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# Examining Leadership Experiences and Practices of African American Women in Higher Education Settings to Overcome Barriers

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This dissertation, directed and approved by the candidate's committee, has been accepted by the College of Graduate and Professional Studies of Abilene Christian University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

## Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

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Abilene Christian University

School of Educational Leadership

Examining Leadership Experiences and Practices of African American

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A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction

of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

by

Tanya Stubbs White

February 1, 2023

## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother, Loretta Octavia, my aunt, Shirley Ann, and my cousin, Corliss Vaughn—all mothers to me who were my inspiration on how to live life. Thank you for your support, love, and encouragement during my younger years. Your influence gave me the vision to realize the power of prayer and to believe and trust in God. I know that all things are possible through hard work and dedication. Your passion and zeal will live in me forever. Although not here to see this, I know you all were here pushing me on. Rest peacefully in heaven and in my heart always.

**Acknowledgments**

I must take the time to thank God for continuously blessing me with physical, mental, and emotional strength and courage to complete this dissertation journey that is so unique for each person. I could not have done any of this without my wonderful dissertation committee members and the Department of Educational Leadership. I must give honor to my dissertation chair, Dr. Dianne Reed, who came to my rescue and guided and supported me when things were tough and looked impossible. My committee members, Dr. Faith Ngunjiri and Dr. Tara Horner, were helpful throughout the process in sharing their ideas that made this study relevant. I want to thank Dr. Dana McMicheal, who has provided me with the reinforcement I needed from ACU over the years. And I must acknowledge Dr. L.V. for your skill of being the best advocate and an expert with knowledge of many things.

I would also like to thank the remarkable women who participated in this study. Your leadership style is outstanding, and it shows in everything you do. You are unique and phenomenal and demonstrate the true essence of the power of strength from within.

To my champion cheerleading squad that has shown patience and unconditional love and support, I am forever in your gratitude, T.L.W. and R.A.B for your friendship; W.B.M., for your peace in chaos; T.W., S.W.A., F.T., and D.H.W., for your incomparable advice; J.A.G., G.E.H, and A.T.W., for your authentic leadership abilities; and to my family and friends, you never gave up on me to accomplish this goal. I appreciate you so much for being there all the time to ensure I saw it through and believed in myself.

**Abstract**

This qualitative case study described the steps 11 African American women have practiced in growing and continuing their path to notable success in higher education leadership. No one size will fit all, but the methods used by African American women may guide other African American or culturally diverse women on how to transcend into and ascertain the well-deserved leadership roles in higher education administration or faculty careers. This study provided narratives of the women leaders to explain their journey to a leadership role. The purpose of the study was to describe the path, barriers, and supports that African American women encountered but were still able to reach while pursuing executive-level positions. Numerous researchers and studies support that African American women leaders in higher education are at the bottom of the hierarchy regarding leadership positions. African American women continue to become more educated each year, with graduation rates for master's and doctoral degrees higher than African American men and just as many as Caucasian women and men. African American women endure the most challenging race and gender suppression in administrative and faculty appointments, often given to their counterparts who may not be as qualified or educated. There is limited data on the competency that an African American woman must secure to excel in a leadership position in higher education. The reactions of an African American woman's behavior, mannerisms, and ethical characteristics were discussed and identified, which may contribute to the discovery of how to become a successful leader in a field where there has always been a challenge to "break the glass ceiling."

*Keywords:* African American women, Black women, Black women leaders, leadership, higher education, intersectionality, racism, gender bias

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**Chapter 1: Introduction**

African American women leaders continually deal with creative ways to break through the invisible, impenetrable glass ceiling to advance in higher education positions. The barriers African American women leaders face are much vaster than other minorities. Evidence indicates that hierarchical obstacles in institutions continue to prevent the professional and academic success that should be achievable for African American women leaders. Coetzee and Moosa (2020) articulated that women's leadership positions have not grown as quickly and continue to lag behind men due to the glass ceiling phenomenon, although women maintain the necessary skills. Coaston (2019) stated that intersectionality directly correlates to the disadvantages and discrimination that women encounter; it demonstrates the gender and sex differences that African American women and women in general face in society. Vallie (2018) found that although women leaders excel in various fields and the number of women in senior positions increased from 26% to 29%, percentages are still relatively low compared to women making up more than 50% of the overall workforce. If there is no deliberate intervention, then the gaps in women's leadership positions in higher education will grow wider (Pasquerella & Clauss-Ehlers, 2017). Therefore, it is critical to clarify the imbalances of leadership, have dialogue, and take action that may encourage and uplift African American women to overcome the obstacles and possibly reach those sometimes unattainable roles.

In this dissertation, I described the perceptions of African American women in leadership positions regarding practices of these leaders that may assist them in overcoming barriers such as racism, disparity, and unequal treatment experienced because of their gender. I described the personal backgrounds of African American women leaders in multiple educational roles in higher education other than front-line management. The African American women that

participated in this study are in the positions of the department chair, executive director, associate dean, assistant dean, dean, assistant vice president, or associate provost. The participants' responses were obtained through virtual methods, in-person interviews, and surveys. In addition, inquiry analysis of visual and textual materials and oral history were examined to attain African American women's habits and techniques in higher education leadership positions. Having a glimpse into the lives of African American women in leadership roles provided a comprehensive view, in their own words, of how they have used their experiences to overcome sometimes complicated processes and rules to become great female leaders.

**Background**

Despite women being able to excel in the workforce over decades, as research has shown in many reports, there is still disparity and disproportionate treatment among African American women in higher education regarding obtaining leadership positions (Gould & Wilson, 2020; Gray, 2021; Olow, 2021). Freeman et al. (2019) contended that discrimination continues in higher education with women in responsibility, salary, promotions, and executive jobs. Mayya et al. (2021) stated that women who have ascended into leadership positions have difficulties based on no peer support, lack of acknowledgment from male leaders, and negligible attitudes and bigotry approaches toward women. Another study found that when examining African American women but also Asian women and race and leadership were explored, they were likely to encounter competence and patterns of influence and power around competence that deprived their ability to ascend in leadership (Rosette et al., 2016). Many different factors must be examined to discern how and why African American women in higher education manage issues concerning intersectionality.

Women must contend with race, gender, inequality, and intersectionality in the higher education setting. In the context of intersectionality, women continually encounter social and political discrimination that overlaps beyond gender. A study by Pasquerella and Clauss-Ehlers (2017) confirmed that conservatives continue to charge that higher education institutions are a force that demonstrates equal opportunity but that upper administrative leadership positions continue to be idle and dormant with slight change over many years (Pasquerella & Clauss-Ehlers, 2017).

Although African American women have successfully entered careers in the academic arena and executive positions in higher education, they must still withstand adverse work environments, being segregated from others, and in many cases, demeaned at all levels in higher education institutions (Brennan, 2019). Showunmi (2021) contended that women's distinctive social and cultural insights into leadership roles improve the visibility of their experiences in academic and executive leadership positions. The insights may educate crucial educational leaders and practitioners about the continuing protests to excel that African American women face.

### *African American Women in the Field of Higher Education*

Since the 1860s, women have been a part of higher education institutions (Parker, 2015). Two private colleges, Oberlin and Antioch, began admitting women of all races to provide a liberal arts education. African American women were usually only in domestic positions, including housekeepers, babysitters, cooks, and maids, and they were uneducated. Over the years, African American women have increased their place in society by becoming more educated and thus more eligible for higher education leadership positions.

In a study on African American women and Caucasian women in professions, Alston (2017) determined that highly educated women and their professionalism provide them with a sense of freedom and authority as they move to different levels as experts in their fields. Logan and Dudley (2021) agreed that women have more positions in higher education jobs but are still diminished compared to men. Storman (2022) confirmed that on college campuses, Caucasian males ages 61 and older have often dominated higher education leadership positions since the creation of higher education institutions in the United States. However, in 2015, although women were still belittled and marginalized, they shattered the glass ceiling and represented 52.7% of administrators. Comparatively, only 6% of African American women identified as being a representative in higher education administration roles (American Council on Education, 2017). The data indicated that female professors and deans move up the ladder much slower than their male counterparts. According to Logan and Dudley (2021), "The women educators were also characterized as less productive, had heavier teaching loads, but continued to have lower salaries and opportunities than African American and Caucasian males" (p. 1555).

Reviewing information from the past experiences of African American women and focusing on the future of what can be done is possible but still very challenging due to the biases women must face. Mosley (1980) stated that, over 30 years ago, "African American women have been pioneers in education for African American and Caucasian people, even though historical references reflect little about their role," and African American women are a distinct group serving as higher education leaders and are seen as an "endangered species" (p. 295). Tevis et al. (2020) argued that the barriers encountered are minuscule power and reviewed as underpaid and overworked, which continues to be accounted for as a part of history and legacy in the present. African American women continue to be doubly oppressed through race and gender, which

causes them to be persecuted and subjected to biases and stereotypes, which impede their movement to higher-level leadership careers.

**African American Women's Underrepresentation in Leadership Positions**

Cañas et al. (2019) concluded that studies verified that while 58.2% of the United States workforce are women, they are still unequally represented in most occupations. Research was conducted in 2017 by the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (CUPA-HR) that reported on higher education administrator equity and diversity (McChesney, 2018). McChesney (2018) researched and discovered that women and people of color are disadvantaged when it comes to representation and compensation. Beckwith et al. (2016) confirmed that the percentage of African American women is significantly less in executive-level positions in higher education roles. A new study conducted by McKinsey and Company and LeanIn.Org estimated that "at the rate we're going, it could take about 25 years to reach gender parity in senior vice president roles, and more than 100 years to do so in C-suite jobs" (as cited in Sahadi, 2015, p. 1).

For African American women, the overlap of gender and race differs broadly based on their personal experiences and how they have learned to encounter, overcome, and triumph through *breaking the glass ceiling*. The issue is being a woman and being the minority in a world where African American women are seen at the bottom of the totem pole in most corporate professional and higher education situations (Beckwith et al., 2016). Scholars point to the weak pipelines of graduate-level scholarship and matriculation/completion, failed recruitment and retention efforts, hostile environments, and the absence of African American administrators are blockades in the upward mobility for African Americans (Blockett et al., 2016; Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Musu-Gillette et al., 2016; Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015).

The contribution of women in higher education has regularly elevated internationally around the world; however, the redundant marginalization of African American women leaders' contributions is stifled in higher education (Logan & Dudley, 2021). African American women in the United States constituted the largest group of non-Caucasian women in academia at 236,375 individuals, with the vast majority serving in clerical positions, narrowly followed by faculty, and only 6% serving in upper-level leadership or administrative positions (Townsend, 2020).

Women of color often must work extra hard and reach above the norm to have access to higher-level positions in the corporate world but also in higher education settings (Washington & Morgan Roberts, 2019). A lack of support and other women to help them overcome barriers that they endure is an ongoing issue and tends to be given a lack of attention in literature and research studies (Washington & Morgan Roberts, 2019). Moreover, Okoli and Okwuosa (2020) argued that women could reach leadership roles, but only after carefully navigating intricate roads that include childcare issues, racism, sexism, and identity discrimination. In this study, I described the persistence and stamina required of African American women, their experiences and learning processes, and what can be used in unknown environments to their advantage to maneuver and ultimately excel in higher education leadership positions. Fourtané (2021) asserted that African American women leaders have a vast array of practical qualities to share and want to make a positive impact in a higher education setting.

Rankin and Caccamise (2017) contended that women leaders desire to be part of an affirmative team and contribute open, honest, and collaborative actions that demonstrate respect for others. Women often value collaboration and harmony while working with others and act as experts at developing positive exchanges which foster strong relationships. Elias (2018)

indicated that women leaders naturally inspire others to use their own talents to fulfill and identify their skills and abilities.

**Statement of the Problem**

African American women who have the skills, education, and training are still lacking in leadership roles in administration in institutions of higher education. There continue to be increased numbers of women of color scholars but not significant increases in women of color leaders in colleges and universities promoted to executive-level positions. Lewis (2017) proclaimed that current research studies demonstrate diminishing gains in the growth of the number of African Americans who are ascending, in particular, to upper-level leadership positions at institutions of higher learning. Block and Tietjen-Smith (2016) concurred that the number of women that achieve advanced degrees is outpacing men; however, women are still underrepresented in administrative positions in higher education. African American women leaders must make many sensitive decisions while leading others. Discovering how spirituality and ethics affect those decisions made by African American women leaders is an essential mechanism used to make organizational and leadership strategies and to make significant changes in the workplace. African American women must endure issues of gender and race to excel in their chosen occupations. Lewis (2016) indicated that the problem is that studies on African American women and their distinctive experiences in higher education environments are strongly predicated on the intersectionality of gender and race, which may prohibit them from attaining executive-level administration positions. Gardner et al. (2014) stated that African American women in leadership positions had been refused promotions at their institutions due to "behavioral bias, lack of career path guidance, insufficient clarity on fundamental requisites, and

compensation level" (p. 237). African American women faculty members frequently deal with a lack of recognition or awards for their academic achievements (O'Meara & Stromquist, 2015).

Gardner et al. (2014) reported that although women have adequate documentation of credentials in degrees and necessary training, African American women ultimately encounter roadblocks to higher education leadership positions primarily due to the color of their skin and being a woman. Griffin (2020) contended that African American women experience hardships handling requests to "forego their respective research agendas which are considered outside of established peer-refereed journals when applying for tenure and promotion" (p. 292). Lewis (2016) confirmed that African American women in higher education jobs primarily endure being separated by irregular stereotypes that hold them to distinguishable characteristics when correlated to Caucasian male counterparts in comparable occupations.

A hindrance that should be researched is the leadership styles and temperaments that differ between women and men in higher education. The characteristics portrayed by male leaders are seemingly accepted when they demonstrate competitiveness, effectiveness, and strategy, but the same traits are seen as aggressive by female leaders (Carvalho & Diogo, 2018). There has been a negative outcome for African American women due to the color of their skin and because they are female compared to male characteristics and how African American women should perform in the workplace. The issues of gender and race continue to serve as injustices to women in higher education institutions. These injustices promote the loss of expertise and value that can hinder an institution from being better because of not taking advantage of distinct situations that can be assets to the university (Gamble & Turner, 2015).

**Purpose of the Study**

For this case study, I described the perceptions of African American women regarding steps they have practiced to continue their path to notable success in higher education leadership. In other words, I described the behaviors and practices of African American women leaders and how they engage at institutions of higher education to overcome barriers, acquire advancement and promotion, and achieve and excel in executive-level careers. In this approach, interviewing virtually or in person and describing the perceptions of African American women leaders at universities in the United States in the southeastern region may be beneficial to other women of color in developing a rite of passage or guidebook of procedures on what it takes in the 21st century to become an executive administrator and influential leader in higher education.

The participants for the study consisted of African American women in higher education who have cultivated their careers and ascended into leadership positions.

**Research Questions**

The study's central research question was: What are the perceptions of African American women in executive leadership positions regarding factors contributing to African American women leaders in higher education settings overcoming barriers? Specifically, the three research questions below will guide this study.

RQ1: What are the perceptions of African American women in leadership regarding barriers to attaining leadership positions in higher education?

RQ2: What are the perceptions of African American women in leadership regarding supports to attaining leadership positions in higher education?

RQ3: What are the perceptions of African American women in leadership in higher education regarding their ethical and spiritual decision-making?

**Definition of Key Terms**

The following terms were used throughout the text and may help the reader understand and interpret their relevance to the study.

**African American.** A person having origins in any of the African American racial groups of Africa. Terms such as Haitian or Negro can be used in addition to African American or Black. The United States Office of Management and Budget (1997) defined *African American* or *Black* in the census of 2010 and referred to individuals who may have ancestry in any of Africa's African American racial groups (Shelanski, 2016). The genetic class includes people who considered themselves and marked African American, Black, or Negro on the census (Shelanski, 2016).

**Barriers.** Circumstances that inhibit African American women's capacity to encounter opportunities of job assignments that are at a higher level or to climb the corporate ladder that is other than entry-level positions (i.e., racial and gender disadvantage or discrimination, absence of a coach or guide to approaching the higher level, and harmful stereotypes (Beckwith et al., 2016).

**Career advancement.** This includes moving to the next step in a job or position and excelling in the upward mobility of a career and climbing from lower-level to higher-level positions. This could include a director, manager, or executive-level occupation.

**Executive title or role.** An executive is someone who has moved from an entry-level position to obtain a status of mid-level or senior-level management within a company or business by climbing to higher levels in a particular field of work (Pratt, 2021).

**Glass ceiling.** The glass ceiling refers to women of color and their climb to higher-level positions and occupations while breaking barriers or into different fields that are usually

occupied by Caucasian or African American men in corporations or higher education (Lewis, 2017).

**Intersectionality.** The term examines references the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that, in turn, shape complex social inequalities (Grabe, 2020).

**Synergistic leadership theory.** A relational and interactive theory developed by Irby et al. (2002) examined interactions of four factors, which included the following: leadership behavior; organizational structure; external forces; and attitudes, beliefs, and values. According to the synergistic leadership theory (SLT), the six points of the tetrahedron connect and form relationships, and there is no structural hierarchy to the model (Irby et al., 2002).

## Chapter Summary

The number of women in leadership positions has always been below those of men, but African American women have to navigate differently. In the leadership realm, Rosette et al. (2018) found that when African American women were described as running companies with declining profits, they received the lowest ratings of leader effectiveness as compared to Caucasian women, African American men, and Caucasian men. African American women often have the skills, knowledge, and abilities for higher education executive jobs. Unfortunately, they must struggle to prove their abilities and may not be given a chance to explore leadership opportunities. Rosette et al. (2018) stated that perceptions of African American women as the least typical of leaders explained this relationship, suggesting that African American women must work harder than other groups to demonstrate their competence and appropriateness for high-status job roles. But because African American women continue to make strides, there must

be some transformational competencies and expertise that can be shared with other women so that they can reach their height of career excellence in higher education. For some, this level of accomplishment may be a provost, dean, vice president, or even a director in their specialty, but obtaining the next level continues to be a challenge. Rosette et al. (2018) concurred that gender stereotypes, among other factors, influence the positions that women are allowed to occupy in organizations and the resources they receive. African American women need the support of other women and develop a network through peers, mentors, and others who may have attained proficiencies and techniques to maneuver through the intricacies that may be involved in breaking the glass ceiling.

Chapter 2 of this study is a literature review that provides information on what other experts have presented on the matter of African American women in leadership in higher education and its positive and negative effects.

**Chapter 2: Literature Review**

This case study's purpose was to describe the perceptions of African American women regarding steps they have practiced to continue their path to notable success in higher education leadership. This chapter provides an overview of the theoretical framework and foundation related to this case study research. Qualified African American women who have the skills, education, and training are still lacking in leadership roles in administration in institutions of higher education. Rosette et al. (2018) explained that job roles, type of occupation, and one's position within an organization directly impact earnings, access to power, decision-making, resources, and networks. There continue to be increased numbers of women scholars but no significant increases in women leaders in colleges and universities promoted to executive-level positions. Putnam et al.'s (2003) study of female executives found that while both African American and Caucasian women reported a sense of isolation from their male-dominated corporate environment, African American women had fewer role models and network contacts on which they could rely (Rosette et al., 2018). African American women of color remain a group that must struggle to reach higher level positions because they are female and they are African American.

The literature review provides the theoretical framework for the SLT to explore female leadership perspectives and practices. Elements of the feminist theory are briefly discussed to help readers understand women's inequality, gender roles, and expectations based on gender. Furthermore, understanding the leadership development experiences of African American women in academia is critical to increasing their possibilities as rising leaders.

**Literature Search Methods**

The focus question I addressed in this research study is, what are the perceptions of African American women in executive leadership positions regarding factors contributing to African American women leaders in higher education settings overcoming barriers? There is significant evidence demonstrating that African American women in higher education can excel in leadership positions; although African American women leaders encounter many obstacles, they have learned to overcome them and become successful leaders (Hyppolite, 2019).

I used a variety of databases in researching and developing my research project. My starting point for searching for information for my study was the Abilene Christian University online library. The databases used included EBSCOhost, JSTOR, ERIC, DOAJ, and ProQuest. The keywords searched were *African American women*, *African American women leaders*, *higher education*, *intersectionality*, *racism*, *gender bias*, *synergistic leadership theory*, *higher education leaders*, *effective leadership*, and *the glass ceiling*. I identified several themes in conducting the searches and reviewing the literature. These include:

- African American women face obstacles that others do not encounter.
- There is a lack of research on structured successes that others could follow.
- The scope of practice is the knowledge gained in life experiences professionally and personally and varies considerably based on the individual's perceptions and how they interact and respond when being a leader.

**Theoretical Framework**

SLT was used for this study and described African American women's leadership experiences regarding barriers and supports in attaining executive leadership positions in higher education. SLT describes four factors that contribute to women's leadership theories, which

include (a) leadership behavior, (b) organizational structure, (c) external factors, and (d) beliefs, attitudes, and values (Irby et al., 2002; see Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

*Tetrahedral Model of the Synergistic Leadership Theory*

**Organizational Structure**
Rotates leadership
Uses expertise of members, not rank
Has commercially derived goals
Values members
Rewards professional development
Relies on informal communication
Disperses power
Promotes community
Promotes nurturing and caring
Promotes empowerment
Has many rulers
Has separate tasks and roles
Maintains a tall hierarchy
Initiates few changes

**External Forces**
Perceptions/expectations
of supervisor/colleagues
Perceptions/expectations of
community
Local, state, and national
regulations
Resources
Location
Culture of community
Socioeconomic status
Language/ethnic groups
Political/special interest groups

**Leadership Behavior**
Autocratic
Delegator
Collaborator
Communicator
Task-oriented
Risk-taker
Controller
Stabilizer

**Beliefs, Attitudes, Values**
Importance of professional growth
Openness as changes verify
Adherence to tradition
Collegial
Importance of character, ethics, integrity
Importance of programs for at-risk/gifted students
Roles of teachers/learners
Purpose of school
Roles of teachers/administrators
Importance of employee well-being

*Note.* Adapted from "The Synergistic Leadership Theory," by B. J. Irby, G. Brown, J. A. Duffy, and D. Trautman, 2002, *Journal of Educational Administration*, *40*(4), pp. 304–322 (https://doi.org/10.1108/09578230210433409). Copyright 2002 by Emerald Publishing.

The SLT is a comprehensive examination of leadership from men's and women's lenses but developed by women with a female vocalization. The theory serves as a generalization of how leadership affects equity in the roles of females and males in the workforce and is gender specific. Irby et al. (2002) confirmed that approaching leadership from this perspective offers a holistic view. Therefore, the direction of this case study was to study the nature, behavior, and attitudes of African American women leaders in higher education and their lived experiences to reach the highest level in their fields.

All four factors of the SLT function collectively; therefore, pressure and imbalance may result if the components of the theory contradict one another (Irby et al. 2002). These factors are depicted as star points on a tetrahedral model. According to Irby et al. (2002), the following are significant assumptions of SLT:

a. Leadership is the interaction among leadership behavior, organizational structure, external forces, and values, attitudes, and beliefs.

b. No theory or model exists in current literature that is all-inclusive of female characteristics or female perspectives.

c. Females bring a particular set of leadership behaviors to leadership positions. (Irby et al., 2002, p. 310)

Irby et al. (2002) argued that SLT is unlike any other theory and is distinguished by the following five distinctive characteristics:

(a) Its development included female leaders; (b) female leaders may be influenced in ways that male leaders are not by external forces, organizational structures, or values, attitudes, and beliefs, and conversely; (c) in contrast to male leadership behaviors, female leadership behaviors may interact differently with SLT factors; (d) the factors may have a

different effect on leaders in varying positions or levels; and (e) each of the four

components are interactive. (Irby et al., 2002, p. 306)

Considerable research has revealed that African American women have excelled but still

face multiple barriers while trying to break the glass ceiling and be equal to their male

counterparts in hiring, promotion, salary, and opportunities to become leaders (Hyppolite, 2019;

Simms, 2018; Whitehead, 2017). African American women have been classified as difficult to

get along with because of the firm demeanor they may take when they reach leadership roles and

executive levels in their careers (Roberts et al., 2018). Block and Tietjen-Smith (2016) agreed

that females are not tolerant of female leaders who are aggressive, lack empathy, and do not

display traits that are expected from society. The research showed that certain behaviors might

be necessary to get ahead based on biases, inequity, sexism, and racism that African American

women face. Specifically, research by Davis and Maldonado (2015) discussed that although

women develop as leaders, they continue to encounter gender and race inequities and adversities

that may detrimentally affect their career trajectories and, ultimately, their lifeline to career

advancement. Moreover, the theoretical framework will also incorporate elements of

intersectionality and feminist theory and how it looks through the worldview of African

American women leaders and how it connects to positions that are traditional to Caucasian males

in higher education (Crenshaw, 1989).

### *Factor 1: Attitudes, Beliefs, and Values*

In *Factor 1*, attitudes, beliefs, and values are portrayed as dichotomous; an individual or

group will either adhere to or disavow specific attitudes, beliefs, or values at any given point in

time (Irby et al., 2002). Leaders must understand the attitudes, beliefs, and values of the

members of their team to properly gauge the buy-in and support of their campus. Irby et al.

