

CAREER PATHWAY OF WOMEN IN HIGHER EDUCATION LEADERSHIP:  
A QUALITATIVE TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

Avel Shenika Fulp

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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APPROVED BY:

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## **Abstract**

This qualitative transcendental phenomenological study aimed to explore the real-life experiences of women serving in senior-level higher education leadership positions in higher education institutions. The theory guiding this study was the Self-Efficacy Theory, as presented by theorist Albert Bandura, was used as a theoretical guide, identifying if participant's self-efficacy could be or was affected by whether or not they were successful in the studied environment, along with how others within the environment contributed to that perception as imposed by their experiences. This research employed a qualitative method, with the design being a transcendental phenomenological study. Purposeful and snowball sampling identified participants as senior-level administrative leaders in higher education institutions. It relied upon the belief that discovery, understanding, and obtaining insight from participants would provide the most significant information based on their expertise in the researched area. Participants completed a demographic questionnaire, a work self-efficacy inventory, individual interviews, and a focus group. Data collected were analyzed using a thematic approach and identified recurrent themes derived from participants' experiences, and deductive and inductive approaches were implemented. The findings of this research addressed and answered the research questions of the stated purpose and theoretical framework of this study and resulted in three key themes (a) development of interpersonal practices for women in higher education leadership, (b) women in higher education leadership and the role of self-efficacy, and (c) barriers for women in higher education leadership.

*Keywords:* administrative, gender bias, higher education, leadership, perception, self-efficacy, women

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this study to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who always sees the best in me and has comforted me throughout this amazing journey with his promise in 2 Chronicles 15:7 “But as for you, be strong and do not give up, for your work will be rewarded.” I dedicate this study, journey, accomplishment, and Philippians 4:13, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” Grace, mercy, love, guidance, protection, and strength, for these things and many, many more Lord, I thank you.

To my children and granddaughter, Taron, Dasia, Kishahn, and Avielle, you are my very heartbeat and greatest joy. Thank you for your unwavering love, support, and understanding throughout this journey, I love you more than words could ever express. You are my WHY and I am humbled, grateful, and honored to be your mother/grandmother. You have given me strength, focus, drive, and purpose. Words could never express how much I love you.

To the memory of my grandmother, Corine Dennis Jasper. For her servant leadership, devotion to ministry, love of family, and the strength she embodied as the matriarch of our family. Your love for our family, both immediate and extended, was unmatched and you will never know how much I love and admire you.

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Finally, I dedicate this study to all of the women whose shoulders I stand on in academic leadership. From those who encouraged, supported, and inspired me during my journey as an

elementary educator to those who are equally encouraging, supportive, and inspirational as I now serve in higher academia. To the women in higher education leadership who saw my potential, acknowledged my skillset, and presented me with opportunities to succeed in my career pathway in higher education leadership.

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## **List of Abbreviations**

Higher Education (HE)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Liberty University (LU)

Work Self-Efficacy Inventory (WS-Ei)

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore how women serving in higher education (HE) administrative positions described their experiences while advancing in higher leadership at public research universities in Southeastern Virginia. This introductory chapter introduced the background of the problem, thus explaining the purpose of this study and the research questions. I outlined the research methodology and design used for the study and explained the relevance of its implementation. A presentation of relevant terms to the study, along with their definitions, concluded the chapter.

### **Background**

According to Horn (2018), the lack of women obtaining administrative leadership positions in HE in the United States remains prevalent. As a continued societal and workplace issue, the ever-present gap between higher education leadership positions offered to men, and HE leadership positions offered to women remains unbridged (Mclendon, 2018). Exploring the perspectives and experiences of women who have successfully obtained and sustained their leadership positions, their perceived self-efficacy, and their perception of gender bias was valuable as it denoted the ongoing continuance of gender partiality. Bakker and Jacobs (2016) identified the academic field as being penetrated by gender bias, as there is more of a male presence than women in practically all areas of academia. While conducting research, Bakker and Jacobs (2016) maintained participants description of gender bias was evident in the promotions to senior-level positions, positions of equality with different income levels, obtaining grant assistance, and performance evaluations. During her research, Maki (2015) presented findings of participants' feelings of exclusion due to the male-dominated HE environment, in



which they recalled instances of resistance, hostility, and other obstacles due to being a woman. For this study, the primary theoretical framework was the self-efficacy theory of Albert Bandura (1982). As women view the response to male leadership, which contradicts how they are received, Bandura's (1982) self-efficacy theory suggests as others are observed, their actions, their words, or modeled behaviors can enhance the observer's self-efficacy.

Moreover, according to Bandura (1982), if the observer possesses similarities to the individual performing or learning the displayed behavior, the observed will strive for and obtain success. Unfortunately, when women behave in a manner considered *masculine*, the perception of their behaviors does not receive the same results as their male colleagues. Historically, socially, and theoretically, researchers have presented results that identify bias as a continued presence in HE leadership, which women face scrutiny as they experience various biases while serving in leadership positions (Bakker & Jacobs, 2016; Castano et al., 2019; Fowler, 2019; Horn, 2018; Krause, 2017; McLendon, 2018). Dorothy Smith's (1974) feminist theory and Lent et al. (1994) social-cognitive career theory (SCCT) accompanied the principal theoretical foundation for this qualitative study, Bandura's (1982) self-efficacy theory, in providing the historical, social, and theoretical context for the examination of women's experiences leading to their perceived self-efficacy as HE senior-level leaders.

### **Historical Context**

Historically, the fight for women's rights and their place in leadership continues to be a part of the culture of male-dominated industries and organizations. Presented in the early 1970s, Dorothy Smith presented the feminist standpoint theory, which reviewed the role and place of women in society and the sociological effects of women being in a male-dominated world. Smith (1974) placed a focal point on gender differences and pursued ways in which women could be

emancipated and released from the shadows of male dominance. Smith's (1974) theory addressed how women could advance amongst the male gender, and she sought to understand the concrete experiences of women's lives, thus bringing notoriety to oppression and calling to attention acts of resistance. According to Smith (1974), "Women appear in sociology predicated on the universe occupied by men" (p. 21). Smith (1974) utilized this theory as a focal point on gender differences and sought to find ways in which women could be emancipated and released from the shadows of male dominance. More recently, Nahabedian (2020) maintained feminism encompasses more than gender differences between men and women as the oppression of women over decades. Therefore, Smith's (1974) feminist standpoint theory was foundational for feminist studies and activism, thus facilitating how women could advance amongst the male gender. For this study, understanding the experiences of women who serve in what is identified as a male-dominated organization (i.e., HE), the strides made by women over the years to have a voice and serve in leadership was shared by participants who obtained leadership positions.

### **Social Context**

Self-efficacy expectations are prevalent concerning one's belief in their ability to carry out managing situations or specific behaviors (Bandura, 1982). In addition, culture, environment, and support of others are all part of shaping individuals learning through social experiences (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994). Lent et al. (1994) developed a theory applicable to career development by implementing an aspect of Bandura's (1982) general social cognitive theory. The social-cognitive career theory is one of the most central career development theories developed to explain how people form vocational interests, set career goals, build self-efficacy and intention to persist in the educational and work environments (Lent et al., 1994). Lent et al. (1994) presented the concepts of self-efficacy, outcomes expectations, and personal goals as the core of

their research. Outlining a conceptual framework that explain the dynamic process, central focus, and mechanisms that outline learning and cognitive phenomenon that complement and join other concepts with existing career models, a combination of cognitive and social learning theories were utilized by Lent et al. (1994) while examining and documenting preexisting literature.

Studies have been twofold as literature is presented by researchers on the continued lack of presence of female leadership in HE leadership and presented data reflecting factors that contributed to women who have been successful in obtaining a leadership position in higher education (Fowler, 2019; Bakker & Jacobs, 2016; Hannum, Muhly, Shockley-Zalabak, & White, 2015; Maki, 2015). Fowler (2019) maintained women who seek leadership positions and even those who hold leadership positions in HE would benefit from having mentors. Bakker and Jacobs (2016) contended women who fail to seek academic pathways to higher-level positions attributed it to the lack of support and mentorship. Mentorship demonstrates the affect of positivity on one's career, especially for women who have endured obstacles while obtaining their position (Fowler, 2019). As women determine their career paths, having supportive advice and guidance early on can assist in furthering their education, choosing professional development, and training opportunities, and selecting a HE institution to fit their respective credentials could change the gender dynamics in higher education leadership (Bakker & Jacobs, 2016).

### **Theoretical Context**

The fight for women's rights and their place in leadership continues to be a part of the culture of male-dominated industries and organizations in the United States. Dorothy Smith studied women's position and role as male dominance continues to overshadow female presence (1974). Continued research presents the lack of diversity of women in HE leadership (Fowler,

2019; Hannum, Muhly, Shockley-Zalabak, & White, 2015; Krause, 2017; Parker, 2015; Peterson, 2016). One of the leading factors of a lack of presence of women in HE leadership is gender bias (Burkinshaw & White, 2017; Fowler, 2019; Peterson, 2016). Castano et al. (2019) presented psychological theories of gender discrimination. Women continue to trail behind in obtaining managerial positions and are identified as so due to workplace discrimination. Bakker and Jacobs (2016) identified the academic field as being penetrated by gender bias and men obtain positions over women in practically all areas of academia. When working in male-dominated industries, the ongoing challenge for women to prove their capabilities is still a barrier, which has the potential to cause low self-efficacy and incapable feelings within (Harris, 2019). As presented by researchers, the literature supports implications of varying barriers that hinder the hiring or promotion of women to higher-level positions at the same rate as their male colleagues (Peterson, 2016). Burkinshaw and White (2017) maintained gender bias is widespread in HE. Due to how prevalent discrimination continues, the navigation and negotiation of the HE culture and for women to overcome this particular obstacle is a priority (Burkinshaw & White, 2017). As experiences of gender bias, lack of support, and domination of the promotion of men in HE administrative leadership positions remain universal, the lack of women in HE administrative leadership could have a positive or negative effect on women's pursuit of a career pathway in HE as well as affect their self-efficacy.

I employed Bandura's (1982) self-efficacy theory for this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study. During the data collection process, I used Bandura's (1982) self-efficacy theory as a lens to analyze collected data as I explored the experiences and self-efficacy of women who serve in HE administrative positions. In conjunction with Bandura's self-efficacy theory, I presented how participants perceived their self-efficacy and their experiences of being a

woman in HE leadership as they reflected on their responses from the Work Self-Efficacy Inventory (WS-Ei) by Joseph Raelin. The WS-Ei was utilized as participants identified and reflected on their self-efficacy in the workplace, which was discussed during the individual interviews and focus group. Participant's candor, as they denoted how their experiences in a male-dominated industry impacted their career pathway in HE leadership, accounted for perceived gender bias and how those experiences either enhanced or diminished their self-efficacy, thus influencing them to strive for the next level of leadership and success (Bandura, 1982).

### **Problem Statement**

The problem identified was the strain on women's sense of self-efficacy as senior-level administrators in HE leadership and how self-efficacy impacts women's career pathway in leadership (Yasinian, 2019). The reason this is problematic is indicative of why there is an underwhelming number of women in HE leadership, which is reflective of the effects this has on the number of women who divert a career pathway in HE leadership (Yasinian, 2019) or even pursuing administrative leadership positions in HE (Alexander, 2021). According to Fowler (2019), HE would benefit from having women and men in leadership positions; however, women are underrepresented in leadership positions in higher education. One of the reasons for this lack of opportunity noted during her research was the bias the women in her study experienced and witnessed because of gender. Fowler (2019) also maintained barriers challenge women's perception of their capabilities as a leader, cause them to pass on applying for senior-level leadership positions and promotions, and can hinder their effectiveness if in a leadership position when faced with biases that affect their self-efficacy.

Nakku (2021) maintained that the gender imbalance in HE leadership remains a worldwide matter, with a slow and uneven progression towards any resemblance of fairness or impartiality. The inequality among women and men leaders in HE leadership is disadvantageous as female leaders miss the opportunity to contribute to the present and future development of the institution's higher learning endeavors (McLendon, 2018). McLendon (2018) argued this inequality is a waste of the talents and skills possessed by women, which could be beneficial to the institution. Likewise, Eliadis (2018) asserted that continuing literature on the importance of the role women play in HE leadership argues the vitality of gender diversity in HE leadership roles, which is attributable to the effects successful women leaders have when working with female and male students as well as with faculty and staff. Particularly, Mohrfeld (2020) contended that women HE leaders are in a position to provide mentorship and be role models for future women who aspire to become leaders in HE and business organizations. Moreover, Mohrfeld (2020) pointed out the vitality of female students having opportunities to collaborate with women who have achieved success and can be role models and mentors. Thus, fostering healthy relationships amongst female students and leadership as well as encouraging future aspirations of becoming a female leader (Mohrfeld, 2020). Those affected by the phenomenon of this study include women who serve in HE administrative leadership positions and those who desire to serve in higher education administrative leadership positions.

Alexander (2021) maintained that women who attain senior-level positions, such as a presidency leadership role, face various challenges, and encounter barriers. Alexander researched the lived experiences of women serving in president positions in HE who found ways to navigate gender barriers within HE to obtain their role as president. Alexander (2021) noted self-efficacy strategies were employed by these women as an assistive measure throughout their career

pathway to presidency. As professed by Bandura (1982, 1995), the self-efficacy theory is founded on how one is motivated, achieves accomplishments, and the emotional welfare and how individuals can impact the occurrences that affect their situation. Alexander (2021) argued confidence builders such as goals and activities for professional promotion, available opportunities, attributes, and performance that indicate career progression towards senior-level positions within the HE institution. Likewise, Hagan and Olivier (2022) examined the correlation linking self-efficacy, transformational leadership, and current gender barriers and support of women leaders in HE. While navigating numerous pathways in leadership, Hagan and Olivier contended as women overcome the barriers encountered, these victories give rise to a stronger sense of self-efficacy. In essence, navigating these barriers throughout their journey in HE leadership is considered beneficial to attaining a more vigorous sense of self-efficacy (Hagan & Olivier, 2022). Krause (2017) researched women in HE and how they remain underrepresented at the executive levels of leadership positions. Krause (2017) concluded with recommendations for further research to include male leaders as a part of the participants used during the data collection process for comparison purposes. The study was limited to women in higher education positions in Arizona, so Krause suggested future research duplicate the study in other geographic areas with a comparable sample population.

As the underrepresentation of women remains prevalent in HE leadership, I explored the experiences of women who serve in senior-level HE administrative positions and their advancement in HE leadership. Over the years, researchers have presented limitations and recommendations for future studies surrounding the topic of the lack of representation by women in administrative leadership positions in HE (Peterson, 2016; Fowler, 2019; Kobler, 2019). Peterson (2016) maintained that there is still a significant gap between a complete acceptance of

women being in leadership positions in academic leadership. According to Peterson, after extensive research, the question of the lasting effects on the self-efficacy of women who serve in higher education based on their experiences remains a gap in the literature. In other research, Fowler (2019) recommended that additional studies on the course taken by women who aspire to be in HE leadership is researched. Similarly, Kobler (2019) declared that for women aspiring to reach upper-level leadership roles in HE organizations and institutions continuous research is needed to identify solutions to this ongoing problem and career strategies implemented in the present and future. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to explore how women serving in higher education administrative positions described their experiences while advancing in higher leadership.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore how women serving in HE administrative leadership positions, at public research universities in Southeastern Virginia, described their experiences while advancing in higher leadership. At this stage in the research, the central phenomenon was defined as the experiences of women in HE leadership and the perceived effects of those experiences while advancing in leadership. The guiding theory for this study was Bandura's (1982) self-efficacy theory. As qualified women in HE leadership have experienced or continue to experience obstacles and hardships while on their career pathway, potentially causing lasting effects on their self-efficacy, this theoretical framework served as a lens to examine the relationship between the premise of the theories and the self-efficacy of women in HE leadership as they described their experiences while in their administrative leadership position. As defined by Bandura (1995), self-efficacy is "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations" (p. 2).



Based on components of Bandura's (1982) self-efficacy theory, women in higher education leadership position's self-efficacy can be affected due to perceived biases influenced by their gender while providing leadership in higher education.

### **Significance of the Study**

This transcendental phenomenological study could have practical and empirical significance for women, women in HE, HE administrators, and HE executive leadership. Concerning women with an interest in HE employment, women who may want to transition into leadership but are concerned about potential barriers and biases, HE administrators seeking an understanding of women's self-efficacy or the lack of interest by employees to advance to leadership, and for executive leadership who interview and hire administrators who may want to understand the experiences of women in HE leadership, I sought to explore the experiences of women in HE leadership and their advancement to senior-level administrative positions during their career pathway. Participants of this study included those who serve in senior-level administration, to include positions such as president, vice president, executive assistant, director, provost, vice provost, assistant to the president, or chief of staff. McLendon (2018) recommended a qualitative study examine specific occurrences and stories experienced by women in HE administration that have led to their perceptions, thus providing a voice and adding a level of profoundness to qualitative studies that research women who are serving in HE leadership. In this study, with the voluntary participation of women who serve in HE administration leadership, this research is significant as it can add to existing literature regarding the process of attaining and sustaining leadership as a woman in HE and the effects on women's self-efficacy due to their experiences while on their career pathway as they advance in HE leadership as they perceive it.

## **Empirical**

Empirically, this research adds to current literature presented by researchers and contribute understanding of the factors that led to the rise of these women leaders in HE . Studies conducted by researchers have identified ways in which leadership positions such as senior-level, regional, director, coordinator, and managers have been successfully obtained by women in HE while faced with obstacles due to various biases seen in male-dominated organizations (Fowler, 2019; Harris, 2019; Mclendon, 2018; Peterson, 2016). As women participants of studies have identified their experiences with either obtaining a senior-level leadership position in HE or reasons as to why they do not aspire to be in leadership positions in higher academia, perceived behaviors are identified in data as one of the reasons there is an underrepresentation of women in HE leadership (Fowler, 2019; Herbst, 2020; Mclendon, 2018).

## **Theoretical**

Smith (1974) maintained the appearance of women sociologically is based on men who occupy the universe, thus leading to her theory on the differences based on gender and the identification of ways that emancipation could take place for women and their removal from the shadows of male domination. The notion of self-efficacy, outcomes expectations, and personal goals are the premise of the social-cognitive career theory with the correlation of self-efficacy regarding an individual's belief in their ability to perform certain behaviors or manage situations (Lent et al., 1994). Positive, engaging, meaningful relationships between women and colleagues, both male and female, who are in leadership positions reflect Bandura's verbal persuasion factor and somatic and emotional states factor when applied to the self-efficacy of these women. As gender barriers and biases remain a mitigating factor in women's self-esteem, they continue to underestimate themselves, thus continuing to negatively affect their self-perception of how they

accurately perform their leadership duties. Utilizing Bandura's (1982, 1995) self-efficacy theory as a window to the experiences of women who serve in HE administrative positions as they navigate their career pathway in leadership. More specifically, it describes their experiences entering HE leadership, navigating their career pathway, and sustaining their self-efficacy.

### **Practical**

The results of this qualitative research builds on current literature surrounding various experiences of women in HE leadership and potentially influence other women seeking their career pathway in leadership, including ways they can navigate their career pathway as a woman in HE leadership within such a male-dominated field. The incorporation of Bandura's (1982) self-efficacy theory in this transcendental phenomenological study permitted my exploration of participant's experiences in HE leadership as well as understand the effects of those experiences on their self-efficacy as data collection included Joseph Raelins' Work Self-Efficacy Inventory (WS-Ei), individual interviews, and a focus group. Lent et al. (1994) social-cognitive career theory (SCCT) is one of the most central career development theories developed to explain how people form vocational interests, set career goals, build self-efficacy, and intend to persist in the educational and work environments. The researchers outlined a conceptual framework that explained the dynamic process, central focus, and mechanisms that outline the learning and cognitive phenomenon that can complement and join other concepts with existing career models (Lent et al., 1994). SCCT, as presented by the findings within the article, stated self-efficacy is developed through one's experiences, accomplishments, and learning from others. Social persuasion, physiological states, and responses also had a part in individual achievements. According to SCCT, outcomes expectations are the beliefs one holds about specific behaviors performed as per the consequences or outcomes. Lastly, personal goals are those that can be

short or long-term, which individuals will engage in contingent upon the value of accomplishment.

This study adds to the overall body of literature surrounding the identified topic by offering research that was focused explicitly on women who are administrators and their experiences while serving in various roles of leadership throughout their career in HE. Additionally, the study advances scientific knowledge by describing how participants' identified experiences influenced how they navigated the attainment of leadership roles, all while growing their self-efficacy during their career pathway in HE. Lastly, I sought to expand on Bandura's theory of self-efficacy by showing how social experiences within the workplace affect one's sense of self-efficacy and influence their career pathway choices.

### **Research Questions**

For this study, I used a transcendental phenomenological research design, guided by the self-efficacy theoretical framework, as defined by Bandura (1982), to explore how women serving in HE senior-level administrative positions described their experiences while advancing in higher leadership. Data collected derived from participants who have experienced the phenomena firsthand, thus addressing the following central research question and correlating guiding questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

#### **Central Research Question**

*How do women serving in higher education administrative leadership positions describe their experiences while advancing in higher leadership?* I employed the central research question to describe participants journey leaders in HE, including what they experienced during their advancement. Mclendon (2018) conducted a quantitative study to examine how women in administrator positions in HE related to their positions, identify their perceptions as related to

gender in HE leadership, and determine where improvement is needed. Harris (2019) performed a qualitative review of the experiences, challenges, and strategies of her participants in or have been in leadership positions and how they addressed gender bias. Harris's literature review covered practical strategies utilized by women in leadership positions, the need for informal networks, how participants of the study described ways in which they overcame bias, and other approaches taken by women who are in leadership positions and deal with gender bias, thus leading to a successful career pathway in leadership.

### **Sub-Question One**

*How do women in higher education administrative positions describe their leadership style and its impact on their advancement?* Research sub-question one examined how participants viewed their leadership style and the impact of their leadership style on their advancement. While researching the underrepresentation of women in HE, researchers have found perceived behaviors to be a theme in the data. According to Burkinshaw and White (2017), women's leadership style is called into question when mocked for being assertive and accused of displaying masculine characteristics. Fowler (2019) contended women would leave HE without being promoted to senior-level leadership due to the bias and stereotypes of perceived behaviors and how they interact within the environment. This question identified leadership strategies and techniques that participants used to gain the respect of those within the workplace without there being accusations of mimicking male leadership styles, during their career pathways in HE leadership.

### **Sub-Question Two**

*What experiences shape the self-efficacy of women in higher education administrative leadership roles?* Research sub-question two described participants perceptions of their self-efficacy and the

experiences that have shaped these perceptions while serving as women in HE administration. Gender bias experienced by women when trying to obtain higher-level leadership positions in HE supports the importance of having a solid psyche in a male-dominated environment. Fowler (2019) maintained for one to grow to their maximum capacity, they will need psychological inner strength. Bandura (1989) defined self-efficacy as one's beliefs in being organized and successfully executing the required action to manage prospective situations. Hannum et al. (2015) stressed the importance of women receiving support and encouragement from others in leadership within their organization and their networks, thus feeling accepted, respected, and confident in their ability to provide effective leadership. Furthermore, due to barriers, biases, and gender-influenced behaviors, the self-efficacy of women can be diminished when applying for a leadership position, performing duties and responsibilities while in a leadership position, or when seeking a promotion if they are not in an environment that fosters their growth (Hannum et al., 2015).

### **Sub-Question Three**

*How does one's perceived self-efficacy affect their pursuit of leadership opportunities as a woman in higher education administration?* As with research sub-question two, the intent of research sub-question three was to describe participants perceptions and what they have experienced firsthand regarding leadership advancement in HE administration as a woman. Data collected during Fowler's (2019) study identified that women's lack of interest in leadership positions has been attributed to the bias women have experienced and witnessed due to their gender. Krause (2017) explored stereotypical views of women's behavior and how those stereotypes affected women who sought to obtain positions in HE at the senior-level or executive positions. Collected and analyzed data found the study participants identified that experiences of

bias and stereotyping hindered them from receiving higher-level positions and sought-after promotions due to their perception of their behaviors.

### **Definitions**

As a section of this research, terms considered significant are specified as they are relevant throughout this qualitative study. These terms also provide an understanding of the development of the purpose, phenomenon, and research questions. The terms operationally utilized throughout this body of research are as follows:

1. *Administrative Leadership Positions* – In reference to this study, administrative leadership positions will be indicative of those who hold senior-level positions in HE leadership, to include president, vice president, executive assistant, director, provost, vice provost, assistant to the president, and chief of staff.
2. *Gender Bias* – In reference to this study, gender bias will be indicative of biases that occur in academia, Bakker and Jacobs (2016) defined gender bias in higher education academia as occurrences where men are favored over women. This bias can include a promotion, pay, acceptance, and essential all domains of the organization.
3. *Higher Education* – Fowler (2019) described HE as an accredited institution that awards degrees to students enrolled in undergraduate and graduate programs.
4. *Self-efficacy* – Bandura (1995) defined self-efficacy as “[b]eliefs in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations.” (p. 2), which the self-efficacy theory implies the moment of self-efficacy achievement and a boost in motivation and performance.

## **Summary**

Women's continued underrepresentation in HE senior-level leadership positions, unequal pay in the workforce, and other gender bias experienced by women is one of the many issues currently present in higher education (Krause, 2017). I explored the experiences of women who serve in HE leadership and the effects of those experiences on their advancement in leadership. This phenomenon included women who serve in HE senior-level administrative positions in Southeastern Virginia. This study examined how women who hold senior-level leadership positions in HE described their experiences while advancing in higher leadership.



## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Overview**

A systematic review of literature, examining the self-efficacy of women in HE leadership and their experiences in leadership as they perceive it, and their career pathway in leadership, identifies the underrepresentation, biases, and experiences of women in leadership. This chapter examines the current literature related to the topic of study. The first section identifies theories relevant to self-efficacy, social cognitive career, and the theory of feminist standpoint, followed by a synthesis of recent literature beginning with self-efficacy perceived by women in HE. Next, literature regarding the role of self-efficacy in the career pathway of leadership that identifies success and challenges. Lastly, literature surrounding the development of self-efficacy for women in HE, both personal and environmental. The identification of a gap in literature conferring a likely need for the current study concludes the literature review.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The incorporation of theory in research assists in the guidance surrounding the study's topic, research and research design, methodology, and analysis and interpretations of data collected. Collins and Stockton (2018) identified theory as a variety of ideas organized by a larger idea with a lofty degree of explanatory value. Moreover, Mays and Pope (2019) contended theory in qualitative research is used in understanding and explain findings. For this qualitative study, the primary theoretical framework was Albert Bandura's (1982) self-efficacy theory. Dorothy Smith's (1974) feminist theory and Lent et al. (1994) social-cognitive career theory (SCCT), as accompanying theories, provided historical, social, and theoretical context alongside

Banduras' (1982) self-efficacy theory as I examined the experiences of women who hold senior level leadership positions in HE.

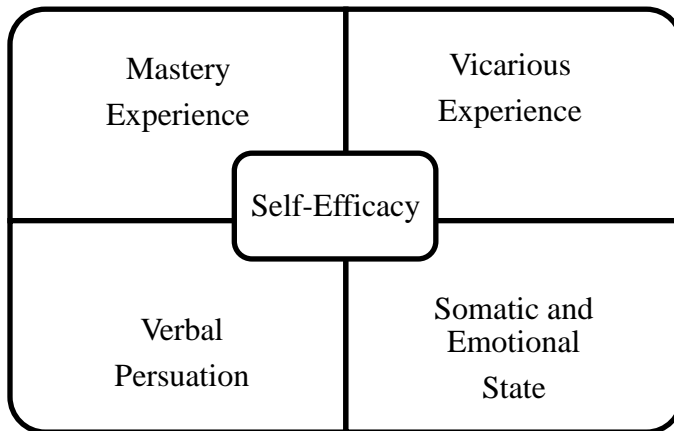
### **Self-Efficacy Theory**

The theoretical framework for this study was Bandura's (1982) self-efficacy theory, and this section, using Bandura's theory, describes how one's beliefs or social interactions can affect one's perception of his/her self-efficacy. As defined by Bandura (1995), self-efficacy is "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations" (p. 2). Self-efficacy plays a vital role in the preparation and implementation of actions and handling of complex tasks. Consequently, Morgan (2014) argued that when one has not identified with their self-efficacy or has low self-efficacy, that individual will be inclined to abort the completion of a task if they find it to be challenging. Moreover, due to the biases and challenges faced by women during their career pathway in HE leadership, Hagan and Olivier (2022) noted that they begin to question their self-efficacy. Therefore, the perception one has of their self-efficacy can affect their actions and in the long run, their performance results (Bandura, 1995). With that in mind, Hagan and Olivier (2022) asserted HE institutions have the opportunity to create a standard of acceptance, a cultural shift in diversity, and increase leadership roles for women when they understand the specific encumbrances women face in HE leadership positions and the effects on their self-efficacy. However, Fowler (2019) contended that although HE would benefit from having women and men in leadership positions, there are not many women trying to attain leadership positions in higher academia, subsequently resulting from a lack of confidence in their ability to serve in these critical positions.

Bandura (1982) described the perception of self-efficacy as being influenced by mastery experience, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and somatic and emotional state. These concepts include mastery experience, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and somatic and emotional states. Figure 1 below presents Bandura's self-efficacy theory as I imaged with mastery experiences happening when an individual attempt to complete a task and is successful. Furthermore, success is attributed to the belief that achievement occurs when something new is completed successfully if it is similar to a previously achieved task (Bandura, 1982). Vicarious experience is when individuals observe others' successes or failures similar to theirs, thus experiencing others' experiences vicariously. As others are observed, what is seen, heard, or modeled has the potential to enhance the observer's self-efficacy, particularly if the observer possesses similarities to the individual performing or learning the displayed behavior (Bandura, 1982). Verbal persuasion is the third factor that Bandura presented as affecting self-efficacy. When interacting socially, individuals can be verbally persuaded to believe their ability to achieve or master a given task, thus leading to their completion of the task (Bandura, 1982). The final factor is somatic and emotional states. When individuals think doing something is an indication of the probability of failure or success, their self-efficacy is affected due to physical and emotional state (Bandura, 1982). All these factors can affect the mastery of one's self-efficacy (Bandura, 1989).

**Figure 1.**

*Bandura's self-efficacy theory*



Note. From Concepts of *Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory* as adapted by A. Fulp, 2021.

Bandura (1982, 1995) has presented findings over the years through multiple studies where the effects are seen through others' actions, behavior, and creativity. Bandura (1982) maintained that human competency requires not only the skills individuals possess but the confidence and self-belief in one's capacity to effectively use those skills effectively. Bandura (1982) described self-efficacy as the belief one holds regarding their ability to arrange and complete a job and one's insight into the management of potential situations. Bandura identified that the perception of efficacy is influenced by mastery experience, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and somatic and emotional state (Bandura, 1982). Bandura stated that those who successfully accomplish a given task provide positive examples that mold perceptions, leading to the mimicking of the task or one like it that is considered achievable. As applicable to this study, Bandura's (1982) theory addressed the self-efficacy of female leaders and how they perceived their self-efficacy within the organization while performing their leadership duties and interactions amongst their male colleagues who also hold leadership positions. Self-efficacy

plays a vital role in the preparation and implementation of actions and handling of challenging tasks. An individual's self-efficacy can affect their actions, and in the long run their performance results. Incorporating Bandura's (1982) self-efficacy theory in research serve as a theoretical guide to identifying if participants' self-efficacy can be or is affected by whether or not they are successful in the studied environment, along with how others within the environment contribute to that perception.

### **Related Literature**

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to explore how women serving in higher education administrative leadership positions described their experiences while advancing in higher leadership. In this literature review, the experiences of participants from studies over the years described the experiences of women who have served in HE leadership positions. The literature review for this study began with Bandura's self-efficacy theory as the theoretical framework. An overview of women in HE leadership is presented, including the challenges and successes. The literature review continued with the role of self-efficacy in the leadership career pathway and concluded with women's self-efficacy in HE leadership. All research articles, journals, dissertations, and all other pertinent documents utilized for this study were assessed for relevance as they pertained to the phenomenon of this study. A considerable amount of the literature reviewed outlined the idea of the underrepresentation of women in HE, the experiences of women who serve in HE leadership, barriers and biases experienced by women in leadership roles, and self-efficacy. Foundationally, this research was primarily attributed to the experiences of women who serve in HE leadership. The literature review for this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study included online studies surrounding women who serve in HE leadership and their experiences, including barriers, biases,

challenges, and success. Online libraries provide a gateway to research databases including, Education Resource Information Center (ERIC) Digest, National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education (NCBE), ProQuest, EBSCOhost, and dissertations. I used the following search terms: administration, biases, Bandura, barriers, HE, leader, leadership, self-efficacy, and women. Along with sources previously listed, I pulled citations from the reference pages to cross-reference the literature.

### **Women in Higher Education Leadership**

Underrepresentation of female presence in HE senior-level leadership positions is one of many issues currently present in HE and identified throughout research over the years (Eliadis, 2018; Horn, 2018; Mclendon, 2018; Fowler, 2019; Kobler, 2019; Selzer & Robles 2019; Madsen & Longman, 2020; Mohrfeld, 2020; Thomas, 2020; Nakku, 2021). Horn (2018) argued there are numerous obstacles experienced by women who aspire to advance to the highest levels of leadership, such as president experience. Horn conducted a literature review on the examination of women serving in university presidency positions and the impact of leadership programs that developed their skills in preparation for their current role as presidents. Horn (2018) identified several essential components that contributed to the success of women in HE leadership due to leadership development programs, to include topics of administration, mentorship opportunities, mock interviews, and self-awareness emerged as usual components of leadership development programs. Horn concluded that the content of the literature review identified the benefits of leadership programs, especially for women with aspirations of a career pathway to HE upper-level leadership.

Thomas (2020), while researching the underrepresentation of women in HE, acknowledged how women have significantly obtained earning HE degrees; however, this

accomplishment has not completely converted to an equal representation in leadership roles. Likewise, Nahabedian (2020) argued that discriminatory factors in HE is most prevalent in the areas of senior-level administrative positions, earnings, and departmental status as applicable to gender differences amongst men and women. Despite the rise of senior-level administrative positions incorporated into the pipeline of opportunities in HE, the bleak amount of women who attain these positions remains a grave matter (Nahabedian, 2020). Nahabedian (2020) researched the pathways to college presidency taken by women in HE leadership to identify their experiences and how they overcame barriers throughout their journey. During the hermeneutic phenomenological study, Nahabedian identified barriers that hinder women from attaining senior-level positions, including the belief that women lack the required leadership skills to be effective leaders, stereotypes regarding gender and leadership, and the inability to acquire mentorship. Considering this continuous underrepresentation, Yasinian (2019) contended it is still important to gain an understanding of why there are fewer women than men who become involved in HE leadership. Taking this into account, Alexander (2021) posited the vitality of institutions understanding what women have experienced while navigating barriers so that more women leaders are attracted and retained for future employment. According to Alexander (2021), with half of the workforce being women, there is still a small number of women who hold president's positions within HE. Alexander researched women serving in president's positions and how they have successfully navigated their gendered organization as a way to share the lessons learned from personal experiences. Research suggests that women continue to encounter gender bias, lack of support, and domination of men receiving promotions in HE executive leadership positions (Burkinshaw & White, 2017; Fowler, 2019; Hannum, Muhly, Shockley-

Zalabak, & White, 2015; Krause, 2017; Mclendon, 2018; Mohrfeld, 2020; Nakku, 2021; Parker, 2015; Peterson, 2016).

Smith (1974) described the effects of women's sociological state while in a male-dominated world and reviewed their role in society while in the shadows of male superiority. Decades after Smith's research, Castano et al. (2019) presented psychological theories of gender discrimination, as women continue to trail behind in obtaining managerial positions which is attributed to workplace discrimination. Burkinshaw and White (2017) maintained that gender bias is widespread in higher education, and due to the prevalence of continued bias, the navigation and negotiation of the HE culture should be learned in order for women to overcome this particular obstacle. Burkinshaw and White (2017) argued women who succeeded in obtaining senior-level positions in HE still experienced uncertainty in the security of their career/position. They were characterized at times by male colleagues as behaving in an aggressive, loud, and domineering manner, particularly in meetings with other senior managers and leadership communities of practice made it difficult for women to progress in their careers (Burkinshaw & White, 2017). Subsequently, Fowler (2019) contended that HE would benefit from having women and men in leadership positions; however, there are not many women trying to attain leadership positions in higher academia.

Fowler (2019) found the lack of interest exhibited by women in obtaining leadership positions was attributed to the bias they have experienced and witnessed due to their gender. Similarly, Herbst (2020) conducted a quantitative, cross-sectional study to examine gender differences in self-perception accourage and found gender differences from both a male and female perspective, low self-awareness was demonstrated, thus showing the accuracy of low self-perception. Notably men, more generally, overestimated themselves as opposed to women.



However, McLendon's (2018) quantitative study on the examination of how women in administrator positions in HE related to their positions identified their perceptions as related to gender in HE leadership and determined where improvement is needed. Findings reflected a unanimous expression of a level of comfort and success for women in HE leadership. Also, most participants stated they would choose this route again. Women's self-efficacy can have a positive or negative effect on their pursuit of a career pathway in HE leadership.

### ***Challenges***

The number of women in senior level positions, such as presidencies, has progressed over decades; however, those numbers are not indicative of equality in HE leadership (Horn, 2018). As the underrepresentation of women in higher education senior-level administration remains prevalent, the American Council on Education (2017) reported that 30% of college and university presidents were women and 70% men. Furthermore, the reported three out of 10 women in college presidency positions served in public institutions, with their lack of presence most notable in private and doctorate-granting institutions (American Council on Education, 2017). Whitford (2020), in an Inside Higher Ed article, maintained that with the increasing representation of women and minorities in multiple areas of higher education employment, they continue to obtain fewer leadership positions than their white male peers. According to Whitford (2020), a third of college and university presidents are women, holding 44% of provost positions. Cheung (2021), in American Council on Education International Briefs for Higher Education Leaders, argued the ongoing lack of women's presence in senior-level leadership worldwide, as women across the regions hold fewer higher education leadership positions than men. With that said, Cheung (2021) acknowledged progress, even if minuscule, in women obtaining leadership positions as 19.5% of top institutions, 39 out of 200, worldwide are presently led by women.

More recently, Fuesting et al. (2022) reported in the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources that women hold 32% of higher education presidency positions. Women who aspire to fill HE senior-level positions are faced with numerous challenges (Horn, 2018), thus making equality in HE leadership difficult to achieve. Moreover, due to the obstacles women face when attempting attainment of leadership positions, women are less ambitious and are discouraged, hence leading to a lack of aspiration for advancement in their career pathway (Eliadis, 2018). Eliadis (2018) maintained that countless mid-career women elect to pass over advancement to HE senior-level leadership positions to avert conflicting difficulties that arise between the balance of work and life, sexism, and unpleasant politics.

Burkinshaw and White (2017) contended that the lack of diversity of women leaders in HE is perceived behaviors that are considered inappropriate for women in leadership positions. During the analysis process, Burkinshaw and White (2017) found their participants were accused by men of having characteristics described as behaving aggressively, speaking loudly, and having domineering mannerisms. Participants felt it was contradictory that there was an acceptance of men in senior-level positions to be loud, aggressive, and display overbearing behaviors, but women are condemned for it (Burkinshaw & White, 2017). By the same token, McLendon (2018) conducted a quantitative study examining how women in leadership positions in HE related to their positions, outlining feminist perspectives, historical context for women in HE as well as barriers, self-perception to include that within leadership and leadership in a couple of capacities. Conducting the study with mid-level women serving in management and administration in HE, participants completed a survey with questions that garnered responses that described their experiences and perceptions while serving as female administrators in HE (McLendon, 2018). Findings from McLendon's study indicated participant's level of comfort

while serving in HE leadership and the power they employed in their respective HE environments, along with the confidence that if they had to repeat the journey, they would. Notably, majority of participants were in agreement that assertions made by women regarding discrimination in HE leadership were valid (McLendon, 2018). Moreover, McLendon's (2018) study discovered the exhaustive perception of participants having to perform harder than their male colleagues, consequently continuing to eclipse participants' ease and success as female leaders in HE. This is not to say there are not women who mastered the pathway process to senior-level leadership in HE with few barriers.

Harris (2019) contended that even with the growing presence of workplace hiring of women, they still face challenges and disadvantages compared to their male counterparts. Harris noted that the success of women as leaders hinge on the provisions of particular skills and strategies that support their advancement. Harris (2019) identified practical strategies utilized by women in leadership positions as participants of the study described ways they overcame bias and other approaches that can be implemented while dealing with gender bias, thus leading to a successful career pathway in leadership. Additional studies have identified women who have gained an understanding of the pathways process to successfully navigating their way to higher-level positions in higher education (Peterson, 2016; Krause, 2017; McLendon, 2018; Fowler, 2019; Kobler, 2019; Mohrfeld, 2020).

### *Successes*

Accessible research findings show the lack of female presence in upper-level leadership positions; however, there is not a significant amount examining the circumstances and history of women who successfully achieve executive-level positions (Kobler, 2019). Kobler (2019) argued the need for understanding the guidance, environmental factors, and career pipeline experienced

by women leaders, thus assisting in comprehending development practices implemented for expanding women in HE leadership. Likewise, Nahabedian (2020) asserted being able to assess the distinctive barriers faced by women throughout their career is vital to, first and foremost, gain an understanding of the avenues taken during their careers while pursuing upper-level leadership positions. With that said, researchers have identified successful women in HE leadership who have navigated biases and challenges while on their career pathways (Peterson, 2016; Krause, 2017; Mclendon, 2018; Fowler, 2019; Kobler, 2019; Mohrfeld, 2020).

Krause (2017) explored how women who seek senior-leadership positions in HE is affected by the stereotypical views of female behavior. A common theme emerged when the respondents defined the differences between their feminine gender roles and the leadership-style characteristics they took on to succeed on their career path to a leadership role in HE. All participants experienced tremendous growth in their careers in leadership regardless of their gender and gave little significance to any bias, stereotyping, or prejudice toward them because of being a woman. Likewise, Mclendon (2018) conducted a quantitative study that examined the experiences of women in leadership positions in HE concerning their positions, along with their perceptions as related to gender in higher education leadership, and determined where improvement is needed. This study outlined feminist perspectives, historical context for women in HE as well as barriers, and self-perception to include that within leadership and a couple of leadership capacities (Mclendon, 2018). A unanimous expression of a level of comfort and success for women in HE leadership, most participants stated they would choose this route again and with a positive outcome, identifiable issues presented and should be addressed to further assist women in being successful as HE administrators included support and help needed to navigate the HE leadership terrain. Moreover, Fowlers' (2019) study consisted of participants

who held positions at the Dean level or higher, including Vice President and Vice Provost, for at least eight months. In addition to their current tenure in HE leadership, participants of Fowlers' study held some sort of leadership position prior to their current position. The main findings included the identification of environmental and personal mechanisms for success, which included formal leadership training, supportive networks, and leveraging internal strengths (Fowler, 2019).

Mohrfeld (2020) conducted a qualitative study using the phenomenological research design while exploring the journey to academic leadership for women who serve as Deans in HE, employing purposeful based sampling during participant selection. Mohrfeld conducted exploratory interviews as participants shared their experiences of being a Dean in various higher academic institutions. Additional data collection included participant's submissions of their CVs, demographic questionnaires, and a written, descriptive account of life-world experiences. Using the descriptive-analytic approach, participants were able to share their journey to higher academic leadership (Mohrfeld, 2020). Likewise, Kobler (2019) conducted a phenomenological study of women and their experiences as CEO leaders in four-year higher education institutions. Kobler (2019) explored the lived experiences of women to gain an understanding of the phenomenon of those participants overcoming barriers and securing their presidency position in higher academia. Kobler focused on the pathway participants took while on their career journey in hopes of enabling other women with strategies and ways of navigating barriers and obstacles while navigating the pathway of achieving senior leadership positions such as a presidency in colleges and universities. Subsequently, Peterson (2016) found that participants attributed resilience, self-authoring, and self-reflection as the foundation that supported the habits and mindset they created for success.

Madsen and Longman (2020) noted the need for further development of women in critical leadership positions in HE, in which research has also presented numerous strategies and ways to bridge the gap of a higher number of male leaders versus female leaders. Madsen and Longman argued (2020) that there are numerous benefits to women being in senior-level administrative positions in higher education, including a better display of financial operations, a more robust climate within the organization, and enhancement of the reputation and social management of the organization. Nonetheless, Madsen and Longman (2020) maintained that when acknowledging the reality of gender in higher education it is vital to contemplate the challenges and barriers approached by women during the decision-making process when deciding whether or not to attain a leadership role. Moreover, Selzer and Robles (2019) maintained that despite educational qualifications or lineage, women allotted the opportunity to serve in important leadership positions endure a significant burden of proving their qualifications due to a higher level of expectations with minimum time to make their contributions as a leader memorable. Consequently, Herbst (2020) described women as having lower expectations of success than men, which demonstrates that the self-efficacy of women is affected by the way they underestimate their capabilities.

### **Role of Self-Efficacy in Leadership Career Pathway**

As researchers have sought to understand the lack of women in HE leadership, there is the belief that women's self-efficacy may play a part in this misrepresentation. According to Bandura (1982), one's expectation, as it pertains to their potential to achieve goals based on their capabilities alone, stems from self-efficacy. Morgan (2014) maintained that when challenges arise numerous factors impact one's belief about their ability to achieve success when given a task. Consequently, those who have not established an awareness of self-efficacy are more prone

to abandon the task when challenges come about (Morgan, 2014). Hagan and Olivier (2022) contended that as women navigate their career pathway in leadership, obstacles and difficulties arise that challenge their sense of self-efficacy. Hagan and Olivier (2022) argued that when these adversities are vanquished women gain a stronger self-efficacy. Consequently, by having a greater understanding of the distinctive barriers encountered by women serving in HE leadership and how their self-efficacy can be affected, HE institutions have the opportunity to reassess the current structure of the organization in support of increasing positions for female leadership (Hagan & Olivier, 2022). Likewise, Yasinian (2019) noted that researchers continue to study the relationship between job-related choices and career development concerning women's self-efficacy. Adding to the body of literature, Yasinian's (2019) study investigated the choices made by women in pursuit of leadership opportunities and how those choices are connected with the makeup of their self-efficacy. More specifically, Yasinian examined the correlation amongst self-efficacy and leadership development of women in academia. While conducting research, Yasinians' principal focus was the identification of ways that self-efficacy influences the decision of women to pursue university administration leadership positions. Yasinian (2019) argued that there had been little attention placed on understanding the relationship between self-efficacy and the effects on the career pathway of women serving in academic leadership. Despite significant attention placed on understanding how self-efficacy affects women's decisions regarding their career pathway in academic leadership, Castano et al. (2019) presented a systematic review of organizational stereotypes and discrimination. These stereotypes and discrimination could have bearings on how women perceive their self-efficacy in the workplace, which in leadership remains a male-dominated area of study.

Bakker and Jacobs (2016) identified the academic field as being penetrated by gender bias,

favoring men over women in practically all areas of academia. They maintained that observable gender bias existed in positions within the organization, promotions to senior-level positions, positions of equality with different income levels, and obtaining assistance, such as grants and performance evaluations. Bakker and Jacobs's (2016) qualitative study found a positive impact of the tenure track system on women and their promotion. There was, however, a difference in ratios of the rates of women and men regarding promotions before and after the tenure track system (Bakker & Jacobs, 2016). Bandura's (1982) mastery experience, as it depicts the self-efficacy of those who successfully meet the objectives and goals of given tasks, is indicative of the perceived self-efficacy of women in Bakker and Jacobs (2016) study as findings identified good stints in academic positions for women, thus encouraging interests of being a woman in HE leadership. Furthermore, Krause (2017) explored how women who seek senior-leadership positions in HE is affected by the stereotypical views of female behavior. A common theme emerged when the respondent's defined differences between their feminine gender roles and the leadership-style characteristics they took on to succeed on their career path to a leadership role in HE, and all participants experienced tremendous growth in their careers as leaders regardless of gender, giving little significance to any bias, stereotyping, or prejudice toward them because of being a woman (Krause, 2017).

Fowlers' (2019) study consisted of women who held senior-level leadership for a minimum of eight months. Additionally, participants held other mid or low-level leadership positions before reaching their current status. During analysis, findings suggested that the self-efficacy of these women was fostered by success obtained from personal and environmental structures in the workplace, professional development, support systems, and anchoring strengths within. Moreover, all participants previously participated in some form leadership training and



agreed that the training helped them in their current position. Similarly, a qualitative review conducted by Harris (2019) examined the experiences, challenges, and strategies of her participants in or have been in leadership positions and how they addressed gender bias. Harris's literature review covered practical strategies utilized by women in leadership positions, the need for informal networks, how participants of the study described ways in which they overcame bias, and other approaches women who are in leadership positions and deal with gender bias can explore, thus leading to a successful career pathway in leadership. A descriptive quantitative study conducted by Herbst (2020) examined gender differences in self-perception accuracy and found that gender differences were significant regarding self-perception accuracy. Participants' perspectives identified low self-awareness, thus showing the accuracy of low self-perception. Participants of this study will be able to expound on how they view their abilities to govern over others in a male-dominated environment and feel confident while doing so if they feel confident while doing so.

Self-efficacy and belief in oneself is visible through the investment of one's education, training, professional development, and career pathway plan to be successful in leadership. Bandura (1982) maintained that self-efficacy is the self-belief one personifies concerning their ability to organize and complete a job and one's insight into the management of potential situations. Lent et al. (1994) maintained that people are inclined to expand their interest and go after careers that they feel incredibly competent and successful, which this development of self-efficacy for career choices attribute to childhood aspirations that continue throughout adulthood. Bandura (1982) argued that women in academics endure emotional stress, having the potential to influence their sense of self-efficacy negatively due to how others misjudge their capabilities when under strain and stressful circumstances. When under stress and dealing with bias, women

in HE may perceive themselves as unequipped, incapable, and unsuccessful due to the self-perception of being a failure; therefore, embodying what Bandura (1982) has coined as the final factor of his self-efficacy theory, somatic and emotional states. Due to a physical or emotional state of failure, as indicated by their actions, performance, or interactions, this state of Banduras' self-efficacy theory can determine how women decide whether or not they want to be involved in HE leadership, especially if there is perceived bias. Adversely, those who, while being in a physical or emotional state, achieve success indicate a perceived self-efficacy that views tasks as being achievable (Bandura, 1982).

Peterson (2016) examined ways women utilized their experiences and informal learning experiences during their career pathway to become transformative women leaders, finding that participants' acknowledgment of their role models, mentors, and a level of confidence and power of participants led to their transformation to leadership in higher education. Participants attributed resilience, self-authoring, and self-reflection as the foundation that supported the habits and mindset they created for success (Peterson, 2016). Likewise, Maki (2015) explored the interrelated aspects of women's experiences of leadership in HE as well as gained a better understanding of the factors that influence their decision to pursue a senior-level position in higher education. Notably mentioned, advancement opportunities were influenced by geography and location and their own professional goals, personal interests, furthering their education, and ongoing professional development (Maki, 2015). Having the potential to assist in the development of women's self-efficacy in HE leadership, numerous studies identify the influence on the development of women leaders by senior executives, assistant leaders, managers, male colleagues, employees of the workplace, and all others that embody the work environment

(Peterson, 2016; Bakker & Jacobs, 2016; Eliadis, 2018; Horn, 2018; Kobler, 2019; Roy, 2019; Selzer & Robles 2019; Madsen & Longman, 2020; Mohrfeld, 2020; Nahabedian, 2020).

### **Self-Efficacy of Women in Higher Education Leadership**

The support provided to women in HE leadership, or lack thereof, can affect their self-efficacy in such a male-dominated field (Yasinian, 2019). Increasing the self-efficacy of women in administrative leadership positions of HE organizations and understanding their experiences while on their career pathway to becoming a leader is vital (Herbst, 2020; Mclendon, 2018). As numerous studies on the lack of women present in leadership exist, some studies have found that women who are in leadership are successful due to various factors. Fowler (2019) sought to provide an overall understanding of women leaders and the environmental and personal mechanisms that supported their success in their careers. The main findings of the study included the identification of environmental and personal mechanisms for success, including formal leadership training, supportive networks, and leveraging internal strengths. Moreover, all participants previously participated in leadership training and agreed that the training helped them in their current position. Similarly, Hannum et al. (2015) maintained that women in their study provided a positive side of women in leadership positions. Results yielded evidence of support for continued attention regarding stereotypical expectations, discrimination, and other forms of inequity women continue to face, and findings led to the suggestion of new approaches for leadership development that specifically addressed the challenges and the positive aspects of leadership. Consequently, Mclendon (2018) examined women in higher education administrative roles, along with their perceptions concerning gender and the attainment of higher education leadership positions. There was a unanimous expression of comfort and success for women in HE leadership, and most of the participants stated they would choose this route again thus

supporting women's self-efficacy can have a positive or negative effect on their pursuit of a career pathway in HE leadership (Mclendon, 2018).

### **Building Self-Efficacy in Women in Higher Education Leadership**

Gender stereotypes and childhood experiences that linger throughout adulthood are external obstacles faced by women, thus influencing their self-perception, and viewing themselves as being less competent when taking on tasks and responsibilities which they view as being beyond their abilities (Betz & Hackett, 1981, as cited in Yasinian, 2019). Selzer and Robles (2019) asserted that progress could be achieved by women in the attainment of HE leadership positions if women distinguish themselves as a rising leader, establish moments for assessing and reflecting on their career, and take steps to execute strategies for promotion supported by women who are successful in senior-leadership. With that in mind, the underrepresentation of women in upper management HE leadership will remain if there is a lack of action on the enhancement of preparing, advancing, or promoting women in higher academia (Kobler, 2019).

Kobler (2019) argued that the development of women in HE leadership, including the development of leadership skills, mentoring, and building a network of supporters, would be beneficial to enlarging the number of women in HE upper management roles. Leadership programs establish a setting outside of an individual's home institution, which fosters the development of mentorship and networking associations, hence allowing women in HE leadership the opportunity to achieve their goals of becoming senior-level administrators (Horn, 2018). Horn (2018) maintained differences amongst leadership programs offered at institutions and nationally based; however, all programs contain administrative subject matters, mentorship opportunities, campus visits or apprenticeships, practice interviews, and self-awareness. For

women in higher education with aspirations to attain senior-level leadership positions, Horn (2018) asserted that programs which promote leadership development are essential to the knowledge and preparation of the responsibilities required for senior-level administrators, thus being a pathway in which HE institutions can fill senior-level positions. Likewise, Mohrfeld (2020) contended that leadership programs offered by the institution, when promoting diversity in leadership, are beneficial the establishment of leadership teams, departmental connections take place across the institution, the promotion of advantageous diversity ,maximization of employee's potential, and the overall effectiveness of the institution ensured. Additionally, Madsen and Longman (2020) maintained motivation to move into a leadership role with the intention to promote a goal or purpose, in which a person demonstrates passion or being responsive to an awareness of related obligations to others or the organization can benefit from numerous developmental associations, thus empowering women to become more involved in a more extensive territory of leadership. This endeavor to manage a more prominent role in leadership may derive from identifying that more mid-level positioned women require someone to mimic or be mentored (Madsen & Longman, 2020).

Selzer and Robles (2019) contended that women in HE are interested in understanding the steps to advancement and are willing to fulfill their aspirations, attain a better grasp of what it takes to be promoted, and execute the initiative of achieving an advancement. Consequently, those women seek the assistance of leadership development programs, and as a commonly offered solution to confront barriers women face as they aspire to advance in HE leadership, utilize mentorship to support and enhance self-efficacy (Selzer & Robles, 2019). Eliadis (2018) identified the benefits of HE leadership by incorporating mentoring programs into the organization's culture as a way of developing women's aspirations in leadership, along with

minimizing the difficulties and biases that remain in HE institutions. Likewise, Reis (2015) argued that such leadership coaching systems implemented to assist and encourage women in leadership, foster performance growth, engage employees at a more expansive level, minimize the deteriorating number of women in HE leadership, and enhance collaborative efforts needed in HE. In addition, Nahabedian (2020) argued that mentorship provides mentees with the experiences of those who have achieved the goals mentees aspire to attain. Moreover, Mclendon (2018) identified during research, that participants felt the necessity to obtain mentorship as support of them as they navigate the territory of HE leadership as well as transition into and sustain their position as women in HE leadership. On the other hand, Madsen and Longman (2020) pointed out that associates who work outside of an individual's workplace and affiliate with a developmental network can communicate confidence in the potential of women even though masculine standard voices neglect to do so.

In leadership, the success of a leader derives from creating a solid network of individuals equipped to work as a team (Eliadis, 2018). Furthermore, this integration, while on a career pathway to HE leadership, provides women leaders with the support needed in preparation for and attainment of their leadership roles (Mohrfeld, 2020). Hence, Hagan and Olivier (2022) contended that the effectiveness of persevering through a host of hurdles and engaging in support structures that inspire other females who aspire to be in leadership is indicative of women who have achieved success in HE senior-level positions. These women who have attained these positions have developed a high self-efficacy and a leadership style characteristic of a transformational leader, thus making them an asset to other women who desire a career pathway in HE leadership. Yasinian (2019) analyzed how impactful the learning experiences, along with the academic environment, are on the self-efficacy of women to determine how self-efficacy

facilitates the role between career choices, one's surroundings, experiences, and obtainment of leadership positions. Yasinian (2019) maintained that this study would potentially lead to the accomplishment of female academics' potential and their entire involvement within the institution during leadership development, consequently boosting university's success (Yasinian, 2019). She also argued that the findings of the study could promote professional, social, and psychological alterations for women by heightening their consciousness of barriers that impede their self-efficacy and transition into leadership positions.

### **Ethnic Biases Experienced by Women in Higher Education Leadership**

Ethnic bias is not the central focus of this study; however, it is noted through research the lack of diversity amongst the female gender in administrative leadership (Nakku, 2021; Elsey, 2020; Estrada, 2020; Satori, 2020; Minthorn & Shotton, 2019; Roy, 2019; Townsend, 2019). Parallel to research surrounding the topic of the continued lack of women in administrative positions in higher education over the years, research studies also support the lack of diversity in HE leadership positions held by women (Castano et al., 2019; Roy, 2019; Fowler, 2019; Minthorn & Shotton, 2019; Elsey, 2020; Estrada, 2020).

Roy (2019) examined the leadership of Asian American and Immigrant Asian Women in higher education administration. Participants were those who served in HE institutions within the United States in faculty and administrative positions. Roy sought to explore the goals, barriers, and support structure available to the study participants while navigating their career pathway in higher academia leadership. Roy (2019) acknowledged the advancement of Asian American and immigrant Asian women's presence and leadership roles in higher education academia. The areas of focus for the study included participants' experiences, identifiable challenges, and the part played by mentors, and members of the participant's support system during their journey

(Roy, 2019). Implementing the qualitative methodology, Roy utilized semi-structured interviews to address barriers faced by participants, how they dealt with discrimination, who their support system and mentors were and the effects on shaping their leadership, and the unique challenges they faced due to their ethnicity. Employing snowball sampling, participants of Roy's (2019) study included 15 Asian American and immigrant Asian women serving in administrative roles in higher academia within the United States. Upon completion of the semi-structured interviews, data analysis revealed that even with similar backgrounds, Asian American and immigrant Asian women had various experiences indicative of their upbringing, immigration status, class, and family heritage. Participants expressed the various difficulties endured on their leadership career pathway in higher academia. While serving in higher education leadership within U.S. institutions, participants not only experienced racial and gender biases, but their experiences were also affected by the climate of the campus, the discrimination they faced, and the influence of those who served as mentors and members of their support systems, thus keeping them motivated (Roy, 2019).

Else's (2020) qualitative study explored female Asian American administrators' experiences as they described their journey in leadership while serving in predominately white institutions. Using purposive and snowball sampling, participants were selected to identify their leadership style, if they understood their leadership instead of gender and racial/ethnic identification, describe their leadership on predominately white campuses, and what facets of their experiences played a part in their success as a leader. Using a semi-structured interview and focus group, Else sought to understand the phenomena of female participants' experiences in higher education leadership. Results of the data collection process identified five participants who were successful and innovative while serving in their leadership roles. Participants



described instances where their leadership was challenged by their supervisors and colleagues if perceived as not being sufficient; however, it was then noted that stereotypical viewpoints of Asian women led to participants experiencing reprimands when they did show a specific level of authority. Lastly, participants expressed their weariness with maneuvering situations that kept them from truly being who they were as leaders. According to Bandura (1995), self-efficacy plays a pivotal role in how one prepares and implements actions and handles arduous tasks. This final finding speaks to women's self-efficacy and how their self-efficacy was affected by the day-to-day circumstances of leadership as a female in HE.

Research conducted on the experiences of women of Indigenous descent also identifies a lack of presence in HE leadership. Minthorn and Shotton (2019) conducted a qualitative study using a narrative approach to identify indigenous women's approach to leadership, how they view themselves as leaders in HE, the impact of leadership roles, and the context in which they serve in leadership. These overarching questions allowed researchers the ability to examine and gain an understanding of the experiences and viewpoints of indigenous women who hold leadership roles in higher academia, along with their experiences while serving in institutions across the United States (Minthorn & Shotton, 2019). Fifteen participants took part in one-to-one in-depth interviews to narrate their experiences of being either a college or university president, university administrator, an educational organization leader, or a state Indian leader in education. Concluding analysis identified three themes from the findings, including factors of cultural, political, and social nature (Minthorn & Shotton, 2019).

Likewise, during an examination of the racial barriers that occur when women aspire to attain leadership in HE, Estrada (2020) conducted research on the experiences and perceptions of Hispanic women. The purpose of the study was to pinpoint the obstacles faced by participants

when vying for higher education leadership positions, more specifically, institutions that offer doctoral programs. Some of the questions of this study included the cultural challenges experienced when applying for leadership positions, if being of Hispanic origin affects their chances versus being of foreign descent, if participants have experienced barriers when selecting candidates for HE leadership positions, the impact of organizational culture on Hispanic female applicants, and organizational culture effects due to participants Hispanic origin versus them being of foreign descent (Estrada, 2020).

### **Promoting Diversity in Higher Education Leadership**

Higher Education institutions are led by those who bear an essential role in molding and educating future humanity; therefore, a robust and diverse structure is essential (Eliadis, 2018). The literature review by Eliadis (2018) identified the ongoing lack of diversity in HE senior-level management in today's academic system. Eliadis's literature review of the interrelationship between women and leadership in HE structures revealed that gender diversity is crucial to HE leadership due to the success of women in leadership positions and their work with both male and female staff, students, and faculty. This revelation suggests productive developments and favorable transformation will take place due to the divergent nature of concepts and occurrences versus ones that come from leadership that is gender homogenous. Eliadis (2018) argued transformation leadership is exhibited more by women than men due to women's ability to combine both feminine and masculine qualities, thus encouraging the incorporation of gender diversity in HE higher level positions, which should be of interest to all humankind. Likewise, Alexander (2021) maintained that it is important to incorporate diversity amongst those selected for leadership positions.

The thought of HE presidents being women leads to gender impartiality challenges (Kobler, 2019). Kobler (2019) argued that the expansion of women in HE leadership is needed as there is still an inadequate number of women present regardless of improvements made throughout other sections in HE. According to Eliadis (2018), by expanding the developmental ideas of women by way of increasing the identity of the organization, the improvement of HE leadership within organizations and institutions can be achieved, thus escalating women's aspirations to attain HE leadership roles and promoting diversity in regard to gender and culture (Eliadis, 2018). Moreover, Hagan and Olivier (2021) maintained that the potential growth and success of women and the institution, when limited by the lack of diversity, hinders benefits from gender diversity. Additionally, Thomas (2020) maintained that women in leadership accomplish success due to the strong support of the institution. She argued that men and women who serve as mentors and coaches are most impactful on the success of women serving in HE leadership. This support, along with the success of these women, benefits the institution as women who have advanced in their careers are more inclined to remain at the institution (Thomas, 2020).

Yasinian (2019) explored the relationship amongst self-efficacy and the attainment of leadership positions for women in HE. Arguably, understanding the underrepresentation of women versus men in HE leadership is vital to the academic community (Yasinian, 2019). One of the reasons Yasinian noted as being a significant reason for the study was that the information obtained could potentially influence post-secondary institutions to implement impartial environments so that both men and women faculty have opportunities for career progression. She also argued that the increase in women serving in leadership positions could be encouraging to students, more specifically female students desiring to serve in leadership

(Yasinian, 2019). Moreover, Mclendon (2018) maintained that the lack of female presence in leadership roles supports the claims of the continuous imbalance between men and women leaders. Due to this inequity, women miss the chance to play a part in the coming evolution of HE institutions and their underutilized gifts and skills result in the lack of growth and advancement of the institution (Mclendon, 2018).

### **Summary**

The underrepresentation, gender bias, challenges, and even the career pathway success of women leaders in HE are issues that remain prevalent. Over the years, research indicates the dominance of men in HE leadership (Hagan and Olivier, 2022; Madsen & Longman, 2020; Nahabedian, 2020; Thomas, 2020; Fowler, 2019; Kobler, 2019; Yasinian, 2019; Krause, 2017; Peterson, 2016; Parker, 2015; Hannum, Muhly, Shockley-Zalabak, & White, 2015). Undisputedly, extensive research on the progression of women in HE leadership, including promotions in leadership positions, plans of action, and promising practices, all of which have provided a narrow gateway for women to fulfill HE leadership roles, and considerable barriers continue to exist which actions predicated on the bias that consciously or unconsciously takes place remains to dominate (Madsen & Longman, 2020). However, Eliadis (2018) contended that leadership and practices used to lead others has changed more recently and attributed to women's ability to actively participate in higher-ranking leadership roles. With that said, Eliadis pointed out that there is still a lack of diversity in higher ranking positions in today's HE institutions. Acknowledging the efforts to expand and influence fairness, diversity, and expansion of women's presence in HE leadership, Eliadis (2018) argued that improvement is still needed in HE leadership by the organizations and institutions.

Reoccurring issues are that qualified women in HE leadership positions have experienced or continue to experience factors such as gender bias, behavioral stereotypes, lack of mentorship, and hardships in advancing throughout their career path, which can affect their self-efficacy (Fowler, 2019; Kobler, 2019; Yasinian, 2019; Krause, 2017; Morgan, 2014; Peterson, 2016). Morgan (2014) examined how those face obstacles, with practical means and self-efficacy as the essence of achieving strenuous tasks. Notably, self-efficacy in Morgan's study reflected disadvantaged women embark on challenges, such as pursuing a career or furthering their education, becoming independent, and nearing financial freedom. Morgan (2014) argued that self-efficacy is a multifaceted thought which derives from one's sense of individualized means, and when challenges arise, numerous components impact their belief about the attainability of the task. With that said, Bandura (1995) asserted that an individual's understanding of their means and capabilities extends to understanding their self-efficacy, which is incorporated into cognitive and affective operations. As a result, this permits the opportunity for elevated interest and more profound involvement in activities, generating a more powerful devotion to completing the task at hand (Morgan, 2014).

As another viewpoint of understanding the journey of achieving upper-level leadership as a female, Kobler (2019) declared that for women aspiring to reach upper-level leadership roles in HE organizations and institutions continuous research is needed to identify solutions to this ongoing problem and career strategies implemented in the present and future. According to Kobler, understanding the pathway to attain leadership positions from women who have successfully achieved upper-level leadership positions, including the practices and strategies utilized throughout one's career pathway, will assist more women's decision to pursue the pathway to these HE leadership positions.

This qualitative study using the phenomenological approach addressed the perennial issue of the underrepresentation of women in administrative leadership positions in higher education in the United States. The implementation of a phenomenology presented the opportunity to conduct interviews, work inventory, and a focus group with several participants who serve in leadership positions within HE and have dealt with challenges during their career pathway to their leadership role(s). Data gathered depicted participants' experiences, including their perceived self-efficacy, their experiences with how they mapped their career pathway to their leadership positions, how they navigated their way through barriers and biases throughout their journey and the effects on their self-efficacy. Moreover, participants of this study, through their shared experiences, assisted in identifying how women who aspire to be leaders or seek leadership pathways to the next administrative level can effectively and professionally address experiences that challenge the attainment and sustainment of leadership positions. The reflections and disclosures identified during data analysis helps other women be successful in their leadership endeavors and provide organizations with first-hand knowledge of best practices, strategies, and motivation that foster the growth of women leaders and potential hardships, discriminatory actions, or mistreatment of women that are still a part of today's organizations.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODS**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to explore how women in higher education administrative leadership positions described their experiences while advancing in higher leadership in the United States. Chapter three of this study restates the problem identified in this research, reiterating the research questions and describing the nature and sources used to address the identified research questions. An explanation of data sources used during the data collection process is presented, along with the selected methodology as opposed to other methodologies. Furthermore, an explanation, outlining the research design and how it was used, to gather data for this study is identified. A presentation of the setting, population, and study sample, a description and justification of the methods used to determine validity and reliability, and description of the process used to collect and analyze the data are presented in. The chapter concludes with the following: (1) a discussion of the ethical issues for this research as well as present the way I ensured the human subjects and data are protected; (2) a description of the related limitations and delimitations related to the methodology for this research; and (3) summation of the key points of this chapter.

### **Research Design**

The research design utilized for this qualitative study describing women's experiences in HE senior-level administration was a transcendental phenomenological design. With a focus on the perspectives of women leaders and their experiences in HE administration, a qualitative approach was appropriate as participants provide descriptive, in-depth, detailed, holistic, and a real-life context (Patton, 2014). Quotations, observations, and document excerpts are all components of qualitative data used to explore participants' experiences (Patton, 2014).

Lichtman (2013) stated that the basis of reliable qualitative research is questions answered both verbally and visually and the examination of human behavior in the natural setting versus an experimental environment. Crossman (2020) maintained that qualitative research is fieldwork conducted by researchers by observing the behaviors of participants and recording the responses. Employing the qualitative research method captured data on the behaviors of those within HE leadership and how women in leadership positions perceived their self-efficacy, the influence of perceived gender bias, and how they have navigated their career pathway success. As a phenomenological study, the purpose of this research was to gain the perceptions of participants regarding their real-life, personal experiences, whereby the approach allowed participants the opportunity to narrate their experiences and the feelings of that experience (Bound, 2011). A holistic account of participant's experiences while on their career path as a leader in HE administration (Moustakas, 1994) was posited during the collection of information from a demographic questionnaire, a work self-efficacy inventory, individual interviews, and a focus group describing their self-efficacy. This qualitative study explored the experiences of women in HE administrative positions while on their career pathway.

For this study, the qualitative approach solicited subjective responses as participants described their experiences as women in HE leadership leading to the perceived effects on self-efficacy. In contrast, a quantitative approach would be objective, seeking numerical evidence with exact measurements and analysis to address a hypothesis (King et al., 1994). McMillan and Wergin (2010) described quantitative research as the use of numerical calculations, traits that are descriptive and explorative, and the reliance on variables, measurement, statistics, and controlled experiments. The phenomenon addressed for this study would not yield the responses to the research questions identified using the quantitative method. Therefore, the quantitative research



methodology was unsuitable as this methodology is used by researchers to gather numerical and statistical data. Peterson (2019) maintained that qualitative research obtains knowledge from participants through verbal descriptions of their experiences in full essence and meaning. According to Yin (2016), qualitative data is descriptive, and it communicates the experience of others based on their real-world experiences. As the most appropriate methodology for this study, the qualitative research methodology focuses on conducting research studies in the natural setting, and according to Feustel (2015), the appropriateness of the qualitative method is best implemented by the researcher who seeks to examine a specific situation. Patton (2014) contended that a qualitative methodology is frequently utilized in investigations as it captures and communicates participants' stories through their voices. Likewise, Ritchie et al. (2014) maintained that qualitative research is a practice that attempts to present holistic understandings of the views and actions of participants in the context of their lives in a general capacity. Maxwell (2013) identified several approaches to conducting a qualitative study, including narrative, grounded theory, ethnographic, case study, and phenomenological. As I explored how women serving in HE education administrative leadership positions described their experiences while advancing in HE leadership, I employed the transcendental phenomenology research design. Phenomenological research examines a concept or a phenomenon in which there is an ordinary meaning for multiple participants of experiences they have lived (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). Moustakas (1994) maintained that phenomenological research describes experiences and does not provide an explanation or analysis of what has taken place. During this research design, similar experiences of participants were shared through data collection methods such as focus groups, interviews, and a work self-efficacy inventory (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The phenomenological research approach examines a concept or a phenomenon in which

there is a common meaning for multiple participants of experiences they have lived (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). The design for this study was a qualitative transcendental phenomenological approach and employed the Epoche process. The phenomenological transcendental approach allowed the examination of a phenomenon with a common meaning as experienced by multiple participants, with an examination of entities from numerous points of view, experiences, and perceptions (Moustakas, 1994). Epoche, known more commonly as bracketing in research of a social science nature, allows researchers the ability to set aside their understandings in order to conduct their research with a fresh perspective when examining the identified phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Implementing the Epoche process removed preconceived notions due to professional experiences and understanding of the explored phenomenon, thus ridding the study of prejudgments, beliefs, and knowledge (Moustakas, 1994). Moreover, according to Moustakas (1994), the Epoche process allowed my interactions with participants to be objective, open-minded, and innocent as participants shared their experiences and perceived self-efficacy while in HE administrative positions. Participants had experience in senior-level HE administrative leadership and were able to share those experiences, describe their perceived self-efficacy, and discuss the journey of their career pathway in HE leadership (Holley & Harris, 2019). Participants had the opportunity to recall and share their experiences in HE leadership and how they perceived those experiences shaped their self-efficacy throughout their journey, as perception is considered the main source of knowledge without casting doubt (Moustakas, 1994), along with how they navigated their career pathway in HE leadership as a woman. Creswell and Poth (2018) maintained that phenomenological study is descriptive of the common meaning for multiple individuals of their actual experiences of a concept or a phenomenon. Implementing this approach aligned with data collection identified during the

exploration of participants experiences and perceived self-efficacy through individual interviews, which the Work Self-Efficacy Inventory by Joseph Raelin was discussed, and a focus group discussion with participants while they described their leadership experiences during their career pathway.

## **Research Questions**

The following research questions guide this transcendental phenomenological study:

### **Central Research Question**

How do women serving in higher education administrative leadership positions describe their experiences while advancing in higher leadership?

### **Sub-Question One**

How do women in higher education administrative positions describe their leadership style and its impact on their advancement?

### **Sub-Question Two**

What experiences shape the self-efficacy of women in higher education administrative leadership roles?

### **Sub-Question Three**

How does one's perceived self-efficacy affect their pursuit of leadership opportunities as a female in higher education administration?

## **Settings and Participants**

The target sites for this qualitative phenomenological study were higher education universities located in Southeastern Virginia. As applicable, I used the pseudonym Higher Education Achievement University, ensuring confidentiality, thus protecting participating site's

identity. Using pseudonyms also protected the identity of participants, which they selected their pseudonyms. According to Holley and Harris (2019), the site chosen for research is deemed appropriate when it “fit the scope, goals, and particular research questions” (p. 4). Holley and Harris (2019) also maintained that the site in which data collection takes place is realistic, therefore considered accessible, has the data sources needed for the research study, permits collaborative interactions amongst researcher and participants, and ensures a practicable assurance of favorable quality and credible data.

### **Site**

The HE institutions used for this study offer various undergraduate and graduate programs both on-ground and online. There are several departments within these institutions administration, to include but not limited to the office of the president, academic affairs, administration and finance, human resources, office of research, student engagement and enrollment services, and university advancement. Higher Education Achievement University A, which authorized site approval for this study (see Appendix B), has approximately 89 individuals who serve throughout the administrative departments, with 57 being women. Of the 57 women, 20 women serve in leadership positions as vice president, executive assistant, director, vice provost, assistant to the president, or chief of staff. Additional participants derived from HE institutions along the East Coast as a result of snowball sampling and social media recruitment. Participants were asked to be a part of this study as I sought to explore the experiences of women who serve in senior-level HE administrative positions while advancing in HE leadership.

### **Participants**

This study included purposeful and snowball sampling. Purposeful sampling is the belief that researchers discover, understand, and obtain insight from a population of individuals that

will provide the most significant amount of information based on their expertise in the researched area (Elo et al., 2014). Moreover, purposeful sampling of participants who met the criteria of this study garnered a depth of experiences, knowledge, and insight into the experiences and perceived self-efficacy, thus providing abundant, extensive, rich information during data collection (Holley & Harris, 2019; Patton, 2002). I began by recruiting and attaining signed consent letters from women in senior-level leadership positions at higher education universities. Participants completed a screening and demographic questionnaire (see Appendix F) to ensure they provided responses and experiences that addressed the phenomenon and research questions of the study. As illustrated below, participants who met the criteria were those who serve in senior-level administrative leadership positions, such as, vice president, executive assistant, director, provost, vice provost, assistant to the president, chief of staff, or with titles and responsibilities indicative of senior-level administration. According to Creswell (2013) snowball sampling used conjointly with purposeful sampling typically occurs after research begins and takes place when participants are asked, by the researcher, for recommendations for potential participants. Along with purposeful sampling, I incorporated snowball sampling to ensure the required sample was reached and saturation achieved.

Table 1

*Participant Screening and Demographic Questionnaire*

Participant	Gender	Ethnicity	Education-Highest Conferred Degree	Years Employed in Higher Education	Years in Senior-Level Admin. Leadership	Current Position
Arlee` Davis	Female	Black American	Master	11 years	1 year	Director

Dottie B.	Female	Black American	Master	19 years	6 years	Director
Michelle Copeland	Female	White American	Bachelor	17 years	6 years	Director
Kimberly Banks	Female	Black American	Bachelor	45 years	41 years	Executive Director
Dr. Charlene Thornberry	Female	Black American	Doctorate	10+ years	5+ years	Associate Director
Kate Anders	Female	White American	Master	18.5 years	8 years	Vice President & Chief Officer
Dr. Lydia Grace	Female	Black American	Doctorate	34 years	26 years	Chief Officer & Senior Advisor to President
Destiny Manifest	Female	Black American	Master	9 years	8 years	Associate Director
Cooper Smith	Female	Black American	Bachelor	3 years	3 years	Director
Dr. Janay Taylor	Female	Black American	Doctorate	8 years	2 years	Director
Marie Swank	Female	White American	Bachelor	25 years	19 years	Assistant Director
Dr. Michelle Oh	Female	Black American	Doctorate	6 years	3 years	Director
Dawn Chapman	Female	Black American	Master	26 years	12 years	Vice President

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\*Participants Names are Pseudonyms.

Employing the phenomenological approach, I focused on what Moustakas (1994) considers wholeness as I explored the various perspectives, boundaries, and understandings of participants. Therefore, I aimed to obtain a sample size of 12 women leaders from HE institutions to ensure saturation during the data collection process and would continue to sample until I reached thematic saturation. From the 20 women who met the criteria and expressed interest in continuing as a participant, the first 13 women who responded and submitted their

signed consent forms received directives to complete the Work Self-Efficacy Inventory (WS-Ei) by Joseph Raelin, which was discussed during the individual interviews. Data collection continued with individual interviews and a focus group. The identity and responses of participants was protected by employed boundaries that are appropriate and preserve confidentiality (Creswell, 2013). Pseudonyms selected by participants were used to ensure confidentiality.

### **Researcher Positionality**

Throughout the years, I have had the pleasure of seeing firsthand the practical, professional, remarkable leadership of women who were mentors, who shared best practices and strategies, encouraged my educational pursuit, and supported my career goals. By the same token, male leaders have encouraged my goals, mentored me, and supported my journey as a female leader in HE. Even though leadership in higher education is continuously researched and gender bias is still widespread within organizations, my transition to HE never hinged on how I would or would not be treated as a female or if gender bias would stop me from achieving my goals. During the end of the 2013-2014 school year, I transitioned from a primary educator to an adjunct instructor in HE. After being within the field of education for six years as an early childhood and elementary educator and having an overall extensive background in education, I have excelled on the career pathway of HE leadership. Not long after becoming an adjunct instructor, six months to be exact, I was promoted to another campus as the director of education, as one of four female administrators. At the campus level, four females in leadership were fascinating for most. Not only were there four female directors, but of the three program coordinators, two were also females. Three years after serving as the director of education, I was promoted to the corporate office as the director of academic technology, and two years later, my

title changed to corporate director of academic curriculum. Receiving another promotion earlier this year, my title has changed to corporate director of academic records and curriculum.

Once I became a director at the corporate office, I noticed how many women held leadership positions; however, even with the number of women in leadership positions, it is still a male-dominated organization with a large number of men in leadership positions within the schools as well as on the corporate level, and more specifically the senior-level administrative leadership positions. Within a brand with numerous schools and a corporate office, there are females in leadership positions; however, there are still more men in senior-level positions than women. The journey of these women, their experiences, and ponderance of how their self-efficacy could be affected is what led me to begin reading scholarly articles and dissertations and taking an interest in the self-efficacy of women in HE leadership positions and the effects of biases they have experienced. I am interested in exploring female leaders' career pathways in leadership, including their experiences and how those experiences have influenced their leadership decisions, style, and endeavors to excel in leadership, as well as their self-efficacy as they perceive it due to those experiences. My experiences and perceptions, along with the experiences and perceptions shared by others, led to an interest in the self-efficacy of women in HE leadership and their experiences throughout their career pathways. By conducting a qualitative transcendental phenomenological study, the presentation of current literature, data collected on participants' experiences detailing the obtainment of their leadership position, sustaining leadership position while serving in HE, or following a career pathway as a female leader in HE could identify ways in which organizations can embrace, support, encourage, and respect the leadership of women. I also hope as participants share their real-life experiences as a female leader in the male-dominated world of HE leadership other women can take away best



practices, strategies, coping mechanisms, motivation, and encouragement to either become a leader, sustain their leadership position, or seek a career pathway in HE leadership.

### **Interpretive Framework**

I embraced the philosophical paradigm of constructivism. Constructivism posits that individuals construct a personal understanding and knowledge of the world based on things they have experienced, along with their reflections on those experiences (Honebein, 1996). Therefore, I implemented a constructivist paradigm to examine women's experiences in HE administrative positions while advancing in leadership.

### **Philosophical Assumptions**

Philosophical assumptions provide the direction, scope, and basis of the goals and experiences in research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The experiences leading to the perceived self-efficacy of women in HE administration was explored throughout this transcendental phenomenological study. The philosophical assumptions of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study were ontological, epistemological, and axiological in nature.

### ***Ontological Assumption***

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), ontological assumptions deal with the nature of reality. As the researcher, my ontological assumption for this study was that participants would present numerous realities of what women experience while advancing in HE leadership as they described their pathway to senior-level leadership and their perceived self-efficacy while serving in a male dominated role. Qualitative researchers acknowledge multiple realities according to the lived experience of each individual. While conducting this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study, I examined the phenomenon of women's experiences as leaders in HE and I held the ontological assumption that multiple realities would be shared by participants as

they detailed their perspectives and experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Those experiences were shared by participants as they responded to an inventory, individual interviews, and a focus group.

### ***Epistemological Assumption***

Creswell and Poth (2018) contended epistemological assumption is the obtainment of knowledge as subjectively provided by participants as the researcher builds a close bond with them. As the researcher, my epistemological assumption for this study was that participants would be reluctant to divulge precise occurrences of biases they have experienced, more specifically those they had or were currently experiencing in leadership role. An additional epistemological assumption was that participants would be uneasy disclosing how their experiences had affected their perceived self-efficacy as a woman in HE leadership. Despite the moderate integration of women into higher academia leadership, it remains a male-dominated field as gender bias is as prevalent now as it was many years ago (Reis, 2015). Selzer and Robles (2019) argued that the sustained underrepresentation of female presence in the most prominent level of leadership, along with the barriers to the promotion of women leaders and strategies frequently used to vanquish these barriers, additional guidance is required. The additional guidance gleaned from lived experiences of women who have achieved success in HE leadership offers proven strategies for women seeking to attain leadership success (Selzer & Robles, 2019). With this ongoing phenomenon, researchers remain diligent in pursuing equality for women leaders. Ways in which the doors of acceptance can be opened, based on data collected over the years include, but are not limited to mentorship, ongoing professional development, networking, support and encouragement from male leadership and colleagues, and women having goals and being driven when going after higher level positions (Eliadis, 20218; Elsey, 2020; Harris, 2019;

Maki, 2015; Peterson, 2016; Reis, 2015; Selzer & Robles, 2019). Society, the HE community, male leadership and colleagues, and women themselves are all responsible for changing the dialogue regarding women in leadership positions and fostering attitudes and interactions that accept, support, encourage and expand the presence of women in HE leadership roles.

### ***Axiological Assumption***

Creswell and Poth (2018) postulated axiological assumptions are the values introduced into the study as collected during the data collection process by the researcher. Furthermore, Creswell and Poth (2018) suggested the researcher place themselves into the study so that there is evidence of their voice and presence as they acknowledge their interpretation is noted along with those of the study's participants. As the researcher, my axiological assumption for this study were those that I brought as a woman serving in HE leadership. I am able to identify with the awareness of the continued underrepresentation of women in HE administrative leadership positions and the mischaracterization of women's leadership style as a resemblance of male leadership with the perception that there is a presence of masculine traits due to my position in HE leadership. To ensure the biases identified did not interfere with the credibility, validity, and results of this study, the Epoche process was employed. Incorporating the Epoche process mitigated the biases I brought to this transcendental phenomenological as I explored the experiences of women who serve in senior-level HE administrative positions.

For this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study, the assumptions I brought to this study included: (1) anonymity and confidentiality for all participants; (2) the data gathered was responsive to the experiences of participants of HE institutions; and (4) the analyzed data was free from error or alteration. Another assumption of this study was the theoretical framework. This transcendental phenomenological study utilized Bandura's self-efficacy theory.

An individual's personal expectation regarding their ability to achieve a goal based on their capabilities arises from self-efficacy (Bandura, 1982). According to Bandura (1982), factors within one's environment, including physical and social factors, can affect one's behavior. The setting or influential family members, friends, or colleagues can alter how an individual behaves (Bandura, 1982). Theoretically, concerning the self-efficacy theory, the assumption for this study was the perception women in HE leadership had of their self-efficacy. The final assumption for this study was the perceived presence of barriers and biases identified by participants during their career pathway in HE leadership.

### **Researcher's Role**

The idea of researchers being a research instrument, initially presented by Lincoln and Guba (1985), emphasized the distinctiveness of the researchers' part in the scientific inquiry process. Depicted as the human instrument, Yin (2016) maintained the researcher exclusively investigates the research. Being the main instrument during the data collection process, or the human instrument (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), I utilized Moustakas' (1994) Epoche process by putting to the side or bracketing any personal experiences and presumptions regarding the experiences of women serving in HE senior-level leadership, as I am currently employed at the corporate office of a career school brand as the Corporate Director of Academic Records and Curriculum. Incorporating the Epoche process allowed me the opportunity to remove personal experiences of my career pathway in HE leadership, thus allowing a description and presentation of participants lived experiences during the data analysis portion of this study.

The HE institutions represented in this study, using purposeful and snowball sampling, was inclusive of women in senior-level leadership in post-secondary institutions. It was my belief that the selected level of leadership experience would garner the participation and

responses of women with a substantial amount of information based on their caliber of experience in the researched area of study, hence addressing the central research question and sub questions of this study. Through this study, I sought to explore how women serving in senior-level leadership positions, at HE research universities, described their experiences while advancing in higher leadership. Literature review content was appropriate and relevant to this study and included, but not limited to, journals, articles, and dissertations. As a research instrument in this transcendental phenomenological study, I demonstrated trustworthiness and ethics while interacting with participants, LU IRB, dissertation committee members, and the site research department. Competency and integrity were employed while handling and securing collected data, analyzing and interpreting the data, and completing written documentation.

Merriam (2009) contended that research has the potential to be limited due to either the lack of money or time that would be required to dedicate to a phenomenological study design. The amount of time the researcher can take to conduct the individual interviews and the focus group discussion was a limitation. Lastly, this study did not offer any monetary compensation to participants for their participation in the study. I used a transcendental phenomenological study design to address the phenomenon and research questions for this study. This research was potentially limited to: (1) participants' understanding of and response to the questions presented in the self-efficacy inventory; (2) participants' candor expressed while answering interview questions and participating in the focus group; and (3) potential bias held by participants of their colleagues. While I was not able to control the identified limitations, there were delimitations of the study that I was be able to address. Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) described delimitations as parameters used purposefully by researchers during a study with the intent of minimizing space. While researching the phenomenon of this study and obtaining answers to the aligned questions,

the delimitations for this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study were the bounds of the sample population. The delimitations of this qualitative study included: (1) only inviting women in HE senior-level administrative leadership positions from Southeastern Virginia institutions to participate; and (2) the participants included only those who served in the senior-level administrative leadership positions.

### **Procedures**

This study began upon approval notification from Liberty University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) (see Appendix A). The study proceeded in a systematic approach, thus remaining in alignment with the study's methodology. Using purposeful and snowball sampling, participants identified as having experience as a senior-level administrator in higher education leadership met the criteria (Patton, 2002) and were suitable for the delimitations identified for the study. Potential voluntary participants received an invitation outlining the purpose and processes of the study, along with the request for their participation (see Appendices C & D). Participants received an introductory email with an overview of the research study, including links to the voluntary participant screening and demographic questionnaire and the consent form (see Appendices E & F) to complete and sign. The invitation email informed them of the study's anticipated benefits, risks, their rights as voluntary participants, their right to withdraw, how confidentiality is maintained, instrumentation used to collect data during their participation, and how my analysis would be shared with them (Creswell, 2013). Once participants completed the questionnaire, identified as having met the criteria, and expressed interest in continuing their voluntary participation, their signed consent forms were requested. As the consent forms were received, the next step was the request for participants to complete an inventory that addresses their self-efficacy in the workplace, which was discussed during the individual interviews. The

data collection process continued with individual interviews (see Appendices G and H) and a focus group (see Appendix I). An email forwarded to participants, with their individual interviews and focus group responses for member checking, ensured accuracy of the data analysis (see Appendix J).

### **Permissions**

I employed a qualitative transcendental phenomenological design during data collection, using a screening and demographic questionnaire, a work self-efficacy inventory, individual interviews, and a focus group. The research process began with the submission of required documents, IRB application, and site approval request to conduct research with the chosen HE institution for this study. Upon approval I submitted the written site approval and IRB application, and once approved (see Appendices A & B) I introduced this qualitative study to potential participants identified as having a senior-level leadership position via email and social media. To protect the confidentiality of the participants, I collected the consent forms collected and securely placed them in an unmarked envelope. Permission was also requested for use of the WS-Ei by Joseph Raelin so participants could gauge their self-efficacy while serving in the workplace and was discussed during the individual interviews.

### **Recruitment Plan**

Upon receipt of both IRB and research site approvals, I emailed an introductory letter (see Appendix C), including the screening and demographic questionnaire and consent links (see Appendix E & F) to the sample population via their provided email. Additionally, a summation of the study was placed on my social media page. As potential participants expressed interest, they were forwarded the introduction email including the two links. While collecting data from participants who met the selection criteria and expressed interest in continuing with the study, I

aimed to obtain a sample size of approximately 12 women who held senior-level administrative positions within HE institutions and held positions such as president, vice president, executive assistant, director, provost, vice provost, assistant to the president, chief of staff, or other senior-level administrative titles. There was no discrimination, and I reminded participants that their participation was voluntary and, if necessary, they had the right to withdraw from the study. I implemented pseudonyms during the written analysis of information obtained from the screening and demographic questionnaire, work self-efficacy inventory, individual interviews, and focus group, in which participants selected their pseudonyms. I followed all ethical guidelines and used pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of the organization and the participants (Creswell, 2013).

### **Data Collection Plan**

The data collection process for this research study began with obtaining approval from the research department of the approved institution, using the pseudonym Higher Education Achievement University A. Upon approval by LU's IRB to begin field research, I distributed the invitation email, including the links to the screening and demographic questionnaire and consent forms (See Appendices E & F) to all women employees who held senior-level higher education administrative leadership positions for their voluntary participation in the study. Snowball sampling was employed conjointly with purposeful sampling and social media posting of this study was also used during recruitment. In the occurrence of participant withdrawal from the study, the withdrawn participant would no longer be contacted. If the number of participants fell below 12 women, I would refer back to the pool of participants who serve in senior-level administrative leadership positions and continue to contact the next person on the list until a replacement agreed to participate. The data collection began with the screening and demographic



questionnaire, identifying those most appropriate for participating in the research conducted, and once identified, participants were directed to complete the work self-efficacy inventory, followed by the individual interview and focus group (see Appendices G, H, I). After the individual interviews and focus group, participants received an email with the analyzed responses for member checking (see Appendix J).

### **Demographic Questionnaire**

Upon receiving participant's interest in this study, data collection continued with their completion of the screening and demographic questionnaire (See Appendix F), thus securing the right participants for the study (Holley & Harris, 2019). The link for the demographic questionnaire was provided to women employed at HE institutions, thus ensuring participant's responses during the various data collection methods would address the phenomenon and provide rich data collection (Holley & Harris, 2019; Patton, 2002). Upon receipt of the questionnaires, I guaranteed those who volunteered their participation met the criteria. For those who expressed an interest in proceeding with their participation and submitted their signed consent form, the first 13 out of 20 qualifying participants were provided access to the Work Self-Efficacy Inventory by Joseph Raelin.

### **Joseph Raelin's Work Self-Efficacy Inventory**

With granted permission, Joseph Raelin's Work Self-Efficacy Inventory (WS-Ei) was accessible to participants using Mind Garden, an international publisher of psychological assessments (Mind Garden, 2023), allowing them the opportunity to identify and reflect on their self-efficacy while serving in the workplace. Using this inventory provided participants with a frame of reference regarding their self-worth and success within the workplace, taking into account behaviors and practices on the job concerning one's belief in the direct correlation of

social requirements necessary for success (Raelin, 2010). Participants responded to statements that described a scope of job behaviors and practices that identified their confidence in their ability to perform a collection of activities within the workplace.

Dr. Joseph Raelin is a renowned scholar of learning and leadership that is work-based and focuses on human resource advancement and executive education by ways of action learning (Mind Garden, 2023). Dr. Raelin maintained that self-efficacy can substantially explain behaviors related to how oneself regulates, strive towards achievements, persevere and achieves success academically, manages, decides amongst career prospects, and proficiency in chosen career. Dr. Raelin stated self-efficacy is the awareness of one's capability to complete a distinct behavior pattern (Mind Garden, 2023). Moreover, as applicable to the workplace, Dr. Raelin (2010) contended achievements made in the workplace, successively, enhances self-efficacy by way of a feedback circle which ties succeeding performance to increased viewpoint of one's self-efficacy. To measure such beliefs within the workplace, Dr. Raelin created the Work Self-Efficacy Inventory (WS-Ei). The inventory measures workplace behaviors as related to one's belief in their control of the social demands required for workplace success.

While exploring women in higher education administrative leadership positions as they described their experiences while advancing in higher leadership, I chose to utilize Dr. Raelin's WS-Ei Inventory so participants could reflect and respond to how they perceived their self-efficacy in the workplace. More specifically, the WS-Ei was used to assess the level of self-efficacy for participants as individuals while reflecting on learning, problem solving, pressure, expectations of their position, working as a team, sensitivity, workplace politics, and overall self-efficacy in the workplace. Participants responded, via Mind Garden, to 30 statements while reflecting on their confidence in their performance capabilities in various workplace tasks.

Participants completed the WS-Ei and shared their feelings about their self-efficacy in the workplace during the individual interview process. Participants had the opportunity to proceed with their voluntary participation in the individual interview and focus group discussion.

### ***Questionnaire and Inventory Data Analysis Plan***

The screening and demographic questionnaire responses were monitored for completion. Upon completion, participants were contacted, via email, the request for their completed consent form request and once submitted, they received access to the inventory. Once participant's submissions were collected, responses were reviewed and disaggregated by the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018) of both the screening and demographic questionnaire and the WS-Ei individually, in sequence. Participants had one week's timeframe to complete the self-efficacy inventory. Ensuring the privacy of participants responses, during this part of data collection, participants submitted their screening and demographic questionnaire via google forms and their responses to the WS-Ei via Mind Garden. Upon collection and conclusion of the WS-Ei by Joseph Raelin, participants were contacted to participate in the individual interviews and focus group discussion. Once determined, scheduling of individual interviews for participants began as well as the focus group date and time scheduled.

### **Individual Interviews**

Patton (2002) maintained the purpose of conducting interviews is to permit entrance into the participant's perspective. According to Moustakas (1994) phenomenological research entails gathered data that derives primarily from firsthand accounts of participants' life experiences. For this study, the data collection process continued with individual interviews (see Appendices G & H). The incorporation of individual interviews as a data collection method generated questions to guide the process (Moustakas, 1994), which participants described their experiences and

perception of their self-efficacy as a leader in HE. Utilizing an open-ended semi-structured interview protocol allowed the exploration of participants' real-life experience in HE and their perception of their self-efficacy as they pursued a career pathway as a woman in HE leadership. The interview process was conducted within one week of the participants expressed interest in continuing with their voluntary participation. I incorporated individual interviews as a data collection method, thus generating questions that guided the process (Moustakas, 1994) and allowed participants the chance to describe their experiences and perception of their self-efficacy as a leader in HE.

## Table 2

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### Individual Interview Questions

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#### *Opening Questions*

1. What is your current position within the organization?
2. How long have you been with the organization?
3. What were the determining factors that led to you accepting this position?

#### *Questions Related to Women in Administrative Leadership Experiences*

4. As you reflect on your journey into leadership, please describe the goals you set for yourself when you began your leadership career pathway.
5. Please summarize your leadership career pathway, the positions you have held.
6. Elaborate on which of those positions met your expectations and if any, those that were not as rewarding?
7. What was your experience like when you were applying and interviewing for your current position?

*Questions Related to Women in Leadership Self-Efficacy*

8. How do you perceive your self-efficacy as a woman who holds an administrative leadership position within your organization?
9. What, in your opinion, are the experiences that have shaped your perceived level of self-efficacy in your current position?
10. Share with me what you learned about your self-efficacy in the workplace, based off of the Work Self-Efficacy Inventory. How do you feel about your self-efficacy in the workplace after completing and reviewing your responses to Joseph Raelin's Work Self-Efficacy Inventory?
11. Tell me your experience with implemented leadership styles, and if you have been questioned or challenged due to your gender status and if so, can you elaborate on how you responded?
12. Share any moments where you experienced self-doubt in your ability as a leader what caused it?

*Questions Related to Barriers and Biases Faced by Women in Leadership*

13. Please elaborate on any barriers or biases you may have encountered while serving as a leader or anytime during your career path as a woman in higher education leadership?
14. What helped you overcome perceived barriers or biases you may have faced during your career pathway in higher education leadership?

*Questions Related to the Perceptions of Women in Leadership and Diversity*

15. What, in your opinion, hinders the advancement of women in higher education administrative leadership?
  16. What, in your opinion, fosters the advancement of women in higher education administrative leadership?
  17. What would you say is the reason there is still an underrepresentation of women in administrative leadership positions in higher education?
  18. What would you say is the solution to resolve the underrepresentation of women in administrative leadership positions in higher education?
  19. Discuss the progression of women in higher education leadership administration.
  20. What advice would you give females who aspire to apply for leadership positions?
  21. As we conclude this interview, I would like to thank you for your time, candor, and participation. I would like to conclude by asking, is there anything else you wish to share on this topic or feel I should ask in future interviews?
- 

### ***Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan***

During the data analysis process, I incorporated a thematic analysis approach of all instruments used during this qualitative study, including the individual interviews (Saldana, 2021). Moustakas (1994) advised using open-ended questions and comments during the interview process when employing the transcendental phenomenology approach to obtain a comprehensive overview of participants experiences as their accounts of life experiences are described with focus, specificity, and in totality. Through thematic analysis, I generated codes and themes from the responses gathered during the interview by carefully reading participants' responses (see Appendix M). The coding process entailed the segregation, grouping, regrouping,

and relinking of data to consolidate what it suggested into themes (Saldana, 2021). I assessed, interpreted, and summarized the findings. While analyzing all documented responses provided by participants, I looked for recurrent themes derived from women's experiences in senior-level administrative positions while they advanced in HE leadership.

Data analysis of the interview responses of participants was conducted using NVivo coding. While conducting the NVivo coding process, I used the NVivo software to sort codes and subgroups across the interview data collection process. Using the coding process of codes, categories, and themes, coding through NVivo permitted emphasis on the confirmed words and experiences of participants (Saldana, 2021). During the coding process, open coding extracted participants' exact wording (Saldana, 2021) with verbatim coding, thus ensuring trustworthiness. Upon conclusion of the interviews and data analysis process, I conducted member checking via email.

### **Focus Groups**

Using purposeful and snowball sampling, a focus group (see Appendix I) was conducted using a separate set of questions, and obtained information in a group setting where participants continued their accounts of being women in HE leadership. Patton (2002) contended that focus groups are a good source of data, allowing participants the opportunity to reflect and disclose subjectively their experiences and perceptions of being a female leader in HE administrative positions leading to their perceived self-efficacy amongst their peers. Focus group participation was conducted via Zoom to minimize responses based on familiarity due to the nature of the relationships between participants (Patton, 2002). Focus group questions were open-ended, allowing participants the opportunity to further expound on their experiences (see Appendix I). Questions utilized prompted responses that participants missed the opportunity to share, and

allowed further clarification of their experiences (Patton, 2002). As another method of expelling perspectives and ensuring counterbalances of participant's accounts of their experiences, Patton (2002) suggested implementing a focus group during data collection. This study employed a focus group as a data collection method to obtain the experiences of participants who served in senior-level administrative leadership in HE upon completion of the individual interviews. Participation in the focus group included two groups of five as three participants were unable to take part on either of the scheduled dates. The implementation of two focus minimized identifiable close relationships amongst participants (Patton, 2002). Participants participated via Zoom and were recorded. Upon conclusion of the focus group and data analysis process, member check was conducted via email.

Table 3

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#### Focus Group Questions

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1. What does it mean to be a woman in higher education leadership?
  2. What has been your most challenging experience(s) during your career pathway as a woman in higher education leadership?
  3. How do you describe the current status of your self-efficacy as you reflect on your leadership pathway journey?
  4. What has affected your self-efficacy as a woman in a leadership position within the administrative department of a higher education institution? Positive? Negative?
  5. Please describe what you believe to be the best approach to beginning and sustaining a career pathway in higher education leadership.
-



### ***Focus Group Data Analysis Plan***

Similar to the interview data analysis plan, I incorporated a thematic analysis approach. Using the transcendental phenomenology approach as I gathered data directly from participants, using questions and comments that were open-ended, permitted the opportunity for them to focus on their experiences and allowed moments of specific awareness and significance, followed by descriptions of their real-life experiences in totality (Moustakas, 1994). Implementing thematic analysis allowed me to code the responses provided during the focus group discussion as patterns emerged (Saldana, 2021), followed by the identification of themes that derived from the shared experiences of the participants (see Appendix M). During the analysis process, I assessed, interpreted, and summarized the findings, thus leading to the connection of recurrent themes of participants' experiences as HE leaders and their advancement during their career pathway.

Resembling the data analysis of the interview responses, focus group responses were also analyzed using in vivo coding. NVivo software as I sorted codes and subgroups. I identified codes, categories, and themes, which gave emphasis on participants' responses and the stories shared of their experiences (Saldana, 2021). I incorporated verbatim method of coding, using the exact wording of participants (Saldana, 2021). During the focus group analysis, I continued with Moustakas' (1994) Epoche process and proceeded with the reduction of data by utilizing horizontalization, generating themes from the assembled horizons, and identifying textural descriptions for the assembled horizons and themes. Out of the textural descriptions, I continued the process of analyzing the descriptions for differing feasible meanings and structural qualities. Structural themes were derived from the structural qualities and the process was concluded with a synthesis of combined textural and structural descriptions to shape the interpretation and essence of women in higher education leadership experiences.

## **Member Check**

After the transcription of individual interviews and focus group responses, member checking allowed participants the opportunity to review their responses and confirm or correct the representations of their documented accounts of their experience (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). I anticipated the member checking process would take twenty-four to forty-eight hours upon receipt of the member check email, as participants addressed any additional information they were inclined to add or make corrections to accurately reflect their shared experiences. According to Marshall and Rossman (2016), member checking allows participants the opportunity to correct the representations of their words presented by the researcher. Member checking included a summation of the data gathered during the interview and focus group process. Participants were allowed the opportunity to provide feedback and notate or clarify the context of any of their responses to be included in the final analysis. Member checking was conducted via email and provided participants with representation of the data analysis of their shared experiences for review (see Appendix J). Once reviewed, participants had the opportunity to use tracking changes on the Microsoft Word document to add any corrections or comments to elaborate further or clarify their experiences. After the member check process, all data was finalized and securely stored.

## **Data Synthesis**

Throughout the data analysis process, I identified responses to the research questions of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study of women's experiences in HE leadership. I used the data source triangulation process (Denzin, 1978; Patton, 2002) to obtain data from 13 women who serve in HE senior-level leadership positions. The data collected, including responses and reflection of the WS-Ei, individual interviews, and focus group, were

analyzed following the standard phenomenological procedure. The convergence of these different sources of data reflected participants' real-life experiences, thus providing a diverse perspective of understanding the phenomenon through identification of themes or categorization that derived from this study (Creswell & Miller, 2000). In addition, the collected data was triangulated to enhance the validity and reliability of this study (Patton, 2002). Expressly, I incorporated a thematic analysis to identify the significant statements and themes amongst participants' responses as they shared their experiences as women in HE leadership. Thematic analysis, using deductive and inductive coding, promoted the connection of identifying accurate literal content of participants' experiences as expressed through their responses and the underlying meaning of those responses, also known as manifest and latent contents (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). The analysis of the data collected was filtered and categorized using NVivo software. NVivo was utilized to sort and order participants' responses and codes that were descriptive, classified, interpreted, and segmented were generated. In addition to the thematic analysis approach, deductive and inductive approaches were utilized during the analysis process.

Using deductive coding identified themes of self-efficacy, women in leadership, and gender bias within higher education leadership. A codebook was developed before data collection, based on applicable theory and existing literature on the field being researched. This type of coding was vital as it allowed concept-driven coding, which the data presented themes that were found in the existing literature. Inductive analysis is the process by which data is synthesized and made meaningful by the researcher, beginning with precise data and concluding with patterns and categories (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Inductive coding was used to group into themes data that emerged during the data collection process (Patton, 2014). As noted by Rudestam and Newton (2007), conducting qualitative research using an inductive approach

provides the ability to identify the emergent theory once all data is collected. The use of the inductive process helped with the organization of the data into groups and the identification of the patterns and connections among those groups (Olinger, 2013). NVivo assisted in organizing and analyzing the data through classification, sorting, and arranging the obtained information. As argued by Rudestam and Newton (2007) when conducting qualitative research, using an inductive approach allows the researcher to identify the emergent theory once all data is collected (Rudestam & Newton, 2007). The inductive process was used to organize the data into groups and identify the patterns and connections amongst those groups. The incorporation of deductive and inductive analysis captured responses and observations of participants more accurately.

The role of the researcher is determining who and what to study, what questions to asks, who conducts the analysis, the gatherer and filter of information, and who is experienced and understanding of the problem, issues, and procedures of the research (Lichtman, 2013). The phenomenological process outlined by Moustakas (1994) was used during the data analysis process. I began with Moustakas' identified Epoche process to ensure objectivity while collecting data from participants, thus avoiding introducing any personal biases into the data analysis process (Moustakas, 1994), followed by an analysis of the WS-Ei, individual interviews, and focus group. Once the interviews and focus group were conducted the interview responses, to include the WS-Ei reflection, and focus group discussion were analyzed and the responses were reduced using horizontalization and condensed into significant statements and combined into themes (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Next, I transitioned to the phenomenological reduction of data through the employment of horizontalization, clustering horizons into themes, and clustering horizons and themes into textural and structural descriptions

(Moustakas, 1994). The development of a textural description derived from participants description of their experiences as a woman in HE senior-level leadership and the structural description depicted a description of the conditions, situations, and context of their experiences throughout their career pathway in HE senior-level leadership (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I continued the process by analyzing descriptions, known as imaginative variations (Moustakas, 1994), to identify various meanings and structural qualities, which developed into structural qualities joined to generate a composite description. Concluding the process, I a synthesis of textural and structural composite descriptions to construct the explanation and nature of the experiences and self-efficacy of women in HE administrative leadership is presented.

While analyzing the data, I sought to identify recurrent themes that derived from women's experiences and advancement in HE administrative positions. I reviewed the data for recurrent themes regarding perceived barriers and biases throughout their career pathways as female leaders. More specifically, I looked for themes about participants' perception of their self-efficacy regarding mastery experience, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and somatic and emotional state. This study employed a thematic analysis, using deductive and inductive coding, along with examining the collected data to identify common themes. A thematic analysis approach was used by combining information gathered from the individual interviews, participants response to the WS-Ei by Joseph Raelin during the individual interviews, and a focus group discussion (Saldana, 2021). As noted by Vaismoradi et al. (2013), thematic analysis is a descriptive approach that helps in the obtainment of responses regarding people's concerns about a topic and their reasons for being or not being a part of a service or an event. By using thematic analysis, codes and themes generated during the data collection methods were identified. This analysis process was essential as identified themes collected during the analysis

process through the triangulated data collected to address the purpose and questions of the research. In addition to the thematic analysis approach, deductive and inductive approaches were utilized while analyzing data.

### **Trustworthiness**

According to Adler (2022), trustworthy research relies on the finding's credibility, accuracy, and dependability. The validity of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study derived from the unobtrusive collection and analysis of data obtained through the collection of a screening and demographic questionnaire, work self-efficacy inventory, individual interviews, and a focus group discussion. Marshall and Rossman (2016) maintained that guaranteeing validity is accurately capturing the voices and experiences shared by participants. Thus measuring the understanding of a study's phenomenon relating to the study's findings Seidman (2013).

### **Credibility**

Credibility delineates the consistency of the findings of the research. As a primary method of increasing credibility, triangulation is applied in a study as researchers identify themes or categories that are formed through the convergence of various sources of information (Denzin, 1978). Creswell (2013) argued triangulations is the collection of data at separate times or from varied sources, which the process entails supporting evidence from those various sources to provide insight on a theme or point of view. Data triangulated in this study was combined and analyzed to construct a greater knowledge of the phenomenon being studied.

A screening and demographic questionnaire was used to make certain the account of participants' experiences addressed the phenomenon and research questions of this study, as the length of time participants have served in HE leadership and longevity in the field while on the

career pathway of leadership was identified, thus increasing credibility. The implementation of screening and demographic questionnaire identified participants' ability to recall and describe their experiences in HE administration, as well as identify how participants view their self-worth and perceived success while serving in leadership roles (Raelin, 2010). The extent of the assessment tool, through its production of stable and consistent results, ensures credibility (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). The methodology identified for this qualitative transcendental phenomenology study ensured credibility as responses were obtained and described the phenomenon of this study as the experiences of women who serve in HE administrative positions at HE institutions were explored.

To further ensure credibility, accuracy, and dependability, member checks were conducted with each participant. Marshall and Rossman (2016) argued that member checking is sharing the data and interpretations found during analysis and upon completion, participants can review and verify their accounts of the analyzed data and documented accounts of their experiences as captured by the researcher. Marshall and Rossman (2016) noted that "stipulating that one will engage in member checks, which invite participants to confirm one's findings and the extent to which one will design and implement a study using triangulation as a strategy will help ensure validity" (p. 48). Furthermore, member checking removed any personal feelings of the researcher from the study, thus allowing the attainment of a neutral and objective attitude (Patton, 2014).

### **Transferability**

The trustworthiness of this study was applicable as the findings could be applied in context and situation to the reader through transferability. As this study explored the experiences

and advancement of women who serve in higher education administrative positions within HE universities, trustworthiness occurred through transferability. With the incorporation of purposeful and snowball sampling, maximum variation was achieved through the participation of women who serve in various leadership positions (Creswell, 2013) such as president, vice president, executive assistant, director, provost, vice provost, assistant to the president, or chief of staff, regardless of race, age, ethnicity, etc., thus ensuring a richer description of the phenomenon and a strong, diverse representation of participants shared experiences of serving in HE administrative positions while advancing in higher leadership. As readers can transfer the findings of this qualitative transcendental phenomenology study to their environment or experiences, they can deduce that the results of this study applies to their situation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I could not guarantee transferability; however, I have provided what is known as a thick description by providing readers with specific information through the presented results of the study and ensuring a detailed description of those who participated, the setting, research design, data collection, data analysis, and findings. This approach permits readers the ability to make a well-thought-out decision regarding their ability to transfer the findings of the study to their own experiences or situation (Creswell, 2013).

### **Dependability**

The dependability of the data collected was obtained through the validity of the instruments used to collect data from participants, member checking, and reflexivity to support the validity and reliability of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study. The qualitative method of collecting data, using instrumentation that allowed participants to be candid in their responses (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and facilitated responses that addressed the phenomenon of the study (Holley & Harris, 2019), ensured dependability.



## **Confirmability**

The implementation of member checking ensured confirmability for this study. Member check is a technique used to ensure the data collected and analyzed is credible, accurate, and valid, as provided and confirmed by participants during the data collection process (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). This process was conducted at the conclusion of the individual interviews and focus group. Participants were invited to review the data from the interview and focus group discussion to provide feedback and check for accuracy as well as offer suggestions needed or provide clarity for any documented statement. Lastly, trustworthiness was ensured through reflexivity. Reflexivity is the process of the researcher reflecting on the relationship between the researcher and the research (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2018). This process was essential during the research process as I continually reflected and ensured the trustworthiness of the research, and that personal bias did not become a limitation (see Appendix K). This process allowed of bias and provided an analysis that was more effective and impartial (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

## **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical consideration in research is a vital characteristic to possess when obtaining trust, transparency, and full cooperation from study participants. Lichtman (2013) maintained that ethical behavior, representing a group of moral principles, rules, or standards, are held by a person or a profession is depictive of one's ethics. Ethical considerations, while conducting research, are vital for the protection of participants as they voluntarily share their experiences for the advancement of our understanding, subjecting themselves to a degree of vulnerability in which guidelines and codes of conduct must be put into place so that they are protected (Bound,

2011). Throughout this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study, all participants were provided ethical consideration as outlined within the ethical guidelines of Belmont Principles.

Ethical considerations were ensured through informed consent, confidentiality, and data protection. Informed consent provided to participants outlined all the pertinent information regarding the study, including the purpose of the research, the potential benefits of the study, the voluntary nature of one's participation, the assurance of the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants, and the participant's right to withdraw from the study at any time (Creswell, 2013). Confidentiality was ensured as participants were identified with the use of pseudonyms, thus protecting their identities. I collected the consent forms once completed and securely placed them in an unmarked envelope. Confidentiality was also implemented using pseudonyms to protect participants' identities (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Lastly, data protection is accomplished by storing the collected data for three years after the completion of this study. Data stored on my personal computer was secured using a secure password. Documentation is securely kept electronically on my personal password-protected computer. A backup thumb drive was used and placed in a locked box. Written documentation was also kept in a locked box in which I have the only available key to access it. All data is kept for three years, after which, I will destroy the electronic data, the backup thumb drive, the audio recordings, and all written documentation.

According to Mauthner et al. (2002), "the complexities of researching private lives and placing accounts in the public arena raise multiple ethical issues for the researcher" (p. 1). Pseudonyms protected the identity of the participating higher education organization and participants of this study. When referencing participants, each was identified as participant, followed by their selected pseudonym. Information obtained during the data collection process

resulted in no punitive measures, and candor expressed by participants was used as constructive feedback and no retribution against participants. Participants were reassured that their participation was voluntary, and withdrawing from the study would yield no retribution for doing so, and there would be no further contact regarding this study. Protective measures were implemented to maintain ethics throughout this research study: discretion and privacy, professional responsibility and relationship with participants, evaluation and analysis, and resolving ethical issues (Bound, 2011).

When determining the best method of guaranteeing the discretion and privacy of participants, I recognized securing trust would serve as the foundation between myself and the participants. Appropriate boundaries and preserved confidentiality were of utmost importance during this qualitative phenomenological study. The limitation of confidentiality was explained in an ethically proficient manner. Communication with the LU IRB, Higher Education Achievement University research department, and participants of the study was effective, timely, transparent, and precise. Necessary precautions ensured all participants felt comfortable, safe, and respected while participating in this study. While collecting, evaluating, assessing, and analyzing data for this research study, I used various assessment tools to observe and ensure the proper execution of ethical behavior and research methods. Consent forms were given to participants before the data collection process and distributed per the directives provided by the site's research department. Participants also received an introductory letter identifying who I was, the study, and their requested participation. Furthermore, after the interviews and group discussion, findings were analyzed, compiled, and openly shared with participants for review, and they were able to provide feedback as needed to ensure accuracy through member checking

(Schmidt, 2015). There was no discrimination from me, and all participants were reminded that participation was voluntary, and they had the right to withdraw from the study.

Collected data is stored for three years dy. Data stored on my personal computer is kept using a secure password. A backup thumb drive is kept in a locked box. Written documentation is also kept in a locked box with the only available key securely kept by the researcher. There were no anticipated ethical issues for this study; however, if unexpected ethical issues arose, I would have addressed them consistently and align with the Belmont Principles (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2018). The Belmont Principles were applicable to the beneficence and respect for persons who participated in this study. Regarding beneficence, confidentiality was maintained throughout the entire study. Participation was voluntary, and no retribution occurred as a result of participants' responses given by the organization's administration.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to explore how women serving in higher education administrative leadership positions describe their experiences while advancing in higher leadership at HE universities. The following framework was presented throughout this chapter: (1) research design; (2) research questions; (3) setting; (4) participants; (4) procedures; (5) the researcher's role; (6) data collection; (7) data analysis; (8) trustworthiness; and (9) ethical considerations. Using the qualitative transcendental phenomenology research design, I explored the real-life experiences of women in HE leadership. The research questions were designed to understand women's experiences in senior-level HE leadership positions, how they perceived their self-efficacy as women in leadership positions, and the lack of diversity in HE administrative leadership. This study filled the need in literature

by using Bandura's (1982) self-efficacy theory and described the experiences of women who have obtained and sustained their HE administrative leadership positions.

To explore the phenomenon of why there is still an underwhelming number of women in HE administrative leadership positions, I conducted a qualitative transcendental phenomenological study with a sample of 13 women from HE institutions where they served in senior-level administrative leadership positions. I began the data collection process with Moustakas' (1994) Epoche process. The data collection process continued with collecting participants' responses from the WS-Ei by Joseph Raelin, individual interviews, and a focus group discussion. The instruments used for this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study allowed participants the opportunity to be candid as they described their experiences as women in HE leadership. As postulated by Ritchie et al. (2014) qualitative methods during the analysis process could (1) provide descriptive details regarding specific outcomes based on what a program consists of and the beliefs that are driving the assumptions and theories; (2) identify factors that aid in the success, or lack thereof, regarding the program, service, or interventions delivery; (3) identify the effects of participating in a program or initiative on the participants and the occurrence of such effects; (4) examine the nature of the requirements of different groups within the target population; (5) survey an extent of the aspects of the organization that surrounds the delivery of the program, service, or intervention; and (6) examine the contexts in the received interventions and the impact on effectiveness . I employed a thematic and content analysis approach during data analysis, depicting the perceptions women in higher education leadership had regarding their experiences, their self-efficacy while serving in their leadership role, along with the influence of perceived barriers on the sustainment of women in HE

leadership. All collected data is stored and will be protected for a three-year timeframe, and at the end of the three years, it will be destroyed.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS**

### **Overview**

This chapter presents the research findings for this study and begins with the purpose statement, research questions, and introduction of participants. In the form of themes and sub-themes, the results of the data analysis presented in this study focused on examining women's experiences in HE administrative positions while advancing in HE. With the assistance of 13 participants who experienced the phenomenon of being a woman in HE leadership, this study explored their career pathways and the advancement to administrative leadership and to respond to the identified need for additional research on the underrepresentation of women in HE, including ways in which women can obtain leadership positions, the impact on self-efficacy of women in HE leadership, practices to resolve this lack of diversity and recommendations for women who aspire to begin or sustain a career in HE leadership. Using pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality during the data collection was identified in Demographic Table 1, in which participants selected fictitious names. In an attempt to permit participants' voices to echo their experiences clearly and concisely, quotes utilized in both this chapter and the following chapter are quoted verbatim, including errors such as spelling and grammar. As outlined in Chapter Three, a qualitative research methodology and a phenomenological approach were employed while exploring the experiences of women serving in HE leadership while advancing in their career pathway of leadership.

### **Purpose Statement and Research Questions**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore how women serving in HE administrative positions describe their experiences while advancing in higher leadership. Employing Bandura's self-efficacy theory as a theoretical framework, this study

aimed to answer one central research question and three sub-questions. The central research question for this study was: How do women serving in higher education administrative leadership positions describe their experiences while advancing in higher leadership? The three sub-questions for this study were:

1. How do women in higher education administrative positions describe their leadership style and its impact on their advancement?
2. What experiences shape the self-efficacy of women in higher education administrative leadership roles?
3. How does one's perceived self-efficacy affect their pursuit of leadership opportunities as a woman in higher education administration?

### **Study Population**

Participants of this study were all women who served in HE leadership in administrative positions. All women were from HE institutions on the east coast of the United States.

Pseudonyms for participants of this study ensure confidentiality, which the participants selected.

Table 1 contains the participants' demographics, which confirms that participants met the study criteria.

### **Participants**

#### **Arlee`**

Arlee's position during this study was Director of Student Life and Engagement. She accepted this position due to her ability to move up in the higher education world, and at the time of this study, she had been with the organization for a little over five months. Arlee` described her experience when applying and interviewing for her current position as very positive. She participated in two rounds of interviews and was offered the position less than a week after her



second in-person interview. As a former assistant director, Arlee` believed her next move needed to be a bigger, more challenging, more rewarding role. As a director overseeing different departments, she felt these new challenges would assist in her attaining more knowledge and growing as an individual and student affairs professional. Arlee's goal when beginning her leadership career pathway was to be a Dean of Students. As she has worked in different higher education institutions and gained additional experiences and skills, her end goal is to become a Vice President of Student Affairs or whatever the title might be, but still Vice President of that respective division. She believes furthering her education, obtaining a Doctorate, and more years of experience would be needed for her new goal. However, ultimately, her goal aligns with remaining in higher education and serving student needs.

### **Dottie**

Dottie's position within her organization is Director of General Operations, and she has been in the leadership of her current department for four years. She described her experience when applying and interviewing for her current position as pleasant. She shared that she is accustomed to an eight-hour interview day; however, the interview for her current position was only an hour, and even though the short time caused concern, as she worried if she conveyed herself succinctly, it turned out to be a pleasant experience. After taking time away from higher education to work for a public charter, lower, and middle school, she accepted the position and returned to the higher education industry. With the decision to return to higher education, Dottie was sure that she wanted to avoid returning to student affairs, which is how she decided to apply and accept the offer for her current position. When she began her leadership career pathway, Dottie's goals were to leave her mark, which led her to higher education, and to be somewhere she could challenge herself. Additional goals included being somewhere that values her thoughts

on given topics or issues valued as well as someone who values the importance of true work-life balance.

### **Michelle**

Michelle's position during this study was Corporate Director of Curriculum. She had been with the organization for almost eighteen years and served in numerous leadership roles.

Michelle set goals for herself when she began her leadership career pathway to continue growing as a leader. Michelle described her experience when applying and interviewing for her current position as interesting because she was working on different projects throughout the organization, attending conferences, conducting presentations on the corporate level, and eventually asked to meet with one of the executive directors at the corporate office, which she describes the interview as going well. She accepted her current position due to the ability to work with leadership in the education department to create and lead better programs, great leadership and to be a part of the process that allows students to gain skills in their field of study.

### **Kimberly**

Kimberly, Executive Director of Academic Affairs, had been with her organization for over 20 years and in higher education for 41 years. Kimberly's goals when she began her leadership career pathway were to do well and create a team of talented people to help her achieve and help the organization reach its goals. Kimberly described her experience when applying and interviewing for her current position as nonexistent because she was appointed and did not have to apply or interview for the role. She accepted this position due to the multiple sub-departments she would oversee and the ability to learn and become knowledgeable in the functions of additional departments.

### **Dr. Charlene**

With goals of being in student affairs, sitting on boards, having a seat on the board of directors, participating in professional development, and earning her doctorate that she set for herself when she began her leadership career pathway, Dr. Charlene's current position within her organization is Associate Director of Student Affairs. She had been with the organization for under a year. She described her experience when applying and interviewing for her current position as very intensive, as she participated in four interviews. She interviewed with the regional, campus president, the director, and her predecessor via Zoom and in person. She was also required to do a test due to her role overseeing educators, so the test was the same that instructors took. She accepted this position because she can supervise a larger campus and be in the room as a director as well as her goals of growing and becoming a campus president.

### **Kate**

The goals Kate set for herself when she began her leadership career pathway were to be innovative, creative, and the kind of leader she wished she had had earlier in her career. She also expressed her desire to make an impact on her profession and give back to the profession. At the time of this study, Kate was the Vice President of University Communications and Chief Marketing Officer and had been with the organization for seven months. Kate described her experience when applying and interviewing for her current position as being interesting and a whirlwind experience. The President contacted her as he asked for candidate recommendations, and those he asked repeatedly mentioned her name. Kate shared that she visited the campus alongside other candidates, and over a thirteen-day time timeframe, from the initial correspondence and campus visit, she was offered the job. She accepted this position because she no longer perceived her previous place of employment to be a good fit, and when offered the

opportunity of her current position, she was intrigued by the opportunity to build her department from scratch; it was a more diverse campus and more of a comfortