research data is also available which



provides insight on the responsibilities of the position by indicating time spent on specific activities and important skills and characteristics of chief admissions officers.

According to Johnson (2000), chief admissions officers have held three main roles throughout the evolution of the position: gatekeeper, marketer, and enrollment manager. Until the 1920's, the admissions officer was primarily an administrative "paper shuffler" (Johnson, 2000, para. 6). Although early colleges and universities had specific admission requirements for undergraduates, they were largely ignored because the institutions needed students. In the 1920's, as competition for limited classroom seats increased, officials at elite institutions looked for new methods for judging applicants (Cohen, 1998). Levine (1989) indicated that new admissions policies transformed institutions from selective to discriminatory, and admissions officers were the gatekeepers enforcing such policies.

The gatekeeper role characterized admissions officers until enrollments began to decline after the 1960's. The emphasis then shifted away from restricting enrollments, and the use of quotas and other selection criteria came to be viewed as anti-democratic (Johnson, 2000). The role of the chief admissions officer changed to that of a marketer charged with finding ways to meet enrollment goals (Canterbury, 1999; Johnson, 2000; Lewison & Howes, 2007). Recently, due to a more business-oriented approach (Donhower, 2003; Gilde, 2007; Jump, 2004; Kirp, 2003) and continued concern with enrollments (Ashburn, 2008), the role of the chief admissions officer has evolved into that of an enrollment manager (Bontrager, 2007; Johnson, 2000; Kalsbeek & Hossler,

2008). As enrollment managers, chief admissions officers develop and oversee systematic sets of activities designed to attract, enroll, and retain students (Penn, 1999).

In relation to the current responsibilities of chief admissions officers, a number of researchers have surveyed individuals in the position to determine their top priorities and how they spend their time. Hilton (1997) found that admissions directors perceived their most important functions to be the following: carrying out the institutional mission, developing the marketing plan, running the office, working with students, and planning/budgeting. In the same study, the researcher also discovered that the two most time-consuming activities were meetings, mostly with staff and other administrators, and administrative activities such as reading and writing reports, attending to e-mails and phone calls, generating ideas, and solving problems. Survey data from *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (2008) also offered information on how chief admissions officers spend their time. The top priorities were communicating with other campus offices; supervising, managing, and/or training staff; strategic planning; analyzing recruitment-assessment data; developing marketing materials; and reviewing admissions policies.

Another way to gauge current roles and responsibilities of chief admissions officers is to consider the qualifications and skills they perceive as important to the position. Blair (1997) determined that at least 90% of survey respondents believed the following areas were key: oral presentation skills, interpersonal skills, writing skills, marketing knowledge, financial aid knowledge, budget management experience, and experience implementing on- and off-campus events. Survey data from NACAC indicated that the areas of experience and/or knowledge that were very important or

important for chief admissions officers, according to 80% or more of respondents, were: writing and marketing/public relations skills, experience in admissions and higher education administration, knowledge of statistics/data analysis, and experience in business and human resource management (Hawkins & Clinedinst, 2007).

During the development of the profession, chief admissions officers have filled a variety of roles on their campuses. As the position evolved, admissions directors devoted more time to administrative functions related to marketing their institutions and managing enrollments. Studies of admissions directors reveal the time-consuming and complex nature of the position and form a backdrop for this investigation of women leaders in the profession.

### **Challenges of the Position**

Another important way to understand the lived leadership experiences of female chief admissions officers is to consider current challenges of the position. Chief admissions officers encounter these challenges as they carry out the main functions of admissions offices: recruiting students, processing applications, and enrolling admitted individuals. The challenges they face on a daily basis can be viewed as constraints that affect the abilities of women to be successful leaders. Internal constraints are those that arise from inside institutions and include organizational structure. This structure is composed not only of the formalized framework of rules and reporting structures but also incorporates an informal culture that defines “the ways they do things” (Itzin, 1995, p. 48). Regardless of their gender, admissions directors are also challenged by a variety of external constraints that impact both their daily activities and long-term enrollment

strategies. These issues include financial aid availability, access and equity, campus safety issues, early decision, standardized testing, and ethical issues related to the adoption of a corporate mindset. Both research studies and the professional literature investigate and reflect the presence of these issues and inhibitors, as described in the two sections that follow.

**Internal constraints.** According to the ASHE Report *Are the Walls Really Down?*, the organizational structure of colleges and universities forms a barrier to the managerial success of women in higher education (Evans & Chun, 2007). This barrier is composed of the formal structures of bureaucratic organization and institutional procedures, as well as less perceptible informal arrangements such as organizational culture and networks. Although not specific to women, personnel management issues also form an internal constraint that can impact the managerial success of admissions directors.

Both critical theorists and feminists have been particularly critical of bureaucratic organizations and their strict roles, impersonality, power, and individualism that have perpetuated gender inequities (Ferguson, 1985; Jermier, 1998; Pfeffer, 1997, Rothschild-Witt, 1979). Ely and Padavic (2007) suggested that in organizations, gender and power are linked structurally, culturally, and operationally. The traditional male domination of organizations has resulted in higher status, better pay, and more institutional power for males.

The bureaucratic nature of higher education is evident in both the academic and administrative sectors. In academics, faculty work in a tiered labor market while

negotiating strict tenure policies and procedures (Bain & Cummings, 2000; Glazer-Romo, 1999). A survey of faculty revealed fewer women received tenure because they did not understand the requirements for promotion (The Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education, 2007). Administrators such as admissions directors are also affected by the tiered nature of their departments. Without the advantage of tenure, directors are dependent on the favor of those above them for continued employment. In turn, they determine the working conditions for those below (Evans & Chun, 2007). Finally, and has already been noted, researchers indicated the ways that male administrators, under the umbrella of bureaucracy, have been able to maintain the status quo by manipulating hiring policies (Claringbould & Knoppers, 2007; Moss & Daunton, 2006). As Itzin (1995) wrote, “Men are the gatekeepers” (p. 49).

The informal culture of organizations also impacts the success of women in leadership positions. Whereas bureaucratic structures and rules form the visible framework and formal policies of an organization, there is also an informal and invisible culture which constitutes the unwritten rules (Evans & Chun, 2007; Wilbanks, 2005). Since males have dominated leadership positions in virtually all organizations, the typical organizational culture is male-dominated and masculine attributes prevail (Acker, 2006; Bierma, 1996; Itzin, 1995; Lyness & Thompson, 2000). This masculine culture reinforces the formalized structure of the bureaucracy with its emphasis on hierarchy, individualism, and top-down communication (Acker, 1995; Helgesen, 1990; Itzin, 1995; Maier, 1999). Organizations and cultures dominated by women, on the other hand, often take on more feminine characteristics, emphasizing collaboration (Eagly & Carli, 2003; Fletcher, 2004;

Regine & Lewin, 2004) and democratic and participative leader behavior (Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Jago & Vroom, 1982; Stanford, Oates, & Flores, 1995; van Engen & Willemsen, 2004).

A number of studies have described the affects of organizational structure and culture on women. Kanter's (1977) *Men and Women of the Corporation* was among the first to describe how the male-dominated bureaucracy hindered women's advancement. Woodall, Edwards, and Welchman (1995) found that opportunities for women in management increased when a public sector bureaucratic organization was restructured. However, other factors such as informal networks and disregarded affirmative action practices continued to limit opportunities. Other researchers determined that masculine behaviors and culture contribute to the subordination of women by subverting equity measures (Kjeldal, Rindfleisch, & Sheridan, 2005); requiring women to develop strategies to learn a culture they did not create (Bierma, 1996); making even successful women feel like outsiders (Davies-Netzley, 1998); and creating a general mismatch between women, the organizational culture, and the men who define it (Kjeldal, et al., 2005; Lyness & Thompson, 2000). Blackmore and Sachs' (2000) study of academe indicated a common paradox for women in higher education: even though the culture espoused collegiality, male domination and individualism prevailed. Badjo and Dickson (2001) found that the organizational qualities that contributed to high percentages of women in management were not typical of male-dominated cultures: high human orientation, high performance orientation, and low power distance.

Whereas researchers have generally indicated the divergence between a supportive climate for women and the male-dominated culture of organizations, women leaders in the south may be particularly vulnerable to the stereotypes and traditions still embraced in their region. Elazar (1994), the founder of cultural mapping, believed there were three distinct political sub-cultures in the U.S., one of which was the traditionalistic culture of the south. The south is characterized by

a paternalistic and elitist conception of the commonwealth. It reflects an older, precommercial attitude that accepts a substantially hierarchical society as part of the ordered nature of things, authorizing and expecting those at the top of the social structure to take a special and dominant role in government. (p. 235)

Cash (1941) emphasized that the south has been characterized by “a fairly definite social pattern—a complex of established relationships” (p. viii). These relationships are built upon an accepted order that defines the roles of men and women (Watts, 2003). Southern men, for example, have “learned since childhood that they must protect women from the rudeness of public life” (Bashaw, 1999, p. 42). One notion that is still less popular in the south is the idea that women should have an equal role in running businesses, industry, and government (American National Election Studies, 2011). Gender stereotypes perpetuate a system of order and hierarchy in the south that Mee (1995) described as a “social caste system” (p. 1). It is a region where women have known and adapted to a system of “terrible constraints,” where “role-playing was the norm, causing true thoughts and feelings to be buried under a morass of social niceties” (Mee, 1995, p. 3).

A number of studies focusing on female educational leaders in the south revealed the lessons and travails of southern women who attempt to infiltrate the top layers of the hierarchy and join the male-dominated world of leadership. The women whose voices were included in these studies spoke about the continual control of male-dominated networks: “There is a political nature of accomplishing tasks and the way things get done. Decisions are made under the table” (Wilbanks, 2005, p. 37). They understand what it means to be tokens and know that because they are women, it can be risky to hire them (Pew, 2002). Sometimes, just to get hired, they have to “blast through the door” because “doors in higher education don’t automatically open for women” (Wilbanks, 2005). They acknowledged that they function in a region where they are expected to conform to “unwritten, political characteristics” and where one is seen “as a woman first and a manager second” (Schuck and Liddle, 2004).

A final informal aspect of organizations that affects the success of women in leadership positions in all regions is the aforementioned male-dominated networks. Informal networks form an underlying structure in organizations. Inclusion in these networks can further one’s attainment of professional and personal goals (Ibarra, 1993). Historically, however, women have been excluded from these networks (Bierma, 2005; Brass, 1985) and have lacked access to influential managers and leaders (Brass, 1984; Brass, 1985; Ibarra, 1993; Ragins & Sundstrom, 1989). Research indicated that inclusion in networks positively correlated to both influence in an organization and rate of promotion (Brass, 1984, 1985; Forret, 2004; Michael & Yukl, 1993).



For women especially, ties to males in management positions appear to be especially important to advancement. Brass (1985) found women in integrated networks were perceived as being more influential, being more central to departmental and network processes, and having more contacts with leaders and individuals outside their departments. Ibarra (1992) showed that although women networked with other women for friendship, they connected with men for career advice and influence. In another study, the same author indicated that women with high potential for advancement had closer and broader information network ties with managers of both genders than men or lower potential women (Ibarra, 1997).

Not all internal constraints are specific to women. One frequent area of concern cited in research studies on admissions directors involved administrative issues related to staffing, workload, and unrealistic expectations (Blair, 1997; “*The Chronicle Survey*,” 2008; Hilton, 1997). Farrell and Hoover (2008) reported that most admissions directors spent large amounts of time supervising, managing, and training staff. Staff turnover is high because new counselors burn out quickly (Farrell & Hoover, 2008; Hoover, December 8, 2008). Chief admissions officers also worked long hours yet still felt they did not have enough time for important tasks (Farrell & Hoover, 2008). Seventy percent of male chief admissions officers and 81% of females worked over 50 hours a week (“Where Senior-Level Admissions Officials Differ,” 2008). Even after putting in such long hours, admissions directors still felt great pressure to meet enrollment goals (Donehower, 2003; Farrell & Hoover, 2008; “*The Chronicle Survey*,” 2008; Wilson, 1990).

**External constraints.** A review of the literature also revealed a number of issues and concerns that arose from outside admissions directors' institutions but impacted their success as leaders. Blair (1997) asked chief admissions officers to rate the importance of several current issues and indicate whether they had the knowledge and resources to deal with these challenges. The most important issue noted was financial aid; 94% thought this topic was very important or important. Other important challenges were multicultural issues, Internet technology, legal issues, administrative restructuring, and remedial education. The only issue where respondents felt they lacked knowledge was Internet technology. However, the chief admissions officers surveyed felt they lacked sufficient resources to deal with financial aid, multicultural, remedial, restructuring, and technology challenges.

Another means to determine common challenges faced by chief admissions officers is to consider research on what they see as professional constraints and sources of dissatisfaction. Blair (1997) noted the most common inhibitors for admissions directors were budgetary constraints, insufficient time, lack of resources, and staff/personnel issues. Hilton (1997) determined admissions directors were most dissatisfied with the amount of time required by the position, difficult personnel decisions, campus politics, office policies, and decision making. Survey data from *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (2008) revealed that the main sources of dissatisfaction have not changed. At least 9.6% of those responding indicated they were unhappy due to a lack of resources, unrealistic expectations, current inter/intra office organization, and workload.

A further review of professional journals and reports issued by professional associations provided support for this research in terms of the current challenges of admissions directors. In its yearly *State of College Admission Report*, NACAC listed a number of key trends in the profession which will be discussed in further detail in the remainder of the section (Clinedinst, 2008). These trends are financial aid availability, access and equity, student disciplinary information, early decision, and standardized testing. One additional issue that appears frequently in the professional literature involves challenges related to ethics and integrity.

Chief admissions officers face increasing challenges related to financial aid. Survey data indicated they viewed financial aid as the most important issue facing admissions personnel and spent increasing amounts of time communicating with financial aid officials (Farrell, 2008). Financial aid policies and awarding processes have begun to play key roles in efforts to meet enrollment goals and operate within budgets (Farrell, 2008; Kalsbeek & Hossler, 2008). As a result, more institutions are using strategic enrollment management to manage and coordinate these processes (Bontrager, 2007; Farrell, 2008; Kalsbeek & Hossler, 2008). Financial aid is also an area of concern due to concerns about a failing economy (Basken, 2008) and decreases in student and institutional aid from federal and state governments (Heller & Rogers, 2006). A NACAC report indicated that 65% of colleges and universities were unable to meet the demonstrated financial need of all accepted students (Heller, 2008). Policies such as differential pricing, discounting tuition, and increasing merit based aid have drawn criticism (Heller & Rogers, 2006; Heller, 2008).

Chief admissions officers also face challenges related to access and equity. Two groups most often mentioned in discussions related to the fairness of admissions and financial policies are minority and low income students. Both groups have lower high school graduation and postsecondary enrollment rates in comparison to their white and middle to high income peers (Clinedinst, 2008; Tierney, 2006). Since the Supreme Court upheld the use of affirmative action in admissions in 2003, race-based admissions policies continue to be employed in three forms: race-neutral policies, policies seeking to increase diversity by considering socioeconomic status, and critical mass policies (Davis, 2007). All three policies have been criticized. Race-neutral policies cause black and Hispanic student enrollments to fall (Colburn, Young, & Yellen, 2008; Davis, 2007). Although it is tempting to look for factors other than race to improve diversity, “there are simply very few minority candidates for admission to academically selective institutions who are both poor and academically qualified” (Bowen & Rudenstine, 2003, para. 28). In addition, few low income students meet academic standards for admissions and/or are able to manage the enrollment process (Tierney, 2006). Critical mass policies may reduce isolation but can also contribute to tokenism (Davis, 2007).

As the number of minority high school graduates is expected to increase in the next 20 years while the number of white students declines, minority recruitment and admissions policies are likely to be examined and questioned. In addition, chief admissions officers will also be scrutinized because they control access to the American dream (Hoover, May 8, 2008). The average acceptance rate across all baccalaureate institutions is approximately 70% (Clinedinst, 2008). However, scholars and journalists

continue to focus on a small number of select institutions and debate how admissions policies favor affluent white students and perpetuate an educational environment of wealth and privilege (Golden, 2007; Sacks, 2007; Schmidt, 2007; Soares, 2007).

*The State of College Admission* also noted three additional areas related to the application process that are beginning to pose greater challenges to chief admissions officers: student disciplinary information access, early decision, and standardized testing (Clinedinst, 2008). Although the tragic events at Virginia Tech and Northern Illinois University brought the issue of releasing student disciplinary information to the forefront, there have been about a dozen shooting incidents on college campuses over the last decade that involved students. As a result, admissions offices are being asked to consider past disciplinary records as a part of the admissions process (Fox, 2008). Although more institutions are including community standards questions on applications, 75% of secondary schools do not have policies in place related to releasing this information (Clinedinst, 2008). As a result, admissions directors are challenged by determining if they will require students to answer questions about past disciplinary and/or criminal infractions when they apply for admission. If potential students are asked to reveal past disciplinary problems, institutions face a second challenge. They must then collect adequate supporting documentation from schools and individuals to assist with the decision of whether the student constitutes a danger and should be denied admission.

Early decision and standardized testing are also areas of concern for admissions professionals. Only 18% of colleges and universities utilize an early decision process (Clinedinst, 2008), but the process continues to garner attention and debate. One criticism

of early decision is that it contributes to increased competition among institutions (McPherson & Schapiro, 2007). Some selective institutions have eliminated this policy, but few others have followed suit. Instead, the use of early decision has increased slightly (Clinedinst, 2008).

Some high profile institutions also captured attention by dropping their standardized test requirements. For most institutions, however, the importance of tests in the admissions process has actually increased (NACAC, 2008). NACAC (2008) noted five criticisms of the use of standardized tests in admissions. They indicated that other factors may result in more appropriate decisions, disadvantaged students are harmed by their lack of access to preparation activities, scores may be misused for purposes such as institutional rankings, secondary school personnel are not properly educated about test use, and the test may be unfair to some groups of students. The organization called on institutions to consider dropping their test score requirements in order to adopt admissions policies that are a better fit for their enrollment goals.

One final issue that has received attention in the professional literature involves ethical conduct and integrity. At the core of this issue is what NACAC called the “biggest college admissions story”—not student achievement or innovation but competition. “Increasingly, the rhetoric of the admissions profession is that of an enterprise driven by the bottom line” (Hawkins & Clinedinst, 2007, p. iii). Like administrators in the business world, “admissions directors are judged by the numbers they produce, and by whether these numbers make their institution look better than its competitors” (Donehower, 2003, para. 14). As a reflection of this concern with numbers, admissions offices have adopted

the practices and language of the corporate world (Donehower, 2003). Practitioners recognized higher education as a business, viewing students as customers and baccalaureate degrees as products (Gilde, 2007; Kirp, 2003; Jump, 2004). To some professionals, this corporate mindset has compromised the integrity of the profession. They criticize the commercialization of admissions (Gilde, 2007; Kirp, 2003; Thacker, 2005), the loss of the personal touch (Donehower, 2003), and the role of the admissions officer as “an aggressive marketer” (Wilson, 1990). The intense competition has also contributed to a number of instances of ethical misconduct such as hacking into other institution’s websites and manipulating data to improve national rankings (Farrell & Van Der Weef, 2007; Young, 2002).

In conclusion, there are a variety of internal and external constraints that affect the leadership experiences of chief admissions officers. For women in particular, their success as leaders may be impacted by the formal and informal organizational structures that define the institutions in which they work. Admissions directors of both genders also face a myriad of challenges that have the potential to affect the choices they make every day as higher education professionals.

### **Chapter Summary**

The purpose of this chapter was to provide a thorough review of the literature that relates to the research questions forming the basis for this study. The first section of the chapter presented an overview of critical theory and feminist theory. Then, recent literature related to the leadership journeys of women in higher education was summarized. Specifically, studies were included on career development and obstacles to

advancement. The final section of the chapter included information on two areas related to the nature of the chief admissions officer position: roles and responsibilities and leadership challenges. Research studies and information from professional journals indicated admissions directors face challenges in the form of constraints that are both internal and external to their institutions.



## CHAPTER THREE

### RESEARCH PROCEDURES

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to describe the essence of the shared leadership experience of female chief admissions officers (van Manen, 1990). Moustakas (1994) indicated that the rich, descriptive data that describes a phenomenon is not always attainable through quantitative investigations. Within the qualitative tradition, however, there exists both the means and the justification for planning and implementing a study that can literally and figuratively transport the reader into the world of the participants (Patton, 2002; van Manen, 1990). As a research method, phenomenology serves not as an unalterable set of distinct steps but as a more fluid approach that can be shaped and fashioned to fit the needs of an evolving research plan (Creswell, 2003; van Manen, 1990, 2002). In van Manen's (1990) ideas about the purpose of phenomenological study, there is also the justification for my own search to understand the lived leadership experiences of other women in admissions.

This chapter begins with an overview of the phenomenological research method. It also includes a discussion of the evolution of phenomenology as well as my rationale for choosing van Manen's (1990) hermeneutic method. The next section provides details about the selection of participants and the procedures followed for gathering and analyzing data. Finally, the chapter ends with a discussion of ethical considerations and the methods employed for enhancing the validity of the study.

## **Phenomenological Research Method**

In order to address the research questions set forth in the first chapter, I needed to employ a method that would allow me to step into the worlds of the participants through the stories they told. By listening to and interpreting their narratives, I was seeking an in-depth understanding of the day-to-day realities of their leadership experiences as female admissions directors (van Manen, 1990). Crotty (1998) indicates that it is important for the investigator to make informed choices about methodology and method to achieve the aims of a research study. These two elements provide structure for the investigation and offer “a sense of stability and direction” (p. 2). As qualitative research is emergent and often follows a research plan that continues to evolve (Creswell, 2003), it is especially important that there is a sense of alignment between methodology and method, as well as theoretical perspective (Crotty, 1998). This section details the choices that formed the “scaffolding” of the study (Crotty, 1998, p. 2).

Methodology can be described as the overall approach to the research. It guides the investigator’s choices about method, which are the actual procedures used to collect and analyze data. Methodology is strategy—it is the link between research procedures and outcomes (Crotty, 1998). Phenomenology formed the methodology for this research study on the leadership experiences of female chief admissions officers. It has been continually evolving since its founding by Husserl early in the twentieth century (Patton, 2002). Husserl envisioned phenomenology as a response to the misguided attempts of researchers who tried to apply techniques from the natural sciences in studying the human experience (Lavery, 2003). He developed transcendental or descriptive

phenomenology because he felt the scientific method “has nothing to say to us”—it failed to address basic questions about the meaning of human existence (Husserl, 1970, p. 6). In contrast, phenomenology offered insight into “the correct comprehension of the essence of the life-world” (Husserl, 1970, p. 123). It is about understanding the conscious experience of “what we know best, what is always taken for granted in human life, always familiar to us” (p. 123).

The goal of the transcendental phenomenologist is to make an experience known and understood by turning it into “*pure*” *consciousness* (Husserl, 1999, p. 67). In doing so, the researcher puts aside all thoughts, biases, assumptions, and prior knowledge to direct his or her focus onto the realities of an experience. Husserl believed that it is possible to experience transcendental consciousness because there are certain elements of any experience that are universal to all individuals (Husserl, 1999). He asserted that reality is objective and is not impacted by context or the specific nature of the world in which we live—there is “a *sense-bestowing* consciousness which, for its part, exists absolutely (Husserl, 1999, p. 84).

The other major school of phenomenology is Heidegger’s hermeneutic or interpretative phenomenology. Heidegger worked with Husserl, who trained him in the phenomenological method, but Heidegger eventually challenged and then dissociated himself from Husserl’s ideas (Lavery, 2003). Whereas Husserl believed in the absolute truth of consciousness (1999), Heidegger (1996) wrote that “the methodological meaning of phenomenological description is interpretation” (p. 33). The researcher attempts to interpret an individual’s subjective reality and proposes possibilities to help us

understand an experience. Heidegger (1996) also believed that the ideas and personal experiences of the researcher are valuable and should not be pushed aside. These presuppositions form the basis for any research project or quest for understanding. He indicated that the hermeneutic phenomenologist needed to go beyond looking for generalities and understand how individuals' lives are influenced by the environments in which they find themselves. People cannot extract themselves from their lives and consider them only as exercises of consciousness. They cannot escape history (Heidegger, 1996), and they are intertwined with and affected by the cultural, social, and political aspects of their worlds (Lopez & Willis, 2004).

When it was time to select a method for this study, Moustakas' (1994) step-by-step, almost scientific approach, which was based on Husserl's transcendental phenomenology, seemed like a logical choice. However, as I continued to clarify my own role as a researcher, I realized that there was a major mismatch between this method and what Crotty (1998) considers another key element of the research plan: theoretical perspective. My critical and feminist orientation was incompatible with a transcendental approach, which calls for the researcher to bracket or put aside all presuppositions. Moustakas (1994) calls this process the Epoch and it is a critical stage in his method. As a result, I began to seek another phenomenological method that would be compatible with my critical and feminist beliefs that women have a long history of being mistreated and alienated from the leadership arena in higher education (Grogan, 2000; Jermier, 1998). I reviewed other research that embraced this same orientation and found van Manen's

(1990) phenomenological method, which allows for presuppositions. van Manen (1990) indicated that it is better to make these thoughts explicit and to come to terms with them.

van Manen's (1990) hermeneutic phenomenology offered the best approach for this study because it was congruent with the purpose and results sought through the research (Lopez & Willis, 2004). As the purpose of this study was to provide an understanding of the leadership experiences of female chief admissions officers, van Manen's (1990) method was suitable because it answers the question of what an experience is *really like*. Another goal of the study was to investigate the experiences of a select group. Therefore, the hermeneutic approach was also appropriate because it reveals the commonalities and differences between the experiences of individual members of the group as they experience their life-worlds (Lopez & Willis, 2004). This approach is the opposite of transcendental phenomenology, which seeks universal truths (Husserl, 2006). When considering leadership, a feminist, like myself, would argue that generalities are not possible. Previous research bears out the notion that the leadership experience is different for men and women in aspects ranging from how they are perceived by others (Duehr & Bono, 2006; Heilman, Block, Simon, & Martell, 1998; Martell, Parker, Emrich, & Crawford, 1998; Schein, 1973, 1975) to the degree that they are integrated into organizational culture and networks (Brass, 1985; Forret & Dougherty, 2004; Ibarra, 1993). Women also differ as individuals. Even though feminists incorporate the viewpoint of gender, they do not believe there is a universal female experience (Ramazanoglu & Holland; 2002; Reinhartz, 1992).

Hermeneutic phenomenology also aligned with my feminist and critical approach because it emphasizes situation or context. This study involved interviewing individuals in their own environments by traveling to their institutions (van Manen, 1990). Their organizations were key elements of this study because I hoped to fill a gap in the literature by offering an interpretation of the leadership experience for female administrators at specific types of institutions in one field of higher education. The study was also situated in a region where women have attained a strong representation in leadership positions. As a feminist, I believed that the experiences of these women could not be separated from the environments in which they practiced their leadership (Weedon, 1997). My critical viewpoint also called for an awareness of what was happening in the participants' organizations and the ways that some individuals were able to maintain control over others (Jermier, 1998). The hermetic phenomenologist believes "that humans are embedded in their world to such an extent that subjective experiences are inextricably linked with social, cultural, and political contexts" (Lopez & Willis, 2004, p. 729).

Finally, a hermeneutic phenomenological method was suitable in relation to the results that were sought. According to Patton (2002), interviewing individuals who have directly experienced the phenomenon allows the researcher to study "a relatively small number of cases that are successful at something and therefore a good source of lessons learned" (p. 7). Thus, this study involved obtaining results that would be applicable to those practicing the profession of admissions, including myself. van Manen (1990) wrote that the goal of the phenomenological researcher is action sensitive knowledge. At

minimum, the knowledge gained through this research will improve the practice of leadership by offering suggestions for more thoughtful and tactful behavior (van Manen, 1990). It may also, however, begin the process of righting wrongs and bringing forth the change called for by both critical and feminine theorists (Brookfield, 2005; Jermier, 1998; Ramazanoglu & Holland; 2002; Reinhartz, 1992).

To implement this study, then, I incorporated the activities in van Manen's (1990) methodical structure, which is not a step-by-step approach but the "dynamic interplay among six research activities" (p. 30). These activities are as follows:

1. Turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the world;
2. Investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it;
3. Reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon;
4. Describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting;
5. Maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon;  
and
6. Balancing the research context by considering parts and whole. (pp. 30-31)

Although there is no required method for critical or feminist researchers, (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2005; Ramazanoglu & Holland; 2002; Reinhartz, 1992), van Manen's (1990) method is congruent with these two orientations. This method begins with me as a woman and my interest in the leadership experience of other women. However, this method required an investigation of the experience of women as they lived it (Lopez & Willis, 2004). Kincheloe and McLaren (2005) called on critical researchers to be open to methods that allow them to understand the lives of those they study and to

avoid imposing the control to seek to expose. Feminists also understand that this stance is important because one cannot assume a general female experience—to do so would be to make the same mistake of male researchers who believed that the leadership experience was the same for everyone (Irby et al., 2001; Shakeshaft & Nowell, 1984). Finally, van Manen's (1990) method is about bringing the experiences of the researcher and the participants together. My job will be to analyze the words of the women and offer an interpretation of their experiences (van Manen, 1990). This is the aspiration of the hermeneutic phenomenologist: to delve into the narratives of an experience and capture the meanings that lie within but are not immediately apparent to those in the midst of the experience (Lopez & Willis, 2004).

### **Selection of Participants**

This study was marked as an evolving, qualitative research project from the outset because I began without a clear idea of the exact number of participants that I should have. This level of uncertainty, however, does not diminish a qualitative study; it merely formed the first area requiring some trade-offs (Patton, 2002). Moore (2005) indicated that five to ten participants is an adequate number for a qualitative study. This number is considered appropriate for a phenomenological study provided the research has a narrow scope, the nature of the topic is clear, and the investigator obtains rich, informative data (Morse, 2000). Feminist researchers also prefer small sample sizes in order to obtain in-depth data from individuals in a specific context (Cooper & Bosco, 1999). But, despite this guidance, Patton (2002) succinctly indicated that “There are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry” (p. 244). He wrote that sample size should be guided by what will



be useful, what can be accomplished with available time and resources, and what one wants to know (Patton, 2002).

This investigation involved learning about the leadership experiences of women in admissions in a region where they had gained a strong presence. I also wanted to know if my experiences as a woman in the southeast and as a leader in admissions were similar to those of other women, especially those who had succeeded in advancing into director positions. As a result, the participants who could provide the most useful information were female chief admissions officers at specific types of institutions in the 13-state region served by the Southern Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (SACRAO, n.d., “History”). Table 3.1 on the following page provides a list of the member states. At the time the research project was initiated, SACRAO had 3,188 members (SACRAO, n.d., “SACRAO Member Look-Up”). Among my colleagues in the southeast, SACRAO was the professional organization of choice, most likely due to the organization’s longevity and size. Founded in 1947, SACRAO is the oldest professional group for admissions officers (SACRAO, n.d., “History”). In contrast, the Southern Association for College Admission Counseling (SACAC), the other professional organization for admissions professionals in the south, was formed in 1966 and had approximately 1,350 members (SACAC, n.d., “History”).

The southeast region also proved to be the most suitable area for conducting the study because, as Patton indicated (2002), a researcher must work within certain limits related to available resources. When I planned the study and collected the data, I resided in the southeast. By choosing to interview women in this region, I would be able to travel

by car or airplane to meet with a small number of participants with a reasonable amount of accommodation. Being a full-time professional meant that it was possible to take some time off to conduct interviews, but a number of short trips made more sense than an extended foray through a larger geographical area. As a member of SACRAO, I also had access to member data and contact information that was easily retrievable through the online directory. Finally, the organization's membership would form an audience for the results of the study.

Table 3.1

*Member States of SACRAO*

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Member States
Alabama
Arkansas
Florida
Georgia
Kentucky
Louisiana
Mississippi
North Carolina
Oklahoma
South Carolina
Tennessee
Texas
Virginia

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Finally, my selection of participants was guided by the purpose of the study and what I wanted to know. My goal was to discover what it was *really* like to be a female chief admissions officer (van Manen, 1990). I hoped to convey some degree of understanding and awareness of this intense lived experience of leadership (van Manen,

1990). Therefore, this study required a small number of women with a deep understanding of the profession and the position; in-depth knowledge was more important than generalizations (Patton, 2002). I used purposive sampling to locate a homogeneous group of individuals who had experienced the phenomenon to be studied—being a female chief admissions officer in the southeast (Creswell, 1998). I did not seek a group of women who were representative of all female leaders in higher education. The participants selected were women whose experience and institutional affiliations made them “information rich cases” who had much to impart about the day-to-day realities of the successful female chief admissions officer (Patton, 2002, p. 46).

Aside from geographical region, title, and gender considerations, I sought participants who had at least two years of experience in the position. The experience requirement ensured that participants had first-hand experience as female leaders in admissions; had been through the year-long admissions cycle at least twice; and possessed knowledge of recruitment practices, organizational environments, and external factors that affect how they do their jobs on a day-to-day basis. I wanted participants from public institutions as opposed to private. These two types of institutions differ in areas such as funding sources, regulations and oversight, and recruitment techniques, so participants from public institutions were more likely to share a similar leadership experience. Although private colleges and universities do cost more to attend, they have the advantages in the recruitment process of being able to offer large amounts of institutional aid and discounting tuition. I also chose participants from institutions whose primary degree offering was the baccalaureate degree. This criterion was included

because the level of competitiveness is much greater for baccalaureate institutions in relation to primarily open-enrollment two-year colleges.

I initially planned to select individuals from institutions classified as master's level by The Carnegie Foundation (2010). These institutions are able to compete for students at the regional and national levels. As a result, their admissions directors seemed more likely to participate in and be impacted by national debates over issues affecting higher education and college admissions. Since this study focused on successful women leaders, the ideal participants were women who had attained top leadership positions at public, master's level institutions that are standouts among their peers because of their size and prestige. In higher education, "Prestige means more than bragging rights for trustees and alumni. It brings tangible benefits, and small differences in reputation have large consequences" (Kirp, 2003, p. 4).

Once these criteria were established, the next step in selecting participants was to access and download membership data from the SACRAO website. I then hand-sorted and tabulated the data according to gender, title, and institutional classification. Hand-sorting was necessary because of the variety and combinations of titles held by chief admissions officers, as well as the formats used to abbreviate titles. Appendix B includes a list of all titles that were deemed indicative of possible chief admissions officer status. My personal knowledge and experience in the admissions profession were critical in completing this process. Chief admissions officer status, gender, and institution were later verified through phone calls to potential participants by phone. These phone contacts also

served as opportunities to ask the women about their current responsibilities and number of years in their positions.

At the time this study was initiated, there were 3,188 members in the 13-state region that composed the Southern Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (SACRAO), 68% of whom were women (2,159 individuals) (SACRAO, n.d., “SACRAO member look-up”). Hand-sorting and tabulating the membership data revealed that 59% of the individuals who identified themselves by a title indicative of possible chief admissions officer status were women (217 individuals). Upon applying the established criteria related to type of institution, 45 of the female members of SACRAO appeared to be eligible for the study (see Table 3.2 below).

Table 3.2

*Numbers of Individuals Meeting Selection Criteria*

Selection Criteria	Number of Individuals
Total number of SACRAO members	3,188
Female SACRAO members	2,159
Female members who have a title indicative of possible chief admissions officer status	217
Female members with chief admissions officer title employed at public institutions	125
Female members with chief admissions officer title employed at public master’s institutions	47
Female members with chief admissions officer title employed at public research institutions	32

The next step was to contact the eligible participants to determine if they would be interested in participating in the study. Clemson's Institutional Review Board approved the study before any participants were contacted and the current SACRAO president also supplied a letter of support. The IRB approval and letter of support are in Appendices C and D, respectively. I then sent an initial recruitment e-mail to the 45 potential participants (Appendix E), indicating that I was a SACRAO member and asking for their help in conducting a research study on admissions professionals. After sending a follow-up e-mail one week later, five individuals responded and indicated they were interested in participating in the study. My next step involved contacting these individuals by phone to verify that they met the eligibility criteria and to obtain basic demographic information. I also inquired about their availability to participate in the research. The telephone protocol for verifying eligibility and interest is in Appendix F.

After completing this initial round of the selection process, a roadblock appeared: I did not have enough participants. Although qualitative studies do not require a specific number of participants (Patton, 2002), I was following Moore's (2005) recommendation of five to ten individuals. A figure in this range would allow for the collection of rich, in-depth data about the experience and provide a manageable number of participants for the interview process. It was disheartening to be unable to connect with two individuals for the follow-up telephone calls even though they expressed an interest in the study. One potential participant did not meet the sampling criteria.

Although I found myself in a quandary, I had prepared for this occurrence and had a "Plan B." In earlier discussions with my chair as well as the committee, they had

asked me to think about what would happen if initial selection efforts did not result in an adequate number of participants. Fortunately, I was ready for this obstacle and, after consulting with my committee chair, sent the recruitment and follow-up e-mail to an additional 32 women working at research institutions, as defined by the Carnegie Foundation classification criteria (2010) (see Table 3.2 on page 74). These individuals were deemed sufficiently homogeneous to the initial target group to be included in the study. Their institutions were comparable in size, prestige, and regional and national competitiveness. In hindsight and after completing the interviews, this was indeed the case. The initial target group could have included chief admissions officers at research institutions because the leadership practices of all the women selected had much in common and did allow me to understand and interpret a shared leadership experience.

As a result of enacting the back-up plan, an additional eight women responded and indicated their interest in participating in the study. I followed the same process of contacting potential participants as was used with the initial target group. Each individual was contacted by telephone to gauge her level of interest and compatibility with the selection criteria. Although not every potential participant could be reached by telephone, I was able to reach the majority of these individuals. As a result of increasing the pool of eligible participants and completing follow-up telephone calls, I selected six participants who seemed most likely to allow me to meet the purpose of the study: understanding the essence of their lived leadership experience (Patton, 2002). Once the interviews were completed, those not selected were notified that they were not chosen for the study and thanked for their interest.

## **Role of the Researcher**

In qualitative research approaches, “the researcher is the instrument” (Patton, 2002, p. 14). Qualitative studies involve going into the environments of the participants to have direct and personal contact with those who have experienced the phenomenon first-hand (Patton, 2002). When it was time to actually go visit these women at their institutions and conduct the interviews, I felt both excitement and trepidation. The experience of going into the field seemed like the true beginning of the study. It was humbling to know that my skills and competence would determine the overall credibility of the investigation (Patton, 2002). I also knew that my experiences and outlook on life could impact the overall success of the project. They would play a major role in how I conducted the interview process and interpreted the resulting data.

van Manen (1997) indicated that “the researcher is an author who writes from the midst of life experience” (p. 368). As personal experience often forms the starting point for a phenomenological study (van Manen, 1990), I wrote about my own experience in admissions in the first chapter. I have a strong interest in the field as well as a desire to understand the meaning of the leadership experience for others in similar roles. This understanding will contribute to my own professional development and, hopefully, assist other women preparing for their leadership journeys. Clearly, I had a connection with the women who were participating in this study, having been a member of the same regional organization, worked in the same profession, and advanced into a leadership position. This connection allowed me reach out to potential participants in my initial recruitment e-mail and could help build a sense of rapport with the participants when we met.



However, I was also cognizant that this connection could be abused. There is a difference between establishing rapport and thinking one has achieved some deep level of intimacy and understanding. Seidman (1998) cautioned that an interviewer can be friendly but not truly be friends with the interviewee.

In relation to data analysis, the goal of a phenomenological study is to not only authenticate the researcher's experience but to also understand the meaning of the lived experiences of others (van Manen, 2002). In order to remain open to the experience of another, the researcher must embrace a perspective of "receptive passivity," which essentially means adopting an attitude of wonder and being willing to accept new ideas and viewpoints (van Manen, 2002, p. 249). To this end, I tried to maintain a pedagogical relationship with the research. Phenomenology is a type of action research that links knowledge with real world experience and merges the researcher and practitioner (van Manen, 1990). This approach challenges the researcher to keep an open mind and really listen to what the women are saying when interviewing them and analyzing their words. In doing so, I became acutely aware of the complexity that came to define their lived leadership experiences. In addition, while seeking to describe their leadership experiences, I was also coming to terms with my own. During the course of the study, I accepted a new position in admissions and turned down another path in my personal leadership journey.

As I became more comfortable in my role as researcher, Johnson-Bailey's (2008) comments about the delicate dance of the researcher in a qualitative study struck a chord. She indicated that there are both advantages and disadvantages for an interviewer who is

an insider in a group. In terms of advantages, there is the notion that only someone who is a member of a group is capable of understanding and telling their stories; gender and other factors such as race can unite researcher and participants. At the same time, biases can occur when a researcher has insider status. A researcher can take for granted his or her connection with the participants and not realize when common ground has disappeared. In this study, I utilized a number of strategies that allowed me to use my insight gained from personal experience but also preserved the authenticity of the experiences of the participants. These strategies are included in the section on validity in this chapter.

### **Data Collection**

Once the participants were located and had agreed to take part in the study, the data collection process began. The primary means of data collection was in-depth interviews using open-ended questions (Patton, 2002; Seidman, 1998; van Manen, 1990). I conducted two pilot interviews with female colleagues in higher education leadership positions to test the interview questions, hone my skills, and reflect on the interview experience (Seidman, 1998). One of these interviews proved to be an especially powerful experience in terms of the stories that were told and the feelings that surfaced. When I talked with my colleague after the interview to ask for suggestions for improving the questions and my skills, she indicated that she had not thought I would be able to elicit such frankness and feeling. It was a powerful experience for both of us, one that revealed the intensity and effectiveness of the interview. The pilot interviews also clarified my role

as an interviewer. For example, I learned when to probe, how to acknowledge and encourage, and when to remain silent.

Scheduling and conducting the interviews was a journey. The first stage was to contact the participants to learn when meetings would fit into their schedules. It seemed important for establishing a positive working relationship to hold each interview on a day, at a time, and in a place of the participants' choosing. Sometimes I worked with the participants directly and, other times, I became quite familiar with their administrative assistants. I ultimately chose to drive to all the interviews because it was more economical and it allowed me greater flexibility in scheduling. Sometimes, a trip involved one interview and, at other times, careful scheduling allowed me to talk with several women over the course of a journey. By the end of the data collection process, I had driven 3,641 miles. All interviews took place in the naturalistic settings of the universities of the participants (Creswell, 2003; Patton, 2002). Five interviews took place in the participants' personal offices and one occurred in a conference room adjacent to the individual's office. The interviews lasted from 60 to 90 minutes each and were captured using a digital recorder.

When interviewing, I used an interview protocol (presented in Appendix G) but varied the questions as needed to probe for additional details or to clarify responses (Patton, 2002; Seidman, 1998; van Manen, 1990). The protocol consisted of open-ended questions because they "permit one to understand the world as seen by the respondents (Patton, 2002, p. 21), which is the goal of a phenomenological study (van Manen, 1990). Seidman (1998) recommended conducting three separate interviews with each participant

for a phenomenological study, but this was also an area where a trade-off was necessary due to time and financial constraints (Patton, 2002). Instead of conducting three separate interviews that moved an interviewee through the stages of describing her life history, detailing her current experience, and then reflecting on the meaning of her experience, I developed an alternate approach. The interview protocol incorporated Seidman's (1998) three stages by asking the women to describe their leadership journeys, current responsibilities and challenges, and the meaning of leadership.

A two-step approach was also utilized for gathering data. After conducting each interview, I listened to the recording and then contacted the interviewee by phone approximately one week after the initial meeting. During these calls, I asked each participant to clarify or elaborate on any points made during the interview that seemed unclear and inquired as to whether the individual had any additional insights to add after a period of reflection. Both the interviews and notes from the follow-up telephone calls were transcribed by a professional transcriptionist or the researcher. The participants chose pseudonyms during their interviews, and these were used during the transcription process to help protect their identities.

Throughout the data collection process, I also made summary notes before, during, and after each interview. These notes included information related to the surroundings, demeanor, appearance, and reactions of the participants, as well as my thoughts, feelings, and reactions. Creswell (2003) indicated summary notes are important as they form a method through which the "researcher filters the data through a personal lens" (p. 182). Driving to the interviews also allowed additional time for reflection,

causing an accumulation of miles as well as thoughts. The long hours spent in the car were tremendously valuable in processing each meeting in terms of what I had heard, thought, and felt and in determining how these insights would ultimately come together to form a picture of the leadership experience.

### **Data Analysis**

The next primary activity in the research method involved analyzing the data using techniques suggested by van Manen (1990). He wrote, however, that there is no set or exact method for phenomenological research; it is the responsibility of the researcher “to select or invent appropriate research methods, techniques, and procedures for a particular problem” (p. 30). The two key components of the data analysis process for this study were identifying essential themes and then communicating the essence of the experience through the writing process (van Manen, 1990).

The goal of a phenomenological study is to describe the essence of an experience by identifying and reporting the essential themes (van Manen, 1990). These themes form the *structures of experience*. van Manen (1990) described three methods for identifying themes from textual data: 1) the holistic approach, 2) the selective approach, and 3) the detailed or line-by-line approach. For this study, I first utilized the holistic approach and read each transcript twice. This approach allowed me to get a sense of the overall experiences of the participants and the contexts of their leadership practices. It was also a way to begin the process of generating themes from the text.

I also utilized the line-by-line approach (van Manen, 1990). As I had chosen to adopt a feminist approach, this orientation added an element of responsibility to the data

analysis process. To avoid some of the pitfalls of researchers who have failed to consider the female viewpoint (Irby et al., 2001; Shakeshaft & Nowell, 1984) and because women describe their experiences differently than men, it was an essential part of my research method to consider the individual voices of the participants (Gilligan, 1982). In addition, by having traveled to the participants' institutions, spent time with them, and listened to their memories about some of the most intense and profound moments in their careers, I felt a tremendous obligation to not just tell their stories, but to tell them as credibly as possible. Therefore, every statement or sentence that they uttered was important.

The line-by-line approach provided a means to analyze and code the data by reviewing each statement for what it might indicate about the relationship of the themes to each other and the essence of the leadership experience. (The next chapter includes more detailed information about the coding process and the resulting themes.) The computer software *NVivo8* facilitated the process of determining the emerging themes. While analyzing the data, I used free imaginative variation to determine the essential themes. A theme is essential, according to van Manen (1990), if taking it away changes the meaning of the experience or phenomenon.

Another means utilized to determine the essentialness of themes involved the development of a data display to illustrate what was happening in the leadership practices of the participants (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Miles and Huberman (1994) wrote that creating a data display is a key component of data analysis. Such displays allow the researcher and reader to understand the patterns or themes that emerge from the data. As the coding process for this study progressed, the complexity of the phenomenon

substantiated the need for a visual representation of the themes and how the interplay between them gave meaning to the leadership experience. For the phenomenological researcher who is trying to understand the big picture—what an experience is *really* like (van Manen, 1990)—a data display is useful for visualizing the phenomenon. However, it is merely a tool to aid in understanding. As van Manen (1990) indicated, it is the job of the researcher “to construct a full interpretative description of some aspect of the life-world, and yet to remain aware that lived life is always more complex than any explication of meaning can reveal” (p. 18).

In determining the best format to present research findings, van Manen’s (1990) writings provided for great flexibility. The use of a data display seemed appropriate because he spoke of the need for the description to allow “us to ‘see’ the deeper significance, or meaning structures, of the lived experience” (p. 122). Of course, he was referring to the themes but “every phenomenological description is in a sense only an example, an icon that points at the ‘thing’ which we attempt to describe (pp. 121-122). Miles and Huberman (1994) also offered justification for the inclusion of a data display. “By display we mean a visual format that presents information systematically, so the user can draw valid conclusions and take needed action” (p. 91). Whereas textual description of a phenomenon is cumbersome, dispersed, and bulky, data displays are arranged systematically and present all relevant information simultaneously. Formats must be determined by the research questions but, otherwise, the design is shaped by the researcher. van Manen (1990) also indicated support for the creative inclinations of the researcher in presenting findings, as long as the format for doing so is consistent with the

method and purpose of the research. Although I did not initially plan to develop a data display during the study, “A certain openness is required in human science research that allows for choosing directions and exploring techniques, procedures and sources that are not always foreseeable at the outset of a research project” (van Manen, 1990, p. 162).

Once I had developed the data display and determined the essential themes, my final step was to describe the phenomenon they represented through “The art of writing and rewriting” (van Manen, 1990, p. 32). This step is perhaps the most critical in the research process, as doing phenomenological research is an exercise in writing (van Manen, 1990). The feminist researcher also bears great responsibility at this stage because decisions made as to what to include in the final report have great implications. “At best you can be as aware as possible that interpretation is your exercise of power, that your decisions have consequences, and that you are accountable for your conclusions” (Ramazanoglu & Holland).

Throughout the writing process, I was concerned with remaining focused on the research questions while describing the shared leadership experience of the participants (van Manen, 1990). I also continued to maintain a critical and feminist perspective. Analyzing the statements of the participants and understanding the contexts in which they practiced their leadership were a part of the process of identifying incidents that implied or were illustrative of control and abuse (Gorgan, 2000; Jermier, 1998). Indeed, this approach became evident in some of the resulting themes and led to the inclusion of a section in Chapter Five that presents a critical and feminist interpretation of the results. The final product of this study, then, is a written report that intertwines my thoughts,



interpretations, and reflections with those of the participants. My goal in producing this report was to allow the readers to see and understand the leadership experience in a new way that somehow enhances or teaches them something about their own lives—just as it did for me (van Manen, 1997).

### **Ethical Considerations**

Planning and implementing this study involved the consideration of some standard ethical issues. As was previously mentioned, I obtained approval for conducting the investigation from Clemson University's Institutional Review Board (Appendix C). When the participants were initially contacted by phone, at the time of their interviews, and when they were contacted to review the findings, they received information related to the expectations and limits of confidentiality. Before beginning the interviews, I reviewed the informational letter/informed consent form and obtained each participant's signature (Appendix H). The participants also received this document via e-mail before their interviews so they would have time to review the information. They were also provided with a paper copy when they signed the form, and the signed copies were stored in a locked security box.

I also took a variety of steps throughout the data collection and analysis processes to ensure the anonymity of participants. Participants are referred to in transcripts and in all writings generated during the study by pseudonyms they selected at the time of their interviews. Neither their specific titles nor institutions were named at any point in writings generated by the research. Digital copies of the interviews were maintained in a locked security box and on a password-protected computer. These recordings will be

destroyed after the defense of the dissertation. Transcripts will be maintained as they do not identify participants by name. Access to each interview transcript in its entirety was limited to the researcher, committee chair, and a professional transcriber.

As part of the review of the findings, I utilized member checking (Creswell, 2003; Patton, 2002) and e-mailed the results chapter to the participants. They were asked to specify any areas that they felt compromised their anonymity (Seidman, 1998). Only one participant indicated that she had some concerns related to a number of quotations and a description of the application review process at her institution. She suggested some edits and all her suggestions were incorporated. Her identity was protected but I was still able to present her words and experiences in the final report. None of the other participants indicated any concerns related to confidentiality. It is my profound hope that withholding the identity of the participants allowed and encouraged them to answer all questions with candor and confidence.

### **Validation of Findings**

Patton (2002) indicated that qualitative researchers adopt different methods than those undertaking quantitative studies to ensure validity. Whereas the latter strive for objectivity, qualitative researchers operate under the premise that no reliable measures exist to capture the absolute truth (Patton, 2002, van Manen, 2002). Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommended that qualitative researchers strive not for objectivity but for trustworthiness and authenticity. Instead of one truth, the researcher must be open to and be able to convey multiple perspectives (van Manen, 2002). I became acutely aware over the course of conducting this research of the difficulty of being able to offer a credible

description of the leadership experience of the six women interviewed. Although I personally invested a great deal of time and money in this project, my most important sense of obligation stemmed from the responsibility that I felt to describe what it really was like to be a female admissions director in the southeast. I felt very privileged to have been allowed inside the worlds of these women, and I wanted to offer an authentic account as possible of their leadership experience.

I realized very quickly that my own personal experience as a leader in admissions was both a tremendous asset and a potential liability. It was a great advantage to understand what various titles meant, to have lived through the yearly admissions cycle, and to have experienced some of the obstacles common to female leaders. At the same time, this experience also meant that I had acquired certain biases that could potentially impact and distort any aspect of the study, from how data was collected to the themes that emerged from coding. Thus, to help ensure validity, I used a number of strategies during the various stages of the research process. The initial conception of the study was a time for clarifying biases (Creswell, 2003; Patton, 2002) and participating in interviewer training before collecting data (Seidman, 1998). The use of rigorous coding and theoretical sensitivity helped to ensure validity during data analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). When reporting results, I utilized member checking and presented thick, rich description and disconfirming evidence (Creswell, 2003; Patton, 2002). Finally, transparency was used as a validation strategy during the length of the study (van Manen, 2002). The remainder of this section describes these approaches in further detail.

The first strategy used to ensure validity was attempting to clarify my biases. Morrow (2005) wrote that the qualitative researcher is by nature inherently subjective. Additionally, research such as this investigation that takes a critical approach is “unapologetically political” (Morrow, 2005, p. 254). In Chapter One, I openly discussed my adoption of critical theory and feminist theory as orienting perspectives. I also presented personal viewpoints and biases that related to my leadership experience in the Role of the Researcher section in this chapter. Since interviews were the sole method of data collection for this study, the success of the investigation hinged on the information gathered from the interviews (Patton, 2002). To improve my skills in this area and to help ensure validity in collecting data, I completed an interviewer training program under the direction of my committee chair and also participated in two pilot interviews. Admittedly, I struggled with my unbiased interviewer role at times. After my first interview, I felt a tremendous burst of excitement and confirmation when one of the participants eloquently gave voice to some of my own thoughts and feelings. However, my chair was there to remind me to slow down, keep an open mind, and remember that there were five more participants to interview.

During the data analysis process, rigorous coding and theoretical sensitivity helped ensure validity. The coding process must be data driven; therefore, possible coding schemes and themes were not proposed before the analysis began. Through the use of a systematic, multi-stage process, I analyzed significant statements and identified common themes (van Manen, 1990). Although this sounds like a simple process, it was

lengthy and complex and involved coding the data three times before arriving at the themes that seem to best capture the leadership experience of the participants.

An additional means for achieving validity was the incorporation of theoretical sensitivity. Strauss and Corbin (1990) defined this process as “the attribute of having insight, the ability to give meaning to data, the capacity to understand, and capability to separate the pertinent from that which isn’t” (p. 42). Again, my personal experience was both a help and hindrance. While sorting data, I had many conversations with my chair about what these women were actually doing in their leadership practices and how they were doing it. Although I could not prevent myself from identifying with some of the experiences that were recounted, it was important to listen with an open mind. The stories of the six women were their own; they were not universal and they did not always resonate with mine.

As there is no absolute truth in phenomenological inquiry (van Manen, 2002), I attempted to describe the leadership experiences of the six participants as authentically as possible when reporting findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To this end, I utilized member checking, which Lincoln and Guba (1985) called “the most crucial technique for establishing credibility” (p. 314). Essentially, this process entailed asking participants to verify the accuracy of the resulting thematic descriptions and overall findings (Creswell, 2003). To do so, I e-mailed the findings chapter to the participants and waited for their responses. All six women gave their blessing to the findings and the project. As was already mentioned, one participant did have some concerns related to confidentiality and the questionable areas were revised.

Thick description was also a means to establish validity (Geertz, 1973). Patton (2002) described this quality as “the bedrock of all qualitative reporting” (p. 438), and it called for providing as much detail as possible about what the participants were thinking and feeling as they led their admissions operations and their teams. Finally, I achieved validity by reporting disconfirming evidence. Doing so was an exercise in fighting a natural tendency to try to affirm initial results (Morrow, 2005). van Manen (2002) also stressed presenting conflicting evidence, writing “that no interpretation is ever complete, no explication of meaning is ever final, no insight is beyond challenge” (p. 7). There were a number of times when what the women told me simply did not agree with other studies or the professional literature, and these situations are noted.

Throughout the study, I adopted a strategy of transparency to increase credibility and trustworthiness. According to van Manen (2002), “Openness—in the sense of interpretive availability—is a sustaining motive of all quantitative inquiry” (p. 237). Being transparent throughout this investigation entailed engaging in a process of full disclosure from the conception of the study to the presentation of the findings. I began this process by clarifying biases in the first chapter and maintaining careful notes while collecting and analyzing data. These notes formed a framework for preparing the final report and drawing authentic conclusions.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter includes a description of van Manen’s (1990) phenomenological research method, which provided the means to investigate the leadership experiences of female chief admissions officers. Also included in this chapter were descriptions of the

processes for selecting participants as well as collecting and analyzing data to determine essential themes and produce a written description of the phenomenon. Finally, this chapter offers a consideration of the role of the researcher. The chapter concluded with a discussion of the strategies employed to avoid ethical misconduct and to enhance the validity of the study.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

#### **Introduction**

The primary purpose of this research study was to discover the essence of the lived leadership experience of female chief admissions officers at public master's and research institutions in the southeast region of the U.S. Six women participated in in-depth, semi-structured interviews lasting from 60 to 90 minutes in the natural settings of their institutions. During this time, they shared stories of the journeys that led them to leadership roles in their profession and at their institutions and spoke of the current challenges and responsibilities that form their day-to-day realities. Based on these interviews, the findings reveal that the shared leadership experience of these women has been and continues to be one of tenacity, struggle, affirmation, and fulfillment.

This chapter presents the findings based on data collected during the interviews. These sessions provided a window into the lived leadership experiences of the women. The chapter is composed of three sections. The first section presents demographic data for the participants. Part two details the coding process used to determine the central themes and sub-themes that characterize the shared leadership experience for the participants. Each of these themes and the corresponding sub-themes is then discussed in the third section. The chapter ends with a summary of the results of the research.



## **Demographic Data**

This section provides some basic demographic information on the participants in the study. All of the participants were female chief admissions officers at public master's or research institutions in the 13 southeastern states that are a part of SACRAO. Even though the women chose pseudonyms at the time of their interviews that will be used in the presentation of findings, I chose not to present summary information for the six participants in a table. This omission was purposeful in order to maintain confidentiality. Because the women who participated in this study represent a very small and select group of administrators working at particular types of institutions in the southeast, presenting specific demographic information would make a number of the participants potentially identifiable. Thus, the following paragraphs provide information collected at the outset of the study for the group in relation to their age, race, marital status, highest degree, and years in their current positions. Then, the participants are introduced by their pseudonyms and, to offer an initial distinction, according to their definitions of leadership.

The ages of the participants in this study varied greatly, ranging from 37 to 55 years. Only one participant was in her 30's; two participants were in their 40's and three were at least 50. Some of the participants had attained leadership positions at a relatively young age, while others attained a director position later in their careers. One participant was African-American and five participants were white. In relation to marital status, the majority of the participants were similar. Five of the six participants were married at the outset of the study.

The female admissions directors also provided their highest level of education and, again, in this area, the majority of women were similar. All six had earned a graduate degree. Four of the six women had earned a master's degree and two of the women had earned a doctoral degree.

Finally, the participants shared how long they had worked in their current positions as chief admissions officers. As admissions is a unique profession in higher education, it was important that the participants in the study had been in their positions long enough to have experienced the challenges and activities that compose this particular brand of leadership. There was a wide range in the number of years in their current positions. The shortest tenure as director was two years. Three women had been in their current positions for four years and two women had been directors for 12 or more years. To also ensure experience with the day-to-day realities of being an admissions director, participants described their current responsibilities. All were clearly providing the leadership that was responsible for guiding their offices toward the attainment of the university's enrollment goals.

The six participants who were interviewed for this study and their definitions of leadership at the time of their interviews are as follows:

- Anna – “I think a leader should be someone who shows other people what needs to be done by leading by example and also that to be a good leader, you also have to be a good servant—sort of the servant-leadership, um, is something that I'm really big into.”
- Bridget – “When the staff look at me, I want them to be able to say, ‘I like how she runs the office. I like how she listens, but yet she knows when she has to make the decision for the good of the order.’”

- Fern – “Leadership is...is...is being a doer...is getting there and...and...and participating and...and motivating by example and all those kinds of things.”
- Hannah – “Good leaders, um, make things happen, um, are not afraid to make tough decisions, um, surround themselves with great people, um, admit mistakes...constantly learn...Good leaders are collaborative. Good leaders look for partnerships. Um, good leaders look for opportunities.”
- India – “You hire really good people and get out of their way...My job, as a manager, I believe very sincerely, is to create an environment where others can do their very best. Um, it’s also to assess each person’s needs and meet their needs on their level.”
- Susan – “My definition of leadership is...helping to define a direction and the opportunity points for reaching whatever the goals are. Um, I think, ah, leadership offers the opportunity to challenge team members...drawing out of them their best contribution and helping people to see, you know, here is the big picture and each individual person has a unique opportunity to contribute to that big picture.”

### **Coding**

During the investigation, interviews with the six participants took place at their respective institutions over approximately a four-week period. As the interviews were completed, they were transcribed by either a paid transcriptionist or the researcher. The completed transcripts were then reviewed in conjunction with the recorded interviews to ensure accuracy. Follow-up phone calls were made to the participants approximately one week after their interviews. The purpose of the phone calls was two-fold: to ask for any additional comments or insights from the participants after a brief period of reflection and to clarify any statements or ideas. The notes from the follow-up phone calls were also transcribed and, along with the interview transcripts, provided the data utilized in the coding process.

The goal of the coding process in a phenomenological study is to identify the essential themes or structures that convey the essence of the lived experience (van Manen, 1990). First, using a holistic method, I printed the transcripts and read each document twice in order to attain an overall sense of the leadership experiences of the participants and to become familiar with the content of each individual's account (van Manen, 1990). During the first reading, the use of open coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) resulted in the formation of a list of ideas and statements that could potentially be identified as themes of the leadership experience. These ideas were then incorporated into a table. During the second reading, the table provided a format for noting when individual participants spoke about a particular idea or potential theme. This method revealed the ideas or statements that appeared with the greatest frequency. Through a process of continuing review and reduction, I grouped these ideas into six emerging theme clusters: (1) Sucked In, (2) Growing as a Leader, (3) Chipping Away at the Big Issues, (4) Like a Roller Coaster, and (6) Challenges and Opportunities.

Once a list of potential themes was derived, I used a line-by-line approach to analyze each sentence (van Manen, 1990). The *NVivo8* software allowed me to scrutinize sentences or groups of statements and drag and drop them into existing theme clusters (tree nodes). Some statements were assigned to an individual theme (free node) if they seemed significant but were not germane to the theme clusters. Where appropriate, I created sub-themes during the sorting process in order to further illuminate the leadership experiences of the participants. Some statements were assigned to more than one theme, indicating the presence of relationships or overlap to varying degrees among the themes.

Through this process, the original group of themes was further analyzed and refined in a continuing effort to capture the essence of the leadership experience for the female admissions directors. Nine themes and their corresponding sub-themes emerged.

At this point, I had the option of beginning step four in van Manen's (1990) phenomenological method, the process of "Describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting" (p. 30). However, van Manen (1990) also indicated that the method he described is not a step-by-step approach. Researchers may go back and forth between the steps in the process in their efforts to capture the meaning of an experience. Thus, instead of beginning to write and report on the results, I instead engaged a period of reflection, a process van Manen (1990) incorporated as "Balancing the research context by considering parts and whole" (p. 31). My committee chair and I began a series of conversations in relation to whether the current themes and sub-themes adequately captured the overall lived leadership experience—the big picture of what was happening in the leadership practices of the participants. To this end, a data display became a means to understand the leadership experience as a process and to visualize the relationships between the various themes and sub-themes (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Chapter Five presents this illustration.

Once the data display was developed, I conducted an additional holistic review of the interview transcripts to consider not only the essentialness of each theme but also whether, as a whole, the themes adequately described what the leadership experience is like for the participants. In addition, I also considered my own life experiences as a female leader in higher education. van Manen (1990) indicated that such reflection is

appropriate; the researcher has the responsibility of not only describing the lived experiences of others but also authenticating his/her own life experiences.

As a result of these discussions and reflection, I again began the process of sorting data in an attempt to further reveal the relationships and underlying processes that bound the themes into a common shared experience. Data was re-sorted into a refined group of themes that captured the essence of the experience by describing not only what these women were doing in their leadership practices but also how they were doing it. The essential themes were those that characterized how the participants interacted with their environments and how they came to interpret and understand their experiences. Eight themes and their corresponding sub-themes emerged that captured the meaning of the lived leadership experience for female admissions directors. These themes are as follows: (1) Entering the Profession, (2) Sucked In, (3) Mentors, (4) Chipping away at the Big Issues, (5) Balancing, (6), Like a Roller Coaster, (7) Leadership as a Social Process, and (8) Creating Positive Outcomes. Table 4.1 on the following page indicates how the themes align with the interview protocol. The section that follows describes the themes in more detail and accompanies them with the voices of the participants as they describe and give meaning to their experiences.

## **Themes and Sub-Themes**

### **Entering the Profession**

One theme that emerged from the interviews with the female admissions directors was the story of their entry into the profession. All of the women spoke at great length and used much detail in describing the beginnings of their journeys in higher education

Table 4.1

*Themes and Sub-Themes from Research Findings*

Interview Protocol Question Areas	Themes	Sub-Themes
Career Paths	Entering the Profession	By Accident The “Ah Ha” Moment
	Sucked In	Advancing through the Ranks Taking on More
	Mentors	Support and Encouragement Choosing What Works Conflicts and Control
Obstacles	Chipping Away at the Big Issues	Obstacles Faced by Women <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Struggle to Be Seen as Credible</li> <li>• The Struggle to Be Heard</li> <li>• The Struggle for Equality</li> </ul> Strategies for Dealing with Obstacles <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Standing Up for Themselves</li> <li>• Taking Advantage of Opportunities</li> <li>• Acceptance or Resignation</li> </ul>
	Balancing	Driven versus Nurturing Life versus Work
Roles and Responsibilities	Like a Roller Coaster	Production versus Customer Service <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meeting Enrollment Goals</li> <li>• Interacting with the Public</li> </ul> Variety and Intensity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Variety in the Profession</li> <li>• Intensity on the Profession</li> <li>• Cyclical Nature of the Profession</li> </ul>
	Leadership as a Social Process	Interdependency <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fostering Leadership at all Levels</li> <li>• Promoting Collaboration</li> </ul>

Table 4.1 (Continued)

		<p>Interaction</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Doing and Leading by Example</li> <li>• Being a Good Follower</li> <li>• Promoting an Open Environment</li> <li>• Promoting a Learning Environment</li> <li>• Dealing with Problem Staff</li> </ul>
Challenges	Creating Positive Outcomes	<p>For the Success of the Office</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Setting Vision and Direction</li> <li>• Keeping Things Running</li> <li>• Dealing with Challenges</li> </ul> <p>For the Good of the University and the Students</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Telling the University’s Story</li> <li>• Serving the Students</li> </ul>

and, specifically, in the field of admissions. They all told stories that never began with the desire or wish for a career in admissions, yet, nonetheless, led them down a common path to that end. Two sub-themes emerged from their stories which characterize the meaning they have attributed to their entry into the profession. Both can best be described in the words of the participants: the feeling that they entered the profession solely by accident and the “ah ha” moment of finding out that they can and want to work in admissions.

**By accident.** As the participants told their stories about their early days in the profession, one thing that became clear immediately is that none of the women initially set out to be an admissions professional or aspired to a leadership role. Admissions is not a career that these women trained for, earned a specific degree in, or even adopted because they had a prominent role model in the profession. Their initial trajectory into admissions came about through one happenstance or another such as seeing a job



advertisement, finding an open graduate assistantship, or hearing about a position through word of mouth.

Their entrances into the profession were varied. There are few common elements in the data other than their passion for telling the stories about how their career journeys began and the fact that either as an undergraduate or graduate student, they somehow found an opening into admissions. Two of the women found their way due at least in part to their active roles in their institutions as undergraduates. Anna was a student ambassador at her institution and worked in an academic office. Her advisor steered her toward an admissions counselor position when she was trying to decide what to do after graduation. Bridget was a tour guide, and, even though she was planning a career in another field, she took a shot at an open admissions counselor position. Fern began working in admissions as an application processor while she too was an undergraduate. Hannah and Susan both began careers in higher education by working in programs that were more student service oriented—Susan in outreach programs and Hannah through a graduate assistantship in orientation. India had been working in the corporate world and decided to pursue a graduate degree when her company filed for bankruptcy. She took an opening as a graduate assistant in admissions simply because it was available.

For these women, an admissions career was something they stumbled across; it was not the career they had planned. India expressed the view of many of the women when she summarized her entry into admissions by saying she “completely fell into it by accident.” She explained that she knew she didn’t want to do corporate work yet enjoyed managing people, so she thought she would end up working for a small non-profit

company. In Bridget's case, admissions was not even a fall-back career: "I'd always thought that I perhaps wanted to do something in the medical field and then when that didn't work out, maybe something in student affairs." Although these women may have stumbled into admissions, at some juncture, all had the presence of mind to stop and consider this new opportunity, as did Fern when she interviewed for an assistantship but instead ended up with a life-long career:

I actually made contact with him and came and talked to him about the possibility of getting the assistantship. And, I guess he and I just kind of hit it off, and he said, "How would you like to come for a real job?" And I said, "Well, it's not exactly what I had planned to do, but tell me about it. What is it?"

Fern's experience reveals another common element to the stories these women told: they made some type of connection with an individual who would seek them out when another position became available. For Fern, that connection was immediate. Although India enjoyed her graduate assistantship in admissions, she didn't consider the profession as a career until someone sought her out to return:

Finished my grad assistantship and went off and had a baby and, um, eight months later, they called me. I was still home, finishing my master's. Um, and they said we'd like you to come back in a temporary position about 30 hours a week. And I thought what a great way, while I'm finishing up my last class, to be able to get my feet wet in the workforce and separate myself from my daughter a little bit, you know. Um, so I came back.

After working as an entry level counselor, Bridget actually left the admissions profession for a period to work in academic advising. When she relocated with her family, she contacted the director of admissions at a university near her new home: “And I knew the director of admissions, so once I got here, I said, ‘You know, I’m in the area. If something opens up, I would love to—to come back into the field.’” And, just as was the case with India, the phone call eventually came a couple of months later. When a position opened up, the director made Bridget an offer and she accepted. Although the positions may have appealed to the new mothers because of their part-time nature, they nonetheless formed a point of entry into their new profession.

**The “ah ha” moment.** Having an “ah ha” moment means you get to be pleasantly surprised. It’s that moment when the light comes on, everything finally seems right with the world, and the true meaning of the experience is revealed. All six of the women talked about this common aspect of the lived experience—when they knew they had found something in admissions that clicked with them.

For Susan, the participant who coined this phrase, the “ah ha” moment came early on and was revealed as her passion grew for facilitating access:

I worked, um, with programs that did, um, outreach to, you know, African-American students and low-income students, um, different things along those lines and then, like I said, I had this “ah ha” moment. There needs to be a little bit more of a balance. It’s not all about just the standards and their families and making sure they know and have, but what are some of the challenges the institution is facing through a policy/practice perspective that may, you know, like

I said, continue these bottlenecks to occur? And then that's when I seriously started to think about admissions in a larger context.

Anna and Bridget had their "ah ha" moments as entry level counselors, known in the profession as "road runners" because of the large amounts of travel. They knew almost immediately that they had made the right career move. Anna said, "And, I went to the campus, and I interviewed, and I *loved* it. I loved the people, and I didn't know a lot about the recruitment, but I loved the people, and I loved the different things that they told me I could be doing." She recounted with laughter that the best part was being 21 and traveling on someone else's money. Bridget also related that "I just loved it. I loved the connections I could make with students and guidance counselors and felt like I could really talk about and recruit students to my...current institution." She also loved the travel and the chance to be independent and stated definitively, "this was the best thing since sliced bread."

In terms of their entry into the profession, none of the women indicated that a career in admissions was a lifelong dream or career goal. Through various circumstances and twists of fate, they somehow entered the profession and discovered some aspect of the job that continued to draw them in further. Today, when admissions counselors go out on the road, they do so with a variety of gadgets like cell phones, laptops, and GPS devices that keep them on the most direct route and point them in the right direction. When Bridget mentioned her first job as an admissions counselor, she proudly stated that "Of course, that was the day when you only got paid \$5,600 a year. You had no cell

phones, no computers.” Nonetheless, these women were somehow guided down the same path.

### **Sucked In**

A second theme that emerged from the data as the women spoke of their career journeys involved the similar ways that they were able to move up in the profession and take on leadership roles. In the words of Susan, accompanied by comfortable laughter, “admissions is one of those kind of, ah, environments where you kind of get sucked in, you know?” She went on to explain what it means to be “sucked in” to admissions:

There’s so much to it and there’s so much involved that you can be involved in and so many opportunities... You’re really moving; you’re really, you know, in the outreach and recruitment season or you’re in the application review season or you’re out there doing yield activities and all this time it’s just really moving. And, so, you’ll either be burnt out by it or you’ll find an opportunity to sort of take on new and interesting challenges during each of those cycles.

As the women continued to build their careers in admissions, all of them did find new opportunities and challenges in the form of greater responsibility and the chance to lead, as evidenced through two sub-themes: advancing through the ranks and taking on more.

**Advancing through the ranks.** Most colleges and universities are organized around a hierarchical structure. The senior leaders or managers sit at the top of the overall institutional structure as well as the individual organizational units. In admissions, the typical office has a director at the top with a number of associate directors that report to this individual. In the next stratum are the assistant directors, and, at the bottom, are the

entry level counselors. Processing or operations staff may report to one of the associate or assistant directors or may even be organized into a unit separate from the counseling or recruitment side of the house.

The female admissions directors interviewed for this study all advanced by moving up through the ranks. All began their professional careers in admissions either in an entry level counselor position or by stepping into an assistant director position. Those that entered at a higher level seem to have done so because they had some previous experience as a graduate assistant or from working in some other position in higher education. From there, the traditional route of advancement involved moving into an associate director position and then being named director. Bridget captured the nature of this movement when she laughingly recalled, “I’ve had every title known to man!”

Embedded in this sub-theme is the notion that the majority of these women did not begin their career journeys with the intention of advancing to the top of the organizational structure. They utilize a common language when they speak of gaining leadership positions they did not initially seek, indicating this is a part of their lived experiences as female directors. As Susan reflected, she expressed the realization that “You know, I don’t know that I’ve ever *sought* a leadership role.” Hannah echoed that exact same sentiment: “You know, I don’t know that I’ve ever *sought* a leadership role. Um, you know, my career for the most part has just happened.” Fern also indicated an attitude of accepting advancement in the profession as something akin to fate or destiny: “It’s just—things just, I think, happen for a reason. That’s kind of my philosophy in life. I think in a lot of my career, I’ve been at the right place at the right time.”

**Taking on more.** Although the statements of some of the female chief admissions offices in this study belie a sense a self-promotion or ambition, other evidence from the interviews suggests that something more than chance may have contributed to their advancement. In their conversations, these women describe a common lived experience of working hard and seeking more responsibility. All six of the participants sought out opportunities that allowed them to get noticed and learn their next positions. The opportunities also provided ways to stay fresh and focused and avoid burnout. These were women who were not content in their current positions but instead actively pursued the means that would allow them to demonstrate their competence in order to advance to the next level. This experience can be described through another sub-theme: taking on more.

Some of the women spoke openly about their pursuit of opportunities as a means to prove themselves. When India attained her first professional admissions position as an assistant director, she was assigned the task of managing the front office operations but not the people working in that area. Unfortunately, she walked into what she described as a “mess” that was “created, you know, by the people who worked there. A lot of it was actually fixing issues with the people who worked in those positions that I didn’t manage as people.” But with this “mess” also came an opportunity:

I jumped at it because knowing that you have to take every opportunity that you can, hoping that eventually that managing the people would come along with it. And it did, shortly after—probably three or four months after—when they saw that she can manage.

This strategy of seeking out opportunities to grow continued to work for her in terms of helping her to not only acquire management skills but to also be noticed as a potential leader:

I think the challenge in becoming a leader is, um, for me, personally, was taking on, probably, more than I should have at times, of course. I'm the kind of person that you seize every opportunity, whether you get paid for that opportunity or not. That's how you grow. And it's worked for me personally.

As a result of taking on added responsibilities and proving she was an adept manager, India began a career journey that eventually led to a director position.

Fern also spoke of taking advantage of opportunities when they presented themselves. For her, an opportunity came along when her university was converting to a different student information system that allowed her to learn more about the operational side of admissions:

So the director at the time just said, "Well, take it and do it."...I don't remember the company at the time that it was, but, anyway, we were converting our in-house system to this software kind of vanilla package that we had to make work and he assigned that project to me. I took it and we made it work and, um...so that's kind of also how it transpired. I just got—I got a little bit further away from the recruiting side and started doing more of the administrative.

Overall, she described the practice that worked for her as "Digging in. Working hard. Opportunities come along, you apply, and you get it."

Looking for opportunities has also been a way for these women to stay focused



and refreshed in the profession as they have moved into leadership roles. Both Susan and Anna spoke about the burnout that can result and how they countered these feelings.

Susan said,

And I think, lucky for me—I was able to find new and interesting things during each of those cycles which allowed me to take on more and more responsibility.

And so, um, as I began taking on more and more responsibility, it also allowed me to contribute more from the perspective of whether it was presenting at conferences or um, um, mentoring, you know, younger admissions officers so that they didn't get, you know, burned out.

Anna afforded the same meaning to opportunities; they became a way to avoid becoming tired of the profession and the endless activity:

A lot of people burnout so quickly in admissions because it is such a demanding—public speaking, the travel, listening to people gripe and complain, and they get angry, and you have to deal with a lot of angry people. It can be exhausting, and I think, um, you have to just be able to refresh and keep going to grow.

Whereas Susan found her relief in presenting at conferences and mentoring, Anna became more involved in professional organizations outside her university.

Contrary to some of the women who saw burnout as a danger, Bridget saw taking on opportunities as a way to alleviate boredom and advance. Although the admissions profession is fast-paced and relentless, it is also cyclical and involves managing the same processes year after year. For her, opportunities were important to maintain her interest

and to grow: “But I always tried to do things that enhanced my ability to stay in the profession, whether it was asking for more responsibility, taking on more roles, because I didn’t want it to get mundane. It never did. It never did.” India also talked about avoiding the boredom that can come from doing the same thing too long:

Um, what I found along the way is that—when I’ve jumped from one position to the next, all of them in management in this office—basically, um, I always felt like when it, you know, when I first get into a role, I’m going to be happy in this. This is where I want to manage. This is where I want to expand. And what eventually happens with me is, um, not a sense of boredom in the role, but a sense of wanting more—of expanding my leadership capability.

Again, for India, it was this desire for more that drove her up through the ranks.

In addition to a desire to pursue opportunity, there was and continues to be an awareness among the women that in order to advance, they needed to promote themselves as leaders. Self-promotion meant not just looking for opportunities to succeed but gaining visibility and credibility in their admissions offices and at their universities.

Bridget talked about this process:

I tried to position myself as I talked with previous directors. I’m in it for the long haul, so I wanted to take on more responsibility. I wanted to be a supervisor. I wanted to get involved in professional development. I wanted my name to be out there.

Anna’s experience sounded very similar to that of Bridget when she spoke of her own desire to succeed and what she would need to do to achieve this level of success:

So naturally, when I got into, um, a career and thought about long-term, I said, “If I’m gonna—if this is going to be my career, then I’ve got to be at the top of my game.” I don’t want to be on the bottom of the totem pole. That’s just not my personality. I want to take it to the next step, and I also like the fact that as the leader in a department, you get to help mold and mentor the people that are coming along behind you, and so that just sort of appeals to me, I guess, from a natural personality characteristic all the way through, sort of that, “If I’m gonna do it, I’m gonna do it all the way.”

India’s comments shed light on a related aspect of the leadership experience in terms of the importance of positioning oneself to advance into a director position. She spoke about some of the specific skills that a director needs and how she obtained them:

I certainly had a much easier transition to director than I’ve seen other directors have because I was doing—I was writing the annual report already. I wrote our strategic plan. Most of the time, you don’t get a chance to do that as an associate. I understood the budget very well, and a lot of times, I know that that’s one of the biggest challenges for a new director is that they’ve not had extensive budget experience. Um, my director did not have any when he moved into the role, um, and he already said that was my biggest challenge, you know. So, he threw it all to me as an associate so I would.

She also indicated that by taking on some of the things that a director normally does while still at the associate level, she had to learn political savvy as well as managerial skills:

Um, I think there are a lot of people in this office who felt like I did my boss's job for a long time before I became director, and I'd hear comments about that:

“Well, you do his job for him. What does he do?” And that balancing act of, one, being appropriate in my answer out of my loyalty to my director. Two—knowing that some of that was true, you know, and—and trying to be truthful. And, three, knowing that even though some of that may be true, it was giving me opportunities to grow.

Clearly, other individuals in the office were aware she intended to move up. She navigated her path to advancement by continuing to learn and grow, but she did so in a way that was respectful toward the individual giving her the opportunity.

Despite their statements to the effect that they did not initially seek leadership roles and even Fern's indication of her belief in the predominate role of fate, the lived experiences of these women indicate something else. The stories they told of advancing through the ranks epitomize the notion that career advancement is largely a product of positioning, effort, and determination. They worked hard, watched for opportunities, and took on more responsibility. Although the women sometimes did these things as a way to keep their jobs interesting and fresh, they also proved themselves to be very savvy in understanding how admissions departments are organized and what one needs to do to move up through the ranks. Clearly, they succeeded, as five of the six women attained their director positions without ever undergoing a formal interview. They were either promoted or gained the position through restructuring. Anna talked about the “long marchers—people get into leadership roles, and they may be there 10, 15, 20, 30 years

before they retire.” These women are long marchers, all except one having spent virtually their entire careers at one institution. Although Anna stated, “I think I’m probably rare in that I’ve been at this institution for quite a while, and I have progressed from entry level to middle to top, you know, in my department,” this study shows that she is in good company.

## **Mentors**

All six of the women interviewed for this study mentioned one or more mentors who were instrumental in their career journeys. In fact, when asked about the preparation or learning experiences that have been the most beneficial to their leadership development, five women immediately mentioned mentors. The participants had both male and female mentors, although most mentors were men. Only one participant talked about only female mentors. Three sub-themes are presented in this section that describe the varied impact of mentors and how these individuals contributed to the lived experiences of the participants: support and encouragement, choosing what works, and conflicts and control.

**Support and encouragement.** Mentors were a source of support and encouragement for four of the women in the study. Some of the women used this common verbiage at the outset when describing the role played by mentors early in their careers. For example, for Fern, “the best mentor, I think, that anybody could ever have” is first, supportive, and second, knowledgeable. Aside from a general sense of support, mentors were also instrumental in championing these women. Again, it is Fern who benefited from this role and the confidence instilled in her by mentors. Very early in her

career, she stated, “I had a wonderful director, who was a female. And I think she had, um, a vested interest in seeing other women that would come through the office—seeing them, um, move on.” She added that this director also saw something special in her, as did another mentor who played a significant role in her leadership development: “I just learned a lot from him and how to be a leader....he supported me and he saw something in me that he felt I could do this. I just—that was just very special.”

Two of the women also spoke specifically about the personal relationships they developed with mentors. Susan indicated that the best way for her to learn is through practical experience, but she has also learned from other leaders whom she admires and whom “I can have a personal relationship with.” For her, it was a very affirming experience to have this type of relationship with another female who was also an introvert in a profession that attracts so many extroverts. She saw that

There is this opportunity for you to be reflective introspectively and not all the time talking about “how you’re feeling” and “how things are going” kinds of things. So that was very helpful for me early on to see...someone who was similar from that perspective in her style and in her approach.

When Susan needed a minute to gather her thoughts, it was important that this mentor was there to say, “That’s fine. You know, it’s not how quickly you say it. It’s how well you thought it out.”

For Bridget also, the personal relationships that she formed with mentors are what stand out when she speaks about these individuals. Mentors were there to not only celebrate her journey to a director position but also her journey through life. She stated

that

Most of the directors I've mentioned were like that. They were always there for me. They were never too busy to just stop, talk to me about my day, and really be involved with me, not only on a professional level but on a personal level too. She goes on to talk about how they came to her wedding and they were there at the birth of her child: "it was a real strong working relationship but it was a friendship too."

Although Hannah also spoke of the impact of mentors and her connections with some of these people, she offers the contrary notion that the people she's learned the most from were not necessarily people with whom she had a close bond or connection. She offered that "It gets to a point where superficial things are not as important." The most important thing is that you learn what you need to learn from people and don't worry about whether or not you feel close to them.

**Choosing what works.** Mentors also played a prominent role in the career journeys of the participants in that they were the people these women looked to for instruction in how to be leaders. The majority of the women spoke of mentors who were either their directors as young professionals or were their deans or vice presidents once they attained director positions themselves. Although all the women in the study have earned advanced degrees, Susan indicated that "practical application for me is the strongest way for me to really learn something." Anna also indicated that mentors offer a form of real-world instruction that you cannot obtain in any other way. A mentor is somebody that's already had the experiences that can give you some advice, that can keep you from getting yourself into trouble, or that can, um, maybe help

guide you through situations, or even, um, career-path advice of how to get to the next level. You know, that's more important. You can't read a book and find that information out.

What the women learned from their mentors was not only how to be an effective leader but also how to avoid some of the pitfalls that characterized the leadership practices of those they viewed as less effective administrators.

Learning the lessons of effective leadership from their mentors was mostly accomplished through a process of observing effective behaviors and then adopting these as part of their own leadership styles. Susan talked about the experience of being able to watch effective leaders operate. She described her own thought process in terms of being able to see and recognize what they were doing:

I never thought, "Gee, that's a leadership style that I really like." More so that I've looked at an individual and said, "You know, they're really effective," and, you know, "What is it that they're doing or how is it—how is it that they are able to be effective as they are?"

Susan goes on to talk about a second individual from whom she learned some important lessons about how to manage opposing interests. Again, the emphasis was on watching what the person was doing:

So, to see someone effectively balance the academic affairs/student affairs, um, kind of climate of an institution—not just of offices but of an entire climate of an institution, such as both sides were valued—both sides could see the other side's contribution to the whole, um, of the institution, and could—could navigate



through academic affairs or student affairs easily, um, was—was critical.

Fern also spoke about how she was able to learn from mentors whom she saw as engaging in effective leadership behaviors. Again, she points out that the first part of the process was observing what they were doing:

And, watching [him] interact with, um, students was—was always amazing but also with personnel at the—at the university, other administrators. Um, he was just a—he would sit and he would listen and he would absorb, and then he'd just come out with a solution or he would be able to compromise, um, and I just learned a lot from him and how to be a leader

The second part of the process for Fern, as for Susan, was then enacting what she had observed: “in a lot of cases, I just tried to do what he did because he would do it right.”

Hannah and India also spoke of watching and adopting styles. Hannah indicated that mentors “have taught me some of my, you know, uh, best lessons, uh, that have helped me develop my leadership style.” She explains how she learned these lessons: “I’m always observing, um, you know, what I think works, and you know, what I, um—I’m like a sponge that way.” India also summarized her learning process in relation to interacting with mentors:

There are a couple of mentors who I’ve relied on closely who I’ve, um, watched how they handled problems...very much watched how they handled issues and kind of tried to think, when I didn’t understand why they did what they did, um, I asked them about it or wait and see how it turned out. When I disagreed with what they did, sometimes, I would just stand back and watch and—“Oh, that’s why

they did what they did”—trying to step back and see the bigger picture. So I try to lead as I have by example, and I’ve had, you know, great mentors—leaders that I’ve been able to emulate, think about the things that I liked about their style, incorporate it to my own.

For India, it was important for her to understand the behaviors she witnessed not as isolated actions but as behaviors that contributed to an overall leadership perspective and a successful admissions operation.

As a result of their involvement with mentors, the female admissions directors in the study were able to adopt what they felt were effective leadership practices. The following statements from participants describe some of the various behaviors they were able to see their mentors engaging in and replicate in their own leadership styles, behaviors that have stayed with them to this day:

Susan: One style is I think the ability to, ah, be definitive but at the same time having folks feel that they are being heard. So, it’s a sense of a person, um, can make a decision, um, or the person can, um, kind of figure out what direction may be most appropriate for that particular time, but does it in such a way that they—it is not a top-down, heavy, “you’re doing what I’m saying.”

Hannah: He’s been a wonderful mentor to me because I’ve been able to, um, just, um, watch, um, how action-oriented he is, uh, how demanding he is, um, how respected he is, and...how those things, you know, all gel and fit together, um, to create results, um, and...move agendas forward.

Anna: This person's also been very cutting-edge on taking us to new levels in admissions with things like electronic brochures, personalized marketing in the student-marketing arena, um, applying technology early on in the processing—which has put us out front, um, in being able to service students because we can get the turnaround time... So, I see a lot of that forward-thinking.

India: But what I've learned from that is that she is extremely good at getting buy in, um, much more so than I would be to take the bulldog approach and say, "OK, we're all going to do this and this is why we're going to do it and there's a great reason why we're going to do it. Now, let's just do it."

All six of the participants spoke about the effective leadership behaviors they learned from their mentors. However, their interviews also revealed the reverse to be true as well: they watched individuals doing things that they did not want to incorporate into their leadership styles. Although some of these people were also described as mentors, they were more commonly discussed in terms of being supervisors or bosses. Like many of the women, Fern acknowledged that she's "had a mixture of, um, supervisors that I feel were the best and I've had a few that I felt were the worst." Of those whom she deemed ineffective, she described how they influenced her learning: "And those probably that were the worst, really inspired me to step it up and see what I could do to improve and wanted to step in and, um, see if I couldn't turn things around." Whereas mentors taught her effective behaviors, she learned to recognize the less effective administrators through their directives: "Some of them, you know, it's my way or no way. I'm the director. I'm the boss. I'm gonna tell you what to do and you're gonna do it."

Anna and Bridget also witnessed behaviors akin to Fern's description of the individual on a "power trip" that they did not want to emulate. Anna talked about the way that she has seen arrogance impact a leader's behavior:

And then on the negative sides, I have been able to see things that I say, "OK, when I grow up, that's not what I want—I don't want to do it that way." Um, I strive to not let ego direct my decision-making which, when someone's been in a profession and they've become very successful sometimes that can be—can start to get in the way.

Bridget also had the experience of working for an individual who did not give the staff a voice. She indicated that "in this particular role, she did not elicit ideas—ideas from the staff, and it was—it was tough sometimes to work under that." Her response to the situation was similar to Fern's and she resolved that one day she might be a director with a different approach to leadership.

**Conflicts and control.** Whereas the two previous sub-themes describe the more positive aspects of the participants' experiences with mentors, a third sub-theme emerged from the interviews. The excerpts that support this sub-theme suggest that some of the participants' relationships with mentors were characterized by more complex dynamics than that of offering support and serving as a source of lessons learned. The personal nature of the relationships that sometimes developed between mentor and mentee were commented on by some of the participants. For three of the participants, the interview process elicited strong feelings and brought back some unpleasant memories of situations involving their mentors.

For two of the women, the issue involved work-life balance. The balancing acts that some of these women have engaged in order to have both professional and family lives will be discussed in more detail ahead. Anna and India, however, each found themselves involved in struggles to maintain this balance that took on extra significance because of the involvement of their mentors. According to Anna,

I also have had some experiences where work-life balance was not, um, supported the way I would like to have seen it just because somewhat, my supervisor was at a different point in life and had kind of gotten beyond being—remembering what work-life balance was all about, and with him being male, he also didn't understand some of the issues when you're the mama, you have to do things. This person was an individual she respected and from whom she learned much about effective leadership, but she also stated that “although he's still a very strong and supportive in many ways, there's a lot of things that, being male, he just sort of misses those fine points.”

India's experience, on the other hand, was much more intense and resulted in an experience that, even when she discussed it in her interview, still brought back feelings of anger and resentment. Like Anna, she too prefaced her comments with a complement about the individual: “My previous director, who I'm good friends with—it sounds like I'm not, but we're the—he's one of my mentors...He does amazing things.” The source of their conflict was India's impending maternity leave. She described the situation and the feelings both she and her supervisor were having about her time away from the office:

He was very nervous and he said, “I'm very nervous about you going on

maternity leave. I don't even want to talk about it until you get further along," which builds up a lot of tension between, you know, the two of us. I knew he was worried about it. I was worried about him being worried about it. He didn't want me to be gone.

Ultimately, the situation escalated and according to India, they had their one and only "blowout." As she told the story, India talked increasing faster, and was able to put into words what most upset her about the incident:

To me, it seemed like he was getting a great deal. He thought he was being taken advantage of, so he said lots of things like, "Look what I've done for you." And, basically, we had a strong conversation and it's, "I don't owe you anything. Your job as a manager is to have grown me as an employee, which you have done, and I have produced an amazing amount of work for you....I'm not owing you anything because you've only done your job, which is what you were supposed to do."

India then shared that her philosophy of leadership is that leaders grow people and that "they don't ever owe me anything." She described what she felt when her own mentor indicated she did owe him something as a way to keep her in the office and shorten her maternity leave: "that really disturbs me—that sense of 'you owe me something.'"

As the course of her interview progressed, Fern also reflected on an incident involving a mentor who was, again, someone she admired and someone who was instrumental as she developed her own leadership style. Her interview was more than halfway over when she began talking about some of the obstacles she has faced in her

career because she is a woman. She brought up her mentor and just like Anna and India, she first described him as “someone I greatly respect.” Then she added, “but he was also a male chauvinist in his early years. He got better as he aged, but one of the things he told me when I applied for the director the first time and I—there’s some things you remember.” She started to pause some between sentences as the memory returned:

It’s been years ago. He was talking to me about it and...he was telling me I didn’t get the job. He said, “You know, when I first met you, I thought, ‘That looks like a woman who’d be sittin’ on a bar stool, havin’ a drink every day.’”

Although she laughed nervously, her eyes also welled up. A comment that would be sexist and insulting coming from anyone else becomes something eminently more hurtful coming from a mentor who is a respected role model.

All of the women in this study were able to call to mind individuals who served as mentors at various points in their careers. Mentors were a source of support and encouragement when they began their careers and were the individuals with whom the women celebrated life events. These men and women were their champions and their teachers, demonstrating the actions of effective leaders as well as the behaviors of managers who were not so successful. At times, their relationships became complex, and the disappointments and conflicts that resulted have stayed with some of the participants in this study even after many years have passed.

### **Chipping Away at the Big Issues**

Another major theme that surfaced in the conversations with the female chief admissions officers was that they have faced and continue to deal with a number of

obstacles as women leaders in higher education. They spoke openly about these impediments when they were asked to comment on the obstacles they personally experienced. They also described and interpreted this feature of the lived leadership experience even as they answered questions and engaged in narratives about other aspects of their careers.

It was Susan, again, who used the phrase that forms of the title of this theme early in her interview:

I pause only because, you know, I think that part of being effective is that you're constantly chipping away at the big issues and thinking of more efficient or effective ways for you to, um, do whatever it is that is the—the challenge of the day. I don't know that I can say that there's one specific obstacle so much as there's sort of these day-to-day types of things that you're constantly kind of engaged with.

As a follow-up, she was asked what she meant by the “big issues.” She explained that admissions has been dominated by white males for many years. This point was also emphasized by Anna, “institutions of higher education are very male-dominated by very, um, typically middle-aged white southern males,” and Bridget, “If you're in a—particularly in a large public—there's a lot of male domination at the top and not very many females.” As a result, Susan believes that women must constantly deal with an environment of male domination and prove themselves over and over. The two sub-themes that emerged and capture the essence of the women's efforts in chipping away at



the big issues are their descriptions of the obstacles they have faced as women and their strategies for dealing with these obstacles.

**Obstacles faced by women.** All six of the participants described obstacles they encountered as they rose to the top of their profession. During the interviews, it became evident that there were three common struggles that characterized their experiences and are embedded in this sub-theme: being seen as credible, being heard, and being treated equally.

*The struggle to be seen as credible.* Five of the women discussed various times in their careers when they felt they were not seen as credible or they were not taken seriously as professionals. Anna believes her struggles in this area were simply the result of being a young female in a male-dominated profession. She contributed the added notion that region may have also played a role in her attempts to be viewed as an aspiring young staff member:

I think in this profession, uh, and in the institution that I'm at, being in the south, um, you know, some of those traditional stereotypes—being a young woman, nobody took me seriously until I was 30, um—until I was 35, they didn't believe I was serious.

Although she laughed when she said this, she goes on to explain the reason she did not have credibility as a women:

It's almost like I had to hit 35 before people really had confidence in me so that—being a woman, being young, um, they just—it was almost as if everybody walked around thinking, “Well any day she's gonna be—leave and be a stay at

home mom, so we don't want to invest in that.”

Everyone that Anna worked for when she first entered higher education was a white male. When I inquired further about this aspect of her experience, Anna spoke of the fatherly attitude her male bosses displayed in relation to young women. She felt patronized; these were men who smiled and nodded but never listened to what she said. Their attitude was, in her words, “Daddy knows best.” India also faced some struggles with credibility and explained that “I started as a grad assistant, so they saw me as the little girl.” Unlike Anna’s experience, her supervisors saw her potential, but it was the older employees who “saw a little girl to look after.” After a point, they did stop “mothering” her as she earned their trust and respect.

Although Anna and India faced issues with credibility early in their careers, the statements of other participants indicated that this problem did not always disappear with age and experience. For Susan, another aspect of the struggle for credibility that forms part of her lived experience involved choosing and defining a leadership style. Susan was the participant who coined the phrase “chipping away at the big issues,” and one of the issues for her has been gaining the acceptance of others that women do not have to lead with a particular style. Because women have not traditionally been a part of the leadership arena in higher education, they have to fight to be seen as credible by

really pushing to, um, to be a part of that group and saying, “You know, these are all great, you know. All of these skill sets are going to be necessary in order to, um, make an admissions office successful. So you don't have to be a male who had one type of leadership style in order to be able to be successful but rather, um,

being a female and being, um, driven and focused doesn't make you, you know, any less effective.

For Susan, being seen as credible as a female leader means you may fit the stereotype of the emotional woman or you may naturally be more assertive, but, for her, the “bottom line” is

knowing that what I have to say is going to contribute—has it's value-added.

So...how externally it's labeled you can't be as concerned about and you have to feel comfortable with that you're making a contribution. It's having an impact and things are moving forward. And, you're respected for that.

Anna and Bridget also continued to face credibility obstacles in their career journeys in relation to being seen as directors. Anna spoke about the experience of assuming a director position when the previous person had served in the position for many years and remained at the university when she took over. She described an experience of always being in someone else's shadow when she wanted and had earned the right to be out front: “So, even though I have the ‘director’ title, I'm still sort of the number two person because the person that was the director is now still my boss, but at a higher level.” She stated succinctly that “I never really get to be the boss because he's always here.”

Bridget's struggle for credibility was defined by her attempts to attain a director position at her institution. Even though she was in a leadership position and had been carrying out the primary responsibilities of a director for quite some time, she was not originally considered when the position became available. She spoke at length and with

candor about this episode in her life. Even though she clearly loves her institution, the experience profoundly impacted her thoughts and feelings about her university and its administration. She called it “a low point in my career” when another individual was named director and, as associate director, she was expected to teach this person how to run their admissions operation. During the interview, she struggled to express her thought process in coming to terms with not being considered. She finally stated, “Of course, now...I think they feel very confident in my abilities,” but her voice softens and tapers off as she says, “But to have had to push like that.”

Hannah is the one participant who seems to speak of a different experience. She recounted a journey of moving up through the ranks at her institution that makes it sound as though things fell into place fairly easily for her. The director position she now holds seems to have been created to fit her talents, and she said, “I think some of that has to do with how organizations are, you know, structured to fit people’s, you know, passions and strengths, and, you know, they’re not always just about, ‘What is the best organizational structure?’” She clearly is a leader at her institution with a great deal of credibility; she is the person that everyone in the office can go to when there is a problem. At the same time, however, she does admit that a potential pitfall for her is being taken for granted. She says matter-of-factly: “Sometimes I think I don’t realize that because I’ve been here so long, you know, I’m a known quantity.” She continued to explain:

You sometimes, you know, have said the same thing maybe one too many times where, you know, it turns, you know, it gets turned a deaf ear to. Um, you might have a tendency to become complacent, um, or people may become complacent

about you. So I think if there's any hurdle, it's that sometimes I worry or wonder about that... "[Hannah] will always be there" kind of thing.

*The struggle to be heard.* Another obstacle acknowledged by five of the women was the struggle to be heard. This struggle became evident as they spoke about the experience of not being acknowledged and the tactics they use to ensure their voice and opinions are part of the conversations on their campuses. As has already been mentioned, Anna faced the patronizing attitudes of older white males when she first entered the admissions profession. She laughed when she recalled how "everybody wanted to be my dad, you know. They wanted to look out for you. They wanted to give you advice." She explained that life tended to be easier by just accepting the situation. However, her voice became much more emphatic when she spoke about what happened to women who tried to speak out and did not acquiesce to this type of dominant relationship:

the people that I've noticed who—who've been very title-conscious or very "you will," you know, "treat me as a professional, not like your daughter" and "*don't* give me fatherly advice" —just the combativeness. People, um, seem to migrate away from them because they become—they get stereotyped as difficult to get along with, combative, a know-it-all, and some other less-than-colorful phrases, you know— less-than-positive things that they would say about a young woman who's trying to come into her own.

Although some young women may have succeeded in their struggles to be heard, Anna reported that she has seen many women leave admissions as a result of this obstacle and the attitudes of those who placed it before them. She explained that

It's just they take on a battle that's just not worth the energy. And they get tired. They get angry, um, and I've seen many very potentially successful young women who just are so, sort of self-righteous, that they walk away from a great career path because they just can't accept that that's just how people are.

Susan also spoke about making sure she is heard, although her efforts seem to be part of a more positive and affirming experience than Anna's early struggles. In talking about the obstacles she has faced, Susan explained how she is always aware that when she walks into a meeting, she will usually be the only woman present. For her, this lack of representation means she is constantly engaging in a sort of mental repartee with herself that will determine whether she sits silently or makes sure she is heard. She described her experience:

And what does that do to me then, you know, going into those meetings knowing that, you know, I will be the only woman there and so is that going to be a negative?...Am I going to take that negatively or is it just going to be "That's part of how it is" and I still got to get—you know, make sure that I'm heard or that however this process moves forward that I'm engaged in it.

Susan, as did Anna, also talked about the idea of acceptance. However, she advocated not the acceptance of the dominant male attitudes, but the acknowledgement that "My experiences as a woman have been different from any man's" and this is why she must be willing to contribute. Then, the conversation begins to sound more this:

"You know, I'm not so sure I—I've had that same experience" or "I'm not so sure I see it from that perspective" because here's where, you know, as I've had the

opportunity to work with it, here's what I've seen or known or whatever. And you just have to get to that point where making that kind of a contribution just becomes part of...your role in the group, and I think once you become comfortable with that and issues of gender and race, um, for me, don't become center.

Although Susan did acknowledge that this outlook has come at a time in her career when she is more comfortable and confident with her voice as a woman, it is an internal dialogue that is still a part of her lived leadership experience.

***The struggle for equality.*** Finally, a third obstacle that was discussed by four of the female admissions directors was the battle to be treated equally. As has already been mentioned in the section about mentors, two of the participants have faced issues related to receiving adequate time for family responsibilities. Some women have also dealt with obstacles related to fair treatment in relation to compensation and promotion. Fern experienced an attempt at unfair treatment when she first became a director of admissions. When she was offered the position and the salary was stated to her, it was less than the salary of the previous director, who was a male. Fern knew what her predecessor had been paid but when she asked for the same, she was told she did not have the same amount of experience. For her, this was not an acceptable answer and she replied, "I don't care....I'm not going to come in here and clean up this mess if you're not going to pay me what you paid him." She felt this difference in compensation was not warranted and when she conveyed this point to her supervisor, he finally acquiesced and said (and Fern whispers here as the conversation steers toward money), "Let me see what

I can do.” She received the same salary as her predecessor.

Anna spoke during her interview about obstacles she has faced in relation to advancement. As a mother and a professional, she has had to confront the fact that “when positions do become available, there are still men in the pipeline that get, um, picked first because they don’t have to be out when their kids have their tonsils out.” She knows this through first-hand experience, being passed over for a promotion because she was a female with responsibilities outside the office. As she told this story, she explained why men are chosen over women: “they’re not seen as the, you know, the primary caregiver for the family, so they seem to be the ones that people go to first for leadership, and that’s something I’ve recently had to endure that when a position became available, you know, I was not actually considered.” Instead of being evaluated in terms of her skills and experience, Anna was considered in terms of what might take her away from the office. For an accomplished professional who has moved up through the ranks and earned an advanced degree, it was a frustrating outcome: “because I have young children, I was told I couldn’t give 110%, so, it went to a man. And that’s a hard pill to swallow when you’re the one that—I have the doctorate, and this other person doesn’t.”

For Bridget, the struggle for equal treatment has encompassed issues related to both compensation and promotion. In addition, her statements also brought forth another issue that was touched on by Anna: education level. Of the six women in this study, two have earned doctoral degrees. Two of the women who have not earned a doctorate both felt that this was something that limited their ability to advance. Hannah matter-of-factly stated that “the thing that has impacted my career more, if you want to look at it from that



sense, has not been being a woman, it's been not having my Ph.D.” Bridget has also felt the impact of not having this higher degree, but for her the sting is greater because she has seen men with the same level of education earn greater respect and advance further. In coming to terms with not having a Ph.D. and how this may have impacted her chances to advance, she has struggled with all three of the elements that have been discussed in this area: credibility, voice, and equal treatment:

When I sit at the table, it's mostly men...In fact, without that Ph.D.,...I would never be a Vice President here. I would probably never be an Assistant Vice President here without a Ph.D., which is unfortunate. Now if I moved to another institution, I think, readily, that would happen. It's all about terminal degrees, and that's—that's always been a problem for me. I realize that folks in my same role with a master's degree are very, very competent. We do a good job but yet we're not rewarded in terms of title or money. If I left my job today, they would—they could easily hire somebody as Assistant Vice President—probably be male—and they'd probably make at least \$50,000 more than I did. And that—that's frustrating.

Despite her many accomplishments in the profession, Bridget has also experienced the obstacles that are still present for women in admissions.

**Strategies for dealing with obstacles.** Whereas the participants in this study speak a common language in terms of the obstacles they have faced in their career journeys, they also mentioned a number of strategies for dealing with the barriers or hurdles that have been present in their paths. These strategies are described in this

section. Some of their approaches are positive: two strategies that became evident were their ability and willingness to stand up for themselves and their readiness to take advantage of opportunities on campus related to leadership development. On the other hand, there was also evidence that, at times, some of the women have chosen to accept certain adverse conditions; they have resigned themselves to the fact that they may not be able to make a situation better—at least for themselves.

*Standing up for themselves.* During the conversations that took place as part of this study, five of the women spoke about a time in their careers when they faced an obstacle and decided to stand up for themselves. A few of these situations have already been mentioned in relation to the women's struggles with credibility and fair treatment as well as their relationships with mentors. India had to stand up for herself in order to receive the time off she was allowed by law for maternity leave. Bridget needed to advocate for herself in order to gain a position she had been doing for several years. Fern had to push to receive the same salary as her predecessor. It is a part of their shared leadership experience to learn that, as Fern stated, "You got to stand up for yourself because nobody else is going to do it for you."

When these women spoke about the times that they had to stand up for themselves, their statements also suggested an additional common element to this aspect of their experience: getting to the point where they will assert themselves is largely a matter of becoming comfortable with themselves and knowing that they have worked hard—perhaps harder than any man. Susan spoke at length about the process of arriving at a point where she feels she has something to contribute, even when she is at a meeting

surrounded by men. She knows that “when we’re having these discussions and when a conversation is going on and it doesn’t resonate with me at all...then I have to be sure to make that contribution.” She has been able to make that contribution because of the level of comfort she has achieved with self and gender:

I could think of earlier in my career, I would think of it from the perspective of OK, now they’re only going to hear it as a woman speaking. And it’s like OK, maybe that’s true to a certain degree if that’s all I feel like I’m bringing. But if you have to get comfortable enough with yourself to say, “It’s my whole experience I’m bringing to the table here... Which is different from their’s and that’s the value that I’m bringing—that it’s some—a different perspective that others who we may be trying to serve may also have and would not be served well if I didn’t make this contribution and I think, like I said, you have to grow to that place.

Anna also spoke about acquiring a level of comfort with herself and what she has to offer:

I think I’ve started coming into a place, uh, where I’m comfortable in my own skin, and I believe that, um, feeling like I’m doing the right thing and that I’m helping make the life better for somebody else is more important than being the one that gets recognized or gets the name on the big door or the big plaque or getting the big awards.

For both Anna and Susan, their level of comfort has also allowed them to reach a place where they are willing to speak up because they know their contributions are valuable.

Another idea mentioned by three of the chief admissions officers is the notion that women have to work hard and prove themselves. Susan attested to the fact that women have to prove over and over that they can do the job, and it has already been discussed how Bridget had to push so hard for a position that, as she says, “I deserved—not that I was entitled to it—but I knew that I was the person that could do the best job.” For her, standing up for herself meant taking on a major obstacle: the “old boy network.” She said,

I stuck it out. I’ve weathered the storm and I *will* be probably one of the best directors of admissions they’ve ever had because of this, and that’s not, you know, that’s not being—tooting my own horn. That’s just a fact. And I think you have to—you really have to feel passionate about your abilities to be that successful female. I do think you have to work a little harder. I do. I do. I believe that.

Like Bridget, Anna has also dealt with obstacles in relation to the “old boy club” but she too has learned to promote herself and the three accomplishments of which she is most proud: running a successful office, meeting enrollment goals, and being a mother. She very proudly says that doing all this “I think is pretty successful, um, and I dare any man to come tell me. I’ll take on anybody that says, ‘Oh, you can’t do the job.’”

***Taking advantage of opportunities.*** Another strategy that a number of the women have adopted for dealing with some of the obstacles they have faced in their career journeys is to take advantage of opportunities on their campuses. These opportunities often come in the form of chances to network and engage with other female professionals

in ways that promote leadership development and a positive institutional climate for women. Five of the women interviewed described their campuses as places that promote the openness and opportunities that constitute a supportive climate. Susan said her campus is a place with a “phenomenal amount of resources spread out across the, you know, the entire university.” There are opportunities to go to workshops and attend presentations. In addition, women are encouraged to make connections with other women and take part in activities to promote both personal and professional development.

Through her institution, India received the opportunity to participate in a leadership development program that embraced both faculty and staff. Although she stated that “I’m not one of those females that would ever think, ‘We need a female program,’” and that “I’d never show up for that kind of thing,” she does recognize the value of the program in which she participated. India indicated that this “experience made me think of things from a female perspective I never had before. I really just don’t think that way.” For her, the program has been valuable in helping her connect with other women at her institution and gain a better understanding of issues affecting the whole campus. For example, until this experience, she was not aware of “trials and tribulations that women in the faculty ranks and the academy face.” This understanding has contributed to her leadership development because

it’s made me a better administrator to understand the faculty side, um, understand that when they have children, it’s a huge question of when they have children if they’re trying to earn tenure. Do you take a break from trying to earn tenure... especially [in] the male-dominated fields...I’ve gained a—just an amazing

understanding.

This program represents one of the few times that India has thought about and gained a perspective about her leadership experience in terms of gender.

Whereas India has been involved with a leadership development program for professionals, Anna has focused her energies on programs designed to assist students and young people who are interested in leadership positions. She speaks very passionately about being in a position to help women who may be following her path: “And as I’ve gone through the leadership ranks, I can say, ‘This is something we *will* do.’” She goes on to explain that “I am *going* to make this possible for the younger women in our profession to have a place to go and learn and not have to seek it out on their own and learn it the hard way.” The majority of the women feel that they have the ability and obligation to be a role model to other women. One way they can do so is through their presence and involvement on their campuses and beyond. As Anna explains,

I wish there was a class on how to be a successful female leader that would just—you walk away with a checklist. But since there’s not, I’m doing the next best thing, and I’m, you know, reading and going to workshops and conferences and networking and being visible doing a lot of different things.

***Acceptance and resignation.*** The women in this study have developed two primary strategies for “chipping away at the big issues.” They have stood up for themselves and they have taken advantage of opportunities on campus to network with other women and develop their leadership skills. Not all of their strategies, however, can be viewed as approaches that are as positive and affirming. There have been times when a

number of these women have also simply had to come to terms with negative situations. At these times, they either accepted what was or they decided to choose their battles and fight another day.

Sometimes resignation took the form of silently bearing a negative situation. Fern's recollection of a sexist comment made by a mentor has already been mentioned, but the second part of the story is her reaction. She told the interviewer that when the comment was made, it took her by surprise to the point that she simply did not respond in any way—"that's more of what that era was." Although these comments and attitudes were not supported, women did not file complaints as they would today. Although Fern admits there are times when she has expressed her concerns, as when she pushed for equal pay, she also said, "I'm not one to rock the boat. I probably should be because that would be, I think, a better thing for any future female that might come in this position, but I never have really rocked that boat too much." Her comments indicated that she was concerned not only for herself but also for those who would follow her in the profession and possibly face the same obstacles.

Anna also spoke at several points about the institutional climate she has experienced in relation to gender and how she has had to accept certain situations over the course of her career. As a young professional, she dealt with white males who wanted to create a father-daughter type relationship with her and other young women. Although she spoke of how they wanted to help her and give advice, she also recalled that they were patronizing and resentful toward anyone who turned down their offers. This was at a time in her life when she decided to accept these relationships: "that's something you

just have to take in stride.” She said of her strategy of acceptance: “as the relationships form, if you just allow people to be who they are and work with them on that term, it just seems to make for a more comfortable work experience.” Life was more comfortable for her because she got along with these people and, as a result, she advanced in her career. Part of the rationale behind her decision to resign herself to the process may have been the recognition of what happened to those young women who were not so accepting: “Now I have seen other women who don’t necessarily embrace that, and it’s been very difficult for them. Their lives become very difficult. By embracing it, it hasn’t caused me the mental anguish that I’ve seen some of my peers endure.”

Susan has learned to embrace situations as they are but she also put forth another strategy for dealing with obstacles—biding one’s time and coming back to re-open a discussion. She spoke about what women go through as they learn to accept that there are times when they will be heard and times when they may be discounted:

And what does that do to me then, you know, going into those meetings knowing that, you know, I will be the only woman there and so is that going to be a negative?...Am I going to take that negatively or is it just going to be “That’s part of how it is”?

She has attended enough meetings as the lone female to understand what these environments are like for women. Thus, she explains, “so either I can, um, sit and feel that I’m not contributing or I can, you know, just go at it and offer my opinions.” Essentially, it becomes a situation of choosing one’s battles; once she knows the climate, she can determine her next move in terms of having her voice heard:



I'm going to back up...I'm not going to say anything right now from this but I've got to think about how I'm going to re-introduce this because I think it's important for the success of this, um, and I think you go through that cycle *all* the time or I go through that cycle regularly.

She knows that she may need to pick another time or place. She has learned to wait for the idea or issue to come up again and then she will make her contribution to the discussion.

The six female directors participating in this study faced obstacles on their career journeys and they developed strategies targeted toward, if not overcoming these hurdles, at least allowing them to accept the situations and move forward. The issues they discussed and their approaches to coping describe a lived experience of seeking to gain and maintain a place in the leadership circles at their institutions. They speak of this process through their use of the metaphor of "the table." Four of the women used this expression as they spoke about what women are able to bring to the table and their efforts to find a place at the table. From medieval history to the corporate boardrooms of the present, the table has come to symbolize the place where the leadership team gathers to discuss issues and make decisions. In the majority of the English speaking world, ideas are open for discussion when they are placed on the table. The most renowned representation of the leadership team gathering at the table is the round table of King Arthur and his knights. It is perhaps the significance of the round table that is most akin to what these women are seeking: "As its name suggests, it has no head, implying that everyone who sits there has equal status" ("Round Table," January 31, 2011).

## **Balancing**

Another theme that emerged from the conversations with the participants as they spoke about the day-to-day experience of being a female admissions director was the notion of balance. Achieving a sense of balance means reaching a state of equilibrium. When someone refers to achieving a balance in life, the individual has gained some kind of harmony and stability. These women spoke about balance in terms of something they are constantly seeking and negotiating. It is a work in progress. In addition, there are many aspects of their personal and professional lives where they are seeking stability. In seeking a metaphor for this aspect of their lives, it would not be the standard weighing device known as a balance. Whereas the standard balance has two weight pans suspended from a single beam, the lives of the participants seem to encompass many beams and weight pans, each containing some element of their professional or personal lives. Although they spoke of a number of areas where they struggled to find a balance, there were two areas that emerged with the most frequency in the coding process. They are the sub-themes driven versus nurturing and life versus work.

**Driven versus nurturing.** The six participants were not asked specifically to define themselves in terms of either feminine or masculine ideals of leaderships. However, as the conversations became more focused on their leadership styles and their descriptions of effective leadership, most of the participants either openly gave a self-assessment or it became evident. Their statements suggest that although every woman has a natural inclination to be either more nurturing or more driven, in order to be effective leaders, they have learned how to balance these two styles.

Of the six women who were interviewed, four can be described as nurturers. These are women whose first inclination is to be supportive, who care deeply about the happiness of their employees and students, and who are often seen as the “mothers” of the office. Hannah is a nurturer, especially in her relationships with students. She says that “when you’re a female, I guess you do get an opportunity to be kind of, you know, you shouldn’t say this in this day and age, but kind of to be that kind of mothering role to students.” She treasures her daily contact with students. Anna is also a nurturer and she knows that this sets her apart from most men: “my style of leadership is very different than some of my male peers. I’m much more compassionate, and I want people to have ownership and buy in, and I do respect that work-life balance, and I do live by the idea that I work to live, I don’t live to work, um, and so that’s a little different.” Fern is also marked by her compassion and when she speaks of her staff, some of her greatest concerns are managing workload and making sure people are not overwhelmed. Bridget also jokes about her role in the office and clearly indicates her natural tendencies when she states, “You know, the road runners called me ‘Momma [Bridget]’ for a long time.”

On the other side of the spectrum, however, are the two women who assess themselves as more driven and assertive. This assessment does not mean that they are not compassionate and supportive, but their natural style is more stereotypically masculine. India stated outright that she can be “blunt” and that she leans toward the “bulldog approach” because she is the kind of person who likes to get things done. She told the interviewer that “if you look at my personality, if you look at the Myers-Brigg, um, everything I test on are male...I’m not the thinking/feeling at all. I’m the, what,

analytical, judgmental.” As a result, she has worked well with men because she is “more male-oriented.” Susan is the other participant in the study who assesses herself as more driven. She is more like India in that her strengths and joys lie in accomplishing tasks:

That’s my natural inclination. It is to sit down, to problem solve, to come up with solutions, to see the big picture, to figure out what are all of the pieces we’re going to need to pull together in order to, um, to reach whatever the goal is and to conceptualize and plan it down to, you know, the implementation stages of it, which, um, comes to me, you know, naturally.

At the end of her statement, she snaps her fingers for emphasis, driving the interview forward.

Despite these natural inclinations, the picture that emerges from the interviews is that all six of the women have learned how to attain a balance in their leadership styles, incorporating elements of both a nurturing and a more driven approach. There are excerpts from their interviews that indicate the meanings that they have given to this aspect of their experiences. They speak about the reasons why they chose to attain this balance as well as how they go about incorporating both aspects into their daily leadership practices.

In terms of why they chose to create such a balance in their leadership styles, the primary reason seems simply to be more effective. India, Bridget, and Susan all discussed this notion as the motivation behind their efforts to be both nurturing and driven. India learned about the importance of nurturing by seeing the ineffectiveness of one person who did not attend to the needs of the staff. She spoke of a male supervisor whom people

complained about because they had been working in the office for months but he didn't know their names. She saw the importance of nurturing in order to be an effective leader as a result of this person's failures: "I tried to look and see what the mistakes were...and what I saw was that...what they didn't trust was that he didn't nurture. So, I tried to nurture more." She recognized that being the INTJ personality helped her be a better manager, but the mothering, nurturing side she cultivated made her appeal more to people. She summed up how achieving a balance has increased her effectiveness as a leader: "they trust me as a manager, but also they see that I'm going to take care of this office as if it's my baby."

For Bridget, a nurturer, it was the more assertive side of the leadership equation that formed the area where she needed to grow. In her interview, when discussing how an admissions director must be both compassionate but firm, she indicated "That's a hard *balance* sometimes." As a follow up, I asked if women in particular need this balance. Her response was that she was not sure about all women, but she does. She stated that some women, like herself, are natural nurturers. Whereas women who are comfortable with a more masculine style may have to learn to cultivate a more supportive presence, nurturers like Bridget may need to work on setting expectations and holding firm to their decisions to be effective.

Susan also spoke about how she grew as a leader and became more effective by learning to be both driven and nurturing. She recognized that both styles and their accompanying skill sets are needed in order to successfully lead an admissions operation. One reason that women may gravitate toward such a balance is that they are too often

forced into one category or another because of the stereotypes people hold about what constitutes effective leadership. If a woman is taking care of everything and everyone, she is the supportive one, “but if you’re laying down the rules and doing the policy and moving things ahead, then somehow, you know, you’re not as supportive anymore.” She goes on to say,

I think sometimes women can be challenged because they don’t want to be seen as this, that, or the other. Oftentimes, women who are very effective leaders are—are negatively stereotyped because they’re, you know—because they’re not playing the role that maybe folks think they should be.

If women do not adhere to the accepted standards of behavior, they may not fit comfortably in their offices or organizations. As a woman whose natural inclinations do not put her in the traditional role of the nurturer, Susan believes that it is a challenge to show people that “being supportive doesn’t necessarily have this one look but it can be a variety of different looks. And, that being a very definitive, facts-driven female leader doesn’t mean that you’ve given up something on the—in the exchange there either.” For Susan, “the leadership experience for women is much more about getting comfortable with who you are and where you are.” Part of this process is learning to be less concerned with external labels and more attuned to developing an effective balance that works for the individual.

These previous excerpts from the interviews indicate why some of the participants have felt the need to balance the more feminine and masculine elements of their styles. During the conversations that took place as part of the study, the female directors also

explained how they actually attain such a balance. Three of the women who would be considered primarily nurturers talked about developing the ability to make tough decisions and then stick with their choices. Bridget admits that, sometimes, she needs to take a hard line because “when you’re personable and outgoing and warm and receptive....you have to make sure that folks know that you also can be firm and decisive in situations as need be.” Overall, “I know when I have to make those hard decisions that I can do that.” As part of this process, Bridget and Fern have also learned to be less emotional in their decision-making by not making snap judgments. Fern indicated she now takes the time to gather all the facts, and instead of over-reacting or making a decision based on emotion, she has learned to become more introspective and analytical.

While the women who are more nurturing sought to be more assertive, the two participants with a more masculine style became more supportive to increase their effectiveness as leaders. Susan believes that achieving this balance for her has meant combining being definitive, which was one of her strong points, with a softer approach that has allowed people to be heard. The driven side of her personality means she can “nail out” a meeting in 20 minutes, but she has learned to balance this aspect with a more supportive and engaging approach that involves taking the time to sit around and chat even though it may extend the meeting.

India also indicated that she makes a conscious effort to be more nurturing and supportive by tending to the office “family.” One can see the regional influence here as she says of the group of people she spends her days with, “it’s very important to me, especially in the south, and I always tell people this who come from out of town...you’ve

got to let us get to know you.” She always warns new staff members who are not from the south that they will be asked a lot of questions about what their parents do, how many siblings they have, etc.: “This is the kind of office we have, and when people ask you this, don’t be offended, you know, and think they’re trying to delve into your personal business, which is what they’re really trying to do. But, they’re trying to get to know you.” India also believes that a major part of her ability to adapt and become more balanced came as a result of becoming a mother. She says that “motherhood smoothed out all my rough, tough edges” and allowed her to become a more patient and understanding person.

**Life versus work.** Another balancing act which became part of the lived experience of some of the participants for this study involved making choices about how they merged family and professional responsibilities. For the four women who revealed that they had children, their success in balancing these two parts of their life-worlds was a critical determinant of their ability to find some level of contentment both at home and at the office. As admissions directors, they are the centers of their offices; as mothers, they are the nuclei of their families. Their lived experiences are to a large degree determined by their abilities to be engaged in each of these environments. Thus, this sub-theme describes how family affects career choices, how the participants manage family and work responsibilities, and, finally, whether one really can or cannot do it all when it comes to careers and families.

Hannah and Anna both spoke about how their family choices affected their careers. Hannah is a woman who seems to know herself well and tends to speak very



quickly, but there was a point in her interview when she slowed down to impart her thoughts on combining career and family. She described why she made certain choices and how her life would have been different if she had put her career first:

I've always tried to make decisions about what I wanted my life to be and not what I wanted my career to be. You know, if I made decisions about what I wanted my career to be, I would've gotten my Ph.D. I would have moved around. She believes not having a doctoral degree may have held her back in some ways, "But that decision was really kind of tied back to being a woman and being a mother and those kinds of things." She does not feel she could have raised her children, pursued a doctoral degree, and been on a fast track for career advancement. Instead, she chose to think about quality of life and defined success on her own terms.

Anna is also a woman who has become comfortable with the choices she has made about work and family, even if they may have impeded her career in some ways. She began her career journey in admissions as a young, single woman who was ready to hit the open road, but since that time,

I've gotten married and I've built a house and I've had two children. I've gone to graduate school, and then I've gone back to graduate school to get my doctorate, so those have been little bumps in the road that might have, um—although that's been building my career, it's impeded the fact. It takes a little longer to advance when you're side-stepping for maternity leave.

Overall, though, she has been satisfied to progress at a slower rate than those who were willing or able to "pick and move for the next job." She explains how this outlook

affected her career:

So, although I could have taken director positions at other institutions much earlier in my career, I delayed that because I did not want to pick up and move and relocate my family or separate myself from friends and family that are already established *just* to take the next pay grade or leadership role.

Like Hannah, Anna described one aspect of maintaining a balance between family and work: the willingness to make a choice about what comes first. For both women, achieving a balance has meant allowing the scales to tip more on the side of family, even if it hindered their career advancement.

Although Hannah and Anna spoke about how family choices may have impacted their careers, all four women with children also talked about their experiences in managing the day-to-day aspects of a life with a high level career and a growing family. Even when a woman makes the decision to put family first, as these women have done, there is still the matter of fine tuning the balance they have affected so that, as Anna said, “they can still get the job done.” To this end, the women spoke about their approaches for running a successful admissions operation and being a good mother. Receiving support from others was an important component of their success. For Hannah, being close to her mother and part of a community made a big difference in the quality of her family’s life. She explained,

I have an amazing mother. Now, she’s ailing now, but, I mean, or getting up there. But, you know, I could never have done all the things I’ve done without my mother’s support. And so, living in a community where I had my mother’s

support, and you know, and she helped me with my kids, and living in a town where I was well-connected in my church and active and had other mothers who helped me and things like that, you know. Um, you know, all of that came together to allow my children to blossom and grow and have good support and be able to do everything they wanted to do and for me to always be a part of their lives and, you know, their activities, and you know, things that they do.

For her, having the support of family made it easier when she did have to be at work.

India also talked about the importance of other family members in balancing work and life issues. In her case, having a supportive spouse has allowed her to combine the two areas. Because of her husband's flexible work schedule, he was able to be at home to meet the kids when they got off the bus every day. She wondered aloud, however, what she would do if this wasn't the case: "If I had married someone else in my field or at a job where they had to be there until a certain time, what would I have done? What would have been the compromise?" Bridget also mentioned having a supportive husband as well as a good boss: "When I had my first child, I wanted to make it work and I had a director who also wanted to make it work because he valued me." Her supervisor allowed her, for example, to cut back on travel and do some of her work at home.

Aside from receiving support from other family members, the directors also talked about other practical methods for combining their personal and professional lives. Both India and Bridget explained how they often changed their work schedules so they could spend quality time with family. India explained, "I work a lot of long hours, and a lot of it I do with, you know, my kids in bed at night and me at home. I go home and

spend quality time with them and as soon as they go to bed, I'm on the computer working for hours." Bridget also spoke about working at night and trying not to work on weekends so she could spend time with her children but said, even then, "that's always tricky when you've got a family."

One reason for the difficulty is that even with planning, crises still occur. Hannah revealed another secret to managing work and family when she told a story about a young man who works in her office who missed work because of responsibilities at home:

He had to find a substitute or something to go do something, and when I said, "Well now, why?" And he goes, "Well, you know, I had to take care of the baby." And I said before I could even think—and I shouldn't have said it—I said, "Have you ever heard of a babysitter?" You know, and after I went back and talked to him, and I said... "I would have said the exact same thing to you if you were a female, you know? That's not, you know, an excuse. You know, you have a job to do. You have a responsibility that includes you being in a leadership role, and that means that if all-of-the-sudden somebody gets sick, guess what, you're the one who needs to step in..." Like this other woman down the hall who balances things really well? She's got about eight or nine babysitters on speed dial.

As Hannah's story illustrates, part of being a leader means there are times when one's presence is required. To manage these times, a long list of babysitters is a necessity—or the kid-friendly office that India runs and describes with much laughter:

If your child is controllable, um, and out of school, you know—we've had some uncontrollable ones—but if your child is, you know, on a teacher work day, bring

them to work with you. At least you're here; you're working. If you can make them happy and when we set up the movie, you know, in the theatre room, and have three or four kids in there, you know?

And the best part, according to India, may be the microwave popcorn.

Even with the strategies and compromises that these women have adopted to achieve a life-work balance, their arrangements have not always led to a harmonious existence. Two of the women, Anna and India, both described the intense feelings of “mommy guilt” that surrounded their experiences of working with young children. Anna indicated that part of being a female professional is “trying to overcome the mommy-guilt” and the expectation to be a “superwoman.” As a mother of two children, director of admissions at a large institution, and an active member of her state association, she has the equivalent of three full time jobs and faces the pressure of trying to “keep it all going.” India, also the parent of two children, purposefully spaced her kids out because

I knew that there was no way that I could handle two children two years apart and be—be a professional. Ah, I don't really know how anyone does it, ah, at any job, but mine were definitely apart for a reason of, professionally, that's the way I could manage it.

India also felt a “constant guilt” when both her children were young and said,

it nearly ate me alive the first five years and there is no way you can work without it if you're a good mother. And when you're at work, you feel like you should be at home. When you're at home, you're thinking about work. Uh, and you just have to find a way to live through it because it's absolutely there all the time if

you're a good mother.

Like India, Bridget has also experienced the sense of missing part of her children's lives because of work. She commented, "Have I missed out on some things with my kids? Absolutely. You know, field trips...but I don't really feel like having a career has made me any less of a mother because I just tried to make it work." She made it work by changing her schedule and accepting the support of others, but her children did grow up knowing that there were certain times of the year when she would be very busy.

As the participants talked about balancing family and work, one issue that emerged as they processed their feelings and experiences was the notion of whether one could have it all—whether it was possible to combine a successful career with raising a family. Among these women, there is a personal expectation of high performance in their profession. They set their own standards and they will not accept second best in any aspect of their lives. For some, this meant not pursuing a doctoral degree or putting off having children if they could not do all these things to their satisfaction. Hannah's comments illustrated this point:

Because there's no way that I could have done my job the way that I—what I see is the way. And other people can do it, but I couldn't do it—pursue school *and*—well, I wasn't willing to make the sacrifice to do that *and* be a mother *and* do my job the way *I* wanted to do my job.

She went on to say that "I do like to show women that, um, just because—or not *show* women— but be a role model for the fact that, uh, just because you have family responsibilities, as a supervisor, that doesn't mean I expect you to come to work and do

any less than anybody else.” India also expressed a similar outlook: “I have high expectations for myself...I would not have met my expectations with young children. Impossible.”

So the question remains of whether one really can have it all. For these women, their responses are mixed. Although Hannah at one point began a statement by stating “I try and show other young women that you can have it all,” she interrupted herself and switched from “have it all” to “do it both,” meaning you can combine work and family. She added that “it’s about your life and about the different cycles of your life, and you know, just realize that you can do it all. It doesn’t mean you can all do it tomorrow or you should try and do it all tomorrow.” India is more definitive in her beliefs about what it means to combine work and family and said, “I have realized that you cannot do it all. You can’t have everything your way.” Fifteen years ago, before motherhood, marriage, and a director position, she would have said that you can have it all, but now her philosophy is that “you’ve got to determine how to have the balance that you’re willing to live with.”

Bridget also seems to have come to the same conclusion because she stresses that “you just have to have those priorities.” She indicated that sometimes her kids said things like “Well, sometimes you work too hard” or “Don’t do this at home.” She added that her job in admissions “does require nights. Sometimes I do work 24/7, but have never let this job consume me.” Anna offered an excellent summary of how she has found a balance and how she supports her staff as they begin the same journey of attempting to manage both a family and a career in admissions:

I work really hard with my staff in being sensitive and aware of where they are in their life and in their career and making that work-life balance as positive as possible....When work and personal lives conflict, usually the work is what suffers, and people will leave the profession to seek out a situation that's more supportive to work-life balance, and I've seen a lot of people that had great potential that would just leave because they did not feel that they could do both well, and they chose to put family first, which, I'm a firm believer in putting family first, so, um, you know, I respect that for my staff, and I want to make their work-life balance as good as it can be and still get the job done.

### **Like a Roller Coaster**

One of the questions that I asked of the participants concerned what it was like to be a director of admissions on a daily basis. The impact of gender on the lived experiences of these female professionals is the primary area of focus for this study. However, this theme captures the meaning of the experience of working in an admissions environment, regardless of whether one is a male or female. Despite the absence of gender, it is a critical element of their experience because so much of what they do and how they lead is impacted by the environment in which they function. It was Anna who coined the phrase that captures the essence of this aspect of their lived experience: "there's just a lot of different things, and it's kind of like being on a roller coaster ride some days." It's up and it's down because not every day is good—but most are. According to both Hannah and Bridget, respectively, they do have "the very best job at the university" not to mention "the best job in the world." There are two sub-themes that



describe the ride that life becomes in an admissions office and why this experience is like a roller coaster: production versus customer service and variety and intensity.

**Production versus customer service.** The descriptions provided by the participants in relation to what it is like to be a director of admissions indicated that, as India stated, “we’re unique among other university offices.” Admissions is both a production unit and a customer service office. It is the admissions office that must bring in the students to fill the class—they are one of the few, if only, offices on campus that, year in and year out, has a bottom line. Enrollment goals must be met in order to keep the institution financially viable. At the same time, admissions directors are charged with being the face of the university as their offices are often the first point of contact for prospective students, parents, and an assortment of community members. Thus, although this sub-theme can also be thought of as yet another area where the participants seek a delicate balance, it is more aptly described by the metaphor of the roller coaster. With each admissions cycle, directors negotiate the highs and lows of recruitment and enrollment as they seek to attain an adequate number of enrollment deposits and promote the university.

**Meeting enrollment goals.** All six of the participants spoke of various challenges associated with meeting enrollment goals. Enrollment begins with applications, and as India explained, “we are a high production unit in that we must accept these students, review the materials, make an admissions decision, get the application, get the people admitted so that they can make a decision, and help them yield.” What sounds like a simple process, however, becomes increasingly more complicated and stressful. The

difficulty arises when one considers the intricacies associated with turning large numbers of applications into precise yields for large numbers of majors. Although Bridget indicated that her institution does not have a problem meeting overall enrollment goals, she did indicate that offering admission to a large number of qualified applicants for a specific target in any particular major is a real challenge. Yields will vary from year to year and, recently, economic factors have made this process even more difficult. Completing this feat, she boasted, is “pretty impressive,” and recruiting and enrolling a precise number of students in each major is “an arduous task that we do very well.” Susan also spoke of the difficult nature of this task and indicated that chief admissions officers need a certain amount of vision to be successful. Part of her job is constantly seeking “the sense of what does the pool look like? What does the pool feel like? What types of students do we have in there? What might the class look like? Um, um, what might the talent look like? Um, how competitive is the pool?” And, she indicated, it is a matter of “not just thinking about it for today, but thinking about it for five years down the line.”

Aside from the difficulties associated with having the vision and foresight to play a high-stakes numbers game, admissions offices in general face a tremendous amount of pressure to bring in the freshman class. Even when interviewing entry level processing staff, Hannah imparts the importance of what they do to candidates: “as a part of the interview process, you know, I wanted her to understand that she would be coming to work at an institution—I mean in an office—where what we do everyday impacts the bottom line of how this institution can thrive.” According to India, however, nothing

compares to the stress that the director feels: “I never knew the amount of pressure, um, that goes from sitting in that chair as an associate to becoming director—being totally responsible for the numbers.”

Even though everyone in the office works to bring in the class, it is the director who is truly responsible, and “ultimately, in the end, you’re judged on the numbers...you make every year.” Anna also indicated that there is always an underlying pressure on the director. She said, “it’s scary because we *are* so dependent on enrollment.” She knows she must fill seats in order to create revenue: it’s stressful to “look at the fact that your office generates the new student enrollment which, for me, that’s \$70 million of revenue for my institution. Um, that’s a lot of responsibility, regardless of whether you’re male or female.” The most extreme stress may correlate with the sheer uncertainty of not knowing the final outcome until it is too late to do anything about it. As India, explained, “you run a scoreboard all year long and don’t get to celebrate or be disappointed—don’t know really what the score’s gonna be—until, you know, until August.”

Other participants described the pressure they feel to enroll students. Susan, who spoke about the ability to have a vision for the pool, also talked about the demands that can come from academic departments and other areas on campus who may say,

“We need more men and we need more women and we need more trombone players and we need more gymnasts and...we need more of everything but don’t have too many of anything.” And, you know, there’s this constant, constant. So, um, whether it’s, you know, coming from individual colleges, whether it’s coming from the larger institution, whether it’s coming from different constituents

at the institution, there's always "We need more of something."

Bridget and Fern also spoke of another aspect of the pressure: being asked to continue to generate more applications and maintain their yields with limited budgets. Fern gets very disheartened when recruitment yields high numbers of applications but no additional staff can be hired to process the applications. Her feelings of frustration were evident when she complained that "some years, I'll go in the red in my budget and just say, 'Somebody tell me what to stop doing' because we're doing what we've been told to do," which is to recruit heavily and generate applications. Bridget also spoke of the pressure to bring in high numbers of applications without receiving more money for the staff needed to process them: "if I wanted to just go and have hundreds of more apps to turn down more students, I could do that. But I don't have any more staff. In fact, I have less staff. So why would I want to do that? You're not giving me more money to hire more people."

***Interacting with the public.*** Even as directors struggle with processing applications and meeting enrollment goals, they must also attend to the other main function of the office: customer service. Whereas processing applications and making admissions decisions happens behind closed doors, recruitment occurs out in the open. Customer service is important because as India stated, "we are the first face to the university, so in that way, we're very customer service oriented. We go out and tell people in the community about the opportunities available." Bridget feels that she is a better director because of her relationships with people outside the institution, especially high school counselors: "I think that...my contact with the guidance counselors gives me a lot of credibility because many directors of admissions do not travel." Hannah also

spoke about this aspect of her job as an admissions director: “admissions is a lot about relationship building; it’s about good customer service.” She also added the notion that admissions professionals must network not only with community members but with their institutional colleagues as well because “good admissions offices have good relationships both internally and externally.” In fact, when asked to describe her leadership style, Hannah calls it very entrepreneurial because of her ability to build relationships. Overall, five of the participants spoke about how they manage the customer service aspect of their positions and attend to their customers both inside and outside of the university.

A number of the women described their experiences in building and maintaining relationships within the university. Hannah, Anna, and India all spoke of the necessity of being able to collaborate with other offices and departments in order to, as Hannah stated, “get more done quickly.” Hannah spoke about the benefits of having been at one institution a long time and building relationships with other administrators that she can call on to assist a student. For Anna, collaborating with others on campus contributes to a successful recruitment effort: “I feel like the number one thing in my job is to build relationships and partnerships with other departments like alumni affairs. We work with them on our student recruitment alumni society, which is the group of students that do our campus tours.” Aside from campus tours, she also spoke about dealing with everyone on campus from coaches to parking services to catering to create a successful visit and enrollment experience. For India, building relationships on campus “is something that has enhanced my ability to lead.” Like Anna, she recognizes the importance of involving others in recruitment efforts, especially the faculty. Her ability to network on the

academic side of the house has “enhanced our programs. Um, I don’t get the faculty [member] who says, ‘I’m not showing up at your open house.’ We just don’t have it. I never have it. Um, so, certainly I’ve been very successful in that manner.”

Susan also spoke about interacting with internal customers but her comments describe a different aspect of the experience. For her, being a chief admissions officer has meant being able to form a bridge between two different groups that are present at the university: academics and student services. She indicated that admissions is the area that straddles these two groups and performs functions that relate to and promote each area. On one hand, the admissions office must recruit academically gifted students for the faculty to teach. From a student affairs perspective, however, they must also be concerned with the whole integration of the student into the social and academic life of the institution—finding the right fit between student and university. Because both groups are committed to students in different ways, Susan believes that a chief admissions officer must be able to navigate between these two areas of the institution. For her, effective leadership is about possessing some “type of an ease between academic affairs and student affairs...so that enrollment management and admissions could be at its most effective no matter what your philosophy or thought of where it should be” or what camp it most closely resembled or served.

Chief admissions officers also spend a lot of time working with their external customers: most notably students but also parents, community members, high school personnel, elementary students, and alumni. Again, the most important part of this process is relationship building. An important skill for an admissions director, according

to Susan, is being able to relate to people of all types and at a variety of status levels. One must feel comfortable

whether you're with the president and the cabinet or trustees and being able to help them understand something or providing information and data to them, to prospective students/families, to community members...so it's the ability to navigate through a variety of different constituents, um, comfortably.

Part of this ability also encompasses the skill to market the university by presenting a message that is appropriate for the audience. An admissions director must be able to “take in a whole lot of information, um, and, um, scale it down to some basic talking points.” Susan spoke with almost a sense of compassion about being able to identify the key points and communicate on a level that “people feel it's...something that they understand, something that...relates to them—you know, all of those good kind of things.”

She also spoke about the importance of managing expectations when dealing with external customers. Part of her job is helping people understand admissions standards and that these may not be the same standards that applied to them. This role is especially important with alumni, where managing expectations can mean showing them that their contributions to the institution are valued while at the same time explaining why their neighbor or grandchild was not admitted. Susan's words illustrate a quality that Bridget indicated is essential for admissions directors: a highly developed sense of tact. People have certain expectations and they need specific information to feel a level of comfort with the institution. It is the chief admissions officer who must ensure these needs are met

and that they are met in a way that preserves the dignity of the individual and the institution.

Although the participants mentioned a variety of individuals with whom they have contact as they market their universities, the group that was mentioned the most are parents. In fact, Bridget states that dealing with this group has “probably been the biggest challenge of the last three/four years.” From listening to her words also comes this notion of living life on a roller coaster when it comes to engaging with parents:

this is a hard profession because on a daily basis you’re either loved or hated. It’s not really too much in between. In the fall, everybody loves you. In the spring, most people don’t like you, although the ones that get in really like you.

Usually, when the decisions come out and people are not happy, it is the parents that contact admissions directors, and four of the women spoke of this aspect of their experience.

The most challenging aspect in dealing with parents may be learning to manage one’s own responses while engaging with angry parents. Anna indicated that she is an accessible director who does spend time talking to parents, although it is often not a pleasant experience:

usually when they get to me, they’re in an appeal, or they’re very angry, or they’re not happy with something, or they’re appealing the standards and they’re wanting to know why they’re not admissible, or they have a special circumstance that has to be evaluated.

Three other participants—Susan, India, and Bridget—also spoke about dealing with



parents. What seems to be embedded in their words is the ability to empathize and to transform verbal onslaughts into dialogues that convey understanding and offer options.

Susan spoke about how she gets through these phone calls:

I'm on the phone and someone just is yelling at me, you know, constantly, and I know that this is a rational person. You know, in any other situation, would be a very rational person, and so for me to be upset with them is not, you know—and so, you know, being able just to listen sometimes, even when...there's nothing you could possibly, you know, change about the situation.

Even though she cannot change the admissions decision, what she can offer is compassion. Susan tries to understand where the parent is coming from so she can see through the anger and say, “Here's where we are, you know. Here's some options, you know. It isn't the end of the world.” India also spoke about her ability to be able to put a positive spin on these types of conversations, not only for the parent, but for herself as well. It is important for her to “go home feeling good at the end of the day, even when you've had a mother yell at you for the tenth time. You've made a positive impact and if that mother yelled at you, hopefully, even if you said ‘no’ to them, they've learned something from that ‘no.’”

Bridget also spoke about the importance of being able to say “no” in a tactful way, and it is through her statements that both the frustrations and joys of dealing with parents are understood. As the chief admissions officer, she knows there will be disappointed families when decisions are released. Like Susan and India, she has developed a particular ability to be able to manage expectations and turn what can be a

negative conversation into something positive. She is very proud of this ability and it often comes in handy when she deals with helicopter parents. She laughingly told me, “You’ve heard the terminology. They’re now the Blackhawks ‘cause they hover.” She indicated both a frustration and a healthy respect related to dealing with parents. They are “an outside force that certainly needs to be reckoned with because they have a lot of power in school systems.” But, at the same time, she spoke of the joy of “being able to sit down with a family and talk honestly and openly about their child” and the satisfaction of being contacted when the family is ready to send their third child to her university. She indicated that she often runs the gamut of emotions. It’s that up and down of the roller coaster once again, but there is the sense that the ability to have these emotions and make these connections is what makes her successful in her position.

**Variety and intensity.** This sub-theme refers to another aspect of the daily lived experience of chief admissions officers that is aptly characterized by the metaphor of the roller coaster ride. These individuals function in an environment that can be defined by its variety and intensity. Admissions directors must be masters of multi-tasking because of the sheer variety of tasks they may be asked to accomplish. This variety is due in part to the nature of their department as both a production and customer service unit, as previously discussed. They must utilize a vast array of skills as they supervise admissions operations that begin with publicizing the institution and end with accepting a student’s enrollment deposit. At the same time, they also function in an arena marked by its intensity. Not only is the pace of the job unrelenting, but the tasks are cyclical, recurring

in the same time frame every year as the admissions cycle repeats itself over and over, like a roller coaster traveling its track.

*Variety in the profession.* Four of the participants who were interviewed spoke about the variety of the position as something they enjoy. Fern has enjoyed being an admissions director because she did not want to do the same thing every day. She likes the fact that “you never know from day-to-day what’s gonna hit you as a new demand and a new charge.” Her thoughts are echoed by Bridget, who indicated that the variety is why she stayed in admissions so long: “that’s one thing I love about this job—there’s not any day that’s the same.” Anna captured the essence of this aspect of the experience as she stated, “there’s no two days that are alike. I mean, you have a—you basically come in and have a different job every day.” She went on to explain how this is possible:

One day you’re marketing and public relations; the next day you’re doing research. One day you’re public speaking. One day you’re, you know, you’re processing and you’re pushing paper, and you know, if you feel like being a people person one day, you can be, and if you don’t want to deal with people, you can go back and deal with files and forms, and you get to do just so many different things.

As a result of being able to do so many things, admissions directors tend to have a set of skills that are as multi-faceted as their days in the position. When asked about the skills that are important to be successful in the profession, the participants mentioned all of the following: managing projections, understanding statistics, predictive modeling, public speaking, listening, balancing student and academic affairs, relating to different

constituents, multi-tasking, building relationships, seizing opportunities, reading people, handling conflict, solving problems, being tactful, and possessing a knowledge of enrollment management techniques. Such a long and varied list means that chief admissions officers must have highly developed people skills as well as the ability to manage the more technical aspects of the position. Bridget, in fact, said in her interview that you will find directors who are stronger in one area than others, but “you have to have a little bit of a balance.” In other words, these women need to be able to do a little bit of everything.

*Intensity of the profession.* Aside from the variety that characterizes the position, life as an admissions director is also intense because it is constant and busy. It is a position that requires long hours and allows for few boundaries. As Susan spoke about what her days are like with all the activities, she said it means that “You’re really moving” all the time. She also described a level of intensity that is so constant that it is easy to reach a point where you’re at your desk 24/7. Of the busiest days, she says, “those are the days where I feel like I worked hard, but I didn’t get anything done, you know?” Both Bridget and Hannah also used the numbers 24/7 to describe their positions. One of the things Hannah now loves about the job is that it is a “there’s never enough hours in the day” kind of job. However, it was not always this way. She used to be frustrated by how little she accomplished, but “one of the benefits I’ve had as I’ve gotten older is that you just realize that. You get through the day. You work really hard, and you move on.”

In terms of how these women get through the day, a number of common elements emerged as the data was analyzed. Some of the women make it a point to get to the office

early and stay late or they put in extra hours at home to manage their workload. Fern described her schedule on a typical day by saying,

I'm an early bird...Our work day officially is 8:00 to 4:30, and I'm usually here at 7:30...up until the last few months, most of the time, I was here until 5:30 or 6:00 every day. And mainly, I was here early before hours and after hours so I could do work that I needed to get done because my day is filled with constant flow of people coming in and asking me questions.

Even though she has her own tasks to complete, she must put in extra time to balance being able to attend to other staff members' needs, so there is not only intensity but also an element of self-sacrifice here as well. Hannah also talked about getting up at 7 a.m. and making the first task of her day checking her e-mail—before she even arrives at the office. Anna also starts her days early and simply stated, “I'm here when everybody else walks in in the morning.” She arrives early for part of the same reason that Fern expressed: as the director, she sometimes can't do her work because of assisting others. She describes a work day that “is sort of driven by the crisis of the moment and what needs attention.” Bridget also spoke of long days; she is typically at work by 7:15 or 7:30 a.m. and it “may be 7:30, 8:00, 9:00 o'clock when I go home.” And, even when they do go home, these women often continue to work extra hours. They extend their work days just to keep up, to take care of the things they were not able to get to that day, or to prepare what they need for the next day.

There is also a level of intensity common to the admissions experience because being a chief admissions officer means there are few boundaries between personal and

private life. Certainly this situation is illustrated by the work patterns of the participants in this study; they tend to be the first ones in the office and the last ones to leave at night. And, even when they do manage to leave early or on time, they may still be reading files at home, checking e-mails, or working on the computer after their kids are in bed. Being an admissions director can also be an intense experience because of a lack of boundaries. Statements from several of the women provided descriptions of their feelings about this aspect of the job. Anna spoke of boundaries in terms of a separation between her work and private lives, but it is a division that is difficult to achieve. Her comments indicate a level of frustration that her personal space will be invaded but also a certain level of maturity that this is simply how it will be. She explained what her life is like because she is a director of admissions:

When you go to the grocery store, people see you, and they want to come up and they want to ask you about admissions, or they want to tell you that their niece or their nephew or their granddaughter is going to your institution and what can they do to help them, and there's no escape from—I mean, it's not like when you leave at 5:00, you leave the job behind. It follows you because you're out in the public eye; people see you and associate you with the institution.

For Anna, this is one of the more unpleasant parts of the position and it's "one of the things that makes this position... a little more difficult in my eyes than, you know, some other job—not saying that the work level is any different, it's just that this job, it requires work and life to integrate." These women just do not have the luxury of clear boundaries.

Bridget also discussed the lack of boundaries that can exist, but she has come to

understand and accept people's preoccupation with admissions and their desire for more transparency. Whereas Anna's statements indicate a level of frustration, Bridget seems amazed at the interest people have in her job. She stated, "there's a lot of hoopla around our profession in admissions—how we do business." When asked what she meant by this description, she laughed and said that if she goes to a dinner party and people find out what she does, everyone wants to talk about admissions. "*Oh my God!* It's like being a doctor," she expressed animatedly. Despite her amusement, she did indicate that she spends about 25 percent of her time talking to people about how admissions decisions are made. She tries to be as transparent as possible, but it is never enough. Parents and school boards have acquired a lot of influence and are continually lobbying for more power, and it's a frustrating situation because "They think they know how to do our jobs."

*Cyclical nature of the profession.* Another aspect of the chief admissions officer position that was described by the participants is the cyclical nature of the environment. The women generally met the question of "What is a typical day in admissions?" with some degree of laughter and an expression akin to rolling one's eyes. The consensus was clearly that there is no typical day in admissions, or rather, as Susan described, "depending on what time of the year it is oftentimes will determine what a typical day is going to be like." Anna expressed the same idea: "every day can be very different depending on the season; we're very season-driven. Is it recruitment season? Is it processing season? Is it accepting and admitting season?" What she means is that the admissions process is a sequence of events that take place during very specific segments of the year. Fall is the recruiting season when most staff members are attending college

fairs and other events to market the university. Then, the applications begin to roll in and everyone is entering data, reviewing files, and making decisions. Once decisions come out, the emphasis turns to yield and a variety of strategies are put into play to bring in deposits such as open house programs, phone calls, and mailings. Then, they do it all over again.

India talked about what it was like to become a director and go through this process for the first time:

I had felt the exhaustion of the cycle before, but especially the first year I felt that *huge*, ah, you know...build up to my first class and what would that be and taking it very personally. And granted, we were extremely successful, thank God. But then that anti-climax of “Oh my God, I’ve gotta do it again?” I just never felt that as associate director....I was surprised at the difference.

Part of the difference between experiencing the cycle as a director as opposed to another staff position is that the director must keep everything running and be sure activities are being implemented that will result in adequate yield. The only element that seems to be a constant, regardless of the time of the year, is meetings. Every one of the women spoke of their frustration at having endless meetings, many of which they felt they could do without. Bridget described the situation most aptly when she stated emphatically, “You can be meetinged to death! You can quote that!” Thus, despite the array of meetings that fill their days, admissions directors function in an environment where, every year, they get to start over. Regardless of what happened in the previous recruiting year, the cyclical nature of admissions means they do it all again. Bridget summarized what it is like to



function in this environment and manage the cycle:

There's a new target and I'll put this class to bed [while] working on the next one.

That's why it's never boring. You're always in this mode of constantly thinking about what will happen next. You do it all. It's kind of like having a child. You have the child, you forget about the pain, and then you start it all over again.

That's what it is.

What it means to work in admissions, at least for a director, is that you are a part of an environment that is both changeable and constant. Its nature as both a production and customer service department requires a leader who has mastered—or at least attained—a workable balance in both technology and people skills. It is an intense and variable atmosphere that offers a leadership opportunity for an individual who can adapt to busy days, long hours, and a life with few boundaries. It also means accepting that even when the class is in, there is no time to celebrate because the cycle must begin again. The participants in this study are successful because they have accepted this environment, found ways to manage the demands, and come to love the changing nature of the profession. All of the women have stepped onto this roller coaster and none have gotten off; they keep going around the track, traveling the dips and inclines, and reveling in the fun and excitement.

### **Leadership as a Social Process**

As I analyzed the data that was collected from the interviews, I sought to understand how these women were leading and what they were doing in their leadership roles that indicated a common experience. From the stories they told and the examples

they provided from their day-to-day lived experiences, a theme began to emerge in relation to their shared leadership practice. Throughout their conversations, they described the importance of the relationships they were able to build with the people that were a part of their offices and institutions. For these women, effective leadership is about fostering and promoting a social process. Their leadership is characterized by actions and behaviors that create interdependency and interaction, the two sub-themes that will be discussed in this section.

**Interdependency.** This sub-theme describes one way that the participants have come to understand effective leadership—as an experience of interdependency. Their style of leadership stands in sharp contrast to an experience based on independence, either on their part or that of their staffs. These women have learned that they cannot do it all on their own. Instead, they have chosen to foster an environment where there is a shared sense of responsibility. They create this climate not only to ensure that the goals of the unit will be accomplished but also because they understand that people are happier when they feel that they and their contributions are a valued and necessary part of the admissions operation. Excerpts from the interviews describe a shared leadership practice of interdependency among the participants that is signified by their abilities to foster leadership at all levels and encourage collaboration.

***Fostering leadership at all levels.*** Although the women in this study are the figureheads of their units and the lone individuals standing at the helms of large and complex operations, their styles are not defined by this representation of leadership. Every one of the six women spoke about the ways that they foster leadership among all

staff members. For Susan, being able to engage her team and encourage them to step forward to contribute defines her leadership style:

My definition of leadership is...helping to define a direction and the opportunity points for reaching whatever the goals are. Um, I think, ah, leadership offers the opportunity... to challenge those that are engaged in the process—whatever it might be—and...drawing out of them their best contribution and helping people to see, you know, here is the big picture and each individual person as a unique opportunity to contribute to that big picture.

Although the leader may be the individual who sets the vision, no goal can be attained without each individual accomplishing his or her part. Encouraging individuals to step forward is a matter of creating understanding, buy-in, and accountability. In relation to helping people understand their roles, both Susan and Fern pointed out that a large project—the aptly phrased “big picture”—can be very overwhelming. Part of the responsibility of the leader, according to Fern, is to “make sure that work is distributed fairly—that no one gets, um, more, on their plate than someone else” or more than they can handle. And, as Susan added, every individual does not have to pay attention to every aspect of the project, but staff members need to know what their contributions will be and how their duties impact the team and the project.

Aside from ensuring that staff members understand how their individual contributions add value to the overall goal, fostering leadership at all levels is also a matter of buy-in and accountability. The two go hand-in-hand and signify a high level of interdependency. If staff members accept that the tasks they are given are critical toward

completing a project or accomplishing the mission of the unit, they are more likely to feel responsible and accountable. Susan's definition of leadership incorporates a sense of accountability, but it is India who spoke at length about the value of buy-in as a means to help people understand a direction and be willing to go there as a group. India learned about buy-in from her mentor at a time when she was more likely to take "a bulldog approach" and say, "OK, we're all going to do this and this is why we're going to do it and there's a great reason why we're going to do it. Now, let's just do it." By taking the time to explain the goals and how the contributions of the group were critical in meeting objectives, she learned how to "build up to where people feel like they have an ownership." The end result may be the same, regardless of the approach, but "we'll all end up there happier... We all feel like we actually had a piece of it rather than feeling like you were forced to do something."

Closely related to buy-in is the notion of accountability, and the participants in this study felt very strongly about the importance of encouraging a sense of responsibility among their staffs. For Anna, fostering leadership is about giving people an immediate responsibility. Like India, this was a lesson that she learned from a mentor and a practice that she has continued to enact as a director:

You were responsible and accountable for a certain project, whether it's a visitation night or a report... You were immediately given responsibility, um, and you were held accountable... when you have that ownership, I think you take your job a little more seriously.

When staff members do take their jobs seriously, leadership will flourish in the office and

other individuals will step forward to keep things running smoothly. This occurrence signifies a high level of interdependence—that staff members feel responsible not just for their individual tasks but also for the overall success of the office. Fern spoke about seeing this type of leadership in action in her own office:

right now, we're faced with, um, processing large volumes of applications of students that are wanting to come in the fall. And, the volume of telephone calls and transcripts and things coming in the office are...more than the actual processors handle, so the administrative team step up and they help by taking telephone calls, for example. That takes a lot of the work load off of the processing team.

Communicating the goals of the office has led to a climate of shared accountability where “some people work faster than others, so they sometimes step in and help their partners and so forth.”

Fern, Bridget, and India all begin this process of fostering leadership by working with their associate directors, who run the day-to-day operations, to create a sort of trickle down effect. Hannah, however, believes it is important for the director to create an expectation of accountability from all staff from the time they first enter the office. For Hannah, even entry level staff members must understand how their jobs impact the bottom line. To be successful, her entire admissions team must be a study in interdependence. As a group and as individuals, they are responsible not only for filling the class but also for attending to the needs of individual students. To be accountable and a leader in admissions—at any level—means understanding that the job “impacts every

day the lives of people who are making a decision to go back to school.”

Fostering leadership at all levels creates a more effective admissions operation because goals are more likely to be met when the director promotes buy-in and accountability. When the participants in this study spoke about the leadership they see exhibited by their staffs, they spoke about their feelings of trust. Anna has a lot of pride in her staff and her style of leadership is defined by her trust. She relies on her staff to help her stay organized and keep things running. She has to trust them “because we have so many things going on and so many programs that if I had to know every detail about everything in one minute, I think my brain would explode,” she explains while laughing. She understands the importance of hiring good people and building relationships with those whom she hires, a philosophy also noted by Hannah, Bridget, Fern, and India. Hannah stated that great leaders “surround themselves with great people” and Bridget admitted that “I hire good people... You’ve got to have staff that you respect who respects you, that are smart and innovative, and that you can give projects to.” Like the other directors, she allows her associate directors to manage the day-to-day operations of the office and does not micro-manage. Fern stated that when you’re hiring people, “hire people smarter than you because they only make you look better and make your office look better.” India operates from the same perspective: “my definition of leadership is, um, you hire really good people and get out of their way.”

The admissions directors interviewed for this study are able to delegate because they trust their staff members. This trust is a result of the interdependence that has been initiated and nurtured by the directors. Anna stated that having good working

relationships with her staff is “more important than any knowledge about process.” They could figure out what to say in a speech or how to run a program, but good relationships need time and trust to develop and must start with hiring good people. When all these elements are present in the mix, Bridget described the interdependence that exists and that allows her to let go of a project:

I think the hardest thing about being a director, particularly in my role, when I’ve always kept things and done them myself, is to then give things away. And you give it away knowing that someone’s going to do just as good a job as you on that particular project. I have a lot on my plate and can’t do everything. I just have to make sure that the people I hire are people that I feel comfortable giving these assignments to.

The letting go is difficult, but it reflects a mature outlook on what it means to be a leader. It also makes the leader feel good because everyone is responsible for the goals and the vision: “All of a sudden, it’s kind of the weight of the world off of you. You realize, ‘Hey, I don’t have to do everything to be successful.’”

***Promoting collaboration.*** In addition to their abilities to foster leadership throughout their organizations, all six of the participants in this study also spoke about the need for collaboration. The second part of this sub-theme, then, entails how the female chief admissions officers encourage and take advantage of collaborative efforts in their offices, at their universities, and in their profession. Collaboration is about working together to achieve a goal. It entails a high level of participation from everyone involved and is rife with the notion of equality—that all contributors are important to the effort.

The participants are perhaps proudest of the collaborative natures of their offices. Their language indicated that by working together, their employees have become much more than a staff. Although the directors are cognizant of staff members' individual needs, these individuals are also seen as a unit; they are "the group," "a team," and "our office family." The women's statements indicate how they have created a social order defined by collaboration and interdependency. Susan spoke of collaboration when asked what she thought it meant to be a successful female leader. In her response to the question, she indicated first that "I don't know that I necessarily see myself as a successful female leader. I see myself as an effective one." The reason she is effective: collaboration. She indicated that even though she may bring a vision to the group as the leader, the goal can only be reached by working together. "An effective leader for me is...it's not a, ah, top-down [approach], but it's much more of a collaborative type of an engagement with folks." By engagement, she means taking the time to learn the culture, norms, celebrations, and challenges of the group and then working with her team to understand and articulate a vision. Creating a climate of ongoing participation and engagement is important because "you can come in and kind of create things but...if it's for the moment, then it's not going to be effective. It has to have some, you know, it has to be able to last."

India is also a director who puts a great deal of effort into creating the type of culture that encourages ongoing collaboration. Her compassion and love for her staff became apparent when she talked about "our office family." Like Susan, India understands the importance of taking the time to understand her staff and mold the



culture of the office. She stated that “it’s very important to me, especially in the south, and I always tell people this who come from out of town, is you’ve got to let us get to know you.” She strives to bring people into the fold of the office family and create a common bond. Getting to know someone is important to India because of her upbringing, but what she is also doing is building a team that will be able to work together. She enjoys the diversity that people can bring to her office, but she also takes the time to forge a common ground to achieve the collaboration she needs for a successful admissions operation: “I like to hire people from small privates. I like to hire people from publics outside the state. Um, I want to draw on people who have different experience than me. That’s the way you build a team that’s comprehensive.”

Once a team is built, it still takes effective leadership from the admissions director to maintain high levels of collaboration. It is an ongoing process. One example that is illustrative of the directors’ efforts to encourage collaboration involves merging the counseling and processing staffs. India indicated that an important aspect of her job is ensuring that these two groups work together and understand that they must collaborate to create a successful admissions operation. It can be a struggle to achieve this understanding because the two groups have different functions that reflect the production and customer service areas of admissions:

getting the people who do the production and getting the people who do the recruitment to understand each other is sometimes difficult. They have a low tolerance for each other. So when you see a production person—a data entry person—playing on the Web, the first thing the recruitment person says is, “They

don't do anything all day except look at the Web." When you see a recruitment person flying to New York and it looks glamorous to the person sitting behind the desk all day, you have to make them to understand that travel—you know, five different hotels in five different days and standing behind a table for eight hours is not glamorous.

As a leader, India's job is to "break down barriers and get them to understand what each other really does. That's the first way, I think, you must create a successful office." Both groups must collaborate in order for the admissions unit to achieve its goal of enrolling students: "You cannot recruit unless you deliver a timely decision to the student. You can't deliver a timely decision to a student if you don't have the application, which the recruiter brought in." To do these things, all staff members must work together and they must recognize their interdependency.

Fern and Bridget also spoke about the ways that they encourage collaboration from recruitment and processing staffs. For Fern, there is the expectation that the administrative staff will step forward to help when the processors are dealing with large volumes of applications. In Bridget's office, however, she has created special project teams made up of both counselors and processors. Team members are charged with developing new ideas to improve communications, recruitment, and diversity. The teams allow everyone to participate in an equal way in the development of new initiatives. Even though Bridget is the chief admissions officer at her institution, what brings her joy is not individual accomplishments but seeing the good things that result from the collaborative efforts of her staff: "I feel good about when we've met enrollment goals and the

university's very, very happy and I can talk about the staff and how well they've done this year and how everybody works as a team to make all that happen.”

These women are also effective leaders because they encourage and utilize collaboration at both the university level and in their professional organizations. It has already been mentioned how Susan advocated the value of being able to balance and reconcile the two worlds of academics and student affairs as part of managing a successful admissions operation. In her position, it is important to be able to navigate between these two realms to recruit and serve students. Much of the collaboration that she engages in at her university involves networking and communicating about common concerns:

I engage in with the associate deans a great deal, um, to ensure that, you know, whatever is going on in the college is consistent with the larger university, expectations that are then consistent with the state university system, um, policies that are then consistent with, you know, any legislative statute, rule, or whatever...So, that takes up a good portion of my time—just making sure we're doing what we're supposed to be doing and not get ourselves in trouble as it relates to any of those different types of environments, um, and so meeting with them and talking with a variety of different folks to help them to have that information.

Interdependency exists because campus administrators collaborate and share information for the good of the university. Hannah also spoke about the connections that she has developed with other people across the institution. She believes that her leadership style

is entrepreneurial, which she defines by stating that “good leaders are collaborative. Good leaders look for partnerships. Um, good leaders look for opportunities.” She uses these partnerships to simply “get things done.”

India feels fortunate to be at an institution where collaboration is the norm, and she has been able to promote and take advantage of this atmosphere. She relishes this aspect of her job because she gets to work with other campus leaders on big issues and be a problem solver at the university. She has two arenas in which to do these things. On the one hand, she has been able to join a network of other women through a leadership development program that has “brought me into a connection of women that is going to be very valuable no matter what job I hold on this campus.” She has also been fortunate to be a part of a larger network of faculty and staff that work together on issues, which she indicates is unusual: “I hear all the time from my colleagues about these silos of the faculty and administration. They don’t work well together...I never run into that here. I am amazed at our ability to collaborate.” She attributes this cooperation to the fact that “we run too lean all the time, so we’re forced to collaborate. I mean, we just don’t have a choice.” Whatever the reason, the outcome is that “We’ve come up with some beautiful programs, um, and it’s because we had to collaborate and speak to our colleagues and work together.”

Aside from collaborating with people at their own institutions, three of the women talked about their involvement in professional organizations outside their universities. Although two of the women in this group described their involvement with professional organizations as a means to stay fresh and avoid burnout, all three indicated that these

activities also allow them to connect with colleagues. Susan explained that it is very easy to become isolated on one's campus. One important benefit that she receives from her professional contacts and involvement is the chance to learn about best practices:

I think that is a much more interactive and engaged kind of person and when you have your colleagues doing really interesting things in their campuses. Then to be able to sit at a conference and, you know, and hear them give a talk about whatever it is they're doing or to sit on-on-one with them and delve a little deeper and those types of things.

Through her collaboration with leaders at other schools, she can learn what they are doing that works and bring these ideas back to her own campus.

Anna also pointed to the networking opportunities that come through professional organizations as being extremely valuable. For her, the most important benefit has been “getting out there, working with other professionals, getting to know other professionals, and forming relationships—having people I can call and ask for advice.” She gave an example of how this type of collaboration ultimately makes her a more effective director and benefits the students she serves:

And then networking is obviously, um, very important to me because in this field, you are very dependent on other people—whether it's your high school counselors or recruiters at other positions. Um, it's very much a “who you know” environment to get things done and, uh, to help students because not every student needs to be at my institution. They may need to be at your institution. Being able to pick up the phone and call and say, “Can you help this student?” ... That's what

my job really is.

Bridget is also an active member of various professional organizations. She values the insight she has received on best practices and echoed Anna's comments about benefiting from the advice of others: "Where if it's something that I've never faced before, I feel comfortable in calling anyone of my colleagues... 'What do you think about this? Give me some ideas.'" Despite the nature of admissions as a profession where directors are competing for a limited number of high school graduates to meet enrollment goals, these women have benefitted tremendously from their professional contacts. Their statements indicated the respect they have for their colleagues at other institutions. Bridget, in fact, considers these individuals not only colleagues but friends, people with whom she enjoys collaborating. She knows they can do more together because "Collectively, we're really intelligent."

**Interaction.** Another characteristic of the leadership practices of these women that marks their leadership as a social process is the degree of interaction they are able to achieve and promote. As is the case with interdependence, a leadership style built upon interaction is more about the participation of everyone than the directives of one individual. In fact, this sub-theme describes the way the women in this study engage in behaviors that are far removed from those of a strong, solitary figurehead. Their style of leadership is characterized by participation; they feel comfortable stepping forward and helping with the task at hand, which reinforces the value of both the task and the individuals who perform it on a regular basis. Through their actions and behaviors, the women in this study operate in and promote an environment where they are able to

achieve results by being active participants themselves and by giving others the tools needed to develop their own skills of influence.

*Doing and leading by example.* One way that these women lead is by being active participants in the work processes in their offices. All six of the women indicated that they are still involved to some degree with the everyday tasks that must be accomplished to keep things running such as reading files, working with individual students, and recruiting. In this respect, they lead by doing. Hannah indicated that she is a doer because she enjoys the tasks and it helps her make improvements to office processes: “Yeah, I do more hands-on than I should. OK. Um, I love it. I love my hands-on. But, I always tell myself that I try and take my hands-on and use it to shape improvements, changes in processes, things of that nature.”

Fern is also very hands on and stated that she enjoys this aspect of her job. She gets involved to help her staff when they are too busy to accomplish something that needs to be done. She stated that “I’m like overseeing and all that and making sure it all runs smoothly, but I also feel, as the director, that I have to get my hands involved in things too.” On the day that she was interviewed, she brought my attention to her latest hands-on project and spoke about the other ways she participates in the day-to-day functions of the office:

I’ve got a big old stack of papers right there. It’s something I’m working on right now in Banner because—on student records—because the staff, right now, is getting ready for the fall semester. They don’t have time to do things. So every few minutes that I have free, I sit over here and check off a few of the—the

students off that list. I've been known to go into the mail room if the students are doing a mailing and help them stuff some envelopes if we've got to get something out. Um, in the fall, my philosophy is everybody in this office is a recruiter, whether that's part of your job description or not. We are the recruiters for this university.

Fern's words convey both responsibility and equality. Even though she is the director, she feels responsible for ensuring every task is completed and she is willing to do the same tasks as other staff members so that the office runs smoothly.

Aside from keeping their admissions operations running, the statements of the women afforded additional insights about their leadership practices in the ways they explained their participation. For Fern, leadership *is* doing: "I actually have a hard time seeing myself as a leader. I feel like I'm more of a doer." During this part of interview, she struggled to find the words to express her thoughts about how and why she does what she does, "Maybe that's my definition of a leadership. Leadership is...being a doer—is getting there and...participating and...motivating by example and all those kinds of things that I don't—I don't, ah—I don't know." Anna was more definitive about why she is a doer and described her style as leading by example, which means

If you're not gonna do it yourself, don't ask somebody else to do it. I think a leader should be someone who shows other people what needs to be done by leading by example and also that to be a good leader, you also have to be a good servant—sort of the servant-leadership, um, is something that I'm really big into.



The statements of these women reveal that they are deeply committed to their jobs, their staffs, and the success of their offices.

For several of the women, there is an element of self-sacrifice to their leadership—the notion that they will put the office and its success ahead of their own. Fern spoke of feeling “like that’s what I need to do” and Bridget expressed that “when I’m not here, I feel bad if I’m not doing stuff.” They do not do it for the glory, as Anna admitted, “I’m not all about funding—you know, taking care of your ego or getting the awards and the recognition. That’s not what drives me.” What drives her is the chance to participate in the task at hand in order to teach others how to do it and to ensure it is accomplished effectively. However, she is also motivated by an obligation to protect her team. When things don’t go well, she will step into the role of the strong figurehead:

It’s all about the leadership example, um, being willing to say, “I messed up. It’s my fault,” and protecting my staff. I mean, that’s what I’m here for. My job is to show them what needs to be done, and also, um, if something goes wrong, take the bullet for them, and then help correct those mistakes.

For these women, leadership is about doing and interacting—they get things done and build the staffs that will continue to work to achieve the goals of their offices.

***Being a good follower.*** The women in this study are able to step out of the role of the leader who is a figurehead and become doers who lead by example. Closely related to this practice is another way of relating to their supervisors and staffs that characterizes their leadership experience: being a good follower. Like leading by example, being a good follower implies a leader who is willing to share influence and whose actions are

more about achieving good things for the office than for herself. According to Susan, women have a long history of being the followers in admissions operations:

I mean for a very, very long time, admissions was a very much...from the leadership side of things, very much a male-dominated...and, um, kind of the women took care of the, you know, they were real good associates, you know, associate directors or outreach coordinators and...making sure all of the programs and these types of things were done well. But when it came down to really, um, thinking about what it was going to take to build the class or if you were needing to talk about financing and funding...the women weren't necessarily there.

Unfortunately, as Susan's statement indicated, playing the role of the good follower has not always been a matter of choice for women. Despite the fact that they may have acquired the skills and experience needed to run an admissions operation, they were relegated to lesser positions in the office hierarchy.

Four of the women in this study discussed their roles as followers in their organizations. Delving into this area was a difficult subject for some of the women. "Follower" is not a word that they used themselves, but their behaviors and actions as followers have become an element of their lived leadership experiences. When they spoke about these experiences, there were feelings of frustration, anger, and obligation. Hannah spoke about the obligation that one has to respect a boss or supervisor as a leader, even when she may not agree with how they conduct business. At one point in her life, Hannah reported to someone who she enjoyed as a person but she "was uncomfortable with decisions that were being made." At the time, she felt she had no

recourse. She felt it would be inappropriate to voice her concerns to others and so she instead continued to do her job and be a good follower out of what amounted to her respect for the administration. As she tried to explain her dilemma, she stated,

that was really tough because, you know, I have very pretty strict rules about my loyalty, my respect of, you know, supervisors, and... things of that nature. Um, I very much believe that... you support, um, the leadership. You support the vision of those leaders.

In choosing to support this supervisor, she had to temporarily put her own opinions aside. She saw this decision as being not really about her but for the good of the institution: “I believe that in the long run, um, you know, the most important thing is the organization.”

India and Bridget also talked about events in their careers when they chose to be good followers for the benefit of their offices and institutions. In both cases, they had essentially been doing the job of director but someone else still formally held that title. In Bridget’s case, since she had extensive admissions experience, she was expected to teach many of the directors she worked with who had little or no admissions experience. In her words, to be placed in this position was “devastating,” but she went on to articulate why she stayed:

I had to make a decision whether or not I was going to stick it out, help the new person, do whatever I could to make this work...which is what I did. I taught our new director everything I knew because I was the associate and I loved my job, and I wasn’t going to let that little—little bump in the road affect me long term or leave an institution that I really loved. But it was hard; it was really hard.

Like Hannah, it was something she did for the good of the university.

India, on the other hand, talked about a different experience as a follower. Even though she also was placed in a position where she was doing the director's job as an associate, she chose to continue in this position out of respect for her supervisor and because being a follower represented a chance for her learn:

I think there are a lot of people in this office who felt like I did my boss' job for a long time before I became director, and I'd hear comments about that: "Well, you do his job for him. What does he do?" And that balancing act of, one, being appropriate in my answer out of my loyalty to my director. Two—knowing that some of that was true, you know, and...and trying to be truthful. And, three, knowing that even though some of that may be true, it was giving me opportunities to grow.

Hannah, Bridget, and India all had different experiences as followers. Although India saw being a follower as an opportunity, for Hannah and Bridget, talking about this aspect of their leadership experience evinced feelings of frustration and anger. For all three, however, following was a form of leadership because they were interacting in a way that supported the harmony and interactions of the office and allowed their admissions operations to continue to function.

***Promoting an open environment.*** Since the participants in this study have experienced being a follower as well as leader, it is no surprise that they also devote considerable effort to ensuring that all staff members feel valued and heard. One way that they actively promote this positive interaction is by creating an open environment, open

in the sense that people feel comfortable speaking about their concerns. They encourage buy-in and accountability from their staff members. In addition, the participants in this study also talked about a leadership style that molds the social environment by encouraging interaction through consensus building, listening, and approachability.

Susan spoke of her efforts to create consensus whenever there is an important decision to be made because just as buy-in shows value, consensus building takes the process a step further. The interaction that results in consensus building implies that everyone must be in agreement or at least acceptance to move forward; there is both participation and equality as people recognize “here’s how I’m a valuable member of the process.” However, the skill of the leader becomes even more important when there is disagreement. At these times, according to Susan, it is important for a leader to be definitive but also to listen. She went on to describe the process of listening and engaging and how these behaviors become part of a leadership style that brings people together and channels their interactions into a positive outcome for the group:

not everyone’s going to be happy with the final outcome and not everyone’s going to be happy with the decision and that is OK. You know, the next issue, the next day, the next hour, the next meeting where, you know, somebody wasn’t happy before will be happy about that piece and somebody who was happy previously will not be happy and that is just a continuous part of kind of, um, managing people and engaging in a consensus kind of a building...of acknowledging that everyone’s not going to be happy but feeling confident that this is the right decision—that we’re being able to move forward with it and then,

um, being able to make a definitive decision after...and still having the group feel as if, you know, they've been heard.

Although it is important to make a decision, Susan's comments indicated that it is equally important for a leader to take the time to ensure all groups members were listened to and had the opportunity to share their comments.

Although Susan seeks to listen to her team members as one means to gain consensus, several of the other women spoke of the power of listening as means to maintain and gauge morale in the office. India indicated that being a good listener means one is willing and able to understand and attend to the needs of others. Like several of the directors, she makes it a point to hold not only team meetings but also individual meetings with her key staff members. She spoke about the importance of

getting to know your people very well, um, and then being able to meet their needs...I have monthly conversations with each of my assistant directors, um, and everyone of those monthly conversations are handled very, very differently because I've worked very hard to learn how they want to approach their work, what kind of feedback do they need, um, and everyone of them is run very differently.

India's way of getting to know people indicates a respect for the individual and a willingness to listen, a practice she believes has also made her a better leader.

One additional aspect of the leadership styles of the participants that surfaced in the data analysis in relation to promoting an open environment involved their efforts to be approachable and accessible. Approachable means that staff members know they can talk

to their directors and share good news as well as bad without repercussions. Accessibility indicates more of a physical presence. These behaviors are important because they signify that the leader is engaged in the office and that the people who work there matter; they are worthy of the director's time and attention.

Five of the participants spoke about what they do to attend to their staffs and be available. Fern makes sure she is approachable by being what she calls "an open door policy director." Her office has what seems like "a revolving door" because so many people are constantly going in and out. Whether it is a difficult problem or a simple question, she wants to resolve the issue so things can move along and her staff members feel better. She stated that "very rarely will I ever tell anyone to come back because they feel like they've got a crisis and I want to try to resolve that crisis and not put them off and send them away to stew over it or worry about it. Let's deal with and wait for the next crisis to come along." Bridget also signals her approachability in the same way: "My door's always open with candy." She saw other directors make mistakes in this area, so she was determined to be a director whom people could come in and talk to and know it was a safe environment.

Aside from having an open door policy, four of the chief admissions officers interviewed talked about other ways that they seek to be available to staff. Anna and Bridget spoke about making sure they physically leave their offices to connect with staff members in different areas. Anna makes it a point to visit the reception area:

I'm constantly walking up front asking, "How's it going? What's going on?" you know, or "Is there any problem?" or I'll walk around behind the counter, "What

are you doing? Show me what you're doing." Just sort of to stay in touch with what's going on and to let them know that I'm accessible.

Susan related how she uses meetings to attend to the needs of her staff:

I can outline and be driven, pass out assignments and be—be done but I don't think that's very effective. I think you can outline things and pass out assignments and then you've got to go back and make sure that everyone is feeling taken care of as they're moving through the process—that they're feeling that whatever their assignment is is valued.

Even though the items on the agenda may have been completed, Susan takes the time to connect and interact with staff.

The women in this study spoke about the ways they have been able to promote interaction on their staffs through their availability. India's leadership experience, however, also offers an additional notion: that directors also need to attend to their own needs to feel valued. India talked about the physical isolation she had to overcome when she was named director and moved from the busy, active side of the office to the quiet side. She was very aware of the symbolism of the previous director's office, a place everyone called "the ivory tower." True to its name, the office was sterile and white, so she had it painted in the hopes that it would create a more comfortable environment.

Nonetheless, she still found that there was a psychological isolation that came with her change in location and status that new paint could not disguise. She explained:

I even had it painted when I moved in for them not to see it as "the ivory tower."

Um, but it still was like that. I didn't hear as much of the action, so I was lonely in



location. But also, um, the people who would come to me and tell me the office problems before didn't come to me and tell me the office problems. I was the director. So, in some ways, it was lonely. Ah, I had to get used to that.

She spoke about how she has adapted. Sometimes, it's nice to be removed from the office drama and gossip, yet she still feels separated: "I have to adapt to not being the—really what I would say is the, in some way, the heart and blood of the office.... I lost it."

India's leadership style is characterized by behaviors such as listening and seeking buy-in. She cares deeply about her staff and wants them to feel valued. In fact, through these efforts and by moving to "the ivory tower," she has given her staff free rein to be loud, busy, and social. However, in doing so, she has sacrificed some of these same privileges for herself.

***Promoting a learning environment.*** Another aspect of the lived leadership experience of the female chief admissions officers is that they promote a growing and learning environment. This environment becomes an aspect of the social processes that they nurture because it is indicative of an ongoing responsibility to develop other staff members even as they are constantly learning and growing themselves. All six of these women seem to love working with younger staff members who are, as Bridget calls them, the young stars in their profession. They spoke of a number of ways that they are able to promote learning in their offices.

One way that they are able to grow others is to simply allow them to take advantage of all that admissions has to offer. Fern is very supportive of her new staff members and is keenly aware of what she and her operation can teach a young

professional: “I feel like we’re a good, um, training ground for them to learn—not just about the university, but how to manage their time, how to work with people, how to work with the public.” Bridget also added that as a leader, she can give people more responsibility, provide feedback, and send them to workshops to help them learn. Both women, along with India, indicated the pride they feel when staff accept new positions, even though it means they are leaving the office. Fern stated that “I feel like it’s a compliment to the office when they leave and have a better job, especially on-campus. I tell them it’s, you know, it only does us good when they see we have people leave us, moving into other jobs. They do a good job when they get out there.” Even though India stated that “I don’t want them to leave,” she continued to talk passionately about the satisfaction she gets when staff members move on to new positions.

It’s my job to grow them. So, you know, my philosophy of leadership is definitely ...my job is to grow these people. My job is to watch them move onto a promotion. I don’t—they don’t ever owe me anything. You know, I hate to be thanked.... That was my job, um, you know, and, of course, I don’t say, “Don’t thank me.” You know, I say, “You’re welcome, but you’re the one who did all the work.”

In her statement, there is a sense of her willingness to put other people and their personal welfare ahead of her own need to hold on to talented staff.

Although a number of the women spoke about the ways that they promote growth and learning in their offices, India’s and Bridget’s comments also reveal the degree that they are considerate of an individual’s wishes in this area. It has already been discussed

how the women in this study were themselves very assertive in taking on opportunities that allowed them to grow. However, the data indicated that these two leaders understand that this route may not be for everyone. They do not take it for granted that everyone wants to advance and take on more responsibility. India spoke about the importance of getting to know people and listening to them. Part of her job as a director is not indiscriminately forcing opportunities on people but

helping people build at the level they want to build. You cannot force data entry people to do some things that you would strongly encourage, ah, professional people to do. You know, what I've learned is I thought that everyone wants to advance and do the next job and you've got to help them grow. That is not—absolutely not true. There are people who want to do what they're doing and be left alone to do it and be given positive feedback for what they do and their contribution, and they never want to be made to stand up in front of an audience and talk about what they do.

Thus, India discovered the importance of promoting a learning environment where and when it is wanted. Part of being an effective leader is being considerate and compassionate toward all staff, including those who may be comfortable where they are and are not looking to move up in the same way that these two directors did.

Bridget's experience in this area also reveals a concern for the individual as well as an insistence on high standards and expectations for those who want to advance. She openly talks with staff about opportunities to grow and learn but indicated that they need to tell her what they want to do: "I try to share that with my current staff. 'You tell me

what you're passionate about so (a) you feel good about coming to work every day and (b) if you want to seek additional responsibilities, I need to know that so that I can help you move up.” In this respect, she is like India in that she likes staff members to tell her what they want to accomplish. Bridget's words do reveal, however, that she has high expectations for staff who want to advance. She expects them to earn their opportunities in the same way that she did. She said “You do have to pay your dues,” which can be difficult for some because they “just want things too quickly”:

new professionals don't want to pay their dues... They're 21-years-old, they come out of school in admissions jobs. They want large salaries, a big office, and a lot of responsibility. They can't handle any of those... most of them have some good ideas, but you got to go through the ranks. You're not going to come out of school as an associate director—supervising—when you've never even been supervised. That's important.

Bridget concentrates her efforts on those who indicate that they want to make admissions a long-term career. She is willing to work with them and teach them how they can go far in the profession, but, sometimes, the first part of this process is a frank conversation. She feels a need to “set the record straight with some of them” so that they understand they have a lot to learn and that it is not going to happen overnight. Unfortunately, in the interim, many will move on to jobs with higher pay and more status.

Even though some staff do move on, others stay and become the next generation of leaders in admissions. The data collected from the interviews indicated that overall, these women do seem to gain personal satisfaction from their leadership in this area.

Three of the women, Fern, Anna, and Hannah, expressed the pride and personal satisfaction they feel in being able to be a role model for someone—it's one of things that keeps them going and something they feel they contribute to the profession. Fern talked about this feeling of accomplishment:

I hope somewhere out there there's someone that's worked for me that thinks of me as their mentor and have taken from me and my management something, um, that they can then pass forward to someone at some point. Um, I know I have some people who come and tell me that they, you know, when they leave that how much they've enjoyed working in here in this office and how much they've learned, but I hope they've learned some things from me.

Although Fern talked about mentoring all young staff members, both Anna and Hannah feel a special obligation to help women in the profession. Hannah stated in relation to her own leadership experience, “the part of that I take most seriously is my responsibility to be a role model to other women.” To this same end, one of Anna's current projects is developing a mentoring program for young female professionals. For this project, she does rely on the power she possesses from being in a high level position to be able to help young women develop their own leadership skills: “I've used the fact that I can now be in a leadership role to say, ‘I am *going* to make this possible for the younger women in our profession to have a place to go and learn and not have to seek it out on their own and learn it the hard way.’”

For some of the participants in this study, being a leader means fostering a learning environment that prepares the next generation of leaders. All six women,

however, also spoke about their ongoing learning process, and in this way they also serve as role models. Even though all the participants are seasoned and experienced admissions professionals, they are still open to new ideas and trying new things. They learn in a variety of ways. Susan and Anna spoke of the opportunities they have to present at and attend conferences. Working at large universities, as all these women do, means that, oftentimes, they do have more access to resources and opportunities than some of their colleagues. As Anna stated, “it is exciting in that, as a large institution, we have a lot of opportunity to do things, to travel, we’re on the cutting-edge of technology in a lot of areas, so we get to go to conferences and present.”

In addition, both Fern and Hannah pointed out that, as they have often done, leaders need to be able to learn from their mistakes. For Fern, some of her biggest mistakes have been in hiring new personnel:

Um, you always have, I think, situations where you wished you had done something different and you question, “Did I do the right thing there? Did I make the right decision? Did I set the right example?” I, um, sometimes—well, I know I have, ah, failed in a few hiring decisions that, ah, people then began to question me and how did I reach that decision, um, which made me question how did I reach that decision, but you work through those situations and you try to learn from them and not do it again.

Her comments illustrated the learning process she went through on these occasions as she analyzed her decision-making process to figure out what went wrong. In addition, professional colleagues are also a great learning resource for the participants. A number

of the women spoke about learning from their peers in professional organizations as well as at their own institutions. When they have a problem or are facing issues they have never dealt with at their universities, they often turn to these colleagues to learn how to deal with a situation.

It is not only their peers, however, from whom they have a willingness to learn. Susan spoke about her obvious delight in working with young people and what they have to contribute to her leadership and to the office, especially in terms of using technology in admissions:

this is very new to them. You're seeing everything through fresh eyes, so things that you may think that are, you know, just stalwarts of the profession or opportunity and, you know, some of the young professionals come in and say, "Well why would you do it like that?"... You know, the shift in how technology is used throughout the enrollment management and admissions... is just amazing. And I think these young professionals—who a lot of this technology is just second nature to them offer such a wealth of opportunity and learning for me to be able to say, "OK, you know, what's value-added to what we need to accomplish and what, um, what can we glean from this is going to be really effective?" So, you know, I think there's any numerous or opportunities for me to learn and grow and figure things out from, like I said, the new professionals.

Working with young professionals is also something Bridget enjoys. She is enthusiastic and passionate about the accomplishments of her staff and like Susan, appreciates their contributions. As a leader, she benefits from their "great ideas that are very innovative

because I'm not afraid to think outside the box.”

Thus, the lived leadership experience of these women is one of continual learning. They promote learning opportunities for their staffs and they take advantage of them personally. These are women who are aware of the talents and skills they bring to their positions. But, they also know there is still much to learn from a variety of people at all levels. Their statements indicated a talent for locating and implementing the kinds of ideas that have the potential to increase the success of their departments. They all seem to have taken the advice of Bridget about being a chief admissions officer: “Go into it saying, ‘I don’t know everything, but what I don’t know, I’m going to find out.’”

***Dealing with problem staff.*** Four of the women who spoke about learning talked about experiences with what Hannah deemed “hard personnel lessons.” The data supports a separate sub-theme describing the struggles of the participants with what can be termed problem staff members. These are staff members who for a variety of reasons may disrupt the social processes and normal functioning of the office. They may be individuals who are not able or willing to perform their jobs adequately or are unhappy in the office environment. Although four participants mentioned dealing with personnel issues, two spoke at length about how these issues impacted their leadership experiences and how it was a necessity to address these issues to preserve the positive interaction they had nurtured in their offices.

The two admissions directors who spoke at greatest length about how they handled personnel issues were India and Fern. They did not speak of a particular issue they were dealing with at the moment; their statements implied that this aspect of their



leadership is ongoing and that they have been continually affected by difficult experiences in this area. As Fern stated, “I think, the bottom line on most of the difficult times that I can think of were all something related to personnel.” These times were difficult because of the intense obligation they feel to preserve the harmonious and high-functioning offices they have created. India clearly feels this obligation and she stated, “I truly believe that I am accountable to handle conflict immediately in this office. I’m accountable to the people who work in this office to create an environment where people are successful and people who aren’t successful need to be somewhere else.”

India continued and spoke extensively about her leadership style in regard to promoting an amicable environment. One of the points she made is that when there is a problem, a leader must deal with the issue immediately or face the consequences:

To me, being able to handle conflict is number one in being a good manager because I see so many people who will not do it—who are such amazing managers in every other way. They just will turn their back to conflict. They’ll ignore it. And it will eventually come up and bite them. Um, so being able to handle conflict, but do it in a way that does not kill the morale of your staff.

She explained how she actually does deal with conflict. For her, it is a process that involves both objectivity and compassion. She must be objective and “assess each person’s needs and meet their needs on their level. And a lot of times, that is assessing that you don’t belong here and you’re not a good fit and how can I help you move somewhere else? And I probably do more of that than other managers.” This assessment must be completed quickly and accurately or else “they will be a disease in my office if

they're not happy here, especially the professional staff.”

Although India's comments are to the point, her words also revealed her compassionate nature. Even though she may assess that there is a problem, she does give the individual the benefit of the doubt and assumes he or she needs more training. Discussions occur with the employee, usually resulting in an action plan. However, if it becomes clear that the employee is not the right fit for the office, she feels that her job is not to punish. She seeks to help the individual see that there is a mismatch and move on willingly with her help. She may say,

”Look at your performance. Look at what you enjoy. Look at what makes you unhappy. Are you really happy here?”...I mean, I've seen people open their eyes and say, “You know, I'm really not.” You know, and, then let's help you. I'll help you. I'll give you references. I'll send you job things. I mean, I've literally helped people move on to a job that they were much happier at, you know? And I never look at it as trying to get rid of them.

She is able to feel compassion and be understanding because of the ability to put her personal feelings aside, “even if those people have literally just exhausted you with their performance or lack thereof.” Ultimately, if she does have to terminate someone, she knows she must move beyond her personal feelings and begin the conversation with empathy: “I've fired people, and I have approached that firing as ‘This is painful for me and this is painful for you. Let's try to do this with grace.’ I mean, you know, I think that that is absolutely key.”

Fern also spoke about dealing with personnel issues and described two past

incidents that made a lasting impact on her leadership experience. Her comments reveal a shared leadership experience in this area as she has learned the same lessons as India and handled them with the same grace and understanding. Both of the incidents Fern described were illustrative of India's point that a leader must deal with a problem staff member immediately. One situation involved a recruiter who was, among other things, not attending scheduled visits and programs. Once it became apparent that there was a problem that talking and training could not solve, it was a long and difficult journey to remove the person from the office: "I had to follow-up with the high schools where she was supposed to visit. I had to monitor the mileage that she was driving in university vehicles. Um, those kinds of things to start the process of documentation to move towards dismissal."

While Fern was attending to this process, the office environment was suffering. India spoke about the compassion a leader must show toward the individual who is not the right fit, but there must also be empathy and understanding for the rest of the office. Fern described how one person created discord in the office and how she tended to the situation:

and while all of that was going on, um, the staff—they didn't realize what I was doing and they didn't need to know. And so, they just kept getting more disgruntled and unhappy and, you know, all I could tell them was..."Just hang in there. We're going to get through this." And, try to support them without telling them because...it wasn't a "need to know" for them of the steps that I was going through to make sure that she did leave. And, um, ultimately, we did. We

dismissed her and things turned around very quickly.

Although this staff member eventually left, Fern has gone through this same process on other occasions. As she and India have both learned, when there is a problem, it is up to the leader to deal with the situation to preserve and protect the morale of the office. Fern used very similar verbiage as India to describe the situation: “while they were here, there was a lot of division of staff and there wasn’t the team effort that I so strived for us to have because that one bad apple over here who was just like an infection.” Whether “disease” or “infection,” the leader must diagnose and find a cure.

In many ways, the admissions director is the person who is responsible for the health of the office. Creating a harmonious and productive office is a process; it is not something that a leader can attend to one day and then ignore on others. It requires a comprehensive approach and commitment to fostering leadership at all levels and promoting collaboration. In addition, it takes a leader who is willing to adopt a style that is far removed from the stereotypical image of the lone individual in “the ivory tower” directing the activities of those below. For these women, leadership means being a doer and a follower and promoting an environment where people are heard, valued, learn, and work in harmony. It is a lived leadership experience of interdependency and interaction, and it is the experience of the female chief admissions officers in this study.

### **Creating Positive Outcomes**

Aside from creating and nurturing a set of social processes, the leadership experience of female chief admissions officers is also about running an effective admissions operation. Universities maintain their admissions offices for one main

purpose: to enroll students. To meet this goal, admissions directors must be able to manage and function within a very change-oriented environment. This fast pace typifies a milieu that is, by its very nature, variable and intense. Then, one must also consider the primary clients of the office. According to India, “the ever-changing trends of an 18-year-old population certainly affect how we do what we do.” Thus, the next theme is about how the women in this study keep pace with and meet the challenges of their constantly changing environment and clients. Two sub-themes describe their experiences in relation to the outcomes of their leadership: for the success of the office and for the good of the university and the students.

**For the success of the office.** Admissions has already been described as a unit that must process applications and interact with the public. But, as this sub-theme indicates, there is more to managing a successful office than understanding the balance between production and customer service. As the interviews progressed, it became evident that the shared leadership experience of female chief admissions officers does at times involve being strong managers who are able to take charge and get results in the form of enrollments. They need these results to ensure the continued functioning of their offices as well as their own tenures as directors. The participants in this study spoke of three areas that require such an approach: setting vision and direction, keeping things running, and dealing with challenges.

**Setting vision and direction.** Three of the women discussed the notion that an important part of their roles as leaders was to set the vision and direction of the office. Hannah spoke about what this aspect of her leadership means: “you play a role in that

vision...but you, um, are always working toward, um, your organization and the role it plays in making that vision happen, and you're always strategically focused toward that vision." Although the vision may come down from the upper level administration, the admissions director must take ownership and accept accountability. Again, according to Hannah, "at my level of leadership, um, you own, um, your institution's vision." Susan shared similar concerns in relation to her leadership experience: "Ah, what is the institution's mission in the largest context? How do we fit into it? And, um, how will we be able to deliver on, you know, the goals that have been outlined for the institution?"

Although several of the women spoke about the importance of the leader in helping people see their roles in the big picture, Susan also talked about those times when leadership involves taking a more direct approach that focuses on results. Adopting this style of leadership does not mean ignoring the needs of the staff for support and understanding but

being able to look at a particular situation and say, "You know, this isn't working, you know. We're all working really, really hard but we're no closer to where we want to get, so let's take an opportunity to evaluate." So the person, in my mind, that's going to be a good leader is going to deliver positive news and negative news in such a way that the group can have—feel a sense of responsibility and connectedness to it, but still, at the same time, feel that they can move forward with whatever the tasks are.

It is up to the leader to ensure the project moves toward completion.

Susan also indicated that in order to get results, the leader must sometimes work

more independently and be the individual who takes responsibility for a large project. She spoke of such a project when asked to tell a story about a significant challenge she has faced in the profession. In her case, it was developing an enrollment reduction plan. To tackle this daunting task, she stated,

it's not just a matter of saying, "OK, well sure, that's easy. We'll just—the freshman class will only have two people and the transfer class will only have six." Um, well no. You know, there are certain reasons why the classes are a certain size and given those parameters, what can we do ensure that, um, we're managing our size better? That we're not just growing for the sake of growing. So, you know, looking at everything from all of our various populations of students.

Part of the complexity of the task entailed making sure that her decisions did not harm the institution or any of its departments. So, finally, once all the variables were considered and the plan was in place, Susan was then in charge of the implementation. Success or failure depended on her ideas and the degree that they could be put into effect. At that point, it was a matter of "engaging every single one of the colleges and helping them to, um, to understand what their number was, how many they could admit in order to enroll." To make a long story short, the plan is still ongoing but has so far been very successful. As Susan told this story, she seemed to get more and more excited. She took on this challenge and thrived within its complexity. Interestingly, and despite her key role as the author of this change, when she described the outcome, she still says, "We did it!"

***Keeping things running.*** Admissions directors are responsible not only for

implementing the vision of the office but also for ensuring that the day-to-day operations run smoothly. Some directors delegate this responsibility to other staff and some are much more hands on, yet it is the chief admissions officer who is ultimately responsible for the functions that impact enrollment. The data reveals that this is another shared aspect of the shared leadership experience.

All six of the women spoke of an experience that encompassed “making sure it all runs smoothly” and entailed the ability to “get stuff done.” India stated frankly that “my job is to make this office as successful as it can be.” Anna also described the nature of her position succinctly when she stated what she does, “I am the director, and I do keep a successful department moving, and we meet enrollment goals.” In order to continue to manage her department, she indicated that it is critical to stay organized and focused. According to Anna, the director may not be involved with every task but must be aware of “the planning, the executing, or the follow-up all the time.” She must “see where we are and what I need to jump on at any given moment.” Susan also described this aspect of her position. Even though she has people to carry out individual projects, she is the one “managing that whole ball of wax, you know, the big picture.” She enjoys this aspect of leadership, she is good at it, and it contributes to the success of her office.

Closely related to this aspect of keeping things running is the notion that these women are not afraid to make tough decisions when they need to do so. Four of the participants spoke about this aspect of their leadership. Although they are concerned with morale and harmony and want their staffs and customers to be happy, their statements indicate that they can also be tough and decisive. Their words express a sense of



confidence in their abilities in this area. This confidence may be due in part to their belief that, as India stated, “*all* of my decisions are based on if it’s good for the office or not.”

Bridget’s statements also indicated these same feelings of confidence and put the practice of making tough decisions in perspective:

I think my definition of leadership is one that when the staff look at me, I want them to be able to say, “I like how she runs the office. I like how she listens, but yet she knows when she has to make the decision for the good of the order.” I always treat people like I want to be treated, and—and with that being said, I tell the staff sometimes, “There are sometimes decisions that I have to make unilaterally.” You know, the buck stops with me.

For some, this part of leadership is easier than others, but Bridget indicated that “you have to make sure that folks know that you also can be firm.” Bridget has learned to be determined despite her natural inclination as a nurturer and gave an example of why it can be important for a leader to show resolve. She said

because when you’re like this, and someone says, “Well, what about this? Can you—can we do this?” I have to be able to say, “No. You know, my decision’s final.” For example, I have a parent right now that wants me to accept a deposit late. I try to think outside the box and sometimes I have, but in this particular case, the young man didn’t submit by the deadline. The father said, “He was just out of town for a couple of months.” No—that doesn’t really cut it. And...and he’s come back to me twice and now he’s going to everybody else. My decision is firm.

Even in speaking to the interviewer, her words evoked a sense of confidence and strength.

Unfortunately, Susan and Anna talked about the flip side—in respect to gender—of sometimes being the one who has to take a hard line or say “no.” In stepping forward to make the tough decisions that impact their offices and universities and then standing firm, the women in this study are pioneers. As has already been mentioned, they work in a profession that has, historically, been dominated by men. Even though these women have moved into leadership positions that require the confidence and willingness to make tough decisions, they are not always accepted in this role. Anna talked about one area of her job that is especially problematic:

You also have to hold to the fact that I get—especially dealing with athletics and different high-profile programs, college of business and other things—they think that as a woman, I may not be able to say “no” to special requests and to the political pressure as a man would. And I think they find that surprising when I can say, “I don’t care if this is an All-American superstar with a, you know, five foot vertical leap. His GPA doesn’t meet the requirements, and he’s not admissible. End of discussion.”

Her frustration was evident as she went on and described what it’s like to do what is best for the office and the university but still be essentially vilified:

That’s sort of been a shock. I’m seeing that a lot of them think that they can kind of, “Oh, you’re a softy; you’re a woman.” They kind of play that up, and when I hold the line, it’s shocking, and I also get called ugly words. Whereas, if it was

the man, they go, “Well, you know, he’s holding the line.” When I hold the line, I have to also endure the fact that they say, “Oh, she’s just a bitch and won’t help us,” and, you know, so.

Anna’s voice tapered off here and she didn’t add anything else as her words hung in the air. However, by the end of the interview, her confidence was back and she proudly stated, “I’ll take on anybody that says, “Oh, you can’t do the job.” She will continue to make tough decisions and keep things running in her office because she is a leader and that’s what she does.

*Dealing with challenges.* Something else that these women do as part of their leadership experiences is deal with challenges. In this sense, a challenge is an issue or situation that poses a potential threat or test to the success of the office or the university. Through analyzing the data, there were four challenges that were mentioned by at least three participants. The most common test involved their budgets and the economy—all six women saw finances as a challenge. Their main question is the same one that Susan poses: how do they continue to meet enrollment goals in tough budget times? Fern also spoke about her financial concerns and indicated that “I’m very much supported by our president and our vice president. They continually tell us we are mission-critical to the university. Whatever you need, you tell us, but there’s a limit.” For every director in the study, there are limits that affect how they recruit, whether or not they will have adequate staff, if they can purchase the technology they need to stay competitive, etc.

A second challenge that was discussed by five participants was the use of technology. Susan described the advent of technology in admissions as “amazing.” It has

to be in order to reach a group a young people to whom the use of technology is “second nature.” Admissions offices must reach out to students through the mediums they prefer, and as Fern stated, “we’re not just sitting here, you know, with paper and pencil and old-fashioned and all that kind of stuff.” The language of the women was peppered with terms like Facebook, Twitter, digital imaging, and e-recruitment as they spoke about trying to keep up with technology trends and “trying to recruit students where they are and not where we want them to be.”

Five of the women also mentioned dealing with staffing issues in the form of turnover and/or burnout. According to Fern, it is difficult to keep good recruiters because of the time spent away from home and the office due to travel and the long hours that are a part of the profession. For processors, turnover can be high because they are increasingly faced with more applications but no financial incentives. Anna believes people burnout quickly in admissions because it is so demanding with “public speaking, the travel, listening to people gripe and complain, and they get angry, and you have to deal with a lot of angry people. It can be exhausting.”

Finally three of the women indicated that they are challenged by shifts in demographics related to high school graduation rates, gender, diversity, and income. Much of their concern with demographics relates back to the economy and as Bridget stated, “looking at geo-demographic information about incoming or future classes—how we may need to shift how we do business so that we’re working more strategically and we’re also working more effectively. You don’t want to work harder with less money.”

Although these common challenges do add another element to the mix of the

shared leadership experience of the participants, there was also some commonality in how they adapted to the challenges. First, as Fern indicated, there is the recognition that they must learn to cope with a change-oriented environment in order to survive:

I've adapted more but change is hard but I know we have to do it. I have some staff who just can't stand to change things and like, "You're in the wrong place because you can't—you can't work in an environment like this and not embrace change or at least support it." So...I've learned that through my years as director.

In this area of their leadership, the statements of the women indicate a more assertive style. As the individuals who are responsible for enrollment, they cannot afford to sit back and let others take the lead in areas such as developing more efficient recruitment practices, implementing new technology, and trying to figure out how to hold on to their staffs.

As they adapt, they have developed an ability to turn a challenge into an opportunity. This outlook is evidenced in their language. Fern spoke about "the willingness to work and learn and adapt," Hannah described a practice of "seizing opportunities," and India discussed

being able to approach problem solving from many different ways. I can't always make quick decisions. I've had to adapt and learn how to know when to make more analytical decisions and step back and walk away from it and be able to get more data, have more time to think about it, and then to know when I need to make a decision and it needs to be now and let's do this and let's do it the right way.

Again, there is a sense of confidence in the statements of the women. They know that they are in a change-oriented and competitive profession, but they have learned how to keep up with the pace and come out on top.

Anna gave an example of this aspect of their leadership experience. Her example stands out because it illustrates an adaptive and direct approach to dealing with the dual challenges of technology and budget. Each impacts the other in what Anna called “a vicious cycle.” Unwilling to continually pump money into some of the face-to-face recruiting events such as college fairs that are less popular with a technology-savvy high school population, Anna’s university is rolling out a brand new e-recruitment program that will focus on social media. The e-recruitment plan creates an opportunity and allows them to adapt positively “to budget cuts and to the fact that they’d much rather look us up on Facebook than walk down the aisle or come to the cafeteria and talk to us.” Similar shifts seem to be underway at the other participants’ institutions. As India stated, “We like to be on the cutting-edge of things.” Although the directors certainly have staff members who contribute new ideas and assist with their implementation, it is often up to these women to step up and take on the issues that come their way. They must find not only a workable plan but also a cutting edge solution that will ensure their success and that of the office.

**For the good of the university and the students.** The first sub-theme in this section described the more assertive side of the female chief admissions officers as they acted decisively and with self-assurance to manage their admissions operations. There is, however, another type of outcome that emerged in the data analysis that characterizes the

leadership styles of the participants. These outcomes are not about the individual accomplishments of the directors or the success of their offices in meeting enrollment goals. This sub-theme is about how these women use their positions and influence to promote the common good of the university and the students they serve.

*Telling the university's story.* Six of the women interviewed for this study spoke about marketing their universities. It is part of their leadership experiences to interact with various groups and individuals and tell them what their institutions have to offer. It is evident, however, that what these women say, feel, and think about their universities involves more than just performing the marketing functions of their jobs. When the chief admissions officers in this study spoke about their universities, they were bragging. Their statements revealed an undeniable and unmistakable love for their institutions. They will say so outright, as when Bridget explained what it's like to be the director of admissions at her institution. She exclaimed with laughter,

Gosh! It's great! You know, when I got this job, it was truly the best day of my life. I mean I have to say that because I was at a school that I love. I did not go here...But I've grown to love it here, with people that I just really respect. I felt like it was a good fit. We talk about that with high school students—the good fit. This is the perfect fit for me, both in the size of the institution and my commitment to the strategic plan of the university.

For India, it's a little more complicated because even though she does not love admissions, she does feel very attached to her institution. She explained as she laughed that “even though I love management and not admissions...you fall in love with this

university. For me, I graduated from here, but other people fall in love with this university.”

They will also declare their love in the countless other accolades they offer. Interestingly, Hannah also chose to praise her institution in terms of how it is the right fit for her: “I always tell people, we’re, you know, we’re not the best-funded institution, um, but we’re the hardest-, smartest-working institution. Um, and that’s just kind of a part of my, um, fabric—my makeup. How I’m built fits well with, uh, the institutional personality.” When Anna talks about her institution, she speaks faster and packs a lot of praise into a few sentences as she talks about how they have increased enrollment, added programs, added facilities, added sports, etc., so they are now at the point where they are a sought-after university with “big-school status.”

Yet it is more than just bragging that becomes evident in their conversations. Because these are institutions they love and where they have found a niche, they are committed to not just marketing their institutions but to portraying them in the best possible light. Fern indicated that this is not something she and her staff tend to discuss but: “We just know we want to present the university well to try to...sell it to the students who may be interested, to show them what we have to offer and let them make those choices if they want to come here or not.” India’s words conveyed the same message because “we really work...in an office where we put a positive spin on everything. Ah, we may joke behind closed doors but when we’re in a group, it’s a positive spin, you know?”

Hannah also stated that “When you, um, represent the university every day, you



know. Um, you know its warts, you know, and you know what doesn't work well. You know what its weaknesses are, um, but you're also blessed to know all the strengths, um, and to know all the success stories." For India, it is a joy to find those special qualities that she can enthusiastically market to others. She explained that when you are a director of admissions,

You begin to believe what you're selling, you know? And you...find things that you think are true and the hidden gems. You get to see all the positives of what we do and how we do it right...and the negatives...You try to balance those. Um, so, being able to share that gift with...one, people from other offices who are negative, and two, from, um, to families and students and parents and make a difference in their lives...you go home feeling good at the end of the day.

And, as her statements indicated, not only does she leave work every day knowing she has served the university by portraying it in the best possible light, but she also gains a sense of personal satisfaction because she is working for the school she loves. "Being a director of admissions means you get to work for the face of your university and you get to tell the positive story and you really, if you're good at it, you believe in that positive story."

*Serving their students.* Aside from believing in and working to promote the institutions they love, all six of the women feel a strong commitment to the students they serve—this duty is a distinctive element of their shared leadership experience. As Fern succinctly indicated, "we are here to serve students and, you know, we do whatever we can to serve them to the best ability that we can." Even though the participants are in

leadership positions that place them at the top of their office hierarchies, every one of them spoke about the joy and satisfaction they receive from working with students. When Fern spoke about her work, especially with first-generation students who need extra help, her words are rife with emotion. The joy she feels in relation to this aspect of her work was evident as she stated, “we’re impacting their futures and...we’re really taking for many people a step that is a life-long dream for some of them who never thought that they would have an opportunity to go to college. And I just think that’s just swell.”

Hannah’s comments express similar feelings of satisfaction and pride about what it means to be a leader in admissions. What she does “impacts every day the lives of people who are making a decision to go back to school. You know, and it...puts a different type of pressure on you when you come to work every day, you know. But it also gives you a different type of joy that other people don’t get to have.” Anna also feels an intense joy from her work. She spoke about how she “just learned to *love* the fact that you can help someone change their life path or to get started on a life path, um, and you could introduce people to things that they may or may not know about, but you can help them with that planning.” India described her experience by saying, “it’s a beautiful thing to know that you literally do work that impacts people.”

India’s comment also touched on another aspect of the leadership practices of the participants: they will use their authority and influence for the benefit of students. Susan spoke about this aspect of her experience. She began her career in higher education working for programs that promoted access for students. What she realized while she was telling students about the opportunities that were available to them was that, as a

professional, she also needed to be able to navigate the institutional policies that could still cause bottlenecks. She found her passion and she stated, “that’s kind of where I find myself now and being able to, you know, um, engage and offer some kind of balance like I said was institutional...but also the students’ and families’ understanding of that side and making a much more balanced approach.” She uses all her knowledge, experience, connections, and positional authority as a leader to continue to work for students and assure their continued access to higher education.

Hannah also talked frankly about how she uses her position to benefit students. She sees her intervention as important because universities are large institutions that can be both “bureaucratic” and “cumbersome.” She explained what her leadership means in relation to students:

my career and my leadership has nothing to do with title. It has to do with, uh, you know, the authority I have—and I mean authority in a more, you know, broad sense than a direct, you know, organizational authority—and what authority I have, and what influence I have, and what impact I have on students.

As she continued to speak about this aspect of her leadership, it became evident that, like Susan, she has a strong commitment to and passion for helping students gain access. In this area especially, she is willing to use her influence. Low-income and minority students need “somebody going the extra mile for them” and Hannah is that person.

Anna and India also spoke about this aspect of their shared leadership experience and discussed how they use their positions to serve students. For Anna, it is often a matter of reaching out to colleagues at other institutions to help. As a director of admissions and

an active member of a number of professional organizations, she is well connected and she uses these relationships. Admissions is “very much a ‘who you know’ environment in terms of getting things done.” For Anna, being a leader means “Being able to pick up the phone and call and say, ‘Can you help this student?’ That’s what makes doing—that’s what my job really is.”

India also recognizes the tremendous amount of influence that she possesses by working in admissions and being the director of her office. She tries to make sure her staff understands the obligation they all have:

I tell our staff all the time...don’t ever forget that you—the news you give...has amazing critical impact on their lives. Um, for those of you who attend a college, you remember the day you got your acceptance packet in the mail. I’m sorry, but you do. You remember the ones that...you got and you didn’t really want to go to those colleges, but you remember the ones that you wanted to go to. How many people can say that they work in a place that made a monumental impact on a person’s life? Even if they chose not to go, you still remember it. You can’t say that if you work at a bank. You can’t say that if you work at a grocery store.

As the leader of an organization with this kind of power, she feels tremendous pressure and an obligation to ensure that when they do make decisions, they are accurate. Being in a position of authority means that she takes mistakes seriously and does everything she can to prevent their occurrence. As the figurehead of the office that makes and mails decisions, she knows that “when we screw up, we are messing with someone’s life. And so that’s, you know, that’s my soapbox stand and what I always say is, ‘We can’t screw

up. We can't afford to.' You're literally messing with someone's life.”

Although all six participants clearly feel that particular joy and obligation that comes from working with students, one area where there are some differences in their experiences is in the amount of attention they accept or seek. For the most part, although these women all have some degree of personal contact with students, they seem largely content to exercise their influence in the background. It has already been mentioned how Anna sometimes works behind the scenes to call colleagues and assist a student. She also explained why she acts in a quiet way:

I believe that, um, feeling like I'm doing the right thing and that I'm helping make the life better for somebody else is more important than being the one that gets recognized or gets the name on the big door or the big plaque or getting the big awards. That doesn't mean as much to me as I would have thought it would have at this point in m life.

Fern also stated that she uses her influence and helps students because it is what she enjoys. Her leadership is not about attention and accolades: “The families—the students—they have no clue who I am. My name may be on letters they get in the mail. They may see it on the Internet. They may see me out at an event. They don't know who I am.” Bridget also expresses the same kind of contentment for how she is able to help students. Although she wishes the administration at her university gave more recognition to her staff for their hard work, she stated, “We don't do it for that. We do it because we have great kids that we want to see be here.” For her, the best rewards are the notes she receives from students that say, “You made such a difference. You allowed me the best

four years of my life.”

Hannah, on the other hand, is the one director who maintains a very high level of direct contact with students and clearly thrives on this aspect of her job as well as the attention it brings her. She is one of the more hands-on directors overall and this is certainly the case when it comes to contact with students. She is entirely committed to students and uses her influence and connections to help them whenever she can. She indicated that there is a difference between having a student-centered leadership and actually having daily student contact. For her, it is the latter that gives meaning and purpose to her leadership experience. She explained that it is her contact with students that “reenergizes” her every day. “And does that mean that sometimes I don’t work extra hours because of that? Does that mean that some things don’t get done?...At the end of the day, though, I think that my student contact—the whole institution and I benefit because of my student contact.”

She went on to tell a story that illustrated what leadership had come to mean to her because of her work with students. She spoke about a student with whom she developed a relationship during the recruitment process. He committed to her university because of this personal attention. She was happy to gain a gifted student, but the compliment that meant the most to her came in an e-mail from the young man’s father, who was a colleague of hers:

the nicest part of the note, to me, was where he said, “And my wife said, ‘Well you know, that was because you knew [Hannah].’” And he goes, “I have every suspicion that we didn’t get treated that way because we know [Hannah], but that

that's the way she treats all students that she recruits.”

Hannah does get some attention because of her high level of student contact; she said “People always tease me that I take students to raise.” In fact, she does feel that she sometimes plays the role of mother to her students. She jokes that she knows it's a little selfish, but “all those things make me feel *good* every day. Sometimes it is all about me.”

Hannah works with students because it makes her feel good. Whereas some of the other directors do not maintain such high levels of student contact and exerting their influence more quietly, they are all deeply committed to helping students. Their statements indicated that promoting their universities and working with students are two aspects of leadership that bring them immense joy. In both areas, they are able to use their authority and management skills to bring about positive outcomes. As Hannah summarized, this part of the leadership experience is all about “doing something you're passionate about, something you're committed to, and something where you're making a difference.”

### **Chapter Summary**

This first section of this chapter presents demographic information about the six female chief admissions officers who participated in this study. The second section describes the coding process used to analyze data and prepare the written report. The application of a holistic and line-by-line approach resulted in the development of the eight themes that capture the essence of the lived leadership experience of the participants. These eight themes are as follows: (1) Entering the profession, (2) Sucked In, (3) Mentors, (4) Chipping away at the Big Issues, (5) Balancing, (6) Like a Roller

Coaster, (7) Leadership as a Social Process, and (8) Creating Positive Outcomes. Each theme is presented and described in relation to how it sheds light on the lived leadership experience. This section incorporates the words of the participants as much as possible. The chapter that follows presents a discussion and interpretation of the findings, recommendations for practice for future research, and the conclusion.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to capture the essence of the lived leadership experience of female chief admissions officers from public master's or research universities in the southeast region of the U.S. Data was collected through in-person interviews designed to provide the rich, descriptive data that is characteristic of a qualitative study (Moustakas, 1994). During the interviews, the participants answered questions related to their leadership journeys and the day-to-day activities and challenges of their current positions. The goal of the data analysis process was to create a written report that would transport the researcher and reader into the world of the participants and describe what it is like to be a female leader in the unique environment of college admissions (van Manen, 1990).

The first chapter of the study provided an overview of the background of the problem, along with the research questions, conceptual framework, and rationale for the choice of a critical and feminist theoretical orientation. Chapter Two was comprised of a comprehensive literature review that presented existing research relevant to this study of the leadership experience of female chief admissions officers. Chapter Three described the procedures for selecting participants, collecting data, and analyzing data. The process used to code data and the resulting eight themes were detailed in the fourth chapter.

The purpose of this fifth and final chapter is to present a discussion of the findings of the study. The chapter begins with the description of a data display that depicts the

relationships between the emergent themes and sub-themes and how they interact to give meaning to the leadership experience of the participants. By referring to the various components of the data display, the findings are discussed in relation to their consistency or divergence from the existing literature. The chapter ends with implications for practice and future studies and a conclusion that incorporates the words of the six participants.

### **Discussion of the Findings**

The primary research question of this study was: How do female admissions directors describe their lived leadership experience? As a result of the analysis of the textual data, eight themes emerged and are as follows: (1) Entering the Profession, (2) Sucked In, (3) Mentors, (4) Chipping away at the Big Issues, (5) Balancing, (6) Like a Roller Coaster, (7) Leadership as a Social Process, and (8) Creating Positive Outcomes. The two sections which follow offer a discussion of these themes and the overall research findings. The first section describes the data display that visually depicts the relationships between the themes that define and give meaning to the leadership experience. Then, the individual themes are considered in relation to how the relevant findings in each area corroborate or contradict the existing literature. Finally, the findings are considered through a critical and feminist lens.

### **An Illustration of the Leadership Experience**

The data display representing the lived leadership experience of the female chief admissions officers is presented as Figure 5.1 on the following page. There are two key components to the illustration that emerged during the coding process which capture the essence of the experience for the participants: bureaucracy and relationality. The circle on

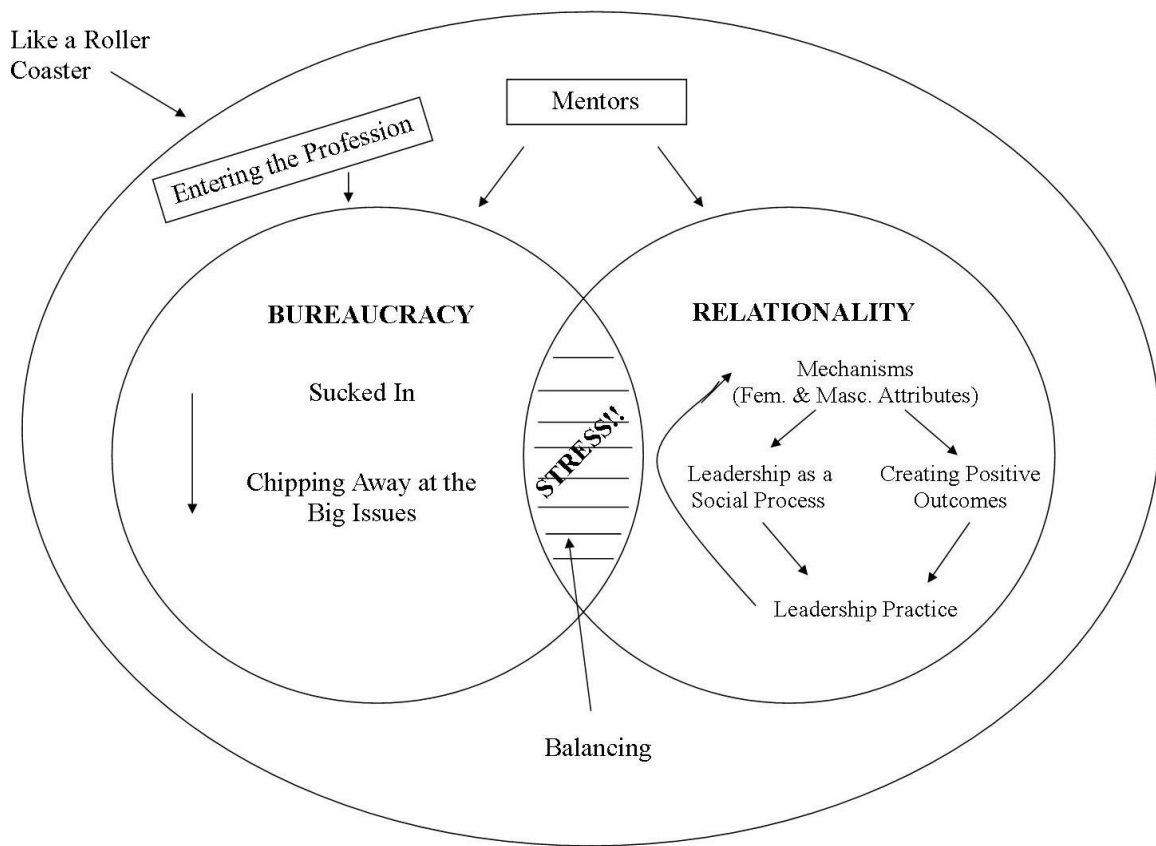


Figure 5.1. Data Display of the Leadership Experience of Female Chief Admissions Directors

the left represents the way that the leadership experience of the female admissions directors is influenced by the bureaucratic nature of the university. This influence is reflected in their patterns of advancement and the obstacles placed in their paths by a male-dominated organizational structure. When these women first entered the profession, they did become part of a bureaucratic organization and department. Relationality describes the leadership style of the participants and is defined by their practice of leadership as a social process that creates positive outcomes.

These two dimensions of the data display stand in sharp contrast to each other, yet they represent the two aspects of what the leadership experience has come to mean for the participants. On the one hand, these women have found a way to exist within and adapt to traditional bureaucratic organizations. At the same time, they emphasize relationships and adjust to change in a way that indicates a shared leadership style built upon social interaction and positive outcomes. When this relational leadership style overlaps or clashes with the bureaucratic order, it results in a stressful situation. This tension is illustrated by the conflicts that arose between the driven/nurturing sides of the participants and their work/life issues. In addition, the leadership experience of the participants is also impacted by the influence of both good and bad mentoring experiences. It is the interaction between these components that gives meaning to the leadership experience of the participants, all of which transpires in the complex environment of the admissions office.

### **The Meaning of the Leadership Experience**

The section which follows explains each of the components of the data display in relation to the emergent themes which are descriptive of the components. Through this discussion, I describe the essence of this phenomenon and offer an interpretation of what the leadership experience has come to mean for the six participants in the study. The findings are also interpreted in relation to the existing research.

**Like a Roller Coaster.** One of the primary themes that emerged from the study involved the day-to-day reality of what it means to be at the helm of an admissions operation. This reality was described in the theme Like a Roller Coaster. Thus, it is with

the admissions environment that this section begins. The circumference of the large circle representing the complex world of admissions forms the boundary of the data display and encompasses all the components of the experience. All six of the women who were interviewed described the variety, intensity, and cyclical nature that characterize their profession. They enjoy the variety of tasks they get to perform in their roles. Each day is different and brings a new challenge to their work. Anna summed the situation up best when she said “you basically come in and have a different job every day.” Having a different job every day also comes with the expectation of being able to excel in a variety of tasks—or at least acquire a certain level of proficiency. The daily responsibilities of these women force them to adapt in such a way that they epitomize the multi-tasking professional.

The findings in this study also indicate the intensity of the position. The women put in long hours yet still find they do not always accomplish what needs to get done. Admissions is, as Hannah stated, a “never enough hours in the day” kind of job. The level of intensity increases because of the high stress level that is a part of the position—admissions directors must fill their classes every year to maintain the financial viability of their institutions, and, perhaps, keep their jobs. They also face the added responsibility of always being in the public eye. Everyone is interested in admissions and everyone thinks they can do it better, a fact that may be expressed on the phone, at the grocery store, or at dinner parties. Finally, these women know that being an admissions director means their work never ends. The variety and intensity are continuous in a cyclical

manner. Every task re-occurs at about the same time every year, so their jobs are exhausting and their responsibilities unending.

These findings both confirm and add to existing research on the nature of the chief admissions officer position for men and women. Hilton's (1997) study of admissions directors indicated the demanding nature of the position and the high time commitment. He indicated that meetings and administrative functions consume the most time. The participants in this study also spend large amounts of time dealing with meetings, e-mails, and a daily barrage of problems and crises. The overall heavy workload was a common element in previous studies detailing the inhibitors of directors in performing their jobs (Blair, 1997) as well as their sources of dissatisfaction ("*The Chronicle Survey*," 2008; Hilton, 1997). The lack of boundaries also seems to be a common element of the profession. Farrell and Hoover (2008) attested to the popularity of admissions directors at cocktail parties, and the professional literature is peppered with calls for more transparency (Clegg & Katyal, 2004; Greenberg, 2008; Hoover & Supiano, 2010; Vedder, 2008).

One area where gender was a factor was reflected in the participants' comments about the skills and abilities that are most important for succeeding in the position. These skills are akin to those indicated to be important by Blair (1997) and NACAC (Hawkins & Clinedinst, 2007) and range from marketing to predictive modeling to personnel management. However, the results indicate that communication and interpersonal skills are extremely critical to the success of the participants in this study. Being able to build effective relationships is more important than technological and administrative savvy,

and the participants' leadership practices are built around their strengths in this area. This finding is consistent with the literature as a number of studies indicated that female leaders were more interpersonal than men (Eagly & Johnson, 1990; van Engen & Willemsen, 2004), had a more "relational, socially-oriented style of communicating" (Kirtley & Weaver, III, 1999), and were more successful in leadership roles requiring interpersonal skills (Eagly, Karau, & Makhijani, 1995). In a study of faculty and staff perceptions of effective leadership, Rosser (2003) found that communication skills and interpersonal relations were two of the areas where female deans were rated most effective. These same two skills were also cited as characteristics of feminine leadership in a qualitative study of female business owners and managers (Stanford, et al., 1995).

Another sub-theme that emerged which is indicative of the complex environment in which the participants practice their leadership involves the nature of admissions as a balance between production and customer service. These women are skilled communicators who are adept at interpersonal relationships, and they thrive on the relationship building aspect of their jobs. However, in addition to making the connections that are critical to the success of their offices, this study also suggests that all admissions directors must adapt to an environment defined by the bottom line. They function in a top-down world where success is defined by whether or not they meet the enrollment goals of the university. Some are challenged by their participation in a high-stakes numbers game designed to ensure adequate enrollments across a host of majors. Others feel a more intense pressure caused by the constant and unrelenting stress of monitoring

acceptances and deposits, knowing that the financial viability of the university depends on the final numbers.

Whether they find the pressure of meeting enrollment goals “scary” or view it as more of an “arduous” task, these women seem to have accepted working in an environment that has been described in a similar way in the professional literature. The accepted image of the admissions director is that of a skilled marketer (Canterbury, 1999; Johnson, 2000; Lewison, 2007) who takes the lead in implementing the enrollment management activities of the institution (Bontrager, 2007; Johnson, 2000; Kalsbeek & Hossler, 2008). Numerous professionals have also described the more business-oriented aspect of admissions that prevails as directors seek to bring in each year’s class (Donhower, 2003; Gilde, 2007; Jump, 2004; Kirp, 2003). Wilson (1990) described admissions as an arena as competitive as big-time athletics. Like coaches, directors “who can’t put the numbers on the board” are fired (para. 1).

The findings from this study also indicate that directors can feel stress and that the pressures placed upon them can come from a variety of sources. Obviously, there are pressures brought to bear from the top administration. Hilton’s (1997) study indicated that admissions directors perceived their two most important functions to be carrying out the institutional mission and developing the marketing plan. These women also discussed the stress of trying to manage staff turnover brought on by long hours, travel, and better opportunities elsewhere, problems corroborated by the literature (Farrell & Hoover, 2008; “Where Senior-Level Admissions Officials Differ,” 2008). Pressure can also come from outside the institution. The majority of the female chief admissions officers in this study



indicated they spend time speaking with angry parents and managing the expectations of the public. They have experienced the demands for transparency from parents, legislators, and high school personnel described by others (Clegg & Katyal, 2004; Greenberg, 2008 Hoover & Supiano, 2010; Vedder, 2008).

One finding from this study that encourages a cautious attitude toward the popular and professional literature, however, is in relation to the competition that is said to exist between universities (Kirp, 2003; Hawkins & Clinedinst, 2007). Despite some evidence indicating a shrinking enrollment pool (Ashburn, 2008; Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, 2008), the directors who were interviewed do not appear to have any problems in attaining enrollment goals. In fact, one of the participants who spoke about the intense pressure also indicated that enrollment is on the rise at her institution. The relationships between these women and their counterparts at other universities are characterized not by rivalry and antagonism but by sharing knowledge and collaborating to help students. All of the institutions involved in this study, however, are large institutions that have high profiles regionally and nationally, so it may be the smaller and less prestigious institutions that are fighting for survival in a competitive atmosphere (Kirp, 2003).

**Bureaucracy.** Another finding that emerged from the study and is depicted in the data display is the way that the bureaucratic nature of the university defined and impacted the leadership journeys of the participants. Within the illustration, the bureaucratic structure of the university is represented by the large circle on the left. Through the voices of the participants, a picture emerges of an environment that has been and

continues to be dominated by white males in leadership positions. Overall, these women are optimistic about current and future opportunities for women, having risen to leadership positions themselves and seen other women do so at their institutions. However, they are also aware that there are unwritten rules that women need to learn, adapt to, and, at times, resign themselves to in order to succeed. They spoke a common language about what it means to be a woman in this environment, using the metaphor of “the table” as they described what it was like to seek a place in higher education leadership where their contributions will be listened to and respected.

The literature is supportive of the representation of the collegiate environment that emerged from this study. Colleges and universities as well as their individual offices and departments are typically bureaucratic organizations (Bain & Cummings, 2000; Evans & Chun, 2007; Glazer-Romo, 1999). As such, they are characterized by a division of labor, hierarchical authority, strict rules and procedures, impersonal relationships, and competence-based promotion (Hall, 1963). Aside from the formal rules and regulations, these organizations also operate with a set of unwritten rules (Evans & Chun, 2007; Schuck & Liddle, 2004; Wilbanks, 2005). The rules are defined and instituted by the dominant members of the organizations, the white males (Acker, 2006; Bierma, 1996; Itzin, 1995; Lyness & Thompson, 2000). As a result, universities are like most large organizations in that both the formal and informal cultures create an entrenched system where individuals advance up a hierarchical ladder, individualism and independence are praised, and top-down communication is the standard (Acker, 2006; Helgesen, 1990; Itzin, 1995; Maier, 1999). It is this type of environment that is reflected in a number of

themes that emerged from the study that give meaning to the leadership experience of the female chief admissions officers. These themes are Sucked In and Chipping Away at the Big Issues.

*Sucked in.* Once the women in this study entered the admissions profession, they all travelled a common path that led to the chief admissions officer position. Hence, one of the themes that emerged from the data was Sucked In, which detailed how they advanced in the profession. The participants were at times humble in their descriptions of how this ascent occurred, describing their advancement as a matter of luck or coincidence. In other cases, they spoke about the pursuit of accomplishment and a desire to be the best at whatever they decided to take on. What they clearly understood was that as women, they would need to work very hard and prove that they could do the job. They willingly took on more responsibility and jumped on every opportunity that would allow them to prove they could manage, get noticed, learn new tasks, and stay fresh and energized. None of the women in the study was able to step immediately into the role of chief admissions officer. They all moved up through the ranks in the traditional manner that one advances in a bureaucracy, and their “long march” and longevity in the profession is a tribute to their dedication, effort, and resiliency.

The findings in this study corroborate the idea that admissions is a highly specialized field. Most directors attain their positions while they are already working in the field, and the most common path of advancement to the top position is from assistant to associate director and then director (Blair, 1997; Hilton, 1997). Although one previous study indicated that female directors tended to have less experience than their male

colleagues (Blair, 1997), the current study suggests that this difference is evaporating as more women enter and stay in the profession. All six of the women interviewed have worked in higher education for virtually their entire careers and five have spent their careers at one institution. Such longevity is typical. A recent survey by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* found that current chief admissions officers are the most experienced they have ever been, as over 70% of the respondents had at least 10 years of admissions experience (2008).

This theme was also very much about the notion that women have to work hard—harder than any man. The experience of working hard and taking on responsibilities in order to advance is supported by other studies related to the leadership experiences of women (Bradley, Brown, & Dower, 2009; Daley, 1996; Lyness & Thompson, 2000; Melamed, 1995, 1996; Ng et al., 2005). Bierma's (1996) study of female corporate executives revealed a pattern of learning and development similar to that of the women in this investigation. An important early stage in the pattern was "competence seeking," where women sought to prove their abilities by pursuing formal education and increased work responsibilities. In their study of CEO's and female executives, Ragins, et al. (1998) found that "consistently exceeding performance expectations" was the primary strategy used by the women to advance. "These women reported that they had to prove their ability repeatedly, and needed to over-perform in order to counter negative assumptions in a predominantly male business environment" (p. 29). This strategy of working hard is also consistent with existing literature related to women in academia. Acker and Feuerwerker (1996) found that female university professors also believed they

had to work harder than their male colleagues. In a study of women administrators in educational leadership programs, the women indicated that having a type A personality and perseverance were the most important factors in sustaining their leadership (Christman & McClellan, 2008).

*Chipping away at the big issues.* A final theme that evolved in relation to the bureaucratic environment was Chipping Away at the Big Issues. Women who journey toward leadership positions in higher education venture into a world characterized by male domination and the unwritten rules that construct and sustain the “old boy network.” The women in this study were able to adapt to and thrive in such an environment, but they also emerged from the process with a collection of, at best, life lessons, and, at worst, painful memories. During the interviews, the women spoke about situations in their pasts where they struggled to be seen as credible professionals and leaders, struggled to have their voices heard, and struggled to be paid and promoted fairly. Although they were at times patronized and discounted, they persevered to be heard and noticed. When they were tired, they pushed on. Whereas they left some struggles behind as they matured personally and advanced professionally, Susan indicated that there are still “these day-to-day types of things that you’re constantly kind of engaged with” when you are a female leader in higher education.

In terms of the women’s search for credibility and to be heard, the findings from this study were indicative of the struggles young women may face in dealing with older employees, especially males. Young females in any field where there is a male-dominated culture or leadership may find it is difficult to be taken seriously. In *Men and*

*Women of the Corporation*, Kanter (1977) indicated that the most typical mentoring relationship for older males and younger females was that of “father” and “pet.” In their study on cross-gendered mentoring relationships, Ragins and McFarlin (1990) found that mentors were more likely to provide parenting functions to younger mentees and be more protective of women. Kram (1985) indicated that for young women, the role of dependent in relation to a senior male manager was familiar and logical. Patriarchy continues to flourish because of the advantages of these relationships for both females and males. Having the support of upper level administrators, traditionally men, is especially important for women who seek to advance (de Vries, et al., 2006; Mainiero, et al., 1994; Ragins, et al., 1998). Men accept or even welcome being an advisor or guardian to “feel powerful and dominant” (Kram, 1985, p. 109). Finally, Keamy (2008) indicated that male faculty members perpetuated a system of patriarchy because even though they outwardly supported women, they feared the loss of their dominant positions as males.

The existing literature is also supportive of another notion that emerged from the study: women may have difficulty gaining credibility because they practice with a leadership style that is effective yet different from the male ideal (Fletcher, 2004). Masculine traits are still considered more indicative of successful leadership and men are perceived as more effective managers (Duehr & Bono, 2006; Heilman, et al., 1989; Martell, et al., 1998; Schein, 1973; Schein, 1975). In apparent contradiction, however, women “are lauded as having the right combination of skills for leadership” in both popular and professional literature (Eagly, 2007). These skills include leading in ways that are more democratic and participatory (Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Jago & Vroom,

1982; van Engen & Willemsen, 2004). However, as the findings for this study indicate, leading with a more feminine, relational style may mean it is more difficult for women to be seen as credible leaders because their style is different from that which is stereotypically male. Women are expected to care for and about their colleagues and students, work hard, and be “good citizens” (Acker & Feuerverger, 1996). Because they lead with a more interpersonal and feminine style, Fletcher (1999, 2004) indicated that women face the danger of disappearing or being seen as powerless.

Two additional aspects of this theme are also consistent with existing research: the struggle for equality in terms of equal pay and advancement opportunities. Two of the women in this study mentioned issues related to fair compensation. The fact that men in higher education earn more than women in the same positions is well-established through survey data. These differences exist across both academics and student services (College and University Professional Association for Human Resources, 2007; National Center for Education Statistics, 2007).

The findings of this study also indicate that women continue to face obstacles in advancing into top leadership positions, which in this study represented positions beyond the director level. This notion emerged in the comments from two of the women. One participant described a situation of not being promoted despite being more qualified than the male who received the nod. The other individual spoke about having to fight to be promoted into a job that she was already performing. The same two women also spoke about seeing men advance quicker even though they had similar qualifications or a higher degree than their male colleagues. They believe that because of their gender, they are at a

disadvantage when it comes to advancing into the top leadership team. These findings seem to support two other studies indicating that, ultimately, women benefit less from human capital investments such as increased education and tenure (Tharanou, et al., 1994; Kirchmeyer, 1998). They also support research indicating that individuals who are in charge of hiring decisions do tend to hire others of the same gender (Appold, et al., 1998; Claringbould & Knoppers, 2007; Foster, et al., 1996; Gorman, 2005; Moss & Daunton, 2006). Since the upper level administration of most universities is still dominated by white males, top leadership positions are likely to continue to be filled by men.

A number of studies have also indicated that it is more difficult for women to meet the competency standards upon which hiring and promotion decisions are based, thus corroborating the findings of this research. Biernat (1997) indicated that for female job applicants, hirers set lower minimum-competency standards but higher ability standards, a situation she described as “patronizing in nature.” Furthermore, “the ultimate outcome for a low-status person is a longer, more difficult trek to document ability and evaluations that are objectively less positive than those awarded to similarly credentialed individuals from high-status groups” (p. 555). Another study indicated that men are selected to fill positions even when they are out-performed by women (Foschi, Lai, & Sigerson, 1994). Research investigating how competency is evaluated in dyads and groups also revealed that performance standards differed by gender (Ridgeway, 1982; Wagner, Ford & Ford, 1986). Thus, the literature is supportive of the beliefs of some of the participants in this study that women are forced to “jump through more hoops” to prove their competency (Biernat, 1997, p. 554).



Men are also at an advantage in the hiring process because of the strength and prevalence of male-dominated networks in organizations. Again, this is an area where women have not been represented. The women interviewed for this study spoke at length about the variety and amount of relationships they build with students, parents, colleagues, faculty, parents, guidance counselors, and community members. The relationships they build through these integrated networks can account for a certain amount of effectiveness in the work place (Brass, 1985). However, other researchers indicated that the relationships that were most important in terms of influence and career advancement were those with male administrators (Daley, 1996; Iberra, 1992, 1997). This finding is also consistent with the present study, as most of the women who spoke about mentors who were instrumental in their leadership journeys and advancement spoke about men.

One additional factor that was discussed in the literature review that does not appear to have impacted the leadership experience of the participants in a significant way was their region. A number of other studies on women in leadership in the south (primarily South Carolina) included statements of participants indicating that they had faced some obstacles related to being females in the south. These obstacles included their beliefs that some male administrators were reluctant to hire women and that the south was rife with various unspoken rules and ways of doing things from which they were excluded (Pew, 2002; Schuck & Liddle, 2004; Wilbanks, 2005). The findings of this study, however, do not seem to indicate that the influence of southern culture or attitudes formed a specific obstacle to the advancement of these particular women. The only time

the southern culture was discussed and commented on at length was by India when she was discussing the office family and how people get to know you in the south.

Although Anna indicated that the attitudes of white, southern males may hinder the advancement of women, the other participants did not make this same regional association. They spoke of male domination and the “old boy network” as established elements of their organizations and just another aspect of the leadership environment for women. In fact, the literature bears out the notion that these obstacles are generally present for women (American Council on Education, 2007; Davies-Netzley, 1998; Kanter, 1977; King & Gomez, 2008; Lively, 2000; National Center for Education Statistics, 2007). The barriers that most affected the career journeys and leadership development of the women in this study involved their struggles to be heard, paid equally, and accepted as credible. Again, these obstacles were not described as unique to their geographical region and are well-represented in a body of professional and scholarly literature that is not region-specific (Biernat & Kobrynowicz, 1997; Bradley, et al., 2009; College and University Professional Association for Human Resources, 2007; Daley, 1996; Kirchmeyer, 1998; Lyness & Thompson, 2000; Melamed, 1995, 1996; Ng, et al., 2005; Tharanou, et al., 1994). However, these conclusions are drawn with the caveat that the women in this study may not have mentioned or associated their difficulties with region simply because it is a given or because they have assimilated the characteristics of a southern culture. The participants were also not asked specific questions about their upbringing in the south or what it means to be a female leader in the south.

**Relationality.** The leadership experience of the female chief admissions officers in this study can also be understood in terms of the relational aspect of their leadership practices, represented by the large circle on the right and the two themes within the circle. The first theme, Leadership as a Social Process, describes the ways in which the female chief admissions officers promote and maintain environments of interdependency and interaction within their offices and extended professional communities. The second theme, Creating Positive Outcomes, explains how they are able to manage challenges and initiate change. They do both of these things to ensure the success of their offices and the common welfare of their universities and students. As a result, the women lead in a way that cannot be categorized as strictly feminine or masculine but more of a melding of the two. In their leadership styles and practices, there is evidence of a new paradigm of effective leadership practice that has been described in the literature (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Uhl-Bien, et al., 2007). Because of the complexity of this leadership practice, Figure 5.2 on the following page provides an illustration of this component of the data display.

***Leadership as a social process.*** To listen to these women talk is to understand how much effort they put into building relationships and creating an environment where everyone can succeed. Their effort is a measure of how deeply they care about the people that work in their offices, at their universities, and even within their professional organizations. Their leadership is a shared process that seeks to engage all these individuals. They are collaborators who foster leadership at all levels by offering and promoting ownership, accountability, and trust. For these women, there is both a necessity and a joy in letting things go so that others can achieve. They help their staffs

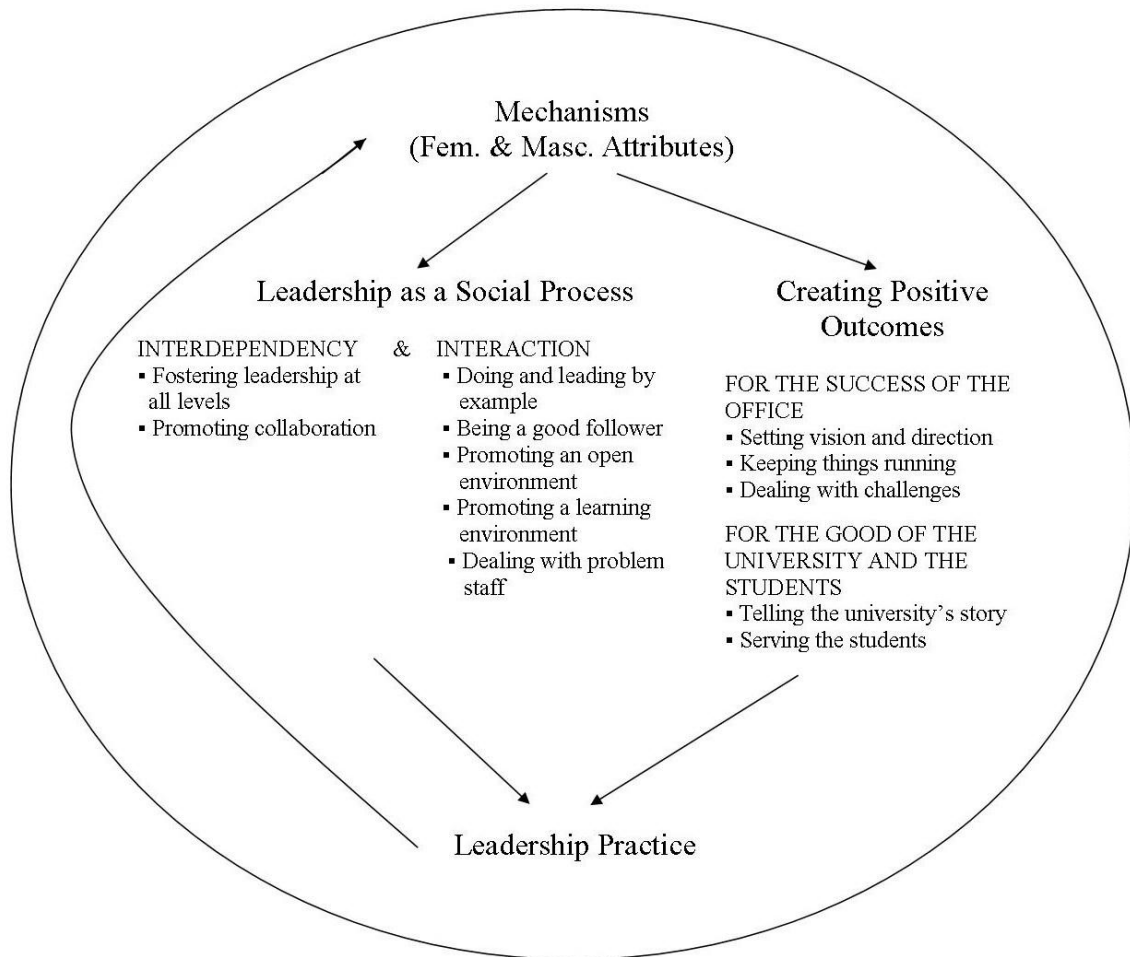


Figure 5.2. Data Display of the Relational Leadership Practice of Female Chief

Admissions Officers

understand the big picture and how each individual makes a valuable contribution toward group accomplishments. Although they may be the figureheads of their offices, they are also selfless and giving behind the scenes. Their doors are always open and they take very seriously their roles of developing and mentoring young staff members, especially women. It's simply part of the job. When the social order is threatened by unhappy or

unsuitable employees, they will handle the situation, but it will be managed with grace and compassion.

What one sees being enacted in the leadership practices of these women, as indicated through the themes, is a notion that has received considerable attention in the leadership literature. As organizations themselves are changing from the hierarchical, top-down control models of the industrial age to organizations more appropriate for the realities of the Knowledge Era (Marion, 2001; Senge, 1990), there has also been a call for new forms of leadership. Whereas traditional ideals and theories of effective leadership have promoted an individually-oriented, masculine style, some new models have begun to incorporate a more feminine approach which emphasizes connection, relationships, interdependency, and interaction (Irby et. al., 2001, Lipman-Blumen, 1992; Uhl-Bien, 2006; Uhl-Bien et. al, 2007). Instead of focusing on a single individual at the top who passes down directives, leadership is viewed as a shared process in which individuals are empowered and enabled and everyone has the potential to lead (Kouzes & Posner, 1987; Pearce & Conger, 2003; Pearce & Sims, 2000). “Post-heroic leadership” is the term used by Fletcher (2004) to describe a leadership that is shared and distributed, emphasizes social processes and interactions, and promotes learning and growth for everyone in the organization. Uhl-Bein (2006) used a similar language when describing her theory of relational leadership “as a social influence process” (p. 668).

The leadership being practiced by the women in this study is a relational style of leadership. For the directors, effective leadership is a product of the connections and relationships they initiate and nurture as well as a measure of a successful team effort.

There is some evidence that this style of leadership is characteristic among other women who have successfully attained leadership roles. Studies have shown that women in leadership positions emphasize collaboration (Eagly & Carli, 2003; Fletcher, 2004; Regine & Lewin, 2004) and lead in a manner that is more democratic and participative than men (Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Jago & Vroom, 1982; Stanford, et al. 1995; Van Engen & Willemsen, 2004). Recently, in a study of women managers in higher education, Griffiths (2009) found that the women adopted a collegial approach to management. They “stressed the importance of building good relationships, boosting morale and ensuring that all staff were working together positively” (p. 401).

Rosser (2008) studied academic deans and found females were rated higher than males in the following leadership dimensions: communication skills; research, community, and professional endeavors; and interpersonal relations. Madsen’s (2008) phenomenological research study on female presidents indicated that all of the following interpersonal abilities were attributes of women who had attained this top position in higher education:

inspiring others to high performance, building positive relationships with others, developing the skills and talents of others, working in a collaborative manner with others, being open and receptive to new ideas, responding positively to feedback, effectively resolving conflicts, influencing others, and building the self-esteem of others. (p. 130)

These attributes have much in common with what leadership has come to mean to the women in this study as well. Their leadership practice is relational because they are

responsible for the social order of the office (Uhl-Bien, 2006). As India stated, “I’m accountable to the people who work in this office to create an environment where people are successful.”

*Creating positive outcomes.* The female chief admissions officers interviewed for this study are also leaders who are expected to make tough decisions, keep their offices running, and meet enrollment goals. Although they are adept at encouraging the participation and collaboration that lead to effective relationships, they are also not afraid to act in a way that is direct, determined, and decisive. Sometimes, leadership means setting a vision and getting everyone moving in the same direction, being the point person for a complex array of activities, and determining how processes will be transformed because of financial and technological challenges. This type of leadership can also require the ability to say “the buck stops with me,” which, according to some of the participants, can be a shocking statement when coming from a woman. What emerged in this study is that these admissions directors, on the whole, love the job and the privileges and obligations that come with it. They get to tell the university’s story every day, and they are in positions where they can use their influence to make happy endings possible for students.

One of pitfalls of the “post-heroic” leadership that describes the style of the participants is the fear that because women lead in ways that are more relationship-oriented, what they do may not be valued or seen as leadership (Fletcher, 1999, 2004). As has already been discussed, women must also function in a bureaucratic environment that continues to be dominated by males at the highest levels and defined by an emphasis on

masculine attributes (Acker, 2006; Bierma, 1996; Itzin, 1995; Lyness & Thompson, 2000; Tedrow, 1999). These potential pitfalls are avoided in two new theories of leadership that support the findings of this study and offer a way to conceptualize how women are able to balance elements of a more feminine style with the realities of masculine bureaucracy.

In addition to its emphasis on social processes, Uhl-Bien's (2006) relational leadership theory characterized leadership as a change-oriented process resulting in new approaches, attitudes, and goals. The theme of Creating Positive Outcomes illustrates how the women in this study adapt to a variety of challenges to ensure the success of their offices and institutions. They also describe two of their primary joys and responsibilities as portraying their universities in a positive light and helping students. However, the women also indicated that, at times, they must utilize a more direct and assertive style to set direction and keep their offices running. Complexity leadership theory (Uhl-Bien, et al., 2007) also incorporated this idea of adaptive leadership and offered the concept of enabling leadership as a means to manage the adaptive and bureaucratic natures of organizations. In the leadership practices of the women in this study, we see individuals who are able to combine the masculine and feminine as they keep their offices running yet continue to emphasize interaction and interdependency. Their leadership is effective, as India explained, because "they trust me as a manager, but also they see that I'm going to take care of this office as if it's my baby."

There are a number of qualitative studies that corroborate these findings. Researchers have indicated that women enact a leadership style that balances masculine



ideals such as achievement with more feminine strengths including nurturing (Cantor & Bernay, 1992; Christman & McClellen, 2007; Madsen, 2007; Regine & Lewin, 2003). The women in Christman and McClellen's (2007) study of higher education were forced to navigate a complex leadership environment in a process akin to "living on barbed wire" (p. 3). They had to vary their styles to fit the needs of their organizations. Madsen's (2008) research on college presidents also corroborated the notion that women leaders "thrive on complexity" (p. 128). Her participants learned and mastered a variety of leadership competencies during their development that included both interpersonal and task-oriented skills. It is also worth noting that Grogan's (1996) female school superintendents used their positional power to create positive outcomes for students.

The women in this study are leading in a way that is characteristic of what constitutes a new ideal of effective leadership for today's organizations. What is illustrated by the two themes that define their leadership practice—Leadership as a Social Process and Creating Positive Outcomes—is a relational style of leadership that is not characterized by, but allows more heroic actions when needed to address the common good. There is evidence of Fletcher's (2004) "post-heroic" style in the way the participants are doers, lead by example, and are good followers. Uhl-Bien's (2006) relational leadership is suggested through their success at promoting collaboration within an open environment and dealing effectively with problem staff. There are also elements of complexity theory because their leadership is a shared process enacted throughout the organization. They create this environment by fostering leadership at all levels and promoting a learning environment. When needed, however, they can adopt a more direct

style for the good of the office or the students (Uhl-Bien, et al., 2007). All three theories hold in common an emphasis on the interdependency and interaction that form major components of the leadership styles of these women as they mold the social processes of their offices and adapt to change.

**Balancing.** The two large circles in the data display are also significant in describing the leadership experience of chief admissions officers because of the area where they intersect. The women in this study faced a number of obstacles in their leadership journeys as a result of the male-dominated, bureaucratic environments in which they function. They also struggled with difficult situations when their relationship- and interpersonally-oriented values came into contact and clashed with the more traditional bureaucratic environment. The emergent theme that is illustrative of this aspect of their leadership experience is Balancing. Through the accompanying sub-themes of driven versus nurturing and family versus work, one is able to understand the delicate tightrope these women walk on in relation to their professional and personal responsibilities and what happens when this balance is threatened.

One area where the women achieve a balance relates to their natural inclinations toward a more feminine or masculine style of leadership. Four of the women in this study are natural nurturers. They have been known to “mother” students and staff, and they are supportive individuals who make sure that everyone is treated fairly and feels taken care of in the office. Two women are more driven and assertive. Their strengths lie in getting things done and moving their agendas forward. All six women, however, have learned to balance these two inclinations. This choice is a conscious one that they made in order to

be more effective. If they were a nurturer, they chose to take a hard line at times. If they were more driven, they learned that a “bulldog” approach did not always obtain results. As women, they are well aware of the stereotypes that they must face and, at times, combat every single day. In the end, they were able to create a balance that is defined by their own comfort levels. They may be called “momma” or they may be called a “bitch,” but they are comfortable with who they are and how they lead.

The ability of the women in this study to lead in a way that is both masculine and feminine has already been discussed. However, this sub-theme was more about how the women came to be aware that a balance was needed between their driven and nurturing sides and how they consciously attained such a state of equilibrium. Their shared experience is in accord with previous research in relation to the reasons that women choose to be more stereotypically feminine or seek a balance between the masculine and feminine. Johnson et. al. (2008) found that in order to be seen as effective leaders, women must possess both agentic and communal characteristics. Women who tend to lead in a way that is more exclusively feminine or masculine may not fare well. The dangers of disappearing and being seen as powerless when operating with a more interpersonally-oriented style have been noted (Fletcher, 1999, 2004). However, women who lead in a more masculine way are viewed negatively (Eagly, et al., 1992; Jago & Vroom, 1982; Rojahn & Willemsen, 1992) and tend to be disliked (Garcia-Retamero & Lopez-Zafra, 2006; Heilman, et al., 2004).

The participants also sought to balance their home and work responsibilities. Four of the women in this study spoke openly about their experiences of being administrators

and mothers. Although this sub-theme describes their process of attaining a balance between work and family, family does come first. Leadership to these women means finding success on their own terms. They made difficult choices in their journeys in order to put their families first. Their choices often involved sacrifices in terms of their careers and educational attainment in order to create a sense of stability for their children. In the end, they seem to have few regrets despite compromises with spouses, struggles with supervisors, and lost battles with “mommy guilt.” Although they may have missed field trips and meeting their children at the bus stop, they somehow worked it all out and met their own high expectations for being a mother and a director. For the most part, they have realized that a woman can’t really do it all. There must be compromise, a recognition most aptly described by Hannah, who said, “I’ve always tried to make decisions about what I wanted my life to be and not what I wanted my career to be.” All seem happy with both.

In relation to the literature that describes female leaders and their work-life conflicts, the experiences of the women in this study do not corroborate one major finding: that women with families are unlikely to advance. Obviously, all of the women interviewed have advanced to the top leadership positions in their offices. Unlike the participants in a study by Marschke, et al., (2007), the women in this investigation did not choose careers more accommodating to family life. Overall, family responsibilities do not appear to have hindered the participants’ advancement as other researchers have found (Armstrong, et. al., 2007; Eagly, 2007; Linehan & Walsh, 2000).

The findings in this study are more indicative of notion that women can be

successful, but this success is more likely to occur under certain conditions. This idea is supported by Loder (2005) who found that female administrators relied on the support of spouses to manage their home and work roles. Jo (2008) also found that turnover for women was lower when their supervisors allowed flexible work schedules. Unlike earlier studies by Shere (1990) and Blair (1997), who indicated women leaders in admissions tended to be single, the majority of women in this study were married with children. It must be noted that one of the participants, Anna, believes her family responsibilities did result in her not receiving a recent promotion. Thus, it may be that these obligations are less likely to constitute a barrier to women seeking to attain a director position but may impede their progress into the upper echelons of the administration.

**Mentors.** One final area of the data display that needs to be addressed is the box near the top that is inside the outer circle representing the complex world of admissions, yet outside the two circles of bureaucracy and relationality. This box is labeled “Mentors.” According to the results of this study, the influence of mentors is a significant part of the leadership experience of female admissions directors. All six of the women who were interviewed were able to talk about significant individuals in their career journeys.

The individuals who were spoken of as mentors had a tremendous influence on the leadership development of the participants. In some cases, mentors were their champions. They were supervisors and friends who offered support and affirmation. However, the greatest gift that mentors gave to the participants in this study was their presence as both good and bad role models. They were a source of lessons learned about

what constitutes effective and ineffective leadership. For the majority of these women, leadership was not something they learned in a classroom or from a book; it was what they saw being enacted before them by their mentors. It was up to them to make choices about their own leadership—to pick and choose from the behaviors and styles they saw as a way to define their styles. By observing their mentors, they learned to listen, be action-oriented, seek buy-in, and be cutting-edge. They also learned about another side of mentoring when they had conflicts with these individuals that left them feeling hurt or disappointed. Yet, even in these cases, the women still spoke of their mentors as, if not friends, at least people whom they admired and respected for their contributions to their colleagues and organizations.

The results of this study corroborate the existing research on mentoring relationships and also draw attention to another aspect of mentoring that is not prevalent in the literature, what Scandura (1998) calls the “dark side” of mentoring. It was expected and found that the majority of mentors for the participants would be men due to the lack of women in top administrative positions in higher education (Lively, 2000; Ragins & Scandura, 1994). The existing research, however, has not indicated that a same sex mentoring relationship is necessary for women to benefit from the mentoring experience (Dreher & Ash, 1990; Koberg, et al., 1998; Lyons & Oppler, 2004; Ragins & Cotton, 1999; Ragins & McFarlin, 1990). In fact, the women in this study attained the same benefits from male and female mentors that are corroborated in other studies. These benefits include psychosocial support (Burke, et al., 1990; Fagenseon-Eland, et al., 2005; Noe, 1988; Ragins & Cotton, 1999) and assistance with career advancement (Dreher &

Ash, 1990; Fagenson, 1989; Noe, 1988; Ragins & Cotton, 1999; Scandura, 1992; Sosik & Godshalk, 2005).

Although the women in this study did benefit from the encouragement and career assistance offered by mentors, they primarily utilized these relationships as a source for positive and negative role models. Role-modeling is often included as one of the psychosocial functions of mentoring (Kram, 1983, 1985; Ragins & Cotton, 1999) and can be described as a situation where “A senior colleague’s attitudes, values, and behavior provide a model for the junior colleague to emulate” (Kram, 1985, p. 33). Both Ragins and McFarlin (1990) and Sosik and Godshalk (2000) found that role modeling was associated with mentoring relationships and that female mentors provided the highest levels of role modeling for other women. However, it should be noted that in both studies, role modeling was considered in positive terms as a form of idealized influence. In the present research, however, mentors were a source of positive behaviors to emulate as well as examples of behaviors to avoid. Kram’s (1985) work confirmed this complex nature of the mentoring process, indicating that a protégé may adopt some elements of a mentor’s leadership style but shy away from others. She indicated this process can be especially difficult for women to manage “since a senior male manager acts in ways that may be inappropriate or ineffective for the female manager” (p. 34).

This study also emphasizes another aspect of the mentoring relationship that is not as prevalent in the existing literature: dysfunctional mentoring relationships. When the participants were interviewed, they spoke about a number of incidents involving conflicts with mentors. The way that these women tended to describe the incidents, by almost

hiding them behind an overall positive assessment of the mentor, seems to be characteristic of the literature on the topic as well. The mentoring process provides an array of benefits to both mentor and protégé, but it does involve a powerful connection and, as such, may have negative outcomes (Scandura, 1998).

In describing the four stages of a mentoring relationship, Kram (1983) indicated that the separation stage can be problematic if managers are reluctant to let their protégés grow and move on. Kram (1985) also indicated that mentoring relationships can be either mutually enhancing or destructive. In fact, she stated that a major misconception about mentoring “is that a mentor relationship is always a positive experience for both individuals” (p. 196). In terms of the frequency that negative incidents occur, Eby, McManus, Simon, and Russell’s (2000) survey indicated that more than half of protégés reported a negative experience with a mentor. They asserted that these negative experiences were a typical and a normal part of the mentoring process. However, it is notable that the majority of individuals surveyed were involved in male/male dyads.

### **Critical and Feminist Interpretation**

The goal of this study was to provide one interpretation of the experience of being a female chief admissions officer at a master’s or research institution in the southeast U.S. The study was conducted with a critical and feminist theoretical orientation. In adopting a critical perspective, I was interested in identifying examples of the abuse of power and control during the processes of collecting and analyzing data (Jermier, 1998). In choosing a feminist stance, I was able to focus on women and interpret the findings in relation to gender (Lengermann & Niebrugge-Brantley, 1988). As a phenomenological



research project, the study involved interviewing six women whose words form the cornerstone of the results. Jermier (1998) considers research methods that are built upon the stories and descriptions of individuals as the hallmark of critical research. This view is consistent with the aim of feminists who indicate the importance of listening to women because they speak in a voice that is different from men (Gilligan, 1982). The use of a critical and feminist orientation in this project, then, allowed me to meet the goal of “blending of informants’ words, impressions, and activities with an analysis of the historical and structural forces that shape the social world under investigation” (Jermier, 1998, p. 240).

The purpose of this section is to identify the structures of power and control that became evident over the course of the research. Brookfield’s (2005) three core assumptions about critical theory served as a guide for this interpretation. These assumptions provided a useful framework for revealing how the abuse of power and mistreatment add an additional level of interpretation to the leadership experience of female admissions directors. Brookfield’s (2005) core assumptions are as follows:

1. That apparently open, Western democracies are actually highly unequal societies in which economic inequity, racism, and class discrimination are empirical realities.
2. That the way this state of affairs is reproduced and seems to be normal, natural, and inevitable (thereby heading off potential challenges to the system) is through the dissemination of the dominant ideology.
3. That critical theory attempts to understand this state of affairs as a necessary prelude to changing it. (p. viii)

Brookfield’s (2005) first core assumption is that despite an emphasis on democracy and equal opportunity, the society in which we live is fraught with

discrimination. Women who work in the field of higher education represent one group that has experienced inequity, injustice, and marginalization. Inequity can be seen in the lack of representation of women in top leadership positions (American Council on Education, 2007; King & Gomez, 2008; McDonough & Robertson, 1995) as well as in the fact that women's salaries continue to lag behind those of their male peers (College and University Professional Association for Human Resources, 2007). Even the language of the participants carries an awareness of the marginalization of women. We know that higher education and leadership are the realms of men when Bridget says, "I've had every title known to man!"

Although the women in this study have been successful in the sense that they have attained the top leadership positions in their offices, there is also some evidence that advancing beyond this point may be a more difficult journey. Anna in particular described the difficulty of moving up for a woman with family responsibilities. Bridget expressed her belief that being a woman means earning less than a man despite having similar qualifications and experience. Susan also described the continuing presence of discrimination and marginalization when she spoke of "senior women who sometimes may exude a level of 'This is as far as I could go or what I could do.'" She indicated that it is important to listen to their stories and understand "what limits that sort of fearlessness that they could have done much more."

The women in this study also faced certain injustices that have become part of their leadership experiences. Two of the most notable examples are Bridget's struggle to be named admissions director at her institution and the conflicts some of the participants

had with mentors. Bridget was asked to teach someone else how to do a job for which she was qualified and was already performing. The experience has clearly left her with an array of feelings ranging from hurt to anger. In relation to mentoring, the experiences of the women in this study illustrate both the positive outcomes as well as the “dark side” of the process that has received less attention (Scandura, 1998). To this day, Fern is still coming to terms with her feelings toward an individual who was extremely supportive but still imparted a sexually charged and demeaning comment. India also faced an incident of injustice when she had to fight to receive time off after the birth of her child. These instances seem fraught with what Jermier (1998) called “abusive control” and may be one reason behind the intense desire and commitment of many of these women to help other young female professionals on their career journeys.

A close reading and analysis of the words and stories of the participants in this study also reveals the ways in which they have been marginalized. The literature is supportive of the notion that women have been patronized (Keamy, 2008) as well as isolated and excluded (Bronstein & Farnsworth, 1998; Davies et al., 1994). This study, however, allows us to hear about these experiences in the participants’ own words, especially in relation to their struggles to be seen as credible and to be heard. As young professionals, both Anna and India felt they were not always taken seriously. Anna especially seemed affected by how older white males kept her and other young women on the fringes. Even though the participants currently occupy top leadership positions, they must still fight to be heard. A number of the women used the metaphor of “the table” to indicate their search for a place among the top leadership where their voices would be

listened to and accepted. Susan indicated the experience of being a female leader in higher education is about “constantly chipping away at the big issues.” For her, leadership means that many times, she will be the only women at a meeting, but she must still find a way to contribute to the discussion.

Brookfield’s (2005) second core assumption is that discrimination is perpetuated because it is part of a system that is accepted as the norm. It is the role of the critical researcher to critique the mores and traditions that define the societies in which we live. “In the process, hidden assumptions underlying accepted problematic cultural practices are exposed, along with their negative aspects (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 1999, p. 361). This study revealed that there is an established system of male domination that continues to oppress and condition the behavior of professional women. In the patronizing attitudes of male mentors who wanted to be like Anna’s father, in the way Bridget had to push so hard to earn her place among the leadership, and through Fern’s reluctance to rock the boat when confronted with an instance of sexual harassment, one sees that the “old boy network” is alive and well. The literature is supportive of the notion that white males have perpetuated this system by seeking to hire other white males (Appold, et al., 1998; Claringbould & Knoppers, 2007; Foster, et al., 1996; Gorman, 2005; Moss & Daunton, 2006) and by using biased standards for judging performance and competency (Biernat, & Fuegen, 2001; Foschi, et al., 1991; Ridgeway, 1982; Wagner, et al., 1986). As Anna found out when a position came available, “because I have young children, I was told I couldn’t give 110%, so, it went to a man. And that’s a hard pill to swallow when you’re the one that—I have the doctorate, and this other person doesn’t.” Her response to the

situation illustrates the point of critical theorists as to how such discrimination is accepted as the norm: “it’s just part of life, I suppose.”

A critical interpretation of the leadership experience of the participants indicates the influence of a process of hegemony. Brookfield (2005) defined hegemony as “the way that people learn to accept as natural and in their own best interest an unjust social order” (p. 43). In terms of accepting male domination and oppression as a natural state of affairs, Brookfield (2005) indicated that “There is little need for dominant groups to force ideas and behaviors on us” (p. 45). As women, we accept them willingly. Instead of challenging the current system of male domination, women have instead simply adapted to it. The women in this study who were mothers, for example, spoke about the great lengths they have taken to balance their work and home responsibilities, even when these accommodations hindered their career advancement. All six women also learned that they could advance by taking on more responsibility and proving their competence—working with the bureaucratic system instead of against it. Miles (1993) was critical of this adaptation in *The Women’s History of the World*:

Finally, and this cannot be dodged, women have colluded in their own subordination—too comfortable with the accommodations they had made, too locked into the ways they found to live with men and with themselves, too welded to their own often pathetically ingenious and resourceful solutions, they have not only helped to sustain the systems of male dominance but have betrayed their children, male and female, into them too. (p. xiv)

She leads us to ask whether women are guilty of perpetuating an oppressive situation by adapting their lives to a male-oriented model of success.

Finally, Brookfield (2005) asserted that a third core assumption about critical theory is its call for change. Critical researchers hold this charge in common with feminists, who seek equal opportunities for women (Grogan, 2000). In the leadership experiences of the participants in this study and in the literature describing a new paradigm of leadership, there is, if not evidence of, at least the potential for change. A critical interpretation of the leadership styles of these women can view their adoption of both masculine and feminine qualities as surrendering to the pressures of the male-dominated bureaucracy. However, it is also possible to interpret their leadership as a form of resistance. The findings of this study indicate that when they were confronted with certain aspects of male leadership that they saw as ineffective, these women made conscious choices about different ways to lead. Even though their leadership is characterized by a relational style that differs from the male, heroic ideal, they persist in leading in a way that is defined by their dual priorities of attending to the social order and adapting to change. The traditional view of leadership is about power and influence (Yukl, 2002), yet they insist on fostering leadership at all levels, being good followers, and promoting collaboration. When they do exert their influence, they act to help students or young professionals or to deal with challenges that threaten the welfare of their offices or universities.

In the literature, there is an indication that leadership theory is changing also. The new theories such as relational leadership and complexity theory are revolutionary

because they offer a way to harness the power of the bureaucracy while empowering all individuals. Complexity leadership especially recognizes the strengths of the bureaucracy for getting results by incorporating the element of administrative leadership. But, it also incorporates the notion of adaptive leadership, which is more democratic, focuses on connections, and “is interested in actualizing values and relationships of great importance to the community” (Uhl-Bien, in press; Uhl-Bein, et al., 2007).

This approach to leadership—of working within the bureaucracy yet emphasizing the empowerment of all individuals—is in accordance with liberal feminism, which “aims to achieve full equality of opportunity in all spheres of life without radically transforming the present social and political system” (Weedon, 1997, p. 4). It is also in line with critical theory and its approach to change. Brookfield (2005) wrote that:

It is a mistake to think of power in wholly negative terms, as only being exercised to keep people in line. A sense of possessing power—of having the energy, intelligence, resources, and opportunity to act on the world—is a precondition of intentional social change. When the power of the individual comes to be seen as inexorably embedded in the power of the collective..., then the possibility of large-scale social change, even of revolution, come dramatically alive. (p. 47)

In the six women who were interviewed for this study, we see leaders who are able to manage the demands of the bureaucratic system while at the same time engaging in a leadership practice defined by their ability to build relationships and empower individuals. Although six women cannot change an entire society or system, they can institute change at the personal level. A critical interpretation of their success “can offer

us a form of radical hope that helps us stand against the danger of energy-sapping, radical pessimism” (Brookfield, 2005, p. 8).

### **Recommendations for Practice**

The findings of this study suggest a number of recommendations related to the leadership practice of women in admissions. These suggestions can be applied throughout the continuum of a woman’s career journey. They represent tactics aimed at helping female leaders to, first of all, attain a presence and survive in a male-dominated world, and, second, once they have attained leadership positions, to flourish and succeed as leaders and as women.

First, through listening to the participants speak about the dominance of males in higher education leadership, it became apparent that colleges and universities need to find a way to increase the presence of women in leadership positions. One suggestion for increasing the representation of women in leadership is quite simple: hire more women overall. Tolbert, Simons, Andrews, and Rhee (1995) called this practice “the 40% solution.” In a study of sociology faculty, they found that turnover among women occurred more frequently until women comprised about 40% of the department. Collins (1998) found that when women comprised 40-50% of the faculty, they also held more full professor positions. The two studies suggested that “there may be increased resistance to the promotion of women until their average representation reaches or exceeded the 40% mark across universities, at which point women cease to be a minority” (Collins, 1998, p. 55). One caveat, however, is that when women do reach



representative levels, men may increase their attempts at marginalization because they feel threatened (Tolbert et al., 1995; Yoder, 1991).

In addition to hiring more women, those who monitor hiring processes need to include evaluative criteria that incorporate a view of leadership beyond the traditional male ideal. Universities can work toward this goal by appointing more women to serve on hiring committees and being receptive to the ways in which they may be re-conceptualizing the practice of leadership. Yoder (2001) indicated that the criteria for evaluating success in upper level administrative positions tend to be ambiguous, subjective, and reliant on personality traits. It seems likely that criteria will remain ambiguous given the complex nature of leadership, but those who evaluate and hire can strive to evaluate leadership potential in terms of both outcomes and relational skills.

Another recommendation for practice that can be made as a result of this study indicates the importance of leadership development programs for women at all stages in their professional careers. Young women entering the field of admissions and higher education need to learn about the male-dominated world they are entering and its rules for success and penalties for infractions. Miles (1993) was overtly critical of the ways women adapt, yet the fact remains that young women who enter higher education and seek leadership positions will be thrust into this world. Male-oriented power structures and rules will play a role in whether they succeed or fail. The early success of the six women in this study was due, at least in part, to their recognition that they needed to prove their competence by working hard and taking on more responsibility. Although they ultimately succeeded, they also learned some hard lessons. As Anna stated, “I wish

there were a class on how to be a successful female leader.” At present, women must seek out their own opportunities for learning. Higher education institutions should make these opportunities available through courses at the undergraduate and graduate levels, organized leadership development programs, and formalized opportunities for networking that teach women what to expect and how to cope. Although such a strategy may mean adapting to a male-dominated system in the present, it may lead to an increase in the number of female leaders so that there will come a time when such coping is no longer necessary.

This study also suggests that leadership development and networking opportunities need to be provided for women who have attained positions in the middle or top tiers at their institutions. India’s ongoing experience with a leadership development program indicates the value of such programs for supporting women and improving the operating efficiency of organizations. The comments of a number of the participants also indicate the degree to which they network with and rely on colleagues at other universities to solve problems and assist students. Although a number of studies have shown that male-dominated networks were most important in terms of influence and career advancement (Brass, 1984, 1985; Forret & Dougherty, 2004; Michael & Yukl, 1993), women have benefitted from same-gender networks and they should not be discounted (Brass, 1985; Ibarra, 1992). In addition, women in high level positions should be encouraged to participate in such networks as influence may be more affected by one’s level in the organization than by gender (Mainiero, et al., 1994).

The prominent role that mentors played in the career journeys of the six women leads to a number of recommendations related to the mentoring process. The first suggestion is that institutions and/or professional organizations provide formal mentoring programs that pair young female professionals with more seasoned women. Now that more women are occupying leadership positions, greater numbers of female mentors should be accessible and available. In addition, it is likely that other women also feel a sense of responsibility in terms of helping new professionals, as was the case for the majority of the women in this study. Anna clearly indicated her feelings when she stated, “I’ve used the fact that I can now be in a leadership role to say, ‘I am *going* to make this possible for the younger women in our profession to have a place to go and learn and not have to seek it out on their own and learn it the hard way.’” Although some studies indicated that gender does not affect the outcome of mentoring relationships (Dreher & Ash, 1990; Fagenson, 1989; Lyons & Oppler, 2004), this research suggests that women need to be involved with other women as they grow and learn. Having female mentors will also eliminate the struggles women face in dealing with older males who are patronizing, controlling, or harassing. Organizations should provide training and support services for both mentors and protégés that lessen the possibility of dysfunction within their mentoring relationships.

If women are going to be successful in professions that are as variable and intense as admissions, especially in leadership roles, universities and professional organizations will also need to address the admissions culture. This recommendation is made as a result of the finding that these women’s families are their first priorities yet they are still eager

to take on leadership roles. Historically, success in the admissions profession has been attained through long hours on the road and in the office (Farrell & Hoover, 2008). These hours play havoc on anyone's attempt to raise a family. Based on the experiences of the participants with children, these challenges can only be surmounted with the support of others. It is unlikely that the travel or recruitment events will ever go away, even with the new emphasis on technology and e-recruitment. Too much emphasis is still placed on the personal touch that only comes from face-to-face contact (Jump, 2004; Donehower, 2003). Institutions that are competing for students as a matter of survival are also unlikely to reduce travel or expect a lower time commitment.

To help reduce these difficulties, university leaders need to ensure that admissions offices are adequately funded so directors can hire enough staff to spread travel around and assist with events. At peak times, temporary assistance may be needed. Offices can institute more family friendly practices such as allowing individuals to work at home, adopting flexible hours, and approving practices such as India's office movies when children are out of school. In addition, as many professional organizations play a role in scheduling college fairs, effort should be made to schedule fairs and other events on weekdays and not on weekends. Thus, admissions staff may still need to travel throughout the week, but they could at least retain some semblance of a normal life by coming home on the weekends.

The final area of recommendations deals with how to assist women in becoming more effective practitioners of leadership and how to ensure that what they are doing *is* viewed as leadership. In the six women in this study, one sees individuals who are

leading in a manner similar to what is described by the new theories of leadership. These women are managing the social order and creating positive outcomes in relational leadership practices that empower staff and keep their offices running. Their leadership practices seem to be in accord with what is needed in today's complex organizations. The question becomes why their style of leadership is not universally accepted and practiced as the norm. Hogue and Lord (2007) indicated that even if women are viewed as effective leaders in their offices and departments, "it would still take considerable time for the emergence of new networks that accord female leaders equal influence in organizations" (p. 375). I support their recommendations for reducing gender bias: encouraging top leaders to champion a culture of equal opportunity, promoting a looser organizational structure that allows this culture to spread, and providing opportunities at a variety of levels within the organization for women to succeed and be visible as leaders.

Additionally, I recommend that women adopt a leadership style that includes both feminine and masculine elements of leadership. One reason that the women in this study have been successful is that they have been able to develop a balanced style. They learned their strengths and weaknesses and how they needed to change their leadership styles in order to be more effective. For the more focused, driven, and assertive women, attaining a balance may mean developing a softer side and paying more attention to relationships. For someone who is already a natural nurturer, it is important to learn how to say "no" and make tough decisions. There is a double standard for male and female managers (Johnson, et al., 2008). Women must exhibit both masculine and feminine behaviors to be viewed as effective leaders. Until the body that practices leadership no

longer matters (Fletcher, 2004), “to be successful in post-secondary education, it is imperative that women leaders have the ability to move between and among leadership styles” (Madsen, 2007, para. 43).

### **Recommendations for Future Studies**

In addition to the recommendations for leadership practice, the findings of this study also have a number of implications for future research. The women who were interviewed are leading in a way that is suggestive of the new leadership paradigm described in the professional literature. This occurrence points toward a number of possibilities for future studies. Most importantly, as the number of participants in this study was small, additional studies are needed to determine whether the leadership practice of the participants is being enacted by other women in admissions and beyond.

The results of this study lead one to ask whether there is something about the admissions profession that is conducive to the type of leadership practice seen here. Yoder (2001) indicated that battling gender stereotypes was only one aspect of gaining acceptance for women as leaders. She wrote that “An alternative to changing the leader is changing the context” (p. 822). Does admissions, with its emphasis on both production and customer service, offer an especially suitable context for the leadership practice of women or the enacting of a more relational style of leadership? Because of the importance placed on meeting enrollment goals, building relationships, *and* adapting to change, is an admissions office a likely place to see the components of complexity leadership theory enacted? Again, as this study involved a small number of participants,

studies involving more female admissions directors as well as male directors would potentially offer more insight in this area.

Another suggestion related to additional research concerns the perceptions of followers. This study focused on the leadership experiences of female chief admissions officers. In order to gain a more complete picture of the leadership styles of these women, one could conduct a study involving other staff members in an admissions office. For example, a case study related to the leadership practice of one director from the viewpoint of her staff would be valuable in terms of learning if her leadership practice really was conducted as she saw it. In addition, a phenomenological study would be valuable that described the experience of being an admissions counselor, assistant director, or associate director. The perceptions of these individuals about the nature of the profession and the effectiveness of various styles of leadership could be different from those of their directors.

I have already noted the importance of mentors in the career journeys of these women. Since some of the participants did have negative experiences with mentors and because there are few studies on dysfunctional mentoring, additional research in this area would be valuable. The findings could improve the mentoring process and indicate ways that young women could benefit from mentoring and not be left with mixed feelings and negative memories. Additionally, as the women in this study have moved into leadership positions, they are being placed in positions where they will have the option to mentor and be role models to other young women. In many studies, most mentoring dyads involved males because there were not enough women in management positions. It

appears that women are now gaining a stronger presence in leadership positions. The question becomes whether this new generation will take the lead in forging mentoring relationships that offer new professionals advantages they may not have had. These advantages include the checklist that Anna talked about on how to be an effective leader as well as the career assistance that has traditionally come from men.

Finally, as this study focused on a group of six women who have risen to chief admissions officer status and have enacted successful leadership practices, one additional recommendation for future research is a study of women who have left the profession. Various surveys indicated the large numbers of women in lower level admissions positions but their lack of representation in director positions (AACRAO, 2008; Blair, 1997; Chapman & Urbach, 1984; “*The Chronicle Survey*,” 2008; McDonough & Robertson; NACAC, 2008). What were the key factors that caused women to leave the admissions profession? Was it the nature of the profession itself with the long hours and travel? Were they disheartened by injustices they encountered as they attempted to advance to higher level positions? Were they not able to find a balance in the areas the participants in this study spoke of: driven versus nurturing or family versus work? A qualitative study involving women who changed careers might be useful in telling us whether there is something truly special about these women who have persevered and how they managed to do so when others did not.

### **Conclusion**

At the outset of this study, I posed a question at the end of the Researcher’s Perspective section that became not only the anchor for this personal statement but also a



touchstone for the entire project. I asked whether women leaders in admissions were still playing by men's rules or starting to make their own. What I learned as I interviewed the participants is that they are doing both. These six female admissions directors all traveled similar paths on their leadership journeys and, along the way, learned the rules for surviving in a male-dominated world. By working hard and taking on responsibility, they were able to prove their competence and advance into leadership positions. When they encountered obstacles, they chose their battles. They fought for and continued to strive to attain the things that mattered to them like credibility, equality, and a life outside of admissions. Once the participants attained director positions, however, they began to change the rules of the game. In their leadership practices, one sees the realization of a new paradigm of leadership. They lead with a relational style that defines leadership as a social process that creates positive outcomes, and they have managed to be effective by balancing both feminine and masculine attributes. These six women and what they have been able to accomplish in their day-to-day leadership practices offer both a promise and an affirmation that it is indeed time for women to have a place at the table.

In order to capture the meaning of the leadership experience for the participants, I also acknowledged in the beginning that this study would be conducted from a critical and feminist orientation. Two of the primary goals of the research were to illuminate the concerns and struggles of women and to allow their voices to be heard. As I listened to their words, I developed a great respect for these women. I still feel very privileged that I was allowed to step into their worlds and that I have been entrusted to tell their stories. It seems only fitting, then, that this report should end with their voices. The paragraphs that

follow provide a composite description of the experience of being a female chief admissions officer. They present some of the final quotations of each participant when they were asked to describe what it means to be a successful female leader in admissions.

I think just being the director of admissions, in general, you have to look at your institution, um, and look at the fact that your office generates the new student enrollment which, for me, that's \$70 million of revenue for my institution. Um, that's a lot of responsibility, regardless of whether you're male or female. But being a woman, um, first you have to kind of prove that you can do it because you are a female. Then, my style of leadership is very different than some of my male peers. I'm much more compassionate, and I want people to have ownership and buy in, and I do respect that work-life balance, and I do live by the idea that I work to live, I don't live to work. Um, and so that's a little different.

You need to work hard. You need to show that you have, um, the willingness to work and learn and adapt...I've adapted more but change is hard but I know we have to do it. I have some staff who just can't stand to change...You're in the wrong place because you can't—you can't work in an environment like this and not embrace change or at least support it. I've learned that through my years as director.

To be a director of admissions, and my being female, is kind of the culmination of everything I wanted to do in this particular field. It's something that, um, I feel like I've worked for all my life—to be in this place and this moment...There [are] a lot males. I stuck it out. I've weathered the storm and I *will* be probably one of the best Directors of Admissions they've ever had because of this—and that's not, you know, that's not

being—tooting my own horn. That's just a fact. And I think you have to—you really have to feel passionate about your abilities to be that successful female. I do think you have to work a little harder. I do. I do. I believe that.

I am a firm believer that you cannot do it all. Um, I would have been a firm believer 15 years ago that you can do it all. Um, I have realized that you cannot do it all. You can't have everything your way. I find it impossible. There's no way I could have done this job with small children. I could not have approached this job the way *I* have high expectations for myself. You cannot have it all and you've got to determine how to have the balance that you're willing to live with. I weathered the storm with my boss, who didn't have any kids and, at one point, wasn't married, and saw what it did to me internally. Um, it didn't hurt me professionally, but I know that it hurt me—it hurt me personally. Uh, and I am bound and determined...to provide a more understanding environment.

I think it means that you...offer a role model to young girls or young professionals that, um, there are opportunities...within this field of...admissions and enrollment management for their skill set and what they have to bring, um, to the table.

For me, my success is...is largely based on, um, the successes of my staff. I get a lot of joy knowing that I've mentored staff that have been very, very successful in their respective jobs and because of having opportunities here. I feel good...when we've met enrollment goals and the university's very, very happy and I can talk about the staff and how well they've done this year and how everybody works as a team to make all that happen.

I know that I've been able to be successful in being not only a mother and a wife but a leader at my institution. Cause you don't have to be a director of admissions to really be a leader in your field. And maybe some people think that, but I always saw myself as a leader, even when I was an admissions counselor. I could learn from other people, but you know what? People can learn from me too. Um, so it's, you know, it's just been a great experience.

I think that the leadership experience for women is much more about getting comfortable with who you are and where you are because I think that...the skill to lead is—is the given in this situation, but it's feeling comfortable in doing it that I think sometimes women can be challenged by because they don't want to be seen as this, that, or the other. Oftentimes, women who are very effective leaders are—are negatively stereotyped because they're, you know, because they're not playing the role that maybe folks think they should be. And, so, therefore, it takes a—a level of comfort to say, “Well, you know, if—if it makes me seem like I'm aggressive. Whereas if it's a man, he's just being, you know, assertive. Then fine, I'm aggressive... Well, if it means that I'm emotional, I'm comfortable with being emotional.” But the bottom line is that, um, I'm comfortable with knowing that what I have to say is going to contribute. How externally its labeled you can't be as concerned about, and you have to feel comfortable with that you're making a contribution. It's having an impact and things are moving forward. And, you're respected for that.

I think I've started coming into a place, uh, where I'm comfortable in my own skin, and I believe that, um, feeling like I'm doing the right thing and that I'm helping

make the life better for somebody else is more important than being the one that gets recognized or gets the name on the big door or the big plaque or getting the big awards. That doesn't mean as much to me as I would have thought it would have at this point in my life, and I think maybe being the mother of two little girls kind of changes that... being able to say, "I am the director, and I do keep a successful department moving, and we meet enrollment goals, and I am the president-elect of a state association. And on top of that, I'm a mom, and I keep it all going." I dare any man to come tell me. I'll take on anybody that says, "Oh, you can't do the job."

To me, my career and my leadership [have] nothing to do with title. It has to do with... what authority I have, and what influence I have, and what impact I have on students. I tell students all the time that, you know, that I hope that when they make a career journey...that they think about their life and not just their career.

It means that you stand at the crossroads and do a lot of balancing for a lot of different issues. You stand at the crossroads of gender and you ensure that, you know, the conversations that might not otherwise take place do take place because...you have the opportunity to be a part of those conversations. Um, you stand at the crossroads of, um, a variety of different communities, um, and so...you have to be the person to ensure that...the information and your ability to convey that information can—can move from community to community or constituent to constituent.

It means I get to work in a world where I tell a good story every day. In some ways, I'd say that our office is a utopia compared to the other departments on campus because we are forced to see the university in a positive light every day 'cause we have to

tell that message. Um, so being a director of admissions means you get to work for the face of your university and you get to tell the positive story and you really, if you're good at it, you believe in that positive story.

## APPENDICES

## **Appendix A**

### **Personal Statement of the Researcher**

I grew up in a traditional, conservative, middle-class family in a small town in a very rural area. From an early age, there were two truths in my life: I would go to college and I was capable of doing anything. In terms of education, although my only brother considered joining the military, I never saw this as an acceptable option for myself. Most likely this was due more to my high grades than my gender. Although I am the first person in my immediate family to earn a baccalaureate degree (my brother is the second), I was lucky to grow up in a family where education was valued. My mother worked at a local university and I had several female great aunts who were teachers. When I look back now, I see that it was the quiet will of my mother who initially propelled me toward higher education. One of my fondest memories is of the day she went to my high school—highly incensed—to speak with the male guidance counselor who had suggested to me that, despite being one of our class valedictorians, I should consider the secretarial program at the community college. Instead, I enrolled at the local university as an English major. Throughout my college career and, as they have been all along, my family was supportive and encouraging, which ultimately meshed well with my own achievement-oriented personality.

After earning my baccalaureate and master's degrees, I found that I had much education but little experience. I began working in TRIO programs in 1991 and became an Upward Bound Director after about two years in the profession. After my program received funding for another cycle in 1999 and I earned a second master's degree, I



accepted a position in admissions and moved up in the ranks relatively quickly. Unlike many of my colleagues, who seem to have just fallen into the job, I always wanted to work in admissions. I think I had an inherent sense after my first summer as a tour guide that this was the competitive, changeable, and fast-paced world in which I belonged. While much of higher education is still mired in the slow-moving collegiality of the past, admissions departments have much more in common with the innovative organizations of the corporate world. Activities change daily—if not hourly—and there are always the twin specters of the bottom line and the competition.

This is the world in which I function and in which I have succeeded. If you had asked me several years ago if my gender played a role in my advancement to or success in a leadership position, I would have said it did not. I have a different opinion today. What changed my mind was a gradual awareness of how my leadership experience has been affected by what I have done and continue to do differently from most other women in the profession who have not attained leadership positions. I moved up quickly because I did several things differently than the average female. Most important were earning a master's degree right after college and working like a man or, in my eyes, even harder than a man. In order for a woman to get noticed and gain respect as a professional, doing the minimum is not enough to advance—even though it seemed to be for some men. I worked long hours and put forth great effort in all my positions and was able to chalk up some significant accomplishments. I also noticed that women seem to have stopped writing guides about how to succeed by playing by men's rules. Instead, they now extol

the advantages of more collaborative leadership. However, the reality is that the former makes you visible and leads to success.

Having attained a leadership position, it is still the things I do differently that bring the influence of gender to the forefront. Even though most people accept women in the workplace and in leadership positions, they have not moved beyond expecting all women to be the supportive, nurturing, hand-holders in the office. For better or worse, I am not this woman. My strengths lie in combining a task-oriented style that gets things done with a strong need for collaboration, but this latter nod to the feminine is not enough to gain the approval of many individuals who expect something different from a female. Although leading in a style that is not stereotypically feminine may hinder my approval rating, being different in another way has helped my advancement. Unlike most other women my age, I am single and do not have children. I imagine that my career path would have been very different if this were not the case. I have known countless women of high ability who have chosen lower paying and lower status careers because of family responsibilities. This choice seems to be especially common in admissions because of the travel, long hours, and evening and weekend work.

Thus, and as stated in the first chapter, when I initiated this study, I was interested in the leadership experiences of other women working at higher education institutions in the southeast. I wanted to see if they have made similar leadership journeys and faced the types of challenges that have been a part of my leadership experience. As a woman, I also felt the need to support other women and seek information about the barriers women face in advancing to leadership positions and how these barriers can be overcome.

## Appendix B

### Titles Indicative of Potential Chief Admissions Officer Status

Adm Director	Dir of Adm & Dual Credit
Admissions Director	Dir of Adm & Enr Mgt
Assoc VP Enr & Dean of Adm	Dir of Adm & Records
Asst Provost/Dir Adm	Dir of Adm & Recruitment
Asst VP for Enr & Dir of Admissions	Dir of Adm & Registrar
Co-Director of Admissions	Dir of Adm & Student Services
Coord Adm & Enr Mgt	Dir of Adm Operations
Coord Adm & Enr Mgt	Dir of Admissions
Coord for Adm/Registration	Dir of Admissions & Enr
Coord of Adm	Dir of Admissions & Enr Services
Coord of Adm/Registration	Dir of Admissions & Records
Coord of Admissions	Dir of Admissions & Registrar
Coord of Admissions	Dir of Admissions Services
Coord of Recr & Admissions	Dir of Admissions, Med School
Coordinator of Admissions	Dir of Admissions/Advising
Coordinator Undergrad Adm	Dir of Admissions/Records Process
Dean Adm & Records	Dir of Recruitment & Adm
Dean of Adm & Enr Mgt	Dir of Undergrad Adm
Dean of Adm & Fin Aid	Dir of Undergrad Admissions
Dean of Adm/Financial Aid	Dir Student Recr & Adm
Dean of Admissions	Dir Undergrad Adm
Dean of Admissions & Records	Dir Undergraduate Adm
Dean of Students/Adm Services	Director Adm
Dir Adm & Fin Aid	Exec Dir of Adm
Dir Adm & Records	Exec Dir of Admissions
Dir Adm & Recruitment	Executive Dir Admissions
Dir Adm & Registrar	Interim Dir of Admissions
Dir Adm & Registration	Registrar & Dir of Admissions
Dir Adm Operations	Registrar & Dir Adm
Dir Adm, Records, Regis	Registrar & Dir of Admissions
Dir Admissions & Enroll Services	Registrar/Dir of Admissions
Dir Admissions & Recruitment	
Dir of Adm	

## Appendix C

### Approval E-mail from the Institutional Review Board

**From:** Nalinee Patin [NPATIN@clermson.edu]  
**Sent:** Monday, February 08, 2010 2:35 PM  
**To:** Russ Marion  
**Cc:** ktimney@clermson.edu  
**Subject:** Approval of IRB Expedited Protocol #IRB2010-004  
Dear Dr. Marion,

Your expedited protocol #IRB2010-004 has been approved. We will follow-up with a formal approval letter via interoffice mail. Please let me know if you would like to pick up your date-stamped consent document(s). Otherwise, we will send them with your approval letter.

Please remember that no change in this research protocol can be initiated without prior review by the IRB. Any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects, complications, and/or any adverse events must be reported to the Office of Research Compliance (ORC) immediately. You are requested to notify the ORC when your study is completed or terminated.

Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns.

All the best,  
Nalinee

**Nalinee D. Patin**  
IRB Coordinator  
Clemson University  
Office of Research Compliance  
Institutional Review Board (IRB)  
Voice: (864) 656-0636  
Fax: (864) 656-4475  
E-Mail: [npatin@clermson.edu](mailto:npatin@clermson.edu)  
Web site: <http://www.clemson.edu/research/compliance/irb/>

## Appendix D

### Letter of Support from the SACRAO President



January 11, 2010

Laura Moll  
Internal Review Board  
Clemson University  
223 Brackett Hall  
Box 345704  
Clemson, SC 29634-5704

Dear Ms. Moll:

As the president of the Southern Association of College Registrars and Admissions Officers (SACRAO), I am writing to indicate that I am aware of the research study being proposed by Dr. Russ Marion and Krista Timney of Clemson University and have shared this information with select members of the associations' executive committee. SACRAO is a professional organization for registrar and admissions staff members. The organization's mission is to provide for the dissemination of information, the exchange of ideas, and leadership in policy interpretation in the 13-state region.

I have been informed that Dr. Marion and Ms. Timney plan to conduct a study of the leadership experience of female chief admissions officers. I also understand that this study will involve contacting members of the organization in order to locate participants for the study and interviewing those members who choose to participate in the study.

I am offering my endorsement of the proposed study and look forward to learning the results that are obtained from the research. If you have any questions, please contact me at 757-221-2801 or [slmarc@wm.edu](mailto:slmarc@wm.edu).

Yours truly,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Sara L. Marchello".

Sara L. Marchello  
SACRAO President  
University Registrar

## Appendix E

### Recruitment E-mail to Potential Participants

Dear SACRAO member:

I am writing to request an opportunity to interview you as part of a research study on the leadership experience of female chief admissions officers. The goals of my research are to understand both the barriers that may limit advancement as well as the opportunities and approaches to leadership that can lead to success. I hope you will consider partnering with me in this endeavor.

Your participation in this study would involve the following:

- Respond to this e-mail, indicating that you are interested in being interviewed.
- Participate in a phone call where you will be asked to provide basic demographic information to ensure you meet the selection criteria for the study.
- Participate in an in-person or telephone interview that will last approximately 60 minutes, during which you will be asked questions about your leadership journey and the challenges of your position.
- Participate in a follow-up phone call.
- Review the written report of the research findings.

Please consider this invitation to participate in a study that will not only add to the scholarly literature on leadership but may also benefit current and future professionals. My interest in this topic stems from my own experience, and as a SACRAO member and admissions professional, I am very interested to learn about the leadership journeys of women who have been successful in this dynamic and challenging field.

Please respond to this e-mail or contact me at 843-349-2256 (work) or 843-650-6636 (home) if you are interested in participating and/or have any questions. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,  
Krista Timney  
Clemson University  
Doctoral Candidate in Educational Leadership  
[kristimney@yahoo.com](mailto:kristimney@yahoo.com)  
843-349-2256 (work); 843-650-6636 (home)

## Appendix F

### Telephone Protocol for Verifying Eligibility, Interest, and Availability

The following questions are designed to screen prospective participants for inclusion in a study on the leadership experience of female chief admission officers. The questions are designed to assist the researcher in determining if an individual meets the selection criteria and demonstrates a continuing interest in and availability for participation.

Individuals selected for participation in the study will be contacted to schedule an interview. Participants will also be asked at that time to select a pseudonym that will be used to help ensure their anonymity and the integrity of the research. Those not selected will also be contacted.

Date of Contact: \_\_\_\_\_ Time of Contact: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Basic Demographic Information

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_ Date of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_

Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_ Marital Status: \_\_\_\_\_

Highest degree earned: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Information Related to Selection Criteria

Current Title: \_\_\_\_\_

Institution: \_\_\_\_\_

State: \_\_\_\_\_ Carnegie Classification: \_\_\_\_\_

Number of Years in Current Position? \_\_\_\_\_

Primary responsibilities and job functions: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Previous Title: \_\_\_\_\_

Institution: \_\_\_\_\_

State: \_\_\_\_\_ Carnegie Classification: \_\_\_\_\_

Number of Years in Current Position? \_\_\_\_\_

Primary responsibilities and job functions: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Information Related to Interest and Availability

How long do you expect to remain in current position? \_\_\_\_\_

Are you willing to schedule time for an initial interview of approximately 60 minutes, preferably at your office? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Are you willing to schedule time for a follow-up phone call approximately one week after the initial interview? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Are you willing to review the written report of the research findings to assist with the validation process and identify any areas that you feel may potentially compromise your anonymity?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_



## Appendix G

### Interview Protocol

#### *Leadership Journey*

##### CAREER DEVELOPMENT

1. How did you come to enter the admissions profession?
2. What led you to seek a leadership role in the profession?
3. What is your definition of leadership?
4. What types of preparation or learning experiences have been the most beneficial in terms of leadership development?
5. What role have mentors played in your leadership development?

##### OBSTACLES/CHALLENGES

6. What obstacles or challenges have you faced in becoming a leader?
7. How has being a woman impacted your leadership journey or experience?

#### *Nature of the Current Position*

##### ROLES/RESPONSIBILITIES

6. What is it like to be the chief admissions officer at your institution?
7. What skills, abilities, and knowledge are most important to being successful in your position?
8. Describe a typical day in your job.

##### CHALLENGES

9. Tell me a story about a significant challenge you have faced in your current position.
10. What influences or factors inside the institution hinder or promote your ability to be a successful female leader?
11. What issues or trends that come from outside the institution affect your daily activities and enrollment strategies?

#### *Summary Questions*

12. Based on what you have told me, what does it mean to be a female chief admissions officer?
13. How have you come to understand the leadership experience for women?
14. What does it mean to be a successful female leader?

## **Appendix H**

### **Information Letter/Informed Consent Form**

Information Concerning Participation in a Research Study  
Clemson University

#### **Description of the research and your participation**

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Dr. Russ Marion and Krista Timney. The purpose of this research is to capture the essence of the leadership experiences of female chief admission officers at public institutions in the southeast region of the U.S.

Your participation will involve participating in an in-person or telephone interview where you will be asked to answer questions related to two main areas of your leadership experience as a female chief admission officer: your leadership journey and the current challenges you face in the position. This initial interview should take approximately 60 minutes and will be audio recorded. In addition, you will be asked to participate in a follow-up telephone call to clarify or add any additional insights after a period of reflection. This contact should take approximately 15-30 minutes. Finally, you will be asked to review and comment on the research findings as part of the validation process.

The amount of time required for the initial interview and follow-up phone call will be approximately two weeks. It is anticipated that it will take 6-8 months from the time of the initial interview to prepare the written report of research findings for your review.

#### **Risks and discomforts**

There are no significant known or anticipated risks to you as a result of participating in this study. You will be questioned about obstacles and challenges and the possibility exists that negative responses will be given that, if revealed, could impact relationships. However, every effort will be taken to protect you from the exposure that may result from such comments. Specific measures will be taken to protect your anonymity and the confidentiality of your comments. These procedures are outlined below.

#### **Potential benefits**

The study may provide benefits to female chief admissions officers like yourself, higher education practitioners in general, and aspiring female leaders. Admissions and higher educational practitioners may gain insight on what it means to be a successful female leader in the field of college admission. Such insight may result in more effective leadership behavior and practice. This study may also provide encouragement to those already occupying or seeking leadership positions by offering success stories and providing role models.

### **Protection of confidentiality**

We will do everything we can to protect your privacy. We will refer to you in interview transcripts by your first initial. In all writings generated by the study, you will be referred to by a pseudonym which you have chosen and neither your specific title nor institution will be named. Interview tapes will also be kept in a secure area by the co-investigator and shared only with the transcriber, and they will be destroyed after the defense of the dissertation. Access to each interview transcript will be limited to the principle and co-investigator. As part of the validation process for findings, you will also be asked review the written report and specify any areas you feel may reveal your identity; these sections will be revised. Your identity will not be revealed in any publication that might result from this study.

### **Voluntary participation**

Your participation in this research study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate and you may withdraw your consent to participate at any time. You will not be penalized in any way should you decide not to participate or to withdraw from this study.

### **Contact information**

If you have any questions or concerns about this study or if any problems arise, please contact Dr. Russ Marion at Clemson University at 864.656.5105. If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Clemson University Institutional Review Board at 864.656.6460.

A copy of this consent form should be given to you.

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