(2002) also suggested identifying and maturing one's own values is critical for leaders who work with others. Examples of this leadership behavior in Factor 1 include "(a) belief in professional growth for all, (b) openness to change, (c) value in diversity, and (d) value integrity" (Irby et al., 2002, p. 307). Beliefs, attitudes, and values influence individual, societal, and organizational perceptions and decisions (Ertosun & Adiguzel, 2018). Additionally, Castillo et al. (2018) acknowledged the relationship between the leader's attitudes, values, and beliefs and those of others in the organization.

### *Factor 2: Leadership Behavior*

In *Factor 2*, SLT illustrated a spectrum of leadership styles, from autocratic to nurturing (Brown & Irby, 2003). In regard to women in leadership, specific behaviors given to female leaders are "interdependence, cooperation, receptivity, merging, acceptance, and pattern recognition" (Smith et al., 2021, p. 10). Years ago, the same attributes were subscribed to male leaders in addition to self-assertion, separation, independence, control, and competition (Grogan,1998; Gupton, 1996; LeCompte, 1996). However, feminist leaders prioritize personal relationships and engage closely with colleagues to establish a network inside the organization (Brown & Irby, 2003). Creating a culture of connection and support in the workplace can improve productivity. Zenger and Folkman (2019) found a more collaborative and less self-centered leadership style is preferred by women than males. In fact, Fassinger and Shullman (2017) found that men tend to gravitate toward authoritarian leadership styles. In contrast, Fassinger and Shullman (2017) discovered women precipitate toward democratic leadership styles that include others and frequently involve them in decision-making.

*Factor 3: External Forces*

In *Factor 3*, SLT identified external contributors or leaders who have a connection to the organization and the leader who clearly exemplifies a set of values, attitudes, and beliefs (Brown & Irby, 2003). Effective leaders understand that uncontrolled external influences will affect the system and produce frustration for people within the organization (Norlock, 2019). External influences that can have an impact on educational institutions are numerous and can include the following:

(a) Perceptions or expectations of supervisors or colleagues; (b) local, state, and national laws and regulations; (c) technological advances; (d) political climate; (e) economic situations; (f) resources, (g) special interest groups; (h) culture of the community, (i) taxpayers, and (j) location. (Irby et al., 1999, p. 170)

*Factor 4: Organizational Structure*

In *Factor 4*, the SLT classified organizational structures among those ranging from feminist to bureaucratic. The SLT organizational structure refers to the organization's vertical and horizontal operations (Brown & Irby, 2003). However, Koen (1984, as cited in Clegg & Bailey, 2008), Martin (1993), and Rothschild (1992, as cited in Cliff et al., 2005) defined feminist organizations as decision-making structures that practice sharing leadership, community and collaboration, promotion, and shared decision-making. For example, bureaucratic, participatory, transformational, and feminist are organizational structures within this structure and factor. The organizational structure can influence and form diverse practices inside the organization.

The SLT is transparent as it outlines the role feminism plays as a critical component. However, in addition to entailing a feminist perspective, SLT includes the following:

(a) Adds a theory reflective of female leadership experiences and voice to existing male-biased leadership theories, (b) improves the theory presented in leadership programs, and (c) creates a framework for describing dynamic tensions between leadership behaviors, organizational structures, external forces, and attitudes and beliefs. (Brown & Irby, 2003, p. 106)

Historically, leadership theories have excluded the female perspective, have been gender biased, and have been written in a masculine voice and perspective (Brown & Irby, 2003; Goethals & Hoyt, 2017). The majority of theories are gender-neutral, written in a masculine tone, and validated with male participants (Sczesny et al., 2016). The number of female leaders continues to increase in industries across the globe; therefore, leadership theories should represent these leaders and their perspectives.

Another significant feature of the SLT that other leadership theories lack is its framework, which permits analysis and evaluation of specific interactions that may contribute to or explain tension, conflict, or harmonious relationships at certain periods in time or across time (Brown & Irby, 2003). Moreover, the importance of alignment among the four factors strongly suggested that no matter what values, beliefs, attitudes, leadership behaviors, organizational structures, and external forces are, the leader and organization can be perceived as effective if there is an alignment among the four factors (Brown & Irby, 2003).

Overall, SLT has been used to improve understanding of leadership practices and educational organizations since its establishment (Brown & Irby, 2003). As African American females strive for equality and break down barriers in higher education, several theoretical perspectives aid in recognizing and comprehending the experiences of African American females in higher education, which is essential if progress is the aim (Cain, 2015).

**Overview of the History of Institutions of Higher Education Up to the Early 1900s**

Women have always aspired to have access to intellectualism and wanted the privilege to learn more to grow in knowledge and empower their families financially. The desire African American women have for advancement is not new. In the United States, African American women's interest in education dates back to the years of slavery (Miles-Cohen et al., 2018). Enslaved women trained themselves to read and write in secret because it was illegal (Miles-Cohen et al., 2018). However, in the late 1830s, a limited handful of colleges began to admit African American students to their postsecondary institutions (Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, n.d.). As a result, African Americans were progressing and making gains in academia.

Oberlin College was founded in 1835 and became the first predominantly Caucasian institution of higher learning to admit African American male students. Two years later, it became the first predominantly Caucasian school to admit female African American students (Oberlin College and Conservatory, 2021). Moreover, Mary Jane Patterson was the first African American female to acquire a bachelor's degree in education from an American institution in 1862. This student went on to teach in Philadelphia at the Institute for Colored Youth school system and became the school's first African American principal (North Carolina Museum of History, n.d.). The school of education has always been a preference in the African American community when granted access to education because it created teachers and professors, and this is the first academic area that African Americans were introduced to and participated in. Another example was Mary Church Terrell; she was also a trailblazer in education. Like Mary Patterson, Mary Church Terrell also earned a degree from Oberlin College and went on to serve as the first president of the National Association of Colored Women (Cook, 2001).

Although African American men and women were granted college access, the rate at which each grew did not grow at the same rate as men and Caucasians. For example, in 1890, 30 African American women graduated with college degrees, compared to 300 African American men and 250 Caucasian women (de Brey et al., 2018). Over the next 35 years, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) were founded and expanded to create educational opportunities for African American students. HBCUs were developed and were founded in Pennsylvania and Ohio before the American Civil War (1861–1865) with the purpose of providing African American youths—who were largely prevented, due to racial discrimination, from attending established colleges and universities—with basic education and training to become teachers or tradespeople. The Institute for Colored Youth (briefly known as the African Institute at its founding) opened on a farm outside Philadelphia in 1837 (Johnson et al., 2017). The educational landscape for African Americans was rapidly changing, but female leaders in education continued to be minimal. In an article written by Njoku et al. (2017), they discussed a narrative that Pearson et al. found in 2009 that HBCUs have a reputation for creating racial uplift and empowerment. However, for African American women in leadership, that uplift or boost for a woman's psyche can often be muddled with sexism or even respectability politics (Lee-Johnson, 2021).

Throughout history, African American women have been overlooked or underrepresented in academics (Breeden, 2021). Employment opportunities at the time were limited to elementary and high schools for African American women. As a result, teaching was the primary occupation of the few African American women who attended college before the 1900s (Breeden, 2021). Additional opportunities, such as dean of women, were created for African American women who gained an education beyond a bachelor's degree and were interested in leadership positions

in education; however, the pay was not equitable and considered "invisible" work (Smith et al.,
2021).

**Feminist Theory**

In general, society has put a classification of all races, genders, and differences in people.
There are caste systems, hierarchies, higher- and lower-level jobs, and meager positions, and
these designations have also been put on women, especially women of color. While the feminist
theory is critical regarding how the social world examines women, looking at the unfairness of
why women are treated differently because of their gender is needed.

Bell et al. (2018) stated that feminist theory has always been about viewing the social
world in a way that illuminates the forces that create and support inequality, oppression, and
injustice and, in doing so, promotes the pursuit of equality and justice. The feminist theory
focuses on how women have had to combat gender and race inequity because they try to attain
the same or more significant goals than men might. Davis and Maldonado (2015) supported that
through the feminist theory, women can centralize their experiences and the social predicaments
that bear the brunt of sexist oppression as a way to understand the collective social status of
women in the United States. African American women have different experiences than other
women, such as experiences of growth, power, and development (Davis & Maldonado, 2015).

Through gender oppression and differences discussed in feminist theory, researchers
further try to clarify why women deal with situations in a particular way versus the way men
may handle situations. Davis and Maldonado (2015) recalled that women of color have not been
exempt from the effects of diminished opportunities because of racial segregation and group
discrimination. Women have often had to share their backgrounds to understand they are not

alone in the struggles of gender or racial inequity but have already built into a societal norm behavior to accept it.

**Underrepresentation of African American Female Leaders in Higher Education**

Women have historically been underrepresented in leadership positions in higher education (Alcalde & Subramaniam, 2020). When HBCUs and other institutions serving a majority of minorities are excluded from the number of universities, African Americans account for less than 10% of the population at colleges and universities. This is due to a lack of representation in higher education, particularly in leadership roles such as president (Alcalde & Subramaniam, 2020). Historically, men dominated leadership positions in higher education, while women held lower-level positions prior to the 1970s (Parker, 2015). As a result, African American women in higher education experienced isolation and underrepresentation (Walser-Smith, 2019). Chance (2022) stated that research by other scholars indicates that adverse experiences of African American women serving in college and university leadership are minimal. African American women continue to face barriers that impede their growth, and an examination is needed on what influences women to develop and overcome these obstacles (Chance, 2022).

Exploration of the phenomenon of African American women learning to overcome barriers and excel in leadership roles will potentially open doors and create awareness in higher education for other women. Barriers will continue to exist and be identified in the literature of African American female leaders in higher education without a clear understanding of their lived experiences. The limited amount of research on African American females in leadership roles in higher education and why the numbers continue to be low compared to Caucasian males, African American men and Caucasian women support and verifies the need for this investigation. It is

important to explore African American women's leadership abilities, styles, and methods used to succeed and reach the ultimate leadership role. Radu et al. (2017) argued that additional studies are needed to explain why women continue to demonstrate superior leadership abilities yet face obstacles in gaining and sustaining leadership positions.

In a study conducted by Townsend (2021), the experiences of African American women administrators at predominantly Caucasian institutions were investigated using a qualitative approach. The experiences of five African American women administrators working in public institutions across the United States were examined in this study. The major findings in the study focused on the impact of Black Tax, the presentation of their authentic selves, and the impact of microaggressions on their retention as administrators (Townsend, 2021).

The first major theme found in this study is known as Black Tax. Black Tax is a cultural price that African American faculty and staff often pay that their Caucasian peers do not. This additional burden usually encompasses extra duties such as working on multiple committees to present diversity in the workplace, mentoring students of color, and guiding students of color struggling academically or socially with racism (Griffin & Reddick, 2011).

The second theme focused on the "Presentation of Authentic Self." In the fabric of this theme, participants reported that encouraging students to be authentic to their identities was a large part of their job but also admitted that it was difficult to do as African American women in a predominately Caucasian institution. Hiraldo (2010) argued that the standards, limitations, and guidelines that have been established are based on specifics and activities that are vital to Caucasian culture, which can be seen as demonstrations of the critical race theory principle of "Whiteness as property" (p. 54). Evidence of this behavior may be visible in the dress code

policy, hairstyles allowed in the workplace, and cultural attire permitted as professional garments in higher education (Greene et al., 2010; Kringen & Novich, 2017).

The final theme reported in this study was microaggressions. Microaggressions are often unnoticed small acts of racism that add up over time. In this study, each participant reported experiencing microaggressions at multiple points in their careers, and some even caused them to leave their jobs to pursue a more welcoming work environment. An equity-minded perspective shifts attention from individuals to organizations, addressing how institutions perpetuate inequality, inhibit their own ability to increase faculty diversity, and sustain barriers that prevent minoritized individuals from gaining access to beneficial resources (Griffin, 2020). However, the apparent issue must be addressed if change is an aim. African American women have made significant contributions to higher education and outnumber African American men regarding credentials (Griffin, 2013; Wilder et al., 2013). However, African American women are underrepresented in key leadership positions.

**The Origin of Intersectionality**

The term intersectionality was conceived by lawyer and professor Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 (Crenshaw, 1989). Crenshaw is known for establishing and introducing the intersectional theory that examines women and their trials with their gender and race. Crenshaw (2018) speculated that the combination of race and gender is a dimension that constructs difficulty for African American women in their experiences in their vocation and finding credible employment opportunities. Intersectionality is the "examination of the relationship between overlapping or intersecting social identities, particularly minority identities, and systems and institutions of oppression, dominance, or inequity" (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 6). Coaston (2019) stated that Crenshaw's scholarship is also critical in understanding intersectional feminism as a subcategory

of intersectional concepts, and "it examines the overlying systems of cruelty and injustice, and the discrimination women confront due to their race, gender, and financial background" (Coaston, 2019, p. 5). Crenshaw discussed that in all generations and facets of life, women have to look at being in many forms. Still, race and gender always take precedence when discussing a woman's feminism and how to maneuver in a male-dominated world (Crenshaw, 1989). Furthermore, "Intersectionality is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects," and not just a race or gender problem for any person (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 4).

Crenshaw (1989) indicated that intersectionality also examines the social aspect, which is double jeopardy regarding status, which encompasses challenges related to one's ethnicity and whether a person is female, existing roles and values, and factors that shape the identity and perspectives of women of color. As stated by Crenshaw (1989), "Given the status of politics today, there must be a movement built on intersectionality, which will form tighter bonds and more organic connections and reflect the constituencies that already exist" (p. 9). Men still minimize the degree of sexism that is so pervasive in our culture, and women of color face additional challenges because of the intersections of their identities (Ruthig et al., 2017). Female African American leaders constantly deal with and try to navigate through the culture that is embedded in the higher education organization, which is marginalized for women. Santovec (2017) stated, "There continues to be mainstream, gender-based ideas of what a leader and who a leader is" (p. 13). Many women continue to be very sensitive and cognizant about how they portray leadership behaviors in front of other leaders, specifically men leaders.

Intersectionality refers to the "crossing of discrimination and intolerance that may be experienced by people of different genders or nationalities with various identities, all of which

may be faced with discrimination or some type of inequity as an individual" (McChesney, 2018, p. 7). Chance (2021a) concurred that multiple studies found that the intersection of racism and sexism in the workplace can result in biases that alter the perceptions of African American women's competencies, thus limiting their ascension into leadership. Intersectionality theory overlaps multiple social identities, such as race, gender, sexuality, and class, and contributes to the specific type of systemic oppression and discrimination experienced by an individual.

### Intersectionality of Race and Gender Roles: Women in Leadership Positions

One area that has to be considered when examining women in leadership positions is that there is sometimes a stigma of women exhibiting masculine traits as women leaders. A study conducted by the American Association of University Women in 2016 indicated that women were defined as aggressive, shrill, pushy, and domineering, while the same traits for men were assertive, direct, commanding, and strong or powerful (American Association of University Women [AAUW], 2016). Brower et al. (2019) stated that in most societies, for instance, aggressive behavior is considered more socially acceptable in men than in women. Brower et al. (2019) contended that scholars have noted that women leaders who violate gender role stereotypes are penalized in the workplace in the areas of hiring, compensation, and evaluations. Ballenger (2010) confirmed that there are stereotypes associated with men and women and differences, such as women working with small children and men being in an office environment.

Women leaders deal with intersectional experiences that can possibly be applied toward change. Intersectional investigations hold the key to interrupting the structural dimensions of power that result in egregious consequences to peoples' social, economic, and political lives, but only if radically restructuring what is thought about knowledge, women's roles, and the products

of research (Grabe, 2020). Grabe (2020) articulated that structural inequities lead to power imbalances and gender-based norms that sustain women's experience of marginalization and oppression. The authors of this study concluded that it is critical when looking at marginalization to understand social identity groups and how women of the majority world confront gender injustices that are reproduced in organizational and global processes (Grabe, 2020). The study also verified that women in a shared culture dealt with the intersectionality of policies and societal practices that create structural conditions that may limit women's rights in their respective communities and the positions they try to attain (Grabe, 2020).

Women leaders must be very intentional in showing specific traits while leading others and mediate through the areas of race and gender in historically marginalized work surroundings. Jean-Marie et al. (2017) contended that this dimension of African American women's leadership could help those searching "for life-sustaining contexts while simultaneously empowering themselves as agents of transformative change who align everyday practice with core values" (p. 35). Women also do not have the same opportunities or are shown value as women scholars. Smith (2017) affirmed that it is clear that many institutions are still very gender specific in terms of who is sought out for leadership, how excellence is viewed, and how talent is identified. Johnson and Thomas (2012) stated that while dealing with the intersectionality of race and gender, women may also encounter class, sexuality, religious prejudice, discrimination, segregation, and critical issues of subordination or selective incivility toward African American women leaders trying to enhance their careers.

In these occurrences, women encountered challenges at the intersection of race and gender trying to confront and determine acceptance of their diversity and if it is stigmatized at their institution, or what may be most valued and sometimes negotiate their values to handle the

critical response or surrounding (Cerezo et al., 2019). African American women in higher education positions continuously have to manipulate their diversified identities and serve in executive-level managerial roles (Beckwith et al., 2016). Nonetheless, with impediments of not being selected for executive roles and often intellectual work being disregarded and devalued, it is hard to see women in administrative leadership and is limited compared to their counterparts when Caucasian females or males (Sotello, 2007).

The research found some obstacles women of color face that keep them out of certain environments and make them hesitant to pursue leadership positions, which impact promotions and hiring practices that organizations may look upon as unfavorable. For example, a study found that African American women in higher education are faced with issues such as racism, sexism, climate, isolation, and institutional ethos that impact their ability to ascend in their careers (Selzer et al., 2017). Moreover, Gause (2020) agreed that dealing with gender and racial bias for women of color may contribute to women deciding not to move into higher-level positions and continue the outdated leadership roles model. Beckwith et al. (2016) stated that the root cause of the inequity is perpetuated in part due to the fact that men wrote many of the workplace policies, norms, and practices for men and out of the experiences of men. As a result of this one-sided perspective, the interests and needs of women continue to be underrepresented or ignored altogether because these "ways of doing business" are deeply entrenched and, in many respects, have become a part of the organizational DNA (Beckwith et al., 2016, p. 116). The bias may create disadvantages for the younger generations and, optimally, the possibility of division of women from helping others and not having the support needed. The disconnect can cause damage to relationships, no real role models, and impaired relationships with the community, family, and career options (Washington-Lockett et al., 2018).

**Spirituality**

Women leaders often cope with obstacles by using their spirituality and faith to help them get through difficult times. African American women leaders at institutions of higher education endure microaggressions that cause them to have to respond to circumstances with different leadership styles. Crawford (2018) stated that as "one dimension of African American culture, spirituality has been noted as a powerful socialized tenet important to African American development" (p. 13). African American women are able to survive and maintain in a male-dominated environment in higher education by "focusing on their spirituality of relationships to ourselves, others, nature and connection to God" (Williams-Skinner, 2018, para. 1). When women leaders use their spiritual aspects, they engage all group members to enhance performance, and achieving desired goals are key features of spiritual leadership (Fry, 2011), which is common with both the transformational leadership theory and servant leadership theory that women exhibit.

The Institute of Spirituality (International Institute for Spiritual Leadership, 2019) concurred that the purpose of spiritual leadership is the following:

> Tap into the fundamental needs of both leaders and followers for spiritual well-being through calling (life has meaning and makes a difference) and membership (belonging); to create vision and value congruence across the individual, [an] empowered team, and organization levels; and, ultimately, to foster higher levels of employee well-being, organizational commitment, financial performance, and social responsibility—the triple bottom line. (para. 1)

Williams-Skinner (2018) explained that African American women experience the pain of being ignored, marginalized, and demeaned and must lean on spiritual and religious values for

inner strength. Women continue to build on their spirituality to rise above the double weight of systemic racism and gender inequality (Williams-Skinner, 2018) to handle the struggles they face while trying to become leaders and be recognized for their talents. A woman's spirituality determines her means of handling others in her life and impacts her decision-making when trying to excel and cope in leadership positions.

**Ethics**

Ethics serve as an individual's moral principles that control their behaviors and decisions when conducting themselves. In a study conducted by Channing (2020), it was discovered that ethical leadership emerged as a key theme throughout the narratives. The women leaders described themselves as moving beyond "reciprocity," having internalized and enacted the social responsibility ethical leadership framework (Channing, 2020, p. 26). Channing (2020) cited Mendonca and Kanungo (2007) regarding how they described two characteristics of ethical leadership related to altruism that were applied to the narratives in their study as "the norm of reciprocity and the norm of social responsibility" (Mendonca & Kanungo, 2007, p. 71). They viewed themselves as part of something larger; the ultimate goal was to create better institutions for students, faculty, and staff. They rejected motivations tied to titles or power for personal gain or prestige, exercised power to inspire and help others to improve their organizations, were keenly concerned with equity and fairness, and recognized that they do not live in a fair world.

Women leaders must use their ethical and moral judgment when dealing with obstacles as a woman and being African American. Pullen and Vachhani (2021) confirmed that facing barriers such as sexism and other forms of oppression, discrimination, and prejudice, and these participants engaged in efforts to effect and lead change to benefit all, a difficult task. The study by Channing (2020) concluded that there are "implications for leaders of all genders, suggesting

possibilities for the conscious development of ethical leadership practices and the creation of equitable, diverse, and fair workplace and learning environments" (p. 28). Pullen and Vachhani (2021) presented evidence in their study that confirmed that leadership and ethics are closely intertwined, and commentators have questioned that sometimes leadership is required for someone to take moral action, which is one reason why leadership ethics serve as a companion to business ethics. Ethics and leadership are more than a position or a person; they portray the individual actions, virtue, and the application of rational and normative regulative ideas that cause them to do the right thing and affect decisions of morality (Pullen & Vachhani, 2021). An African American woman's morals and values influence her ethical practices and impact her leadership behaviors to navigate unequal treatment of gender and race bias.

**Background and Historical Perspective of Leadership Development**

Many researchers admit that there are as many definitions of leadership as there are people who have tried to define it (Northouse, 2012). Essentially, "leadership is the process through which a person inspires a group of others to achieve a common objective" (Northouse, 2012, p. 128).

In higher education, leaders are those who shape the institution's vision and organizational structure (Eastwood, 2020). Bass (1990) described leadership as the following:

The focus of group processes, as a matter of personality, as a matter of inducing compliance, as the exercise of influence, as particular behaviors, as a form of persuasion, as a power relation, as an instrument to achieve goals, as an effect of interaction, as a differentiated role, and as [an] initiation of structure. (p. 11)

Caucasian males have traditionally been used as the group studied to observe successful leadership skills and models. This approach opened the door to leadership characteristics that

were more masculine than gender-neutral, which could be a challenge for female leaders (Eklund et al., 2017). In fact, researchers have established that female leaders and male leaders lead differently. Moreover, Radu et al. (2017) discovered that men tended to be mission leaders and women leaders were interpersonal or caring leaders. Foundational research on the topic found men's mission-focused conduct has contributed to their development as leaders, making them more effective in leadership roles than women (Eagly & Karau, 1991). However, today's leaders are rapidly changing as more and more women assume leadership roles and lead effectively. A study by McKinsey and Company found that, for example, corporations with the highest proportion of women in management had up to a 41% greater return on equity (ROE) than corporations that had no women in management (Borisova & Sterkhova, 2012). Female representation in top management should help improve the task performance of women and increase the motivation and commitment of women at lower managerial levels. Lower-level managers may regard the presence of a woman on the firm's boards or leadership positions as a signal that the managerial behaviors associated with feminine traits are valued by the organization, encouraging them to reach their full potential and rewarding them for good performance (Belasen, 2017). These managerial behaviors may help other women to aspire to leadership positions and develop them as they move into advanced-level occupations in higher education.

**African American Women and Leadership Development**

The growth of African American female leadership in the United States reflects a struggle for oppressive freedom and a way of emancipating the African American community from racial, educational, and economic enslavement (Yang, 2020). However, women are often lauded for their role as outstanding supporters or helpers to men in positions of authority.

Unfortunately, internal and external factors affected African American women and impeded them from opportunities in roles of leadership (Johnson, 2017). According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (1999), gender prejudice was the root cause of women and minorities being passed over for advancements in the workforce. More recent information by the U.S. Department of Labor (2022) persisted that:

> Occupational segregation is a long-standing driver of gender and racial inequality in the workplace, but the COVID-19 pandemic exploded many of its outcomes, causing real economic harm to working women and their families, especially women of color, said Women's Bureau Director Wendy Chun-Hoon. We encourage our partners and coalitions working throughout the country to use the occupation segregation data contained in the department's report to accelerate and strengthen their work. (para. 6)

African American women have long contributed to higher education in general and outnumber their African American male counterparts in being credentialed (Griffin., 2013; Wilder et al., 2013) and in sheer numbers in representation on campus (Johnson, 2017), yet they are missing in critical leadership roles. According to Funk and Parker (2018), opportunities for educated African American women capable of leading are restricted due to their lack of status, position, and influence, not because of a lack of skills or competencies.

There is information that needs to be learned regarding women's leadership development practices and programs that may be beneficial to other women. In a study on leadership development by Selzer et al. (2017), the scholars noted and offered suggestions for three supplemental principles for successful women's leadership development programs: "(a) considering topics in light of gender bias; (b) supporting women's identity work; and (c) focusing on leadership purpose" (para. 2). The study focused on developing women by

identifying their unique talents and abilities but also ensuring they would engage in opportunities provided by other women during their leadership development activities. The article further referenced women leaders being tied to a sense of purpose and being uniquely informed by gender and other dimensions of identities (Selzer et al., 2017). Selzer et al. (2017) further identified that in the study, to develop women leaders effectively, work must be done at the personal, interpersonal, and organizational levels; and that these levels are all interrelated and interdependent. Selzer et al. (2017) verified that within these areas of development, eight emerging themes rose to the surface. At the personal level, it includes (a) vulnerability, (b) structured space for reflection, and (c) being seen and heard. At the interpersonal level, it includes (a) intersectionality, (b) a supportive community for vulnerability, and (c) networking. At the institutional level, it includes (a) cultivation of authentic leadership, and (b) changed culture (see Figure 2). In sum, women's leadership development starts with personal reflection, involves engaging with others in identity work, and needs structural and intuitional support (Selzer et al., 2017, p. 8).

**Figure 2**

*Women's Leadership Levels and Themes*
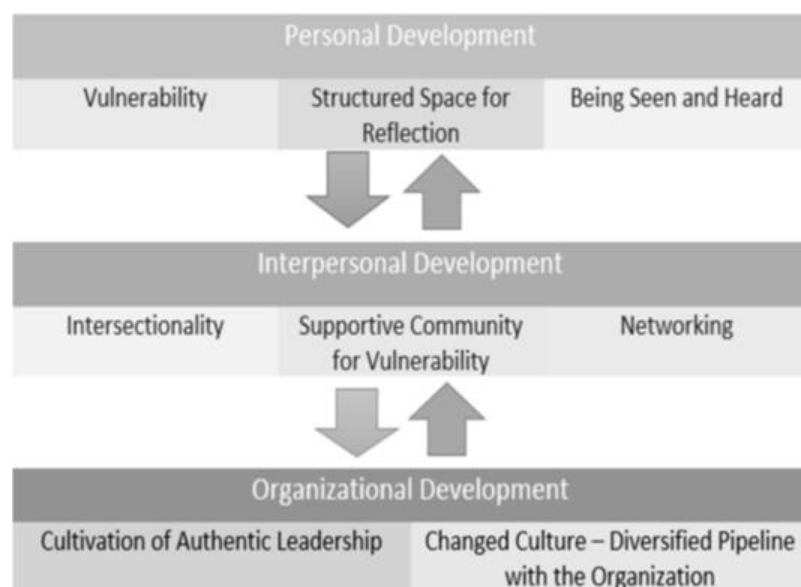


*Note*. From "Rethinking Women's Leadership Development: Voices From the Trenches," by R. Selzer, A. Howton, and F. Wallace, 2017, *Administrative Sciences*, *7*(2), p. 8 (https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci7020018). Copyright 2017 by Creative Commons Attribution.

### Women in Higher Education Administration

In the environment of higher education, leading women have the expectation of operating with a certain attitude to have and gain authority and respect, "but in a way that is caring and nurturing to fulfill the feminine role that others expect and want to see" (Jean-Marie et al., 2017, p. 37). The female leadership orientation is "nontraditional, transformative, or considered different but also inspires, motivates, is democratic, participative, inclusive, collaborative, and envisions shared problem solving and decision-making" (Jean-Marie et al., 2017, p. 37). The literature also stated that many women leaders work within a conceptual framework of three educational system factors to close the inequity gap based on achievements and performance, whereas others may not be measured the same. The three essential qualities are "passion,

practice, and persistence" (Jean-Marie et al., 2017, p. 42). Many professional women have realized that the longer they work in higher education, they exhibit some characteristics that are not their usual behavior and may be more masculine to be accepted in certain situations to be seen as a leader in specific roles (Jean-Marie et al., 2017).

Studies also indicated that "the term *labyrinth* has been used to describe the uneven path of upward progression for women, and this trajectory involves diverse challenges, indirect forays, and ventures to foreign territory rather than following a straight line to the top" (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010, p. 172). Argumentative reasons provided that women do not progress quickly in leadership roles include lack of support, no firsthand experience of the duties, meager opportunities that may have been given to others in their career, different race, social status, sexual stereotypes, old boy networks, and hypocrisy (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). This population remains largely in lower-level positions at universities, stagnated in their career ascension, and stifled by blockades for merely showing up as themselves (Lewis, 2017). In the past, African American women have been seen as "Mammy, Sapphire, and Jezebel" as a racial description to demean them in various situations (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). These derogatory terms to classify African American women are a means of microaggression and stereotypes used in Western cultures and are rooted back to slavery. In many instances of corporate America and higher education, women continue to be faced with discrimination and name-calling. Intersectionality and being a woman of color in an executive role may lead to "sexual and racial patterns of discrimination, unfair work productivity assessments, and unreasonable requests to alleviate the attainment of higher-level jobs" (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010, p. 174).

Gause (2020) stated that there continues to be the auspicious abuse of power, racism, and discrimination that is tolerated as women continue to face underrepresentation institutionally and systemically. African American women are not hired as frequently, are not promoted as often, experience occupational job segregation, may be requested to change, or modify themselves or behaviors based on the job, do not advance as quickly as African American men, and may face negative career expectations due to racism and sexism (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). Wolfe and Dilworth (2015) stated that racial and ethnic minority leaders in higher education have had to play by the rules of competition established by the dominant status group-Caucasian males. According to Banks et al. (2018), "Therefore, traditionally marginalized groups compete with one another, while the dominant group does not have to compete due to their already inherent status of power and privilege" (p. 296). Women in highly visible positions must learn to adapt or attempt to change the institution's culture to excel and change norms (Washington-Lockett et al., 2018). Gause (2020) concurred that women of color who are leaders have become accustomed to racial microaggressions in most positions, but it is more prevalent in higher education leadership positions and is worse than ever before. Jaschik (2019) confirmed that regarding race relations in American higher education institutions, more campuses are engaging the concerns of historically underrepresented students than in the past, but as always, more work needs to be done. Jaschik (2019) also stated that similar to institutions around the nation, campuses have announced plans to dramatically increase the proportion of the undergraduate student body that identifies as first-generation or as members of minoritized groups. Jaschik (2019) confirmed that in response to students' demands, administrators are working with students to reform policies for accountability and acknowledge that racism is an institutional reality and not limited to what one person may do on campus. That said, institutions of higher education are small-c conservative; they are slow to

change, and they often rely on tradition as a bulwark of their prestige. Alcalde and Subramanian (2020) concurred that although gains have been made with women of color, it is stark as they continue to be underrepresented in tenured and full professorships, which limits opportunities to advance into formal leadership, yet we know that qualified and ambitious women are not in short supply (Jaschik, 2019). Most university administrations are still predominantly Caucasian and male, as they have been in the past. There are still racial disparities in the hiring and promotion of faculty.

### African American Women in Higher Education

Women of color must face other barriers that researchers have defined as stereotype threat and imposter syndrome while advancing to leadership occupations. Stereotype threat is "subjecting a person to negative stereotypes of incompetence, and impostor syndrome is defined as an internal experience of intellectual phoniness that appears to be particularly widespread and acute in a chosen sample of high-achieving females" (Washington-Lockett et al., 2018, p. 7). These types of barriers can debilitate a woman's progression in a leadership position and cause them to doubt their ability and skills. The obstacles can also, as researchers state, cause constant hindrances to effective and productive leadership and make being confident while leading others very challenging and burdensome. Marginalization, social isolation, limited mentoring, opportunities, and unwelcoming campus communities are all environmental factors that have affected the leadership experiences and potential for African American women to ascend in their careers (Clayborne, 2006; Jones, 2013; Wallace et al., 2014).

Research has demonstrated over multiple decades that African American women have come to be more accomplished than other groups in higher education but continue to face obstacles, sexism, and racism that hinder their progress from becoming leaders, although they

may qualify (Bates, 2007). For the African American woman leader, haggling through various environments, conventional climates, cultures, and complex political strongholds is necessary to obtain power, career mobility, and maneuver through obstacles that may hinder the path to executive leadership endeavors. As society has demonstrated in history, gender impacts others' perceptions of the ideals of womanhood and leadership. The perpetual manifestation of inequity becomes an informing lens for African American women and women of color to endlessly try to strategize on how to combat the complex architecture of the traditional higher education setting. African American women must operate in a marginalized atmosphere.

An African American woman trying to attain leadership status in a higher education operation continuously observes and lives disparate realities and interjects critical survival tactics in their work community to progress upward (Johnson & Thomas, 2012). Allen and Lewis (2016) noted:

> African American women are portrayed as overachieving and out of control African American lady, sister to the feminazi, to affirm one of the Caucasian truths of the Caucasian republic- African American bodies are excluded from the "we the people" that established the citizen subject. (p. 6)

African American women in leadership positions are seen negatively and are subjected to exclusion, lack of credibility, frequent dismissal, and progressive ideas being attributed to others (Washington & Morgan Roberts, 2019). The perceptions contributed to African American women having to take on additional burdens that will "straighten the shame-producing images of the crooked room" when facing race and gender stereotypes (Allen & Lewis, 2016, p. 6).

African American women in higher education are learning that balancing their leadership is imperative but not easy for success when becoming an executive in academe or administrative

roles. Chance (2021b) acknowledged that factors that support women's ability to excel in leadership in higher education are resilience, social support, and leadership development. African American women leaders must create their own voice and idea of what a woman should look like in a situation where Caucasian and male norms occur that aspire or strive for more, develop models for other women, and where their behaviors are accepted. Women find their own style to demonstrate and maintain effective leadership roles (Johnson & Thomas, 2012).

It is tough for African American women to display a professional image when they are expected to fail due to negative stereotypes, workplace norms, and lower expectations that run counter to the cultural values of African American people and that reward Caucasian male standards of behavior and appearance (Allen & Lewis, 2016). African American women must express their values, shaped by their perceptions and worldviews, so that they can share their lived experiences with others to cope with rising to leadership roles. Since African American women have unique struggles, much different than African American men, or Caucasian women, it is crucial that their experiences become a part of overcoming barriers and difficulties in becoming leaders in higher education positions.

African American women have the opportunity to explain how being oppressed in leadership roles has assisted them in growing, becoming resilient, and resistant to the negative systems that cause inequity and injustice in the workplace. Tran (2014) affirmed that as "more women of color enter the professoriate and serve in leadership roles that they challenge existing epistemologies and resist superficial assimilation while developing innovative practices and supportive networks to overcome these barriers" (p. 302). One reason women have been able to excel in higher education is that there have been more positive examples of mentorship that have

given an avenue of the right path to success when reaching for executive-level positions (Tran, 2014).

**Barriers for African American Women to Excel**

The climb to success has been paved with many barriers for African American women interested in leadership roles. In fact, there is overwhelming evidence of a significant difference in leadership positions in academia for African American females (Reynolds, 2020). Storman (2022) contended that according to Valverde (2011):

> Women of color will not just have to be smarter and stronger to succeed as individuals and groups as they have done in the past, but [will need to] assume the role of change agents, inserting new leadership styles, and redirecting purposes. (p. 51)

Therefore, the leadership style women of color possess is recognized as a critical factor when aspiring for leadership positions in higher education.

These barriers have presented themselves in many facets. In higher education, a variety of barriers to promotion for African American women into leadership roles have produced an invisible "glass ceiling" that has proven difficult to overcome due to lack of access to mentors, gender and race-based expectations, inequitable wage gaps, and stereotypes and misconceptions (Tanner, 2019). Selzer et al. (2017) discussed ways for women to overcome and bare the structural barriers that are policy-oriented, such as pausing the tenure clock or providing flexible work schedules. While barriers for women have become "more permeable, structural barriers that are discriminatory still impede the advancement of women's career trajectories" (Selzer et al., 2017, p. 3). In short, women can be taught negotiation skills in a women's leadership development program, but if exclusionary policies and practices remain in place, concrete walls will continue to exist.

*The Glass Ceiling*

The Federal Glass Ceiling Commission was created to address workplace discrimination that impacted women and created a concealed barrier that prevented this minority group's access to professional opportunities and progress inside organizations and companies (Beckwith et al., 2016). Unfortunately, the number of female college and university presidents is beyond small compared to male college and university presidents. This dismal number of minority female leaders is not due to a lack of qualified leaders, candidates, or interest in the field; unfortunately, the disparity is known as the glass ceiling (Braun, 1995). As a result, the Federal Glass Ceiling Commission was created to combat workplace discrimination that impacted women and constituted the invisible barrier. This invisible barrier continues to exist, as is shown in the literature, and hinders African American women from obtaining the same freedoms, contingencies, and connections to progress in executive-level positions that others may be afforded (Braun, 1995).

The glass ceiling was a term used in the 1980s to describe an invisible barrier that inhibits women and minorities from rising in management positions. As women grew and developed their knowledge and skills in the workplace, the glass ceiling became more evident in different industries (Babic & Hansez, 2021). For example, researchers conducted a study and examined why women managers among 685 employees at a large Midwestern insurance company were underrepresented at the top levels of their organization (Elacqua et al., 2009, as cited in Babic & Hansez, 2021). The study examined the perception of the glass ceiling through the lens of interpersonal factors, situational factors, environmental factors, and the perception of differential treatment of women.

After surveying 320 women in managerial positions in a Belgian organization, Elacqua et al. (2009, as cited in Babic & Hansez, 2021) reported interpersonal relationships can have an impact on how women and their male counterparts are treated; however, due to "(a) lack of mentoring, (b) lack of access to a network of senior managers, and (c) friendly relationships with company decision-makers, the likelihood of women gaining opportunities in management level positions is a challenge" (Babic & Hansez, 2021, p. 11). The same study also reported that the perceptions of unequal treatment between men and women were positively associated with the perceptions of a glass ceiling in the organization (Elacqua et al., 2009, as cited in Babic & Hansez, 2021).

Another study explored the glass ceiling effect in the business industry. Bertrand (2017) asserted that when women are not promoted to senior roles, talent is lost, and the economy suffers. In this study, Bertrand (2017) found three primary reasons that the glass ceiling keeps women out of high-paying positions in the field of business. The three significant barriers reported in this study were as follows:

(a) Women with a college education are more likely than males to reject degrees that lead to higher-paying jobs, (b) psychological conflicts between men and women may account for up to 10% of the wage disparity, and (c) the psychological issues women experience are different from men and account for up to 10% of the pay gap. (Bertrand, 2017, p. 26)

These challenges have slowed down women's progress in gaining careers in leadership positions; however, notable progress has been reported in many areas and continues to develop as researchers identify successful strategies for women in leadership (Selzer et al., 2017).

*Access to Mentors*

A study conducted by Johnson and Thomas (2012) affirmed that African American women might be seen as outsiders in academia and face the barriers of inequity of having to negotiate to reflect their true identity and employ strategies to achieve power, identity, and voice. In research gathered by AAUW (2019), the research indicated that women make up the majority of nontenure-track lecturers and instructors across institutions, with only 44% of tenure-track faculty and 36% of full professors (AAUW, 2019). Women of color are especially underrepresented in college faculty and staff, which contributes to a lack of diversity, equity, and inclusion in teaching practices and curriculum, as well as role models and support systems for students (AAUW, 2019). Furthermore, the study conducted by AAUW (2019) confirmed that only 15% of tenure-track engineering faculty are women, only 14% of computer science tenure-track faculty are women, and, of those, only 5.2% of tenured faculty are African American. African American women are often not mentored, overlooked, and are shunned from applying for or being considered for department chairs, assistant dean, or not put on track for a tenured professor or dean of a school or college (Parker & Funk, 2017). Shepherd (2017) explained that a recent study presented by the leadership foundation discovered that the women in their management program who applied for executive-level roles were denied and unsuccessful but that the comparable male counterparts were successful and hired in the same or higher-level leadership jobs.

Block and Tietjen-Smith (2016) indicated that the influence of other women is important such as sponsoring other women and serving as counselors, coaches, and teachers, which is often taken for granted when trying to climb the ladder of success. This inequity continues to be a concern because the senior leadership imbalance persists with gender disparity for women

(Shepherd, 2017). Tran (2014) concluded that although African American women have achieved advanced levels of education, they encounter inequity within social status and have difficulty obtaining high-ranking positions in higher education and continually marginalizes their value.

Another study conducted by Cañas et al. (2019) depicted other factors that may affect women advancing to leadership positions, including "work relationships, environment, invisible rules, proactivity, and personal circumstances" (p. 6). Researchers argued that another reason that women may continue to have an imbalance in leadership roles in higher education is due to women's missing agency. Shepherd (2017) focused in her study on how some women may take "the form of a perceived lack of self-confidence or ambition, leading to women to opt-out of applying for senior leadership positions because of no encouragement or endorsement of credentials from others" (p. 84). The thought process is that women think that they should not even attempt to apply for the position because they can safeguard themselves from being optimistic and aspiring to a position that they have applied for but are told that they may never receive because of the inequity that is prevalent in the higher education arena (Shepherd, 2017).

### *Societal Expectations Based on Gender or Race*

Many times, in the professional world, African American females have to mask their natural authentic traits for fear of being viewed as aggressive and masculine. Allen and Lewis (2016) argued that this type of suppression "puts pressure on the institutional suitability of the African American female professional from all sides" (p. 7). African American women in higher education often work from a diminished status in higher education. Many women deal with challenges that are attributed to power struggles that aim to subdue women to lower positions and create spaces for men in senior-level positions (Coetzee & Moosa, 2020). Women deal with barriers that hinder the progression or movement into leadership positions because they often

have to demonstrate their authority and assert power to be better than or equal to men in their

behavior (Johnson & Thomas, 2012). In this instance, African American women must engage in

unique leadership strategies to balance their identity and looming academic and administrative

culture and politics that they may not be familiar with (Johnson & Thomas, 2012). The obstacles

that women must overcome put them in a difficult situation, and they face adversity in all areas

of the higher education environment. Chance (2021a) proclaimed that barriers include

"underrepresentation due to Caucasian male influence, vertical mobility and the concrete ceiling,

racism, sexism, ageism, stereotype threat, isolation and often tokenism" (p. 612). Shepherd

(2017) stated that a mix of change interventions may be required that also seek to 'fix' the

organization, that is, in terms of systemic and procedural changes. Shepherd (2017) confirmed

that, more importantly, perhaps, the micro-politics and cultural assumptions that underpin these

practices and procedures; for example, in relation to recruitment and selection, also need to be

acknowledged and addressed.

### *Salary and Wage Inequity*

Research also supported the fact that African American women continue to have inequity

in higher education positions regarding salary compared to Caucasian women, Caucasian men,

and minority men. For example, in an intersectional study completed by McChesney (2018), the

author confirmed that people of color are considered the minority, that there is a limited

representation that is different across job positions and has a paucity with the particular

populations identified. Moreover, women of color continue to be challenged and face multiple

hardships with pay because of the positions they are denied when trying to reach executive

leadership jobs. Women hold more entry-level and service positions in higher education in

comparison to men, with worsened conditions for women of color (Johnson, 2017). In America,

men outpace women in earnings at 4-year public institutions, earning $13,874 more than women and earning $18,201 more at private institutions; at 2-year community colleges, women make $32,495 compared to $30,050 for their male peers (Johnson, 2017).

It is also evident in the data gathered that African American women have more low-paying jobs, thus the lower salaries (Ortiz-Ospina & Roser, 2018). Another factor that contributes to not achieving higher level roles in higher education for African American women is always being biased by gender with African American men and Caucasian men; African American women are oppressed in pay, jobs, opportunities, and hindered advancement (Funk & Parker, 2018). The race and ethnicity challenge repeatedly delays progress for African American women in higher education administration and distinguished faculty careers that lack esteem and desired levels.

African American women also continuously deal with a negative image that has been placed on them because they take charge when it comes to making the decision to excel in a higher education leadership position (Commodore et al., 2020). They have been called names and made to look aggressive and it is hard to attain and reach executive-level jobs that reflect their training and expertise. In a study conducted by Collins (2013) on stereotypes, portrayals are destructive and limiting and do not afford African American women the opportunity of media portrayal in a balanced, emotionally healthy, or progressive fashion and contribute to the public's negative perception of African American women (Commodore et al., 2020). Women of color persistently must deal with suspicion and questions about their competency based not on their accomplishments and potential but rather on their motives as well as how other people perceive their identities, which is identified as a chilly climate that virtually all women in academe experience, and for women of color, it is especially relevant today and becomes even colder at

the top (Alcalde & Subramanian, 2020). Tevis et al. (2020) discussed how "the limited and very damaging controlling images ingrained in popular culture, impact how others view African American women both independently and as a group, regardless of their behavior and professional accomplishments" (p. 284). The behavior of African American women has gotten an unfavorable reputation while they try to assert themselves as leaders and make insightful and necessary decisions in difficult situations. The perception is that African American women are argumentative and challenge others in authority that others feel an African American woman should not (Greene et al., 2010; Kringen & Novich, 2017).

### *Stereotypes and Misconceptions*

The challenge of the negative image causes persistent labeling and misconception of what an African American woman is and how she identifies. Society has created a misnomer that some are threatened by. Commodore et al. (2020) stated that African American women developed weak personalities the more that they had to deal with refusals in promotion experiences in higher education within educational situations that are considered predominately Caucasian. This experience is an extra pressure on an African American woman to try to navigate in an environment that demonstrated bias against any action or acceleration in career advancement that is pursued in higher-level positions. Coetzee and Moosa (2020) stated that women leaders face and experience thoughts and feelings of exclusion, marginalization, voicelessness, and a lack of authority when trying to excel. The negativity also insists that an African American woman prove that she is deserving of an executive-level position, although she may have already made it evident that she has established herself professionally, educationally, and socially. In the literature, women are consistently made to prove they are

worthy of holding roles ranging from student to faculty member to institutional leader (Commodore et al., 2020).

Freeman et al. (2019) identified a phenomenon that African American women encounter called the *cloning effect*, which attributes to women of color trying to reproduce themselves as they see others do. The tendency for organizations to select people who are similar to the leaders they are replacing has been described as a form of cloning and one that perpetuates unequal representation (Shepherd, 2017). Freeman et al. (2019) proposed that because individuals may lack knowledge of underrepresented groups in some instances, then they serve on committees to hire others of similar backgrounds and characteristics. This tactic makes it difficult to hire diverse faculty and staff and the cloning occurs because the African American women's educational and other credentials are reflected to lack value (Freeman et al., 2019). This cloning effect may also cause the social climate to be in a normal situation of always hiring the Caucasian male in specific positions, which undermines the hiring process to be inclusive (Shepherd, 2017).

Another area that remains a barrier for African American women trying to achieve executive levels in higher education is stereotypical expectations of women versus men. African American women and women of color reported that their networking opportunities are minimal, they often obtain less mentoring than others, and many double standards for upward mobility and career development stifle opportunities that may be obtained by other groups (Freeman et al., 2019). The lack of support and awareness of how to obtain the support makes it difficult for African American women to maneuver through the institutional climate and who to turn to for help to gain a mentor or someone to show them the procedures of written policy but also areas that may not be written down though have expectations. This instance occurs in administration

and faculty tenure positions in institutions. The way that many African Americans are treated in higher education is often hidden in subtle hints of discrimination, and other times, women are isolated and are subject to limits of socialization which can, in turn, cause them to deal with the barrier of not wanting to pursue executive roles (Freeman et al., 2019).

*Tokenism*

The influence of marginalization and belittling of women of color is prominent in higher education, which causes discrimination and disadvantages when trying to attain leadership positions. In some instances, African American women are occasionally used in a *tokenism* demeanor (Lewis, 2016). Lewis (2016) stated:

> The culture of borders of dominant groups is rigid ensuing ethnic/gender minorities are perceived as the oppositional other. The behavior of skewed groups creates both a tokenized environment and token positions. The tokenism condition was described as associated with three perpetual tendencies: visibility, contract, and assimilation. Tokens have a high degree of visibility and are universal representatives of their master status (race and gender) for work and social activities. (p. 109)

The thought of tokenism is seen as hiring African American women in roles just because of their race and gender but also to meet the quota or prove that the organization is practicing affirmative action guidelines (Lewis, 2016). In this context, using the allocation of employment to ensure the practice or policy of favoring individuals belonging to groups known to have been discriminated against previously, in this case, African American women. Sims and Carter (2019) submitted that African American women had a unique intersection of identifiers that dealt with harbored feelings of being invisible, voiceless, discriminated against, isolated, undermined, oppressed, challenged, and demoted. African American women trying to break the glass ceiling

in higher education leadership roles have realized that gender intertwines with a hierarchical culture, power, and authority, which has been the conventional attitude for male business leaders (Wallace & Wallin, 2015).

**African American Female Leaders' Supports for Success**

Numerous leadership theories have been based on the observation of predominantly Caucasian men and the idea that their leadership tactics are applicable to all other demographic groupings. However, Parker and ogilvie (1996) argued against this notion, arguing that African American women in leadership positions should be examined through an intersectional lens of gender and race (Sims & Carter, 2019). Parker and ogilvie (1996) contended that the approach African American women employ to lead others reflects their socialization skills inside the dominant culture, resulting in a leadership style that is distinctly theirs. As a result, Parker and ogilvie (1996) developed a theoretical framework that identified the antecedent of socialized traits, behaviors, and styles, as well as African American women's distinctive social location within the dominant culture, resulting in a strategic reaction of leadership strategies and subsequent leadership actions.

*Leadership Strategies*

African American women in leadership positions have used various strategies to be competent and successful leaders. One study reported that African American women effectively navigated Caucasian and African American cultures by employing conflicting leadership techniques of avoidance and confrontation (Sims & Carter, 2019). Moreover, African American women are able to respond to biculturalism by exhibiting divergent thinking, risk-taking, boundary-spanning behaviors, and behavioral complexities and have a greater possibility of being effective leaders. Beckwith et al. (2016) contended that African Americans who were able

to successfully advance from mid-level management positions did so as a result of the following: "job commitment, purposeful career development, positive mentoring relationships, strong sponsorship and a diverse network" (Beckwith et al., 2016, p. 119). Leadership on this level is not one-dimensional because there are several layers to consider. In fact, to navigate the dual worlds, researchers proposed that African American women professionals and leaders engage several sophisticated cognitive and performance abilities as they execute numerous tasks and conflicting roles in complementary and integrated ways (Hooijberg, 1992; Parker & ogilvie, 1996).

Some individuals are able to alternate between the two cultures in an integrated and balanced fashion, while others might experience the cultures as competing and seeking to separate each culture. Further, navigating the terrains of biculturalism is essential to leading successfully. Biculturalism can benefit a leader exhibiting intellectual flexibility and inventiveness or be detrimental if the leader feels stress, loneliness, and insecurity (Sims & Carter, 2019).

### *Avoidance and Confrontation*

Initially, Parker and ogilvie (1996) postulated that African American women practiced avoidance and confrontation depending on the situation. However, Holder et al. (2015) evaluated the experiences of racial microaggressions in the workplace. Holder et al. (2015) identified the coping mechanisms of African American female managers in American corporate positions, which led to additional insight. For example, study participants, which were all female, indicated that they avoided reacting to racial microaggressions and refrained from exhibiting negative emotion in response to microaggressions while working with racist coworkers because they perceived themselves as a spokeswoman for all African American women. Researchers reported

that the participants were seldom involved in confrontation because the women feared fitting the

stereotype of the "angry Black girl" or "aggressive Black woman" (Holder et al., 2015, p. 170).

Sims and Carters' (2019) final conclusion while reexamining the Parker and ogilvie (1996)

model is that the issues African American women leaders encounter are not of their making, and

they alone cannot end these negative experiences. Therefore, the organizations in which they

work, their leaders, peers and followers, and society as a whole must come together to eliminate

racial and gender bias in the workplace.

### *Leadership Behaviors*

Parker's and ogilvie's (1996) original model identified the following leadership behaviors

of African American women: "creativity, risk-taking, boundary spanning, divergent thinking and

behavioral complexity" (p. 190). Additionally, intercultural competency can navigate many

cultures and be adaptable, open to change, creative, and able to problem solve; creativity is

higher with African American students, resulting in diverse thinking. However, with the

changing times, diversity, and intersections of cultures and various factors, researchers have also

reexamined the meaning of successful leadership strategies by updating Parker and ogilvie's

(1996) model (see Figure 3). Parker and ogilvie (1996) revised the model in 1996 (see Figure 4).

**Figure 3**

*A Culturally Distinct Model of African American Female Executive Leadership*
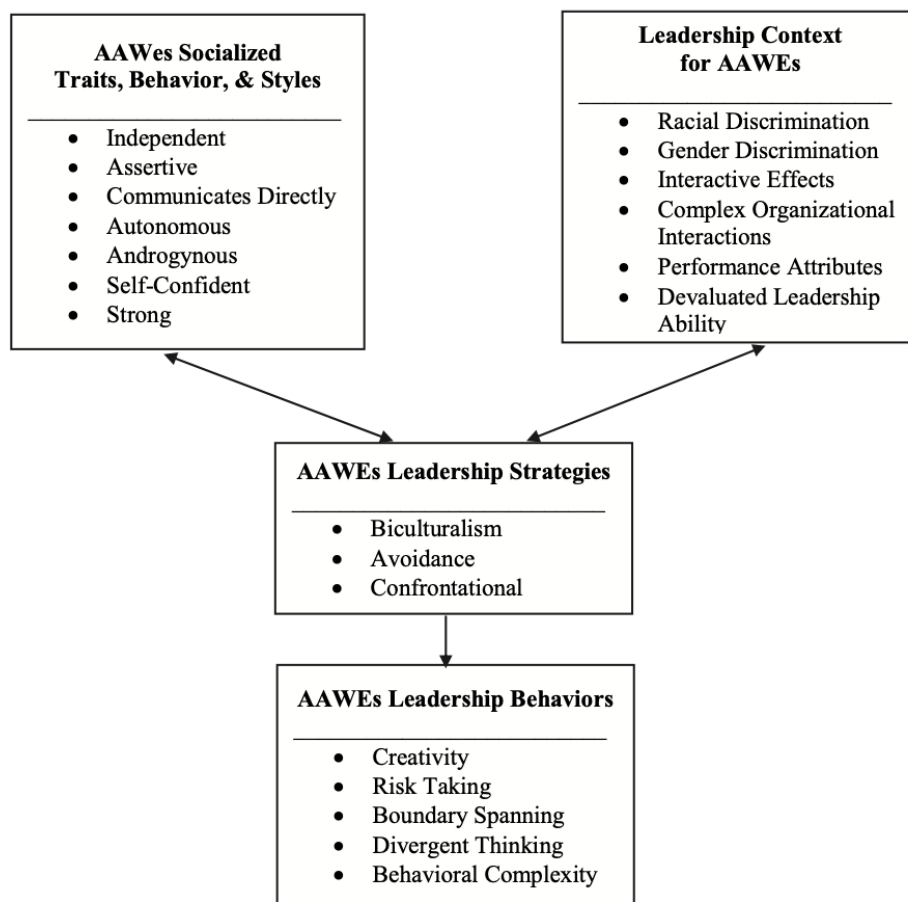


Note. From "Gender, Culture, and Leadership: Toward a Culturally Distinct Model of African-American Women Executives' Leadership Strategies," by P. S. Parker and D. T. ogilvie, 1996, *Leadership Quarterly*, *7*(2), p. 192 (https://psycnet.apa.org/record/1996-05681-002). Copyright 1996 by American Psychological Association.

**Figure 4**

*Revised Culturally Distinct Model of African American Female Executive Leadership*



| AAWEs Socialized Traits, Behavior, & Styles | Leadership Context for AAWEs/*Socio-Cultural* |
|---|---|
| • Independent<br>• Assertive<br>• Communicates Directly<br>• Autonomous<br>• Androgynous<br>• Self-Confident<br>• Strong | • Racial Discrimination: ***Macro/Microaggression***<br>• Gender Discrimination: ***Gender Bias*****<br>• Interactive Effects: ***Intersectionality*****<br>• Complex Organizational Interactions: ***Stereotype Threat*****<br>• Performance Attributes<br>• Devalued Leadership Ability: ***Role Congruity*****<br>• ***Tokenism/Isolation***** |

AAWEs Leadership Strategies
• Biculturalism
• Avoidance/Confrontational: *Microaggression Process Model*

AAWEs Leadership Strategies

• Creativity
• Risk Taking
• Boundary Spanning
• Divergent Thinking
• Behavioral Complexity

*Note.* From "Gender, Culture, and Leadership: Toward a Culturally Distinct Model of African-American Women Executives' Leadership Strategies," by P. S. Parker and D. T. ogilvie, 1996, *Leadership Quarterly*, *7*(2), p. 196 (https://psycnet.apa.org/record/1996-05681-002). Copyright 1996 by American Psychological Association. Revised and new elements are bold and asterisked.

In a study reported in the Harvard Business Review by Roberts et al. (2018), it is depicted that the women studied developed three skills that were key to their resilience: "emotional intelligence, authenticity, and agility" (p. 10). The women became experts, adept at both reading the interpersonal and political dynamics of their organizations and managing their reactions to situations that threatened to undermine their sense of competence and well-being—what some

scholars call "identity abrasions" (Roberts et al., 2018, p. 4). The study participants practiced

authentic leadership through deep self-awareness and an ability to craft their own identities.

Roberts et al. (2018) stated that the women demonstrated agility in their capacity to deftly

transform obstacles (including self-doubt and excessive scrutiny) into opportunities to learn,

develop, and ultimately exceed expectations.

**Chapter Summary**

African American women leaders have many hurdles to overcome to become successful

executives. An African American woman's road is often daunting and can be discouraging while

trying to climb the corporate ladder in higher education. Women of color continue to try to break

through the glass ceiling and have made some progress in years past. Although there is much

disparity in African American women becoming presidents, provosts, deans, and other

executive-level positions in higher education, women continue to excel and reach their positions

of attainment. Multiple research reports have shown that higher career goals are possible through

hard work, perseverance, and continued dedication. African American women must achieve at a

higher level to climb the ladder of success and advance in their careers. It is critical to think

outside the box, make our own way, and go the extra mile to ensure our voices are heard and

become an executive in higher education fields. The arena of higher education was established

for the betterment of all people, women, and men, but women continue to have to struggle to

become recognized, accepted, or promoted to leadership positions that they may qualify for and

have earned through education and experience. Chapter 3 explores the research method that was

used to conduct the study.

**Chapter 3: Research Method**

African American women who have the skills, education, and training are still lacking in leadership roles in administration in institutions of higher education. There continue to be increased numbers of women of color scholars but not significant increases in women of color leaders in colleges promoted to executive-level positions. Lewis (2017) proclaimed that recent studies demonstrate diminishing gains in the growth of the number of African Americans who are ascending, in particular, to upper-level leadership positions at institutions of higher learning. Block and Tietjen-Smith (2016) concurred that the number of women that achieve advanced degrees is outpacing men; however, women are still underrepresented in administrative positions in higher education.

Female leadership development has the potential to act as a centrifugal force for the good of organizations (Kemp, 2020). In a study by Selzer et al. (2017), their data supported that if the advancement of all women is a goal at the organizational level, practicing intersectionality from start to finish in women's leadership development programs and including autoethnography as an evaluation method, are two suggested strategies that can effectively stop the leaky pipeline. In a program that includes these recommendations, women would be empowered to be their whole selves without restriction; there would be more visible and tangible mentoring and sponsoring of other women. It is known that women's leadership would be improved because leaders would see social, institutional, and cultural factors change. For this case study, I described the perceptions of African American women regarding steps they have practiced to continue their path to notable success in higher education leadership. In other words, I described the behaviors and practices of African American women leaders and how they engage at institutions of higher education to overcome barriers, acquire advancement and promotion, and achieve and excel in

executive-level careers. Storman (2022) indicated to overcome obstacles, African American women have to exceed job expectations, hold positions with high visibility, and develop effective leadership skills. More so, they must take ownership of developing and preparing themselves for future leadership opportunities in addition to having a professional degree and excelling in middle management positions. Even with obtaining a doctoral degree, the accomplishment of leadership in American higher education is very small. The 11 African American women in leadership positions were observed in relation to the four factors identified in the SLT: leadership behaviors; organizational structure; external forces; and attitudes, beliefs, and values (Irby et al., 2002).

Data that was gathered for this study provided viewpoints of perceptions of the leadership experiences and practices of African American women in higher education overcoming barriers. The study design is detailed in this chapter, including research methods and data collection used to explore African American women leaders' perceptions of the barriers to achieving leadership roles and their perceptions of what has motivated their successes in higher education.

**Qualitative Research Design**

This case study used qualitative methodology to describe the behaviors and practices of 11 African American women and how they engaged in institutional settings. The strategies and leadership skills used by the participants to overcome barriers, acquire advancement and promotion, and achieve and excel at executive-level positions were described. Moreover, Ruben (2007) defined excellent leaders as using an approach to use the resources in an appropriate way to enrich the school or department. SLT identified and analyzed leadership behaviors that are seen as positive for African American women leaders. Ruben (2007) described that the phenomenon examined "how leaders and leadership practices encourage excellence,

effectiveness, engagement, innovation, and attention to the needs of individuals, groups, and organizations that benefit from programs and services and how leadership practices are reviewed and improved upon" (Ruben, 2007, p. 17). The four SLT factors were examined while defining different levels of leadership to include the interaction of leadership behaviors, organizational structures, external forces, and attitudes, beliefs, and values that intertwine with improving the organization. Delener (2013) declared that excelling in leadership is also characterized by qualities of shared purpose, collaboration, providing a learning environment, commitment, empathy, competence, and demonstrating self-knowledge.

**Research Approach: Case Study**

The case study approach examined an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the richness and complexity of a bounded social phenomenon (or multiple phenomena), be this a social unit or system, such as a program, event, institution, organization, or community (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). In this instance, descriptions of the experiences of African American women leaders in higher education institutions were explored. The purpose of the case study was to generate understanding and deep insights to inform professional practice, policy development, and community and social action (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). The authors also noted that the case study method provides an intensive description and contextual bounded analysis to ensure the audience understands the data. In this instance, Creswell (2014) described a case study in which multiple cases, called a collective case study that includes multiple cases, are described to provide insight into an issue. This collective case study described multiple African American women and their approaches to overcoming barriers to leadership in higher education.

This research approach described how the participants, as individuals and African American women, interpret and reflect their own emotions through their background experiences, involvement, understanding, and practice. van Manen and van Manen (2021) asserted that giving a "direct description" (p. 1070) of experiences is not just narratively reporting, copying, or telling a story, but rather to describe is to write directly (unravel or uncover) what remained hidden or concealed. Vagle (2018) proclaimed that when gathering the experiences of the phenomenon and the descriptions, the meaning must be communicated through emphasizing interviews and writing and describing the experiences relayed. Groenewald (2004) proposed that researchers can research and discover the experiences that people live in and around in their daily lifestyles. Approaching the study in this manner was appropriate because the data gathered was like taking up the attitude of immediately seeing and practicing an attentive awareness to the things of the world as they are lived rather than as they are conceptualized or theorized. Moreover, Creswell (2014) also addressed the use of case study research as a qualitative strategy to gather human elements and characteristics as described by participants in a particular study on their circumstances and experiences. Creswell (2014) stated that collecting data on a cultural group in their natural setting over a specific period of time in the virtual or in-person interview and observational settings would serve as a manner of ethnographic research for a case study. SLT researchers investigated women's leadership styles and behaviors and the impact on the organization and the African American women executive explored African American leadership traits in women, both methods examine knowledge and behaviors of the cultural group in their native environments.

This data collection exhibits a consensus of mutual thoughts, similar struggles, know-how, wisdom, and practical themes. Butina (2015) stated that the styles of inquiry into case study

probe multiple interviews to attain data that provide the history of the individual's life based on stories from their journey to become a leader and includes oral histories or written autobiographies and biographies. Seidman (2019) indicated that in conducting narratives during interviews or case studies, it is essential to request the participants not only to remember but try to reconstruct their memories of what occurred during any incidents that may make the event able to be recalled.

The research in this study described the individual experiences that African American women have endured while maneuvering through higher education to pursue leadership paths and roles. The research described how African American women had managed their personal experiences. Leavy (2013) conferred that analysis interested in human consciousness is a way to understand social reality or how one thinks about their experiences. This section of the study provides information about individual feelings and how the participants respond to certain situations to reflect their lived actions, environment, culture, and interactions of being an African American woman leader in administration in higher education. The study's central research question was: What are the perceptions of African American women in executive leadership positions regarding factors contributing to African American women leaders in higher education settings overcoming barriers? The central question responded to the following questions and guided this study:

RQ1: What are the perceptions of African American women in leadership regarding barriers to attaining leadership positions in higher education?

RQ2: What are the perceptions of African American women in leadership regarding supports to attaining leadership positions in higher education?

RQ3: What are the perceptions of African American women in leadership in higher education regarding their ethical and spiritual decision-making?

**Population**

The study's focus was on higher education and African American women in educational administration in positions of provosts, deans, vice presidents, and executive directors in the southeastern area of the United States at HBCUs located in Virginia. The university has approximately 4,000 to 5,000 students, offers on-campus and online programs, and the employee base consists of around 800 to 1,000 employees. The colleges include African American women leaders, but percentages are still minimal compared to the number of administrators at schools in the immediate area. There is a large imbalance of African American women leaders versus the number of African American students that attend the university and the number of Caucasian women and men in top administrator posts (Garrett-Akinsanya & Mack, 2009). Horsford and Tillman (2012) stated:

> This degree of analysis is increasingly important in fields of study where maleness, Caucasianness, and ladyhood have dominated theoretical, epistemological, and methodological approaches and perspectives, thus limiting the richness of research informed by a diversity of racial, gendered, and intersectional points of view. (p. 2)

**Population Sample**

A population sample is derived from a category of people with similar attributes and personalities that may determine the conclusions of a study. The population sample that was used is a purposive sample of 11 African American women in educational administration positions of provosts, deans, vice presidents, and executive directors in the southeastern United States at HBCUs located in Virginia. The criteria that qualified participants for this study included being

an African American female in a higher education senior leadership position for over 5 years in the eastern section of Virginia in the United States. Examining females in all executive levels of higher education provides a better perspective of why and how individuals were able to move up the ladder in higher-level positions or if they could not excel in roles as desired. The participants range from ages 35 to 59. The women leaders' years of higher education experience varied from 7 to 35 years. All participants have earned a master's degree, a doctorate in educational leadership, or a doctor of philosophy degree. Only 5 participants have also worked at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). No other specific identifiers of participants are presented in this paper due to confidentiality, as it may reveal the participants' true identities.

Purposive sampling is "a technique widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources" (Patton, 2002, p. 273). This involves identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals that are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). In addition to knowledge and experience, Bernard (2018) and Spradley (1979) noted the importance of availability and willingness to participate and the ability to communicate experiences and opinions in an articulate, expressive, and reflective manner. Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) concurred that some advantages of purposive sampling include being cost-effective and saving time due to the participant group selected and helping the research to gather qualitative questions that provide stronger insights on the subject, providing valuable data. Using purposive sampling may also identify best-fit participants so the research is relevant and may lower the margin of error in data because the data sources are a close fit with the research context (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Etikan et al. (2016) stated that the purposive sampling technique, also called judgment sampling, is the deliberate choice of a participant due to the qualities the participant possesses. It is a nonrandom technique that does not need underlying theories or a set number of participants. Simply put, the researcher decides what needs to be known and sets out to find people who can and are willing to provide the information by virtue of knowledge or experience. It is typically used in qualitative research to identify and select information-rich cases to utilize available resources properly. This involves the identification and selection of individuals or groups of individuals that are proficient and well-informed about a phenomenon of interest. In addition to knowledge and experience and note the importance of availability and willingness to participate and the ability to communicate experiences and opinions in an articulate, expressive, and reflective manner.

Vagle (2018) stated that depending on the phenomenon under investigation, a researcher might use interviews, observations, anecdotes, and performances which may be described through written descriptions of experiences. The methods used in this study included primarily interviews with in-depth narratives and surveys that discussed how the participants maneuvered in a higher education setting to overcome barriers as women leaders. The interviews described the experiences, and the survey discussed the leadership styles.

**Profiles of Sample**

The professions and criteria of the African American women participants included executive directors, provosts, or vice provosts, vice presidents, and deans. The inquiry method consisted of virtual or in-person interviews, surveys, and narratives provided by the participants in response to open-ended questions. Some participants were also interviewed via phone due to technical difficulties with their devices. The participants have 5 years or more in their current

leadership job and work at a 4-year HBCU. The candidates have earned their doctoral or master's degrees.

The case study research design proved useful as a way to attain a small sample size of 10 or fewer participants. I sought to describe how African American women leaders in higher education have experienced their individual journeys while becoming a leader. Using this particular method contributed to the personal viewpoint and explained how the leaders had overcome barriers, although having to face discrimination, disparity, and male dominance while having equal credentials, education, professional skills, and knowledge. The data collected described paths that the women took to become successful on their road to opportunities that helped them to attain leadership positions in higher education.

**Instrument**

The research methods included gathering extensive field notes, conducting unstructured in-depth interviews virtually and in person with African American individuals of the sample group, disseminating surveys, and establishing the record of the culture-sharing group of African American women leaders who have excelled in various higher education roles (Creswell, 2015). Additionally, research questions were directed toward obtaining lived experiences and beliefs, feelings, and conclusions regarding the questions. The culture-sharing group of 11 African American women leaders demonstrated shared values, languages, and beliefs that illustrated the larger picture and processes that occurred in this particular group's life. This type of research provided behaviors, attitudes, and emotions that may prove beneficial to other African American women leaders in higher education while attempting to move up the organizational ladder hierarchy within the administrative arena of higher education. The data collected from the

instruments can also conceivably foster relationships for mentorship programs and guidelines for women of color who want to pursue leadership roles and growth in higher education institutions.

The qualitative research conducted in this study investigated 11 African American women and their journeys to overcome difficulties and obstacles in obtaining higher education leadership positions. The case study encompassed an in-depth exploration of a bounded system, such as activities, events, and processes that probed into comprehensive understanding by collecting various data forms (Creswell, 2015). The qualitative data highlighted the particular issues and views that African American women leaders must overcome, which may not be familiar to other races or gender aspects and that only African American women encounter while becoming leaders in higher education surroundings. The qualitative instrument used to collect data was the organizational and leadership effectiveness inventory (OLEI; Irby et al., 2002). The OLEI was developed as an instrument to validate the SLT (Brown & Irby, 2003). The OLEI may be used in conjunction with the SLT for administrators to assess the organization's strengths and weaknesses and to assess the leaders within the organization (Holtkamp, 2001). If problems exist within the organization, the OLEI could be administered to determine if leadership behaviors align with the organizational structure and with values, attitudes, and beliefs. Additionally, the OLEI could be used by individuals to determine their "fit" within an organization (Holtkamp, 2001). OLEI aligns with the SLT, and this instrument is appropriate for the collection of data related to African American women in leadership behaviors. OLEI was used to identify specific leadership behaviors that aligned with the four components of the SLT (Irby et al., 2002). The instrument is divided into six sections, including "(a) philosophical beliefs and principles, (b) leadership behaviors, (c) leadership behaviors II, (d) organizational structure I, (e) organizational structure II, and (e) demographics" (Irby et al., 2002, p. 318; Trautman, 2000). The questions

included in my research aligned (see Appendix A for the interview questions) with the four factors of the synergistic leadership theory: leadership behaviors; organizational structure; external forces; and attitudes, values, and beliefs (see Appendix B for the common themes chart).

**Data Collection Procedures**

African American women leaders in higher education served as the participants in collecting data for this study. Approval to conduct the study was sought and obtained from the institutional review board, chair, and committee assigned to this project. The human subjects form with all the necessary details was submitted to the Abilene Christian University Office of Sponsored Research to obtain the proper approvals to move forward with the study and to the local institution where the participants are located (see Appendix C and Appendix D).

Some of the ethical considerations for this study included concealing the participants' identities and obtaining their permission in a confidential and discreet manner. The consent form (see Appendix E) was included with the survey so that each participant understood the expectations before responding to the questions. In addition, there were interview questions that addressed the central question: What are the perceptions of African American women in executive leadership positions regarding factors contributing to African American women leaders in higher education settings overcoming barriers along with the three research questions to obtain data on barriers, supports and ethical and spiritual decision-making while becoming an African American woman leader in higher education environments.

*Interviews and Questionnaires*

After approval of Abilene Christian University's Institutional Review Board, I contacted 11 African American women in leadership positions via email (see Appendix F) who are employed in higher education settings in the local region and invited them to participate in the

study. The email to the participants inviting them to become study candidates was obtained through professional organizations, associations, conferences, networking opportunities, and African American women in higher education leadership roles.

Preference was not given to those who have a concentration in their degree in higher education or leadership. Scheduling was conducted at the convenience of the participants for one and a half hours but within the specific timeline to ensure the data was collected and analyzed to complete the study in a timely manner. There needed to be at least a minimum of five participants to collect adequate materials to attain a sufficient amount of data to provide reliable conclusions regarding the participants' lived experiences. Groenewald (2004) stated that "researchers are cautioned to allow the data to emerge while conducting studies because engaging in this research means capturing rich descriptions of phenomena and their settings" (p. 47).

**Analysis of Data**

The data analysis was collected from interviews and survey questions. The role of the researcher was to identify emerging themes, make interpretations, and find meaning in the data as it unfolded throughout the study (Creswell, 2014). Investigating the data is the process of gathering, compiling, and organizing the materials that produce meaningful developments and results (Creswell, 2014). This method of data analysis used analytical and logical reasoning to gain information from the data (Creswell, 2014). The major reason for the data analysis was to discover the relevancy in responses and attain knowledge on the subject to support the participants' decisions to continue to excel in leadership positions. The data collected were transcribed and analyzed to develop overarching themes of the participants' responses to interview and survey questions. The participants' responses varied but were examined to find

items in common that African American women encounter during their experiences on the road to discovering leadership occupations in higher education. After the survey and interviews were administered, the topics shared by the participants identified the major themes. The participant responses were examined to determine commonalities and how many participants discussed the same themes. The percentages were provided from the OLEI questionnaire to determine their leadership style and commonalities. The common themes among the participants were discussed, and narratives provided significant outcomes that correlated to the research questions and interview questions (see Appendix G). I analyzed the data by reviewing transcripts and responses to the questions to identify similarities or differences and subsequently find themes. The interviews and survey developed the overall arching themes that were discussed in the responses from the participants. During the interview process, there were multiple responses identified that were not common and demonstrated differences during the women's leadership journeys.

Identifying themes is a fundamental task when establishing the concepts of qualitative research. Ryan and Bernard (2016) stated that themes are abstract constructs that investigators identify before, during, and after data collection of characteristics of the phenomena being studied. The themes can be identified via open coding, word repetitions, keywords in the context, comparison and contrast, metaphors and analogies, unmarked texts, and other connections (Ryan & Bernard, 2016). In this study, keywords were the method by which themes were identified.

Given (2008) recognized emergent themes as how individuals see and experience the world and may be a process that leads to generalizable theories of human society and provide rich and detailed insight into levels of intersubjective experiences of analysis of data presented by the participant. Authors proclaim that qualitative approaches are typically used to explore new phenomena and to capture individuals' thoughts, feelings, or interpretations of meaning and

process (Given, 2008). In addition to the themes outlined to respond to Research Questions 1–3, the participants shared other information that proved to be helpful or served in their attainment or stagnant progress on their path to leadership transcendence. Additional responses identified included details that captured the unique essence of their pilgrimage as African American women in becoming successful authorities in higher education.

The emergent themes identified as barriers to securing leadership positions were depression, devalued leadership ability, oppressive hierarchy, tokenism, and invisibility. Supports to ensure leadership positions that participants would be able to realize described were positive views of other women leaders, systemic change, and strong racial identity, which is a synergistic leadership style that adapts to specific situations and encourages others to excel. Regarding Research Question 3, which addressed ethical and spiritual decision-making, the participants responded that leadership is viewed as a gift, exhibiting authentic and servant leadership, which were pertinent to their leadership ability. This process of responding to the questions, as described by the women leaders, helped them to emerge as they learned, grew, and transformed. The women also shared that they had a different concept and felt special and called to be a leader.

Schatzman and Strauss (1973) stated, "Qualitative data analysis primarily entails classifying things, persons, events and the properties, which characterizes them" (p. 109). The findings should be indexed or coded according to their similarities (Creswell, 2014). The information identified during the research had patterns and themes that correlated or connected to each other. It was critical for me as the researcher to skillfully probe the participants to describe what areas and variables may be unknown to others but identified through this research. The data collected provided the personal perspectives of the participants and ensured no bias was

demonstrated by me as the researcher. The themes derived will be helpful for others to understand the participants' methods used to motivate them to continue their journey for success and become higher education leaders.

**Trustworthiness and Reliability**

Connelly (2016) supported that "trustworthiness or rigor of a study refers to the degree of confidence in data, interpretation, and methods used to ensure the quality of a study" (p. 435). It is critical that the information gathered and then reported on is of the utmost integrity and data collected is reliable and sincere. I followed strict protocols to ensure that the data collection was transparent and ethical and did not produce any inequity or misinformation. I was responsible for providing specific directions to the participants and being credible and unbiased in my own experiences and background. The dissertation chair and committee preapproved all questions provided to the participants before moving forward in the actual study. All questions and responses were thoroughly reviewed and inspected to ensure there was clarity in the process. The interpretation of data was dependable for the study to be successful.

**Assumptions**

It was assumed while the research was conducted and data gathered that participants were honest, open, truthful, and forthright with their lived experiences while sharing information with me. It was also assumed that I was not biased and did not make any type of internal characterizations of personal experiences relayed by the participants. It was assumed that the participants understood their current positions in higher education and the expectations and responsibilities of those roles.

**Limitations**

The study's limitations were those characteristics of design or methodology that impacted or influenced the application or interpretation of the study results. They were the constraints on the generalizability and utility of findings that were the result of how I chose to design the study or the method used to establish internal and external validity (Ross & Bibler Zaidi, 2019). Limitations represent weaknesses within the study that may influence the outcomes and conclusions of the research. The goal of presenting limitations is to provide meaningful information to the reader (Ross & Bibler Zaidi, 2019).

The study participants came from a single state; therefore, their experiences cannot be assumed to be reflective of all African American women in leadership positions at institutions of higher education in the state of Virginia. At this time, there is not a significant amount of research on how specifically African American women leaders in higher education are able to overcome obstacles and barriers and continue to obtain executive-level positions (Townsend, 2021). As I am an African American woman working in higher education for the last 25 years, I have seen firsthand impediments to leadership growth.

**Delimitations**

Delimitations are, in essence, the limitations consciously set by the authors themselves. They are concerned with the definitions that the researchers decided to set as the boundaries or limits of their work so that the study's aims and objectives do not become impossible to achieve. Delimitations are "not positive or negative but rather a detailed account of reasoning which enlightens the scope of the study's core interest as it relates to the research design and underpinning philosophical framework" (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018, p. 157).

All leaders in this study are African American women leaders currently serving in higher education roles in the southeastern area of the United States at HBCUs located in Virginia. Because the SLT specifically includes the female's voice, this study was focused specifically on African American women in leadership positions in higher education. All participants selected to participate in this study are in their current positions for a minimum of 5 years.

## Ethical Considerations

The major areas of ethical consideration for this study were ensuring trust with participants and that I did not show bias as data was collected. In addition, I ensured that there was an elevated level of confidentiality and security of the information collected. Considering the data collected from people and about people, I established a high level of confidence with the participants (Creswell, 2014). It is my role to protect information collected during the study to be sure that information is secure and only accessed by me. The identities of all participants are held in strict confidence and given alias or pseudonyms to preserve the individual's integrity and life experiences. All files, digital or recorded, were only accessed by me with secure passwords. The responses will be kept for 7 years after the completion of this research project and will remain confidential. The participants were provided with an informed consent form, which explained the study and their acknowledgment of an agreement to the terms. All participants were interviewed via tape recording, digital platform, virtually, or in person, and data will be kept in a secure location during and after the study was conducted. All participants were given the same questions to respond to for one hour and a half and treated in a fair and equitable manner.

## Importance of the Study

Although African American women leaders have learned to overcome barriers and take action to deal with discrimination, intersectionality, and inequities, there continues to be a

limited knowledge base when investigating leadership positions for women in higher education and how they are able to advance (Roberts et al., 2018). Recent research commissioned by the leadership foundation found that female alumni of its top management program who subsequently applied for a more senior management role were more than twice as likely as their male counterparts to have been unsuccessful: 21.6% compared to only 8.5% for men (Manfredi et al., 2014). This is a real concern from an equity perspective because unless women account for a high proportion of new appointments, the overall gender imbalance at senior leadership levels will fail to improve (Shepherd, 2017). The case study identified skills or knowledge that can provide efficient ways to understand various methods to handle stumbling blocks or hindrances to transcend into executive-level leadership positions. Washington-Lockett et al. (2018) verified that women with unique experiences are torchbearers imparting knowledge and inspiration to other women of color who have not yet arrived at a certain point in their careers. They have an obligation to other women to ensure that their voices will be heard and opportunities secured.

Another critical reason for the study includes allowing other potential African American women leaders to have mentors, guidelines, and real-life experiences that they may encounter while trying to navigate the higher education environment and climate predominately governed by Caucasian males (Roberts et al., 2018). Mentorship of African American women in educational leadership allows them to increase knowledge, make connections, and learn how to successfully maneuver within educational leadership arenas (Townsend, 2021). African American women must be given opportunities for incremental leadership experiences, starting early in their careers (Townsend, 2019). Strategies to assist with upward mobility should include enhancing expertise, going beyond the scope of the duty to learn the roles, being cognizant of the regulations and guidelines of others in the organization, attaining advanced degrees, cultivating

leadership potential (in self and others), and being abreast of literature and best practices in the field (Townsend, 2019). At the organizational level, women develop their own cultivation of leadership and flourish when there is a changed culture that has a diversified pipeline of leadership (Townsend, 2020). These changes have required organizations to embrace diversity and not just highlight gender and race (Townsend, 2020). More specifically, African American women leaders who can have a positive, social, and economic impact in higher education surroundings for other African American women leaders to navigate difficult situations and influence change. Any leader's role should include providing direction, serving as a role model, building teams, and offering inspiration to others.

## Limited Research

There is limited research on how African American women have been able to overcome barriers and succeed in academics, presidencies, or executive roles in higher education contexts. Sanchez-Hucles and Davis (2010) supported that there have been various studies conducted on leadership on men, but few performed on women and especially African American women and women of color, to define a mechanism that women share with others to improve the path to executive level positions. In a study conducted by Beckwith et al. (2016), the scholars found that "Although in 2014, women in general made up less than 16% of executive leaders in U.S. corporations; only 5.3% of executive leaders in U.S. corporations were African American women" (p. 116).

> According to Walker (2014), clearly, for women of color, the gap is wider. Obviously, women of color encompass women of various races. Women of color make up 11.9% of managerial and professional positions, but African American women make up a mere 5.3%. Women outnumber men on college campuses and have earned a third of

law degrees since 1980; a third of them have entered medical school since 1990, and

since 2002, they have outnumbered men in earning undergraduate business degrees.

(Warner, 2014, p. 116)

Researchers contend that the gap for women continues in high-level C-Suite positions.

Women have attained some executive-level occupations, but numbers are very low compared to

others, and it will continue if there is no intentional pathway to guide others. For African

American women leaders, power in organizations must be understood within the context of

racism, sexism, and classism because of the long-standing history of oppression and

discrimination toward women (Banks et al., 2018). A few studies (Crews, 2016; Townsend,

2019) have been conducted on how women are affected and excel in higher education settings

when pursuing administrative and leadership positions. The current U.S. laws and the U.S.

constitution treat women and men as equals, yet women's career equality efforts have slowed or

stalled in the United States (Bailey & DiPrete, 2016; Kossek & Buzzanell, 2018). Although

women have been studied, African American women and the methods used to "break the glass

ceiling" are limited. Hyppolite (2019) discovered in a study that participants affirmed five major

themes that impacted their journey to executive leadership. These themes included:

(a) Glass ceilings and sticky floors, which were inclusive of marginalization, barriers,

stereotypes, and mentoring relationships; (b) characteristic of African American women

leaders; (c) resiliency of women leaders; (d) social networking; and (e) the role of faith

and family, which help with the journey to executive leadership and sustaining the role

once in the leadership position. (Hyppolite, 2019, p. 98)

Over the last decade, there has been additional research, but not to the extent of

significantly impacting other African American women's actions and the route that they may

have taken to excel in leadership positions. However, when unpacking research and theories around the gaps between Caucasian women and African American women in leadership positions, the barriers become even more difficult to explain. There is little research that explicitly describes the success strategies employed by African American women working in higher education (Crews, 2016). As professed in many peer-reviewed journals and the Chronicle of Higher Education, most studies note that there are no significant studies on research on African American women attaining and cultivating leadership roles in executive-level higher education professionals (Crews, 2016). African American women experience double jeopardy or simultaneous oppression as they navigate the world and workplace as being both a woman and racially African American (Alexander-Floyd, 2010; Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015). There are multiple experiences faced by women leaders that are unfair and lead to missed opportunities and access to gainful employment for African American women to secure positions of scholarly leadership (Banks et al., 2018). Researchers have also discovered that there is a lack of papers that examine how mentoring affects women leaders' development in higher education (Tran, 2014).

**Chapter Summary**

The research presented provides an in-depth description of African American women leaders' lived experiences regarding how they have continued to escalate in higher education leadership positions, although there have been many challenges and obstacles to impede their growth. The data collected was examined to show the similarities, differences, and major opportunities discovered that can make or break a career for an African American woman in higher education. A woman's background and steps to take to excel are developed based on their training, skills, and knowledge, but also her environment, education, culture, upbringing, and

fortitude to withstand difficulties. There are particular skills apparent to include collaboration,

empathy, trust building, and communication, but African American women must put their own

unique identity and personality into their work performance for them to be accepted in leadership

positions (Roberts et al., 2018). Inclusive environments help to promote team collaboration and

create an atmosphere of group support. Hyppolite (2019) confirmed that leadership attributes are

centered around executive presence and voice, collaboration, agenda-setting, and mission-driven.

Leadership includes building relationships and establishing trust with peers, subordinates, and

supervisors throughout the institution. Many leadership characteristics help women leaders

achieve success. African American women must know who they are and bring their true voices

to the table without apology (Hyppolite, 2019). This paper delved into the nature of how an

African American woman can continue to fight and succeed in breaking the glass ceiling as an

executive in the higher education arena. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study.

**Chapter 4: Results**

This study described steps 11 African American women have practiced growing to continue their path to notable success in higher education leadership positions. Therefore, African American women leaders' strategies for succeeding in academia, breaking glass ceilings, climbing the corporate ladder, and reaching the top of their fields at the executive level were described. According to West (2019), African American women are underrepresented and thus lack direct access to culturally similar colleagues, mentors, and role models in senior-level leadership positions. Lewis (2017) found that the once-increasing number of African Americans in leadership positions in higher education has decelerated.

Strategies employed by African American women executives who have succeeded in executive-level positions in their fields in academia are detailed and described in this qualitative case study (Iheduru-Anderson et al., 2022). Despite decades of evidence showing women's increasing success in the workforce, several studies find that African American women in academia still face obstacles in their pursuit of professional leadership roles (Hill et al., 2020). By exploring this qualitative case study, I collected qualitative data via interviews and surveys from 11 African American women working in administrative roles at an HBCU in the southeastern United States in Virginia who are provosts, deans, vice presidents, and executive directors. This study also described the perceptions of African American women executives at HBCUs and provided insight into the skills required in the 21st century to become an executive administrator and prominent higher education leader. I used pseudonyms as the participants' names to protect their confidentiality and privacy. The participants ranged in age from 35 to 59. The women leaders' years of higher education experience varied from 7 to 35 years. All

participants earned a master's degree, a doctorate of educational leadership, or a doctor of philosophy degree. Only five of the participants also worked at PWIs.

For this case study, I described the perceptions of African American women regarding steps they practiced to continue their path to notable success in higher education leadership. In other words, I described the behaviors and practices of African American women leaders and how they engaged at institutions of higher education to overcome barriers, acquire advancement and promotion, and achieve and excel in executive-level careers. In this approach, I interviewed them virtually or in person, and I described the perceptions of African American women leaders at universities in the southeastern region of the United States that might be beneficial to other women of color in developing a rite of passage or guidebook of procedures on what it takes in the 21st century to become an executive administrator and influential leader in higher education.

The study participants consisted of African American women in higher education who cultivated their careers and ascended to leadership positions.

The overall discussion and purpose of the research were the perceptions of African American women in executive leadership positions regarding factors contributing to African American women leaders in higher education settings overcoming barriers. The following questions guided the research study:

RQ1: What are the perceptions of African American women in leadership regarding barriers to attaining leadership positions in higher education?

RQ2: What are the perceptions of African American women in leadership regarding supports to attaining leadership positions in higher education?

RQ3: What are the perceptions of African American women in leadership in higher education regarding their ethical and spiritual decision-making?

This chapter's findings are based on interview responses, the organizational and leadership effectiveness inventory, and the analysis of supporting documents. The findings are summarized and organized by the research questions.

**Research Question 1 Findings**

Research Question (RQ) 1 explored the perceptions of African American women in leadership regarding barriers to attaining leadership positions in higher education. An analysis of participant responses resulted in the following emergent themes: lack of respect, sexism, racism, dismissiveness and disregard for opportunities, self-doubt and imposter syndrome, colleague and peer doubt, and lack of mentorship (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Barriers to Attainment (RQ1)*

| Themes | Frequencies of participants' responses | % |
|---|---|---|
| Lack of respect and devalued leadership ability | 7 out of 11 | 64 |
| Oppressive hierarchy | 3 out of 11 | 27 |
| Stereotype threat | 5 out of 11 | 45 |
| Tokenism, isolation, and invisibility | 3 out of 11 | 27 |
| Voiceless/self-doubt/imposter syndrome | 2 out of 11 | 18 |
| Microaggressions | 5 out of 11 | 45 |
| Not enough role models to emulate that of another | 7 out of 11 | 64 |

*Lack of Respect and Devalued Leadership Ability*

Several participants revealed experiencing a lack of respect and feeling devalued in their leadership position in higher education. Seven out of 11 (64%) shared their perceptions when

asked about the challenges that African American (AA) women in higher education face that may be different from others pursuing leadership. Scarlett stated:

> I would go back to the lack of respect factor—as women as a whole. We all know the history of higher education. When you look at the history of higher education, it started out being Caucasian men. Then, it went to African American men. And then it went to Caucasian women. Then you have to go through all those hurdles. Depending on what generation you're in, it can impact the effects. It can affect how people view you. So, someone that was, you know, prior to a baby boomer, they didn't see women in leadership roles. So, they might not have the same level of respect.

Another participant, Flo, shared, "Inherently, there is an immediate devaluing of her intelligence based on only on her skin color" when AA women are in leadership positions in higher education.

Resin agreed and shared that "Sometimes, in leadership, people do not listen to us, even though they know we might know the answer." Though all of the participants were highly qualified and skilled for their leadership position, some participants mentioned that "lack of respect" at times was demonstrated in subtle ways through human resources.

For example, Penny reported:

> The challenges are really getting in leadership positions where we feel valued means that I don't want to be in a position just because you're feeling that it's time because you're missing a Black woman. It should be because of my value, you know, right? I want to feel that you did not use the word "needed." But you welcome my knowledge. That's why you want me here instead of because you are a Black woman.

Snow agreed and stated, "That's very hard because, in a leadership role, I always want to feel like I'm being supportive, or whatever is asked of me, whether that's me helping or doing whatever is needed." Several participants shared similar encounters.

One of the participants, Midori, compared the challenges she experienced in their leadership role at a PWI and HBCU. Midori indicated that women leaders must change their mindset to overcome the feeling of being devalued.

### *Oppressive Hierarchy*

Three out of 11 participants (27%) indicated sexism in the male-dominated work environment is still a challenge and becomes difficult to progress in leadership roles in higher education. Fiona shared:

> I have faced sexism, and I have faced racism. At one institution, I was the second-ranking woman at the institution, and I was African, and I am African American. I have been locked out of rooms. I have literally been standing on the other side of doors while the Caucasian males were in the meeting, waving at me and reminding me that I was not included in decision-making. Hope indicated that in higher education, you always have to work within the good ole boy network. Many times, a challenge of sexism is not knowing if you are given a position just because you are a woman or meeting the affirmative action quota. Unfortunately, these hiring practices potentially lead to hostile work environments.

> For example, Snow stated:

> I've been in situations where I've been in a room and it's been myself and other men, and the conversation is about something that I know, but it's not directed toward me. It's

directed toward the person that doesn't even know the detail, but if I felt like why is he

asking him, I'm the one that knows exactly the answer to that.

### *Stereotype Threat*

Participants shared how misconceptions and judgments become barriers to attaining

leadership positions in higher education. Five out of 11 participants (45%) reported negative

misconceptions and judgments about African American women are sometimes barriers to

promotions and leadership roles. One participant mentioned the expectation and judgment that

sometimes accompanies women working in leadership.

Sidi shared:

Here, there is a profile you have to fit in if you want to move up that ladder. If I came to

work, not fitting a certain profile, it wasn't good. So, I used to keep a suit in my office

just in case I got called to the president's office or an interview. I felt like I needed to be

prepared and wear normal suits because I'm working with men.

Hope indicated:

The culture of the company or higher education institution largely influences what you

wore, where, and how, and that includes hairstyles, make-up, and wearing dresses or

pants to certain meetings. There is a certain model that is required in corporate, but it also

depends on age and can be a stereotype and misconception of what is acceptable or not.

Now it is different due to diversity, equity, and inclusion, but people still look. Some

Caucasian women will try to touch your hair or ask strange questions because they just

don't get the hair, but we have to tell them it is not okay and be upfront. They need to

judge us on our expertise, not our hair or clothes, but that is our culture, and African

Americans do the same to each other.

Rosa revealed:

I think that, you know, people are not really willing to embrace the culture, the difference

is in African American women. So then, you know, and sometimes we could get a little

bit of that in our own culture. See, we seem to forget that although we're African

American women [who] work with African American women, you know, you get some

women that look at other women, then they view them differently. An African American

born in America is different from an African woman born in Africa, of course, and so she

comes with a certain kind of strength that we don't have. Because we haven't grown up

in the, in that culture. So, you would have those differences. So how do you know? How

can this be overcome? A lot of it is just acceptance. I think it's just basic human nature

and understanding what makes us unique and different, even as a team, is our differences.

And so yes, I am of African descent, but I am educated, reared in, and exposed in a

different way from my sister, who may have grown up in the rural part of South Carolina,

there is a difference, you know. And so, it's just about accepting our differences.

Belle shared thoughts and experiences about how being Afrocentric is often misread.

Belle revealed:

Culture and afro-centricity impacts African American leaders, especially in the area of

[the] style of clothes and make-up and hair. The best way to describe it is it impacts the

day-to-day decisions of how the African American woman leader will display herself.

These questions she mentally decides daily. Will she wear lipstick that will bring

emphasis to her lips, or will she be more subtle? Will she wear a t-shirt in her leisure that

promotes "Black women or girls," or "African influences," or "African American

images," or "women empowerment," or "an inspirational shirt," or a plain shirt? What

message am I conveying? It impacts in other ways, self-view, how we define self-care,

how we practice self-care, how we measure our success. The best way to overcome this

obstacle is to have friends and mentors both in the field and outside of the field. It really

helps to process this feeling with others and share it.

Some of the stereotypes and misconceptions shared were overt, and others were subtle. Several

participants noted the different misconceptions and labels such as "angry Black woman, loud,

aggressive, etc." impacts the work environment. Penny reflected and stated:

I think when we get dressed, we think whether we have to go to meetings. I know

sometimes, I'm real cautious of my suit. I think, I'm gonna wear makeup, I'm gonna

wear my hair. Does it mean to be Black? Right? Because for the longest time, I mean,

when I said I was going to go natural, I was like, Oh, heck no, no, right? Because I didn't

want it said I was trying to be a European otherwise. I just wanted to stay, you know,

with the slinky hair as possible ... your clothing, how it fits on you? And if you had the

big backside naturally? No. Are they going to look at that? Or is it, you know, or is it the

guy sitting closer to me on purpose? How did I actually get to the table? Right? Why do I

have to go through all these changes just to come to work or to a meeting or wherever I

may go, whether it's PWI. They nonchalantly use some negative names, and we don't say

anything because we don't want to be known as the angry woman.

### Tokenism, Isolation, and Invisibility

Two out of 11 participants (18%) reported often feeling dismissed and overlooked for

opportunities as a leader in higher education. Gender bias, isolation, and devaluation of women

in leadership positions have been noted as barriers to climbing the ladder of success in a greater

capacity. Midori indicated, "I have seen these as obstacles and faced these. I do think that we still

work in an environment where some men think women are inferior and are incapable of holding leadership positions." One of the participants mentioned how the barriers influenced some of the professional decisions regarding upcoming opportunities in the field of education. Resin shared, "Sometimes, the barriers can deter you from applying for leadership roles." Snow agreed and revealed an experience that happened during her pregnancy. The participant revealed:

> There was a time I felt like I was being dismissed. It was during my pregnancy when this male I was talking to made me feel like I wasn't being heard. Every time I said something, he would reply to the other men that were in the room and ignored me. It was rude and dismissive.

### *Voiceless/Self-Doubt/Imposter Syndrome*

Three out of 11 participants (27%) shared that they often felt voiceless and experienced moments of self-doubt as African American women leaders in higher education. Some participants shared how the intersectionality of gender and race in their leadership position can also be a barrier at times. For instance, Snow suggested:

> Just being an African American woman. However, I think having the confidence to be able to know that you can do it right. And, you can do it, and you don't necessarily need anyone else to, you know, to say that to you. You have to just have that confidence that you can, you can go, you know, go for it. Stop doubting yourself.

Rosa shared:

> A lot of times, African American women stifle themselves sometimes, you know, a lot of them suffer from insecurities about themselves and their abilities. Yes, and maybe so do I. Sometimes, I wonder if I actually belong in this seat.

The imposter syndrome and expectations placed on mothers in the past have accompanied guilt and impacted women in leadership in various ways. One of the ways noted in this study is self-doubt, no self-confidence, and imposter syndrome. Fiona disclosed an experience and said:

> One of my mentors told me I was, I was kind of beating myself up when you are starting off and you're trying to climb the ladder and you are wife and a mother, right? The whole mother guilt is a real thing for women leaders—it's hard.

### *Microaggressions*

Microaggressions can be subtle and overt in the workplace. Additionally, microaggressions are, at times, unintentional due to the infancy of the concept in the workplace. For example, discrimination against women or members of a marginalized group, such as a racial or ethnic minority, is a microaggression. Five out of 11 participants (45%) shared how different forms of microaggressions can be barriers to attaining leadership positions in higher education.

> Sidi recounted an experience and stated:
>
> It's about having work ethics and going above and beyond and be willing to take a chance when others would not support you. We say that we do well in a work environment, but you will have so many people who will support you until you start moving up. There are really some who are nice and your supporters. They will congratulate you. Oh, it's wonderful. You deserved it. But they're the same individuals that will ask, "Why they picked her instead of them?

Hope agreed that African American women are often undermined as leaders and professionals. Hope revealed:

> There was an experience when I was going to a conference where I was taking students, three males and three females. Other men came up from the conference and spoke to the

male students and not me or the female students. It appears that they assumed the males

were in higher positions and in charge, and I was the director of the group, and they were

my students, so it was like I was not there. At that school, that type of behavior was

discouraging, and I did not pursue positions there because of that.

Flo shared an experience she encountered while considering pursuing an executive position. Flo

revealed:

My colleagues said, "How did you get here? Weren't you a secretary or something at the

center?" … I was arranging the-meetings and advances, you know, turning the computer

on and fixing things in the previous position was all they thought I could do. But they had

no idea that I even had a degree and [was] now in an executive role.

Fiona and Snow also agreed microaggressions vary in the workplace when African American

women are in leadership roles; however, barriers can be ignored and overcome.

### *Lack of Role Models and Mentors*

Seven out of 11 participants (64%) mentioned that the lack of role models and

mentorships is a barrier to their growth and progression as professionals. The majority of the

participants reported that a lack of role models and mentors influences the work environment and

success to a higher level. Scarlett stated:

I'm gonna think that one of the things that I have missed during the course of my career

is actually having a mentor. I think that mentorship is very important. Someone that is

going to have an unbiased position, someone that you're going to say that, you know,

what, you could have handled that differently. And you'd be able to, but you also have to

be receptive of the information that's being shared with you. This reciprocal is not just a

mentor, you know, telling you that, okay, these take these steps to help you along the way

[sic].

Resin shared:

I believe that leadership roles, African American women are moving up on the ladder for

leadership roles in the current college situation; however, it is more on the Historically

Black College and University side of the landscape, not PWI. So, that has affected my

thinking of pursuing a road to a leadership role, and also the women that I was influenced

by. As I went through my college career, it has influenced me to pursue a leadership role

in higher education because of what I saw.

Three out of 11 participants (27%) reported a sense of progression is being made; however,

colleges and universities have quite a way to go. For example, Sidi stated, "I think there's still a

ceiling that we have to break. We can get the job done, but it's different. But sometimes, I

believe it's still a man's world."

**Research Question 1 Summary**

Although African American women in higher education have made some progress over

the years in attaining executive leadership positions, there is still a disparity in finding a clear

path that demonstrates how success is attained. In the data shared by participants of the study,

many women indicated that they do not want to confront conflict and try to avoid dealing with

those specific issues. Although they encounter racial and gender discrimination, devaluation, and

confrontation, the participants indicate that they have learned to use their traits, behaviors, and

leadership style to annihilate or eliminate negative situations or disputes in the work

environments. Parker and ogilvie (1996) verified that Anglo American men's leadership styles

do not apply to all demographic groups, especially those of African American women leaders.

African American women leaders in the case study articulated that gender does not operate the same way based on cultural traditions and situational leadership styles are a significant component to strategizing to attain leadership positions. African American women also lead others by manifesting their unique leadership abilities to transform the organization or specific group that they manage to perform in a specific manner. The findings of this study suggested for African American female leaders to overcome barriers, they must be consistent, work hard, be confident, and have mentor support (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5**

*How African American Female Leaders Overcome Barriers (Findings for RQ1)*
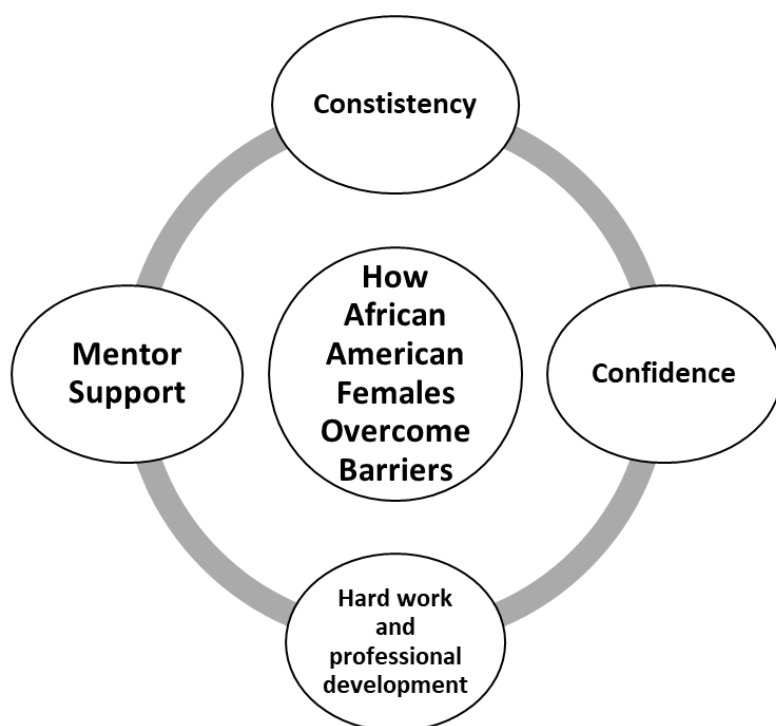


The study confirms that African American women employ specialized traits such as self-confidence, independence, and strong influence strategies in their daily leadership skills (Sims & Carter, 2019). The leadership decisions used are comparable to Anglo American men and

women and are often used as a confrontation and avoidance strategy when approaching race issues. When African American women encounter and deal with Caucasian women from the case study, they exhibit characteristics of conventional traits of democratic and transformational styles that are nurturing, participative, and autonomous (Sims & Carter, 2019). The analysis of African American women leaders in this study verifies that the intersectionality of race and gender is a fundamental element of how women leaders are informed by their lived experiences to handle the current leadership demographics in higher education when negative race and gender issues arise.

**Research Question 2 Findings**

Research Question 2 explored the perceptions of African American women in leadership regarding supports to attaining leadership positions in higher education. The subsequent themes that emerged from an examination of participant responses were mentorship, cultivating a positive self-image, family and community support, and personal and professional development (see Table 2).

**Table 2**

*Supports to Attainment (RQ2)*

| Themes | Frequencies of participants' responses | % |
|---|---|---|
| Mentorship | 8 out of 11 | 73 |
| Cultivating a positive self-image | 6 out of 11 | 54 |
| Family and community support | 10 out of 11 | 91 |
| Personal and professional development | 9 out of 11 | 81 |

*Mentorship*

Most participants agreed that positive support is essential to attaining leadership positions in higher education. Eight out of 11 participants (73%) reported that having female mentors in leadership positions is important to attaining leadership roles. Fiona shared the value of observing great leadership and stated:

You must get a mentor who's gonna [sic] kind of steer you in the right direction. And let me tell you something with mentorship at this level, more is caught than is taught, right? By my mentors. It isn't that they're necessarily telling me A, B, C. D, it's they're allowing me to be in the room. They are allowing me to hear their conversations where they're taking phone calls. They're allowing me to see their thought process.

Flo suggested:

Try to find someone who is open to not a formal mentoring relationship, which it certainly can be that, but when you can tell others what is really on their mind and what they think about. But just being around people who are where you would like to be, it is great being in the room, even small events, plus passing by elevator conversations, right? Those small things add up, and every now and then, there's some exchange that you did not know about that can help you on the journey. I try to listen and learn from those women.

Rosa shared that though she was not initially privileged to have a formal mentorship, she did have someone inspirational in her professional life. Rosa revealed:

In my time of working, my mother was my mentor. And she taught me things because I was young, working in an environment with seasoned adults. She was the one to help me

navigate through that. Not only that but ... I was in higher education, and I was working as an advisor and a student in grad school.

Resin agreed:

I think leaders should find a good mentor. Sometimes you don't know everything yourself in looking, having someone there that can actually mentor you, or to guide you in that right path, and help you figure out your leadership style. Because leadership, you develop those skills over time, right? And being a good leader is also knowing how to follow. So, mentorship is important.

Belle stated, "The best advice I can say is to get involved in professional associations as they help to develop skills and curate knowledge outside your day-to-day activities." Moreover, Snow and Sidi also reported that they had mentors while growing as leaders. However, one participant shared all of her mentors were effective but also all male.

### *Cultivating a Positive Self-Image*

Participants explored the attributes that African American women leaders in higher education need to perform and excel in executive-level roles, and most of the participants agreed that having "self-confidence and empathy" are personal supports that one must attain to accomplish and maintain high levels of success. Eight out of 11 participants (72%) shared the importance of having a positive self-image. Scarlett stated, "patience and confidence become virtues." Sidi agreed, stating, "Just have the skill set, be understanding, and have confidence that you know what you're doing." Hope, on the other hand, placed more emphasis on the benefits showing empathy could possibly have on one's self-image. Thus, Hope shared, "I need to work on being more empathetic to others and giving a second chance. Also, need to be open to new

experiences and learn new things, welcome the good and the bad and learn, be persistent to reach dreams."

One participant noted that enjoying the journey is part of having a positive self-image as a leader. Rosa stated, "To excel in and feel good is not to really take yourself too seriously. And I say that because you can get very rigid." Resin further suggested, "I think all leaders should also be dynamic and charismatic leaders."

### *Family and Community Support*

Participants explored and shared how their support system affected the path to leadership positions for African American women in higher education and shared whether there was a negative or positive aspect.

Scarlett agreed:

I would say the support system makes a difference. You have to have people at home that are going to encourage you, especially when you're trying to be a wife, a mom, and be a successful leader. So, you have to set boundaries, you have to say, because there were many times when I was working on my doctorate because I, you know, already had the other degrees before I had children. But I would have to say, this is Mommy's study time, right? You have to set boundaries. So, but you also have to, it's almost like you have to be everything to everyone, right? But you also have to make sure that you set some time for yourself. And I think that what we don't do is enough of setting time for ourselves.

Midori shared:

Having a strong support system who understands you, understands your value and worth to the organization, and who understands your ethics, your commitment and dedication,

and your abilities to do your job well and above what is required is an important factor in any leadership position.

Snow revealed:

I think a support system is huge, especially when you have children. Because of so much time that you invest in your work, you have to have that support system, I can't even imagine having children and not having the support that I have, like with my family and my, you know, my in-laws and my siblings. Because I think it would be very difficult to do what I do and the time that I spend here and still trying to, you know, do the thing. And I struggled with that at the beginning, like when I first started having kids I struggled. I struggled a lot with am I spending enough time with the kids? Are they going to know me? Right, right. I needed to get the work that I could, you know, I had a job. It is a balancing act of balancing and even still today, I still try to, you know, balance balancing, but I think a support system is [a] huge family support system, a support system within the work like I have, you have to be the people that you can, that you can just talk to, you can then they understand what you're going through.

Sidi suggested, "If you can have people that surround you, that support you, who can provide true guidance and honesty, you can go anywhere." Most of the participants agreed that support is an essential component of being successful. Hope agreed and responded:

A support system is critical—parents, friends, mentors, everything is important to move forward. It is positive most of the time but can be negative when that support system changes on you and gets upset when they try to put their goals above yours, that can cause a problem.

Rosa shared, "Support is critical because, through her network, it's opened doors. So that's why the network is important. Resin stated:

> I think the support depends on your family structure. So, being a person with children, and you need that support in order to continue on your career path, that support is important, you need that support system. Well, maybe going through the single thing with no kids, I really have that flexibility. And having a support system to encourage me is good, but I don't need that support system in order to maneuver around in higher ed because sometimes, in higher ed, it's, you have to go where the next opportunity is, right? So, you might be North one year and all the way in Florida another year. Right. And having a support system in your sphere [of] family structure really can affect you positively.

> Coco shared:

> Well, you have to have a support system. You have to have people rooting you on and there to give you the advice that you need. You can stay strong and just stay on the continuum to reach your goals. I think it can be positive but can be a negative impact. If you're not receiving the advice, or if you're marching to your own drum. I have seen leaders who don't listen to anyone.

> Penny shared:

> I think it's a positive. And I think that the support system does play a major role in your path. But then you have to remember, when you look at family support systems, if you think that's all that you have, and then you know, I think that's why God gives us friends.

Belle reflected and shared, "A support system is crucial, especially when you are a first-generation student. I do not see a negative aspect to having a support system. This helps you to push forward."

### *Personal and Professional Development*

Participants noted ways female leaders in higher education demonstrate that they are knowledgeable and ready to accept a leadership role when they have a positive self-image. Eight out of 11 participants (72%) concurred that displaying leadership potential can be accomplished in various ways effectively. For example, Scarlett shared, "The only way you can do that is [by] taking on additional responsibility. And by that, I mean, things that are outside your normal workflow. For me, I have, I used to volunteer for a lot of things."

Snow shared:

I think you have to show that you can, that you can do it, before you can step in[to] it. So I think that you can lead in any position that you're in, and you don't have to be necessarily in a leadership role to show that you can, that you can lead. There are several different ways that you can, you can show that, so I think if you're doing your job and you're, you know, going above and beyond, that's part of leadership. You know, helping when coming up with, with recommendations, you know, and trying to come up with a plan, like those are things that leaders do, to be able to move things forward.

Sidi stated:

If you do a good job and you're performing at the level, your work speaks for itself. And then I also believe it's not just about doing your work is doing the next step, going above and beyond taking on tasks that you never thought you could do.

Midori noted:

I have shared with others (supervisors, department heads, deans, vice presidents, etc.) this desire to do something different. Sometimes it depends on who you know and the area in which you work. I believe if a female has demonstrated they are knowledgeable and ready to accept the leadership role, then it is up to the supervisor or others to recognize these abilities and pursue her or consider her for leadership opportunities when available. Sometimes, it is a case of it who you know rather than looking at those within the organization who has the potential to do the job.

Rosa stated:

You demonstrated that your competency was important. You know you demonstrate your competency, your ability, your ability [to be] able to handle a variety of things, your finances, and your management of finances. If you are aspiring to a supervisory position, understanding how you communicate is important because you communicate with individuals here. It also says where you would be as a leader and as a supervisor. So, the demonstration of that, your competency, your ability to communicate, and I keep going back to the respect piece in the work environment. Resin suggested, "Let your work speak for itself, always."

Coco suggested:

Make sure that you have the skills and that others are aware. Make sure you're not pretty much hiding in a closet and, and not demonstrating what you can do in terms of your skills and ability. You know, you have to step up and show what you can do.

Penny stated:

Just show up and be committed. Show up and be committed to what it is you say that

you're that you can do. You don't always have to be right. You know, I will say just

show up. And I mean, consistency is really important for us, not just at the interview, but

to be consistent all the way through. Do not be the person that does show up at the

interview, but let that be your real self.

**Research Question 2 Summary**

Women leaders, specifically African American higher education executive leaders, have

continued to find their way through breaking the glass ceiling or fighting the concrete wall to

make it to advanced-level positions. There are barriers but many supports that African American

women have learned to put into place to overcome and excel. As verified by the study, the

women leader participants continue to find strength and strategies by imploring various methods

to discover manageable supports. The study participants could find various types of support

through mentors, networking, professional organizations, and executive women they could

shadow. Findings from participants' responses indicated that African American female leaders

have various forms of support. The primary professional support comes from professional

networking, spiritual/religious organizations, and mentors (see Figure 6).

**Figure 6**

*African American Female Leaders' Professional Support System (Findings for RQ2)*
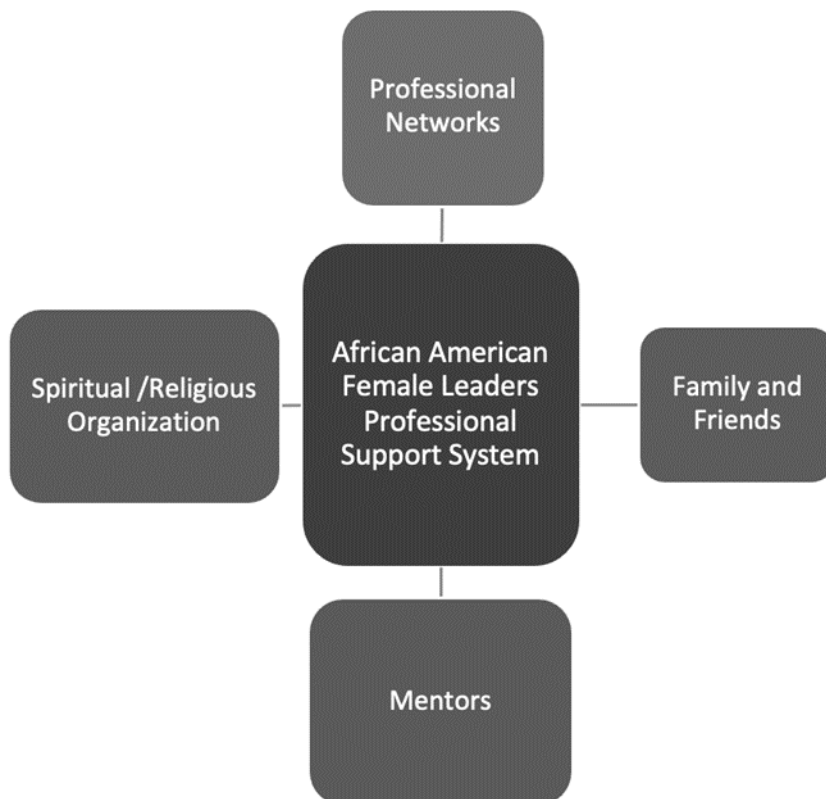


Participants were encouraged by their mentors to pursue leadership positions, but depending upon the specific title, they were guided in different ways based on their own knowledge or expectations of the position. In the data provided in the RQs, there is a comparison and contrast of how the perceptions of African American women leaders are different. There are common themes which include goals of success, being accepted, and for others to acknowledge they are educated, talented, and have skills and abilities to perform leadership duties the same as anyone else, regardless of race or gender.

**Research Question 3 Findings**

Research Question 3 examined the perceptions of African American women in leadership in higher education regarding their ethical and spiritual decision-making.

Seven out of 11 participants (64%) shared how their ethical and spiritual decisions are influenced as African American leaders in higher education (see Table 3).

**Table 3**

*Ethical and Spiritual Decision-Making (RQ3)*

| Themes | Frequencies of participants' responses | % |
|---|---|---|
| Integrity and honesty | 7 out of 11 | 64 |
| Patient and assertive | 7 out of 11 | 64 |
| Self-aware and mindful | 7 out of 11 | 64 |
| Listen and communicate with curiosity | 7 out of 11 | 64 |

***Integrity and Honesty***

The majority of the participants shared that honesty and integrity played a major role ethically in being an effective leader. Scarlett shared:

I think that particularly in finance if you get caught being dishonest, your career is over. Our supervisor always talks about if it's corrupted or improper, then this is how you know that it's not the way one should operate and conduct business. And so, I take that. I've always operated in that fashion. So, I would say that you would have to do that in order to gain the respect of colleagues.

Midori shared, "Race should not influence our ethical decisions. Words like fairness, integrity, equity, loyalty, trust, and compliance should influence our decisions." However, Scarlett shared

the benefits of being direct. Scarlett shared her approach and stated, "I would say I am pretty direct, honest, and frank." Snow agreed:

I'm a very ethical person because of the business. You know, you have to have integrity in order to be able to be in this space for people to trust you. People have to trust, you know, with them the money that comes through with the document, you know, you have to have that trust. However, I wouldn't necessarily think because I'm African American woman, I just think because I'm who I am. I'm a trustworthy person and I have integrity.

Sidi shared:

I don't think race has to do with it or being a woman; I think ethics is across the board. Right? Either you have it if you don't. And it's, whether small or large. I'm a firm believer that I own my signature. That's the one thing I own. That's the one thing I was taught in life. But ethics is something that you have or don't. You know, if your parents taught you, please, thank you, ma'am. But it's like, with ethics and morals, that we still, you know, have to just be honest.

Hope also agreed and said, "We need to continue to be honest and truthful because your word is all you have and is everything." Rosa argued:

The bottom line is the respect the integrity that I bring are going to influence you to be ethical and have integrity as well. It is the foundation of understanding who you are and who you desire to be. Because I desire to be ethical and have integrity in my work, I understand that I am not going to be the favorite. Sometimes, I am not going to be the one that you want sitting around a table because I am ethical. You know, people who are ethical have integrity. We want people who are committed and dedicated.

Additionally, Coco shared a time she made a decision that impacted students. Coco stated:

> I try to do what I feel is the right thing. I try to have integrity in everything that I do. You
> know, even with students, when I have to discipline them, I try to do what is best for
> them.

Penny, on the other hand, shared how witnessing a leader with a lack of integrity and honesty impacted her experience." Penny shared, "I've been around corrupt African American women in higher education. I think it's helped me because I don't want to do that. I ended up seeing what happens to them."

### *Patient and Assertive*

Participants were asked to share the methods they use to avoid or handle conflict and confrontation in the higher education setting. Their responses varied, with seven out of 11 participants (64%) reporting their approach is direct and 36% describing a more calm, delayed approach. Fiona shared her approach to dealing with conflict and stated:

> The first thing is you do not run from it. Oftentimes, I see women running from it. I see
> them conforming. I see them—kind of cowering out to "whatever it is." So how do you
> handle it? You confront it. You usually find it because this cowering down and wanting
> to be everybody's friend and wanting everybody to like you is a fantasy. That is not real.
> Right? Okay. You're going to confront it the best way you can. You're going to gather
> information, and you're going to speak from a place of facts, not feelings. That's very
> hard because I am, by nature, very intuitive. By nature. I go in spaces, and I feel the room
> out and feel what's going on. I am in a position of leadership. What is going on and make
> a decision going forward? And how to make a conscious effort to make the best decision
> to all parties involved.

Midori shared that her method is with more caution. Midori stated, "I tend to believe in listening, understanding, and asking questions to ensure being understood." Likewise, some participants found addressing conflict and confrontation difficult.

Snow stated:

It's difficult for me. I sometimes give it time, in the sense, like, if something happens, like right now, I may not react right now. Right? I may give it like, tomorrow morning to be like, okay, let me think about what just happened. So, I can, then address it, you know, calmly. Another thing, especially like, with working with, with staff, I try to give people time for them to calm down as well right now and then having a conversation. Well, you know, let's just talk about, you know, what happened, you know, things that we could have done differently.

Flo shared:

I believe in mediation, and I did it previously. And surprisingly, when I got back to my job, people thought I was sitting in the same role. So even people in other departments called me to mediate some situations rather than members of that area. Right. I was like, I don't want this task in this department anymore and do not have to deal with the issues. But I also kind of do the same thing, like some people don't like, I'm not a fan of conflict. But I think confrontation in a professional setting can be beneficial if it's structured by mature professionals that it should be in "the right place" at the right time. So, if you can turn the confrontation into a "learning curve," or if you can turn it into something that's how we can see more similarities than differences, then it can be beneficial, right? But absolutely, if someone is escalated to the ninth level, and appropriately, inappropriately, um, what I have learned to do is to not engage, okay. I use

the power of silence to my advantage. You don't have to respond. And I say that in my

head, when people are saying things and meetings, and I want to say something, I'm

telling myself, you don't have to respond, right? Everything doesn't have to be said, of

course. That is how I self-manage.

Coco shared:

Open communication is key and the patience. I just believe that any conflict or perceived

conflict can be resolved. It could be a situation where the person has not had an

opportunity to really share what they're feeling. And, you know, just the need to just sit

down, get it out, and provide options. So, all conflicts can be resolved.

### *Self-Awareness and Mindfulness*

Participants described how spirituality affects their response to racial and gender

inequities. Seven out of 11 participants (64%) shared how their spiritual lives and practice affects

their approach to inequities. Scarlett shared:

I think that your spiritual reality helps you to be calm in situations where you want to go

completely off. And you have to just sit sometimes and just listen. And in your mind, you

say, Lord, have mercy. Please help me to hold my tongue. And because I want to tell this

person something not very nice to their face, and so, sometimes you have to use it to calm

yourself down, internalize, because you are so angry at the things that you've had to deal

with that you have to say, you know, what, this battle was not mine, and keep it moving.

Midori responded:

Having a spiritual connectiveness and faith will allow you to deal with any inequities.

Understand we work in a diverse field, fairness and equity should be in the forefront of

higher education leadership. Having a sense of spirituality puts inequities into a different perspective in terms of how we act, respond, respect our differences.

Snow stated, "I just pray about it, you know, so I pray that something good will come out of the situation." Sidi revealed:

I think spirituality is a basic fundamental that you develop from the onset, I think people can gain it, but I think this, I guess, maybe because I've always been exposed. So, it's something I've already always had, but I think you have to accept people for who they are and use your spirituality to deal with unfortunate situations.

Hope candidly shared:

My spirituality keeps me from getting into trouble. I have grown a lot from me being raised in the inner city. At one time, I would have really told someone something, but now I have learned to hold my tongue and be more professional but I had to learn from mentors, colleagues and coworkers, and even my students. I have learned to be more fair, humble and try to understand others and why they feel the way they do. I am working again on my empathy and emotional intelligence. I try now to talk through situations instead of confronting the issue and have teachable moments.

Some participants admitted that it is not always as simple as it sounds. Belle remarked, "I learn[ed] how to journal and count to 10 often." Flo shared, "I know who I am. And I will say, my response at home is different than my response on the job because, at home, I could just go off." Resin admitted, "It helps you be patient. Being patient is also a gift … It gives you hope." Conversely, Coco stated, "I am spiritually grounded. And so, in terms of racial and gender inequity, I really don't think a whole lot on it and just keep focused."

### *Listen and Communicate With Curiosity*

Participants explored how spirituality affects their response to confrontation. Seven out of 11 participants (64%) shared how communicating, listening, and asking questions assist in confrontation. Scarlett shared:

Sometimes, I have to be able to pivot depending on who I'm speaking to; and I think that communication has been a plus for me being able to say, "Hey, this conversation is not getting us anywhere. What is it that you need from me?" And what is it that I can do for you to help you manage this conflict?" Sometimes avoiding the conflict means avoiding the person and send[ing] somebody else to do the job.

Sidi suggested:

If it's a group, I believe in bringing everyone to the table and having a conversation. I don't believe in he says, she says. And you go back and forth. [sic] No, we're all around the table. And we're going to work through this. I also believe in when you're communicating with someone and you make an error, you go back and clean that error. So, we all are on the same page.

Hope shared:

Usually, I confront the issue as a teachable moment and ask, "What can I learn from this particular situation?" Again, knowing the space you are in is important. If I am not comfortable, then I will avoid the situation by walking away or changing the subject. I do not want [to] make the situation worse but will talk to others if the situation persists, such as my supervisor or HR or get advice from a friend on how to handle the issue.

Rosa agreed:

> We know we have to talk about it. So, it's picking up the phone. A lot of times, we're in the meeting, and there are issues, and I say, wait a minute, let's call and find out, and sometimes you will not know this is an issue. You can't get out of the meeting and still have the issue while we're in the meeting. I want to solve the problem.

One participant had a different approach. Penny shared, "I'll ask for clarification because sometimes it may take me a night to process."

**Research Question 3 Summary**

The analysis of ethical and spiritual perceptions was also explored in the study, and the participants provided various responses. The findings in the study indicated that African American female leaders indicated prayer, listening deeply, and having patience helped them make ethical and spiritual decisions as leaders (see Figure 7).

**Figure 7**

*Strategies for Ethical and Spiritual Decision-Making (Findings for RQ3)*

**Chapter Summary**

The discussion of ethics and spirituality was not difficult for African American women in the study. Most felt that ethics and integrity should be a part of every individual's guidance on how to live life. The participants had various opinions on spirituality, but it was a part of their overall coping mechanisms to deal with various struggles of discrimination, bias, and feeling devalued.

**Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations**

The purpose of this case study was to describe the steps African American women leaders have practiced to grow and continue their path to notable success in higher education leadership. Additionally, the aim included exploring the behaviors and practices of African American women leaders and how they engage at institutions of higher education to overcome barriers, acquire advancement and promotion, and achieve and excel in executive-level careers. In this chapter, I present the study's summary, which includes a brief overview of the problem, the purpose statement and research questions, an explanation of the study design, a description of the participant and setting, and data collection and analysis. Similarly, the study's summary includes an overview of significant findings. In addition, Chapter 5 is comprised of the conclusions drawn from the analysis of the issues discussed in Chapter 4. Future study recommendations and implications for future research are also discussed.

**Discussion of Findings in Relation to Past Literature**

Resilience enables African American women in higher education administration to overcome adversity and strengthen their leadership skills. According to Chance (2021b), African American women in leadership positions in higher education face the challenges of intersectionality, stereotype threat, and tokenism. A study conducted by Chisholm-Burns et al. (2017) also examined strategies for African American women in leadership. In the study, Chisholm-Burns et al. (2017) suggested strategies for surmounting obstacles on the way to leadership. The American Society of Health-System Pharmacists Women in Pharmacy Leadership Steering Committee suggested strategies to promote women's leadership development using the following approaches:

(a) Be assertive when promoting yourself; (b) Create a network by introducing yourself

to people inside and outside of your organization, especially those with connections to

industry leaders; (c) Enlist allies; (d) Select role models; and (e) Pursue leadership

development and training. (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017, p. 320)

The wage disparity women encounter in the workforce is an obstacle to leadership that

has gained special attention (Ammerman & Groysberg, 2021). Although a variety of variables

contribute to income discrepancies, the Joint Economic Committee Democrats (2016) estimated

that up to 40 % of the gap is due to discrimination. In the United States, women earn 79% of

what males earn for the same work, a difference of 21% (AAUW, 2016). In the hopes of

reaching a future of equity for all women leaders, a call to action and a strategy that eliminates

the numerous barriers to women's leadership continue to be examined. This case study highlights

the actions African American women have taken in their pursuit of leadership positions in higher

education that have contributed to their continued success.

The study's central research question was: What are the perceptions of African American

women in executive leadership positions regarding factors contributing to African American

women leaders in higher education settings overcoming barriers? The study participants were

very informative regarding ideas that could be shared with other women to become successful

leaders and move to the next level in their careers. The participants explained that engaging in

mentorship relationships was critical to success in understanding how to become the leader that a

person aspires to be. In the mentor's partnership, it is critical to listen and learn how to deal with

combative situations that may arise in particularly uncomfortable environments.

Another critical factor in ensuring a person is on the path to advanced roles is to know

and own their qualifications and skills by participating in leadership development activities,

symposiums, and panels to hone their leadership skills and continue to educate themselves. Ensuring a person knows themself, their likes and dislikes, and taking a Myers Briggs or other personality test can help discover their strengths and weaknesses to find out their true leadership style. The women leaders also encourage others to circle themselves with sisters who are in the same field to be with like-minded individuals that are already in power to teach a person how to become empowered. Being in groups or certain areas will help one to understand where their passion and interests truly are. Participants also shared a person has to decide what they want to be, emulate others that are doing the same, and go after that goal. There are good people out there who will support each other, but each person has to be open to suggestions and productive criticism. Another critical step to moving toward a leadership position includes joining professional organizations that fit skill sets but also a step above where a person currently is to learn more and continue to grow.

The SLT and the OLEI (see Appendix H) tools were used to examine how women tackle barriers as they excel in overcoming these obstacles and continue to excel in leadership positions. The theory addressed the need for a leadership theory inclusive of female leaders' declarations, expertise, and realities. If the female perspective is excluded, then the field of education could be negatively impacted. The OLEI tool with four subscales addressed leadership behaviors with management and interpersonal behaviors, external forces, organizational structure, and values, attitudes, and beliefs as subfactors. The tool was administered to participants to examine their leadership behaviors as an assessment tool prior to being interviewed by me. The self-assessment contributed to additional and enhanced thought processes as the participants responded to the interview questions and how those factors affected their leadership styles in overcoming and responding to barriers while excelling in leadership.

The OLEI may be a factor in identifying the alignment of the SLT factors and related to the leader's behaviors with external forces, values, attitudes, and beliefs and their impact on the organization and their route to pursue leadership roles. Participants agreed that the tool and questions made them think of the barriers and the many struggles, coping mechanisms, and successes they encountered and achieved during their careers.

*Limitations*

The study's limitations remain as noted throughout the process. The participants in this study originated from a single state; therefore, it cannot be considered that their experiences represent all African American women in leadership roles in Virginia's higher education institutions. There is currently insufficient research on how African American women executives in higher education can overcome difficulties and impediments and continue to acquire executive-level positions. As an African American woman who has worked in higher education for the past quarter century, I have personally witnessed the obstacles to leadership development.

*Participants*

Eleven African American women in educational administration holding roles as vice provosts, associate or assistant deans, assistant vice presidents, and executive directors at a Virginia-based HBCU in the southeastern United States were included in the study. The university may have between 4,000 and 5,000 students, offer both on-campus and online programs, and have between 800 and 1,000 personnel. The colleges have African American women in leadership positions, but the percentages are still low compared to the number of administrators at nearby schools.

*Purpose Statement and Research Questions*

This case study's purpose was to describe the steps African American women leaders have practiced to grow and continue their paths to notable success in higher education leadership. Additionally, the aim included exploring the behaviors and practices of African American women leaders and how they engage at institutions of higher education to overcome barriers, acquire advancement and promotion, and achieve and excel in executive-level careers.

The study's central research question was: What are the perceptions of African American women in executive leadership positions regarding factors contributing to African American women leaders in higher education settings overcoming barriers? Specifically, the three research questions below will guide this study.

RQ1: What are the perceptions of African American women in leadership regarding barriers to attaining leadership positions in higher education?

RQ2: What are the perceptions of African American women in leadership regarding supports to attaining leadership positions in higher education?

RQ3: What are the perceptions of African American women in leadership in higher education regarding their ethical and spiritual decision-making?

*Review of the Study Design*

This case study used qualitative methods to describe the behaviors and practices of 11 African American women and their institutional engagement. The participants' tactics and leadership abilities utilized to overcome obstacles, obtain progress and promotion, and attain and flourish in executive-level positions were described. In addition, Ruben (2007) described outstanding leaders as those who use resources to enhance the school or department. Positive leadership traits for African American women leaders were identified and examined by SLT. The

phenomenon, as described by Ruben (2007), investigated "how leaders and leadership practices encourage excellence, effectiveness, engagement, innovation, and attention to the needs of individuals, groups, and organizations that benefit from programs and services, and how leadership practices are reviewed and enhanced" (Ruben, 2007, p. 17).

When establishing different levels of leadership using SLT, four elements were examined. The four elements included the interaction of leadership behaviors; organizational structures; external forces; and attitudes, beliefs, and values intertwined with the organization's improvement. Excellence in leadership, according to Delener (2013), is also defined by shared purpose, collaboration, providing a learning environment, commitment, empathy, competence, and displaying self-awareness.

**Summary of Findings**

The following is a summary of the findings in relation to the three research questions. Research Question 1 explored the perceptions of African American women in leadership regarding barriers to attaining leadership positions in higher education.

The findings included the following themes:

- Lack of respect and devalued leadership ability

- Oppressive hierarchy

- Stereotype threat

- Tokenism, isolation, and invisibility

- Voiceless/self-doubt/imposter syndrome

- Microaggressions

- Not enough role models to emulate that of another

Research Question 2 described the perceptions of African American women in leadership regarding supports to attaining leadership positions in higher education. The findings included the following themes:

- Mentorship

- Cultivate positive self-image

- Family and community support

- Personal and professional development

Research Question 3 described the perceptions of African American women in leadership in higher education regarding their ethical and spiritual decision-making.

The findings included the following themes:

- Integrity and honesty

- Patient and assertive

- Self-aware and mindful

- Listen and communicate with curiosity

### *Research Question 1*

Research Question 1 focused on the perceptions of African American women in leadership and the barriers and how they encounter in attaining leadership positions in higher education? The emergent themes identified included (a) lack of respect and devalued leadership ability; (b) oppressive hierarchy; (c) stereotype threat; (d) tokenism, isolation, and invisibility; (e) voiceless/self-doubt/imposter syndrome; (f) microaggressions; and (g) lack of role models.

**Lack of Respect and Devalued Leadership Ability.** Participants shared how they experienced a lack of respect, and the unjust lack of confidence colleagues have in them as leaders is a great barrier. However, the participants often addressed the lack of respect with

assertiveness. Additionally, working with confidence was often the resolution for participants who reported feeling unheard and devalued. The identified barriers indicate that the "glass ceiling" is prevalent in many ways. The findings align with Herdlein et al. (2013), which noted that African American women in leadership positions in higher education present a distinct leadership image. If administrators in higher education roles do not aid in entirely dismantling the barrier, according to Ransby (2000), the glass ceiling will present additional challenges for African American women leaders.

**Oppressive Hierarchy.** Higher education, traditionally in the past, has been synonymous with "masculinity" or male leaders. Though gains have been made in the number of women in leadership, participants reported experiences of inequalities as high-ranking leaders working in higher education. Kellerman and Rhodes' (2014) research aligned with the participant's responses, as their research demonstrated that there were gender stereotypes connected with masculinity and leadership. None of the participants indicated that gender was a factor in terms of income, sexual harassment, or overt discrimination, which is generally suggestive of an institutional barrier. Nevertheless, it was evident that there was a "distance" from gender concerns or that the administrators had a unique perspective on gender.

**Stereotype Threat.** The risk of self-confirming unfavorable thoughts or stereotypes about one's racial, ethnic, gender, or cultural group in the eyes of others or oneself is a stereotype threat and can impede the growth of African American women in leadership. Participants shared how their cultural influences were at times misunderstood and interfered with their growth to particular promotions and opportunities. According to Alexander-Lee (2014), African American women who hold senior leadership positions in various organizations, including higher

education, battle with the inner turmoil of self-doubt, negative beliefs, and low self-esteem. They further struggle with the external forces of a hostile environment of racism and sexism daily.

**Tokenism, Isolation, and Invisibility.** Given that Caucasian men dominate the higher education market, tokenism can exacerbate an already challenging adjustment. The participants shared how discrimination in their position contributed to marginalization, feelings of isolation, and tokenism. African American women who hold leadership positions in higher education are continually required to demonstrate that their achievements are justly deserved and earned rather than the result of affirmative action, opportunity hiring, or tokenism (Baxter-Nuamah, 2015). According to Edwards (1997), African American women are "more conspicuous and equally secluded" as a result of the distinctions in race and gender that exist between them (p. 21).

**Voiceless/Self-Doubt/Imposter Syndrome.** Imposter syndrome can be experienced as a barrier in various ways. It may be a lack of confidence, self-doubt, or a sense of not belonging, despite their successes, accomplishments, or mastery experiences, particularly in academics. Participants shared the various ways the experience impacted their leadership growth and path. The findings align with researchers' arguments that in academic culture, women can sometimes experience intellectual isolation, competitiveness, lack of mentoring, and the "publish or perish" mentality, which might lead to imposter syndrome (Howe-Walsh & Turnbull, 2014; Parkman, 2019).

**Microaggressions.** Microaggressions are subtle insults that can be verbal or nonverbal. Although small, microaggressions are purposefully directed toward marginalized people (Pierce, 1970; Solorzano et al., 2000; Sue, 2010; Sue & Spanierman, 2020). About half of the participants indicated that they experienced microaggressions in their current roles as leaders. This finding supports Glass et al.'s (2020) argument that while higher education administrators are

encouraged to foster teamwork and employee engagement, they may also be subjected to a potentially toxic work environment characterized by harassment, bullying, and microaggressions (Glass & Cook, 2020).

**Lack of Role Models.** The majority of the participants in the study agreed that not having access to role models is a major barrier to a female leader in higher education. This finding aligns with a study conducted by Wells (2017) that found that, even though African American women are suited for leadership roles, impediments to mentoring and challenges associated with their race and gender hamper their placement at senior executive levels. Education alone is insufficient as a basis for human capital; mentorship is essential to removing barriers and growing leaders (Wells, 2017).

### *Research Question 2*

Research Question 2 focused on the perceptions of African American women in leadership support needed to attain leadership positions in higher education. The emergent themes included (a) mentorship; (b) cultivating a positive self-image; (c) family and community support; and (d) personal and professional development.

**Mentorship.** The majority of the participants reported the need for mentors and a lack of mentor support accessible to them to help provide guidance that would lead to growth. Johnson and Snider (2015) emphasized the significance of having a mentor who serves as a role model who understands the pedagogical and social difficulties confronting higher education. Research and studies have supported the importance of mentoring for women's job progress (Bartman, 2015; Fries-Britt & Snider, 2015). However, there is still a need to investigate the function of mentorship for Black women because some African American women fail to find a mentor based on known factors, such as similar race and gender (Gardner et al., 2014; Kutchner & Kleschick,

2016). The findings align with Chance's (2021b) study that suggested relationships, mentors, community support, and the encouragement of cultural identity and diversity are essential to the professional progression of African American women.

**Cultivating a Positive Self-Image.** Participants shared the need for a positive self-concept to ascend to achieve great success and maintain it. These findings support the findings of a study conducted by Simms (2018) that suggested that women's self-assurance was crucial to their performance as they progressed to senior positions in the university. Axelrod (2017) suggested that cultivating a positive self-image will influence a leader's thoughts, emotions, conduct, relationships, and job performance in every way. This is particularly important for marginalized groups. According to Roberts et al. (2018), when women are agile and have the ability to shift challenges, such as self-doubt, it becomes an opportunity to learn, grow, and transform.

**Family and Community Support.** Participants overwhelmingly agreed that it would be nearly impossible to accomplish their level of success without family and community support. Support such as family, friends, sorority groups, and professional organizations was noted as critical components for the participant's personal and professional growth. These findings support the other studies that confirm that women leaders rely on a variety of support to have access to opportunities. This positive influence and inspiration, as noted by Roberts et al. (2018), is provided by a network of supervisors, teachers, family members, and friends. Women have various roles, personally and professionally, that must work in tandem, and it requires support. Coleman (2019) pointed out that motherhood can be a considerable barrier for women to overcome to gain entry to and sustain leadership roles in the workplace without support.

**Professional Development.** The majority of the participants reported that professional development played a major role in helping them grow and providing support in attaining new leadership opportunities. These findings align with a study conducted by Hatch (2018) that observed that the trajectory of academic leadership was influenced by factors such as professional preparedness and previous triumphs. Evidence of professional and academic involvement from professional growth supplied associated experiences and activities that demonstrate preparation for leadership roles in a certain organization (Beckwith et al., 2016; Moldoveanu & Narayandas, 2021).

### *Research Question 3*

Research Question 3 examined the perceptions of African American women in leadership in higher education regarding their ethical and spiritual decision-making strategies and influences. The emergent themes included (a) integrity and honesty, (b) patience and assertiveness, (c) self-awareness and mindfulness, and (d) active listening and open communication.

**Integrity and Honesty.** Most participants agreed that their honesty and integrity practices were more about their spiritual values than race or gender. Literature illustrated that religion and spirituality had been a dependable place of resource for African American communities personally and professionally (Hays & Lincoln, 2017; Tarver, 2016). Additionally, participants viewed working with integrity as a part of who they are because of their spiritual beliefs. Leading with the "heart" and "mind" has great advantages for leaders personally and professionally (Peláez Zuberbuhler et al., 2020).

**Patience and Assertiveness.** Most of the participants indicated that one of their spiritual strengths is cultivating more patience while addressing the challenges that accompany a female

being in a leadership position. These findings coincide with a Harris et al. (2019) study that suggested that to address life's transitions and obstacles, numerous African Americans employ religious coping mechanisms to overcome them. This study's findings confirm this idea and shed light on how Christian African American women, in particular, view God's activity in their lives. The vast majority of African Americans believe in the existence of God (Masci, 2018).

Participants illustrated how their leadership style had to become more assertive to get respect from peers, colleagues, and followers. The results of this approach can sometimes be two-fold: positive and negative. Studies coincided with other studies that found that when women adopt more assertive actions, they are typically viewed with greater respect but not always favored by followers (Biddle, 2018). When women in power display a more traditionally feminine approach, they may be liked but not necessarily respected (Hentschel et al., 2019).

**Self-Awareness and Mindfulness.** The majority of the participants shared how spirituality was essential as a form of personal development or "self-work." Participants reported being more cognizant of "how" they interact with others, especially during challenging moments. Most participants admitted that this usually takes a level of self-awareness and a spiritual connection, and one has to be mindful. Steidle (2017) described why becoming a transformative leader involves inner and outer work. The inner labor contains the self, which is comprised of one's capacities, knowledge, and insights that leaders cultivate. Further, Steidle (2017) explained that outside work involves the world that influences us in some manner. Our inner and outer experiences are interdependent on one another and are critical in creating the quality of our experiences.

**Active Listening and Open Communication.** Nearly all of the participants reported confidence in themselves, and their spiritual beliefs gave them agency to speak up when

necessary and listen to others during times of distress but demonstrate it in various ways. These findings coincide with a study conducted by Newman (2021) that stated:

> Some African American women are great leaders because of communication. Black women are able to see and hear what is not said in order to determine how to respond or engage. Communication is a skill that is not a single entity when it comes to African American women because African American women practice it in so many ways. (p. 77)

Further, because communication is about being "heard and seen," participants shared how they took time to listen to others and offer assistance.

**Conclusions**

This qualitative case study explored how African American women in leadership roles in higher education might grow and pursue possibilities to achieve significant achievement. The study also illustrated the attitudes and practices of African American women leaders, their engagement with higher education institutions, and how they overcame barriers to obtaining professional advancements.

Women leaders adapt to various environments depending on the situation that they must handle when dealing with leadership and management opportunities and the impact to excel in their career in higher education. SLT and the OLEI validate that the management style of women leaders and participants in this study have their own feminine presence and voice in leadership development. The SLT is a relational and interactive mechanism that focuses on women's leadership behavior, organizational structure, external forces, and attitudes, beliefs, and values (Irby et al., 2002). The OLEI derived from the SLT confirmed via surveys submitted by participants confirm that the four factors emphasize the dynamic interactions and connections to leadership perceptions. Irby et al. (2002) corroborated that successful leaders consider the broad

view in which they work and that they consider all factors when establishing their interactions and integrated style of being an effective leader.

The OLEI and the responses by the participants further declared that the SLT and OLEI are not only focused on the behavior of the leader but the external forces, attitudes, beliefs, and organizational structure when having a holistic solution to understand the environment and aid in the critical decision-making regarding the organization. The OLEI survey submitted by the participants confirmed that there has to be a certain harmony with all factors to serve as a competent and successful leader. As the SLT focuses primarily on women's leadership tendencies, women are more adaptable to accommodate another set of leadership behaviors, such as situational to solve issues and also realign personal values and belief structures to fit with the organizational needs and best decisions (Irby et al., 2002). The OLEI and SLT validate through sharing by participants via interview and survey that women's leadership styles "reflect 21st-century views including gender inclusivity, cultural relevance, situational, contextual, and changing dynamics, holistic and systemic frameworks, transformative reflection, collaborative interdependence, and socially just underpinnings" (Irby et al., 2009, p. 93). Other significant areas that were pronounced during the finding by the participants and during the sharing of responses were steps to take to excel as an African American women leader in higher education. These included:

- Know your qualifications and skills
- Find mentor relationships
- Pursue leadership and professional development opportunities
- Continue to educate yourself
- Identify strengths and weaknesses

- Circle yourself with like-minded people to become empowered

- Be open to suggestions and advice

- Emulate others who are in roles you aspire to be in

- Institutions need to diversify leadership by promoting an environment of a culturally and gender-sensitive campus that addresses needs to include marginalized groups of African American women and others

**Implications for Practice**

Women can excel in higher education positions by attaining mentors, engaging in network opportunities, being resistant to unfair treatment by practicing patience and spirituality behaviors, and finding significant support systems. The African American women leaders' narratives in this study expressed that although there are barriers to breaking the glass ceiling that the possibilities are still attainable. The management behaviors and personal and professional experiences shared by the participants in the study are a testament that each journey is different but that if a person is resilient, then positive achievements are within reach. Areas that could prepare other women for future practice and to sustain when facing challenges are listed. Also, recognized accessible support for women might help them grow and handle the intricacies of career advancement in higher education. Based on the findings of the current study, I suggest the following practices to implement restorative practices in college leadership:

- Women should advocate for themselves to ensure they have a voice and continue to be their authentic selves and leadership styles when pursuing leadership roles;

- Involve and engage in professional networks and personal support systems that are women who are in the role they desire to acquire to obtain mentors;

- Lift other women up, encourage and pay it forward to share the knowledge they have acquired during their journey to become a leader;

- Consider speaking to leadership about the structural hierarchy to discuss systemic issues;

- Pursue educational opportunities so that one can demonstrate their skills, abilities, and credentials and continue to prove worth and value to the organization; a woman's work speaks for itself;

- In actions, be intentional, strategic, intelligent, deliberate, goal-driven, focused, accomplished, successful, ambitious, and visionary;

- Advocate for a women's group at one's institution for support and involve local and national professional organizations; and

- Find diversity and professional development resources and share them with other women to determine their trajectory and path to leadership roles.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This case study's purpose was to describe the lived experiences, practices, and journeys that African American women encountered while becoming executive-level leaders in the higher education arena. Although all of them faced many barriers and shared the challenges and obstacles that included microaggressions, gender and racial bias, tokenism, pay disparity, underrepresentation, self-doubt, lack of mentorship, working twice as hard, and many other difficulties. The women leaders also shared scenarios and examples of how they have learned to become flexible, adaptable, and adept at handling the various struggles and sometimes demoralizing feelings that intrude upon their attainment of success. The vices that women leaders faced were overcoming through living authentically, ethics of care, and support from

others dealing with the same frustrations, finding a mentor or network, taking each trial as an opportunity, balancing work and life, influencing other women with positive change and safe spaces, expanding leadership abilities to become more adaptable to various situations, collaborating, and having a more open and holistic world view to see the value in others.

Other areas of study that could be examined to combat hindrances for African American women trying to become successful executive women leaders in university settings include the following:

- Examine how African American women are represented in senior leadership positions in higher education and look at one step above and below positions to look at career paths and development programs;

- Research how African American women can be included in decision-making opportunities and allowed to be a voice at the table and their process for career aspirations;

- Examine diversity programs to include African American women and the effect it may have on an institution's hierarchy and internal systems;

- Investigate the labor of female leaders that is different from other races and gender and how it can recognize and compensate for its worth. This would include identifying job skills and capabilities needed to advance to the next level that is indicated by a gap when women are not the same as their male counterparts;

- Discover mechanisms can be put into practice to ensure fair and equitable pay for all races and genders based on labor statistic reports and norms developed by the Title IX regulations;

- Identify how African American women are supported through the hierarchy with

resources to develop a systemic change in the organization; and

- Create a method or women's program for strategic mentorship opportunities and relationships to develop other women and the positive effects on the individual and the organization.

**Final Remarks**

As an African American woman working in higher education for over 30 years, I have seen and heard the attempts and efforts put into women becoming leaders and the "no, not yet, or denial" when applying and seeking executive-level C-suite positions and the adverse effects it has had on their lives. This research was very important to me as I want to clarify, define, and interpret possible systemic changes that can be addressed at institutions where I can possibly influence or involve in the changes needed to make a stronger and more supportive environment for African American women.

Through this qualitative case study, I explored and described the journeys and lived experiences of African American women who are higher education leaders and the methods they used while encountering and coping with barriers to obtain executive-level positions in the higher education field. The participants were very open with sharing difficulties they had but also shared various support systems and areas that a female leader may examine to overcome the obstacles that they deal with on a constant basis.

The study was completed by having 11 participants submit the organizational leadership effectiveness inventory survey and learning about their personal accounts through interviews. The discussions focused on management styles, how to cope with barriers, how the women were affected internally and externally, and the effect on their role as African American leaders. The data collected was the personal perceptions based on their personal beliefs, experiences in the

higher education system, mentors they had, behaviors that were reflective of their leadership style, and how it affected their pursuit of leadership roles. The leaders shared how their ethical and spiritual decisions contributed to their successes and learning experiences as women leaders and how to maneuver in academic settings with males and those who may not support their skills, credentials, and education, although they may have been top performers.

When the interviews were completed, I was during the COVID-19 pandemic in the fall of 2022 and the injustices of racial and social tension throughout the world. All interviews were virtual. The participants, like me, were in times of much reflection and impacted by the global health situation and social and economic challenges that we were all facing. At the end of the interviews, some participants commented on the personal reflection and self-examination they were having when responding to the questions and how they were conducting themselves as they were included in meetings and had a voice at the table in light of the struggles and barriers they faced and that have not changed during their careers in higher education. The challenges continue, but these African American educated, skilled, and professional women are still able to continue on their pathways to higher levels and have become successful leaders. They discovered through their journey that there are strategies that could be implemented to advance when others thought it was not possible. All participants shared a commitment to ensuring that as they continued to deal with barriers that they would try to pay it forward and try to leave situations better than before they were involved. They all want to help other African American women to be their authentic selves, connect, revitalize consciousness from within, and make a difference by supporting other women to break the glass ceiling and become effective women leaders at the next levels of their career paths. All the women had different ideals regarding leadership and described various methods of how they approached leadership. Other areas discussed were

supports to ensure leadership positions that participants would be able to realize described included a positive view of other women leaders, systemic change, a strong racial identity that is a synergistic leadership style that adapts to specific situations, and encouraging others to excel. In relation to Research Question 3 and spiritual and ethical decision-making by the participants during the interview, they revealed that leadership is viewed as a gift and exhibiting authentic and servant leadership were pertinent to their leadership ability, which emerged as they learned, grew, and transformed to become successful and skilled. Many of the women also shared that they felt special to be called to be a leader.

There was a significant impact on me and my being a leader in higher education after conducting this study and listening to and relating to the challenging experiences these educated and skilled African American women leaders faced. In their own right, the women received credentials, training, degrees, and many certifications. The participants had proven that they could do their job and, more times than not, were already doing it without any knowledge but continued to excel, although they may not have been given the prerequisites or had no clear path on how to excel. Clearly, the women were in charge of their own destinies and direction of becoming higher education leaders with multiple barriers to face. I think that many other marginalized African American women will benefit from this study individually but also in their organizations. The study has aided me in discovering more that I am not alone in the journey to pursue higher-level executive positions and that barriers will be encountered along the way, but there is a way to maneuver around them with guidance and direction from others who have the familiarity of the same pitfalls that follow an African American woman in leadership in higher education.

From the research and literature that I delved into, it is evident that the problem of barriers and race and gender still persists, but that gives me and other women of color the opportunity to address the topic of unfairness, inequity, and discrimination as the larger subject of systemic gender and racial exclusion. With the ongoing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) practices that are broad and still being developed, as African American women, it is now our time to bring the subject to the forefront and be more vocal through Title IX, DEI mechanisms, and additional forums and programs for women who continue to encounter the barriers. I think the most important impact on me is that for the last 14 years, I have worked primarily for males and was not moved out of my position because they wanted the work done. We know African American women always get the work done because that is our nature. Once the administration changes or a female is put in charge, then advancement possibilities open up for other women. Why does it take a woman to recognize an African American woman's worth? If I did the work then and am doing the work now, why is there no growth for those women?

I have seen the critical absence of not valuing an African American woman when she is making it happen for the organization in higher education and other fields. Why are African American women shunned or pushed to the side when trying to share a valid opinion, or why is that person the only African American woman at the table in many instances? Why does being a woman designate that they have to consider what they are wearing daily, or is their hair just right because they may be undermined because they do not fit the role or perception that others think? In the environment of higher education and other areas, for things to change or to be added to agendas, African Americans must do the hard and necessary work to be promoted, endorsed, advocated for, and help others to move to the ranking of leadership as deserving individuals and not as a token or to meet the status quo. The short-term impact is that women can forge together

to make a difference for other women they see coming up and trying to excel. We must continue to inspire, mentor, devote our time, and reach one and teach one. Organizationally, socially, and in the community, the issue is systemic, and African American women have to continue to identify ways that other women can support each other during these trials. The steps shared in this study are a start to helping others. The issue is a part of the larger picture of society and deserves additional research for years to come. Unfortunately, each individual must explore and search for ways to combat and isolate the gender and racial inequity that African American women continue to bare.

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**Appendix A: Interview Questions**

1. Does the representation of African American women in higher education in leadership roles represent the current college demographics, and how has it affected your decision to pursue a leadership position?

2. What scenarios can you share as an African American woman to become successful in the pursuit of leadership positions in higher education?

3. What are the challenges that African American women in higher education face that may be different from others pursuing leadership positions?

4. Does culture and Afro-centricity affect women African American leaders, and if so, how can this obstacle be overcome?

5. What steps or courses would you share with other African American women to start on a leadership path?

6. Did you have mentors to assist you in pursuing executive-level positions, and if so, what advice was given to you?

7. What skills, knowledge, and characteristics are required to excel in male-dominated leadership positions in higher education?

8. Is there a correlation between pay discrimination and African American women being paid lower wages for performing the same job as a Caucasian male or female or African American man? What can be done to manage this race parity?

9. How can a female leader in higher education demonstrate that they are knowledgeable and ready to accept a leadership role?

10. As an African American woman leader, what mechanisms have you put into place to deal with obstacles such as gender bias, isolation, and devaluation of your leadership ability?

11. What are the attributes that African American women leaders in higher education require to perform and excel in executive-level roles?

12. Were your family, siblings, or family values a major contribution and factor in seeking a leadership post, and if so, what was the major influence?

13. How does a support system affect the path to leadership positions for African American women in higher education, and is there a negative and positive aspect?

14. How does your spirituality affect your response to dealing with racial and gender inequity?

15. How does being an African American woman influence you to make ethical decisions?

16. What actions have you taken to overcome obstacles and excel when pursuing leadership positions?

17. How do you manage microaggressions in the workplace as an African American woman?

18. As an African American woman leader, what methods do you use to avoid or handle conflict and confrontation in the higher education setting?

19. What is your leadership style? As you pursue executive-level positions, is it difficult to exhibit your unique leadership style, such as authentic, servant, democratic, coaching, etc.?

20. How does the intersectionality of gender and race affect your leadership behaviors and pursuit of executive-level positions?

Please provide any additional details you think are pertinent to your leadership style and information on overcoming challenges as an African American women leader.

# Appendix B: Common Themes Chart

## Research Question (RQ) 1

What are the perceptions of African American women in leadership regarding barriers to attaining leadership positions in higher education?

| (RQ1) Themes | |
|---|---|
| Lack of respect and feelings of devalued | Oppressive hierarchy |
| Stereotype threat | Tokenism, isolation and invisibility |
| Voiceless/Self-doubt/Imposter Syndrome | Microaggressions |
| Lack of role models | |

## Research Question (RQ2)

What are the perceptions of African American women in leadership regarding supports to attaining leadership positions in higher education?

| (RQ2) Themes | |
|---|---|
| Mentorship | Cultivate positive self-image |
| Family and community support | Personal and professional development |

## Research Question (RQ3)

What are the perceptions of African American women in leadership in higher education regarding their ethical and spiritual decision making?

| (RQ3) Themes | |
|---|---|
| Integrity and honesty | Patient and assertive |
| Self-aware and mindful | Listen and communicate with curiosity |

# Appendix C: IRB Approval Letter

## ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY
*Educating Students for Christian Service and Leadership Throughout the World*

**Office of Research and Sponsored Programs**
328 Hardin Administration Building, ACU Box 29145, Abilene, Texas 79699-9145
325-674-2885

June 28, 2022

Tanya Stubbs White
Department of Graduate and Professional Studies
Abilene Christian University

Dear Tanya,

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board, I am pleased to inform you that your project titled
"Examining Leadership Experiences and Practices of African American Women in Higher Education Settings to Overcome Barriers",

(IRB# 22-071 ) is exempt from review under Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects. If at any time the details of this project change, please advise our office of the change(s) by email, so that the committee can determine whether or not the exempt status is still applicable.

I wish you well with your work!

Sincerely,

*Russell P. Kruzelock*

ACU Vice President of Research

Additional Approvals/Instructions:

The following are all responsibilities of the Primary Investigator (PI). Violation of these responsibilities may result in suspension or termination of research by the Institutional Review Board. If the Primary Investigator is a student and fails to fulfil any of these responsibilities, the Faculty Advisor then becomes responsible for completing or upholding any and all of the following:

• If there are any changes in the research (including but not limited to change in location, members of the research team, research procedures, number of participants, target population of participants, compensation, or risk), these changes must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation.
• Report any protocol deviations or unanticipated problems to the IRB promptly according to IRB policy.
• Should the research continue past the expiration date, submit a Continuing Review Form, along with a copy of the current consent form and a new Signature Assurance Form approximately 30 days before the expiration date.
• When the research is completed, inform the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs. If your study is Expedited or Full Board, submit an Inactivation Request Form and a new Signature Assurance Form. If your study is Exempt, Non-Research, or Non-Human Research, email orsp@acu.edu to indicate that the research has finished.
• According to ACU policy, research data must be stored on ACU campus (or electronically) for 3 years from inactivation of the study, in a manner that is secure but accessible should the IRB request access.
• It is the Investigator's responsibility to maintain a general environment of safety for all research participants and all members of the research team. All risks to physical, mental, and emotional well-being as well as any risks to confidentiality should be minimized.

For additional information on the policies and procedures above, please visit the IRB website
https://cdn01.acu.edu/community/offices/academic/orsp/human-research/overview.html
or email orsp@acu.edu with your questions.

*Our Promise: ACU is a vibrant, innovative, Christ-centered community that engages students in authentic spiritual and intellectual growth, equipping them to make a real difference in the world.*

# Appendix D: Study Site IRB Approval Letter

August 23, 2022

Tanya White

PROJECT TITLE:        [1923796-1] Examining Leadership Experiences and Practices of African American Women in Higher Education to Overcome Barriers

SUBMISSION TYPE:     New Project
PROJECT EFFECTIVE DATE:     August 23, 2022
PROJECT EXPIRATION DATE:     August 24, 2023

Dear Tanya White, MAML,

Re:     ██ *[1923796-1] - Approval*

The ███████████ IRB received your request for approval of New Project materials for this project, titled **Examining Leadership Experiences and Practices of African American Women in Higher Education to Overcome Barriers**.

**The ███████████ IRB conducted a review and approved your submission. The effective date is August 23, 2022.**

This approval will expire on August 24, 2023.

- Any required extensions must be processed through the IRB using IRBNet, at least 45 days prior to this expiration date.

- The Annual Reporting form, due no later than one year from the date of this approval, or within two weeks of the completion of this research (whichever occurs first) is available on the IRBNet library.

- Additionally, any proposed changes to the approved protocol must be submitted to the IRB via IRBNet for review and consideration prior to implementation of the intended change(s), unless such a change is necessary to avoid immediate harm to subjects.

If you have any questions, please submit them through IRBNet. Please include your project title and IRBNet ID number in all correspondence about IRB review of this project.

On behalf of the ███████████ IRB, we wish you the very best as you conduct this research and continued success in all your future endeavors.

Sincerely,

███████████ IRB

    Generated on IRBNet

## Appendix E: Informed Consent

My name is Tanya S., and I am an organizational leadership doctoral candidate at Abilene Christian University. As a result of my experiences, I am conducting a research study on the lived experiences of African American women in leadership positions in higher education and how they continue to overcome barriers. This letter invites your confidential participation in a 60-minute, one on one interview virtually or in person toward that aim.

**Activities:**

If you join in this research, I will ask you to:

1. Participate in an in-person, telephone, or Zoom conversation to discuss the purpose of the study and determine eligibility. This activity will take 10 minutes.

2. If accepted, this interview may take 60 minutes to one hour and a half.

**Eligibility:**

You are eligible to participate in this research if you:

1. Serve or have served in a senior leadership role at a college or university in the South Hampton Roads Region in Virginia as an executive director, dean, provost, vice president, or president.

2. Identify as female.

3. You are 18 years or older.

I hope to include 10 people in this research but not less than five women leaders.

**Risks:**

There are minimal risks in this study. There is a potential discomfort for participants who may feel stress when describing any bias or stereotyping that they have experienced. If you experience any discomfort, you may skip the question. You may stop the interview at any time.

**Benefits:**

If you decide to participate, there are no direct benefits to you. The study will contribute to

research on a potential reason for the disparity between highly educated African American

women and the struggles of African American women in leadership positions in the field of

higher education.

**Audio or Videotaping:**

I would like to record your responses. You can still contribute if you do not wish to be recorded.

Please sign here if you agree to audio or video recording.

**Confidentiality:**

The information you provide will be kept confidential as allowed by law. I will use a pseudonym

or number to identify you to keep your information confidential. I will be the only individual

with access to your information. The institutional review board may also review my research and

view your information.

I will secure your information with these steps: locking it in a filing cabinet or locking the

computer file with a password and transporting it in a locked case. I will keep your data for 7

years. I will delete electronic data and destroy paper data after that time.

**Contact Information:**

If you have questions, you may contact me at xxx@xxx.edu. Thank you for your consideration.

**Appendix F: Email Solicitation**

Dear Potential Participant:

My name is Tanya S. White, and I am an Organizational Leadership Doctoral Candidate in the Abilene Christian University School of Education. Although the program curriculum led me to ACU, I remain devoted to the fortification of African American women's advancement at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and higher education. My career includes financial aid counselor, counselor/advisor for student athletes, counselor for other special programs, acting division director, special assistant to the director, special assist to the vice president, executive administrative manager, special assistant to the president and now I serve as Chief of Staff at Norfolk State University. As a result of my experiences, I know well the crucial role female leadership plays in viability and sustainability. I also am keenly aware of the dearth of literature on African American female leadership in higher education and particularly at HBCUs. As such, my dissertation research interrogates intersectional bias against African American female leaders in higher education at HBCUs and PWIs and the barriers they encounter to break the glass ceiling. This letter invites your confidential participation in a 90-minute, one-on-one interview in-person or on zoom toward that aim. As the pandemic continues, if we are in person, we are required to use masks and be socially-distance as needed. There will also be an Organizational and Leadership Effectiveness Inventory survey that requires response.

I endeavor to recruit a sample of 10 African American females in higher education or HBCU leadership for my qualitative case study. Participants must have been employed in higher education for at least 5 years in an academic or administrative leadership role (i.e., provost, executive vice president, vice president, general counsel, associate/assistant vice president, dean, interim, or director). Each will be asked to participate in a voluntary in-person or 90-minute Zoom® interview for the questions for which will be provided in advance. Following the interview, responses will be transcribed and coded to compare, contrast personal, professional, and institutional identities. Respondents will be identified using aliases to keep the identity confidential. All executives and the institution will remain concealed during data collection, analysis, and publication. All data will be securely stored during transcription and analysis and will be destroyed in line with APA guidelines following dissertation defense and publication.

Please find enclosed a consent form. I welcome the opportunity to answer questions regarding the possibility of your inclusion in this confidential, purposive sample, and invite you to contact me ▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓ should you require additional information. If you are interested in participation in this study, please carefully review, understand, and sign the consent form. Scheduling and link details for scheduling will be provided once you sign and return the consent form.

Thank you for your consideration and to your continued success,

*Tanya S. White*

Tanya S. White
Doctoral Candidate
Abilene Christian University

**Appendix G: Research Question and Interview Question Matrix**

| INTERVIEW QUESTIONS | RESEARCH QUESTION |
|---|---|
| Question 1. Does the representation of African American women in higher education in leadership roles represent the current college demographics, and how has it affected your decision to pursue a leadership position? | **RQ3** |
| Question 2: What scenarios can you share as an African American woman to become successful in the pursuit of leadership positions in higher education? | **RQ2** |
| Question 3: What are the challenges that African American women in higher education face that may be different from others pursuing leadership positions? | **RQ1** |
| Question 4: Culture and Afro-centricity affect women African American leaders, and if so, how can this obstacle be overcome? | **RQ1** |
| Question 5: What steps or courses would you share with other African American women to start on a leadership path? | **RQ2** |
| Question 6: Did you have mentors to assist you in pursuing executive-level positions, and if so, what advice was given to you? | **RQ2** |
| Question 7: What skills, knowledge, and characteristics are required to excel in male-dominated leadership positions in higher education? | **RQ2** |
| Question 8: Is there a correlation between pay discrimination and African American women being paid lower wages for performing the same job as a Caucasian male or female or African American man? What can be done to manage this race parity? | **RQ1** |
| Question 9: How can a female leader in higher education demonstrate that they are knowledgeable and ready to accept a leadership role? | **RQ2** |
| Question 10: As an African American woman leader, what mechanisms have you put into place to deal with obstacles such as gender bias, isolation, and devaluation of your leadership ability? | **RQ1** |
| Question 11: What are the attributes that African American women leaders in higher education require to perform and excel in executive-level roles? | **RQ2** |
| Question 12: Were your family, siblings, or family values a major contribution and factor in seeking a leadership post, and if so, what was the major influence? | **RQ2** |
| Question 13: How does a support system affect the path to leadership positions for African American women in higher education, and is there a negative and positive aspect? | **RQ2** |
| Question 14: How does your spirituality affect your response to dealing with racial and gender inequity? | **RQ3** |
| Question 15: How does being an African American woman influence you to make ethical decisions? | **RQ3** |
| Question 16: What actions have you taken to overcome obstacles and excel when pursuing leadership positions? | **RQ1** |
| Question 17: How do you manage microaggressions in the workplace as an African American woman? | **RQ1** |
| Question 18: As an African American woman leader, what methods do you use to avoid or handle conflict and confrontation in the higher education setting? | **RQ3** |

| INTERVIEW QUESTIONS (*CONTINUED*) | RESEARCH QUESTION |
|---|---|
| Question 19: What is your leadership style? As you pursue executive-level positions, is it difficult to exhibit your unique leadership style, such as authentic, servant, democratic, coaching, etc.? | **RQ3** |
| Question 20: How does the intersectionality of gender and race affect your leadership behaviors and pursuit of executive-level positions? | **RQ3** |

**Appendix H: Organizational and Leadership Effectiveness Inventory**

| **Scoring Key:** |
| :---: |
| **SD** = *Strongly Disagree*; **D** = *Disagree*; **A** = *Agree*; **SA** = *Strongly Agree* |

| Management Behaviors | SD | D | A | SA |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | | | | |
| 1.  Leads by example | | | | |
| 2.  Ability to "juggle" | | | | |
| 3.  Communicator | | | | |
| 4.  Lifelong learner | | | | |
| 5.  High expectations of self and others | | | | |
| 6.  Strong academic self-concept | | | | |
| 7.  Motivational | | | | |
| 8.  Communicates vision | | | | |
| 9.  "Can do" philosophy (resourceful) | | | | |
| 10. Persistent | | | | |
| 11. Shares power | | | | |
| 12. Dependable | | | | |
| 13. Efficient | | | | |
| 14. Assertive | | | | |
| 15. Delegates | | | | |
| 16. Utilizes participatory management | | | | |
| 17. Decision maker | | | | |
| 18. Risk taker | | | | |
| 19. Task-oriented | | | | |
| 20. Change agent | | | | |
| 21. Influencer | | | | |
| 22. Analyzes situations | | | | |
| 23. High energy | | | | |
| 24. Achievement oriented | | | | |
| 25. Emotionally stable | | | | |
| 26. Self-sufficient | | | | |
| 27. Effective time manager | | | | |
| 28. Organized | | | | |
| 29. Persuasive | | | | |
| 30. Effective | | | | |
| | | | | |

| Interpersonal Behavior | SD | D | A | SA |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | | | | |
| 1.  Cooperative | | | | |
| 2.  Empathetic | | | | |
| 3.  People-oriented | | | | |
| 4.  Compassionate | | | | |

| |
|---|
| 5. Collegial |
| 6. Team player |
| 7. Strong interpersonal skills |
| 8. Consensus builder |
| 9. Empowers others |
| 10. Networker |
| 11. Transformational |
| 12. Combines social talk with administrative talk |
| 13. Uses affiliate language, such as "we" or "our" |
| 14. Participates |
| 15. Inclusive |
| 16. Nurturing |
| 17. Democratic |
| 18. Intuitive |
| 19. Flexible/adaptable |
| 20. Emotionally expressive |
| 21. Receptive to new ideas/change |
| 22. Alter to social environment |
| 23. Responsive to needs of faculty/staff |
| 24. Reflective |
| |

| **Organizational Structure SD      D      A      SA** |
|---|
| |
| 1. Utilizes system of rotating leadership |
| 2. Recognizes ability or expertise |
| 3. Arrives at goals through consensual process |
| 4. Values/faculty staff as individual human beings |
| 5. Commitment to employee growth |
| 6. Power sharing |
| 7. Promotes community and cooperation |
| 8. Promotes nurturing and caring |
| 9. Promotes subordinate empowerment |
| 10. Has clear norms and values |
| 11. Encourages professional training |
| 12. Has well-defined goals |
| |

| **Values, Attitudes, and Beliefs SD    D      A      SA** |
|---|
| |
| 1. Emphasis on professional growth for self/staff/faculty |
| 2. Openness to change |
| 3. Emphasis on collegiality |
| 4. Emphasis on character, ethics, and integrity |
| 5. Emphasis on programs for special students |
| 6. Emphasis on innovation |
| 7. Emphasis on reflective practice |

| |
|---|
| 8. Openness to diversity |
| 9. Emphasis on professional growth for self/staff/faculty |
| 10. Emphasis on innovation |
| 11. Importance on reflective practice |
| 12. Openness to change |
| 13. Openness to diversity |
| |
| **External Forces SD   D        A        SA** |
| |
| 1.   Emphasis on collegiality |
| 2.   Views staff as leaders |
| 3.   Emphasis on reflective practice |
| 4.   Participative decision-making |
| 5.   Utilizes system of rotating leadership |
| 6.   Recognizes ability or expertise |
| 7.   Arrives at goals through consensual process |
| 8.   Values faculty/staff as individual human beings |
| 9.   Commitment to employee growth |
| 10. Power-sharing |
| 11. Promotes community and cooperation |
| 12. Promotes nurturing and caring |
| 13. Promotes subordinate empowerment |
| 14. Supports director's philosophy |
| 15. Director's leadership is affected by the expectations of the community |
| 16. The socioeconomic levels in the community affects director's leadership |
| 17. Language groups in the community impact director's leadership |
| |
| **Demographics** |
| |
| Gender that applies to you: Male or Female |
| |
| Years of Experience in present position: 5–7; 8–10; 11–13; 14–16; 17–19; 20 or more |
| |
| Please provide additional comments regarding organizational structure, external forces, leadership behaviors, and attitudes, beliefs and values that you feel impact your leadership style. |

*Note*. Adapted from "The Synergistic Leadership Theory," by B. J. Irby, G. Brown, J. A. Duffy, and D. Trautman, 2002, *Journal of Educational Administration*, *40*, pp. 304–322 (https://doi.org/10.1108/09578230210433409). Copyright 2002 by Emerald Publishing.

VITA

Tanya Aurelia Stubbs White was born in Newport News, VA. She attended elementary schools in the Hampton City School District and graduated from Phoebus High School in June 1987. She pursued her higher education many years later and entered Regent University in Virginia Beach, VA, and received the degree of Bachelor of Science in Psychology. She entered Liberty University and received a Master of Arts in Management and Leadership in May 2013. Thereafter, she entered Abilene Christian University and completed her Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership with a concentration on Higher Education Leadership in 2023.

Tanya has worked over the last 30 years in higher education. She began as a financial aid assistant at a career college and was promoted at various institutions during her career. Currently, Tanya has served for the last 4 years as chief of staff for a public institution in Virginia, where she also lives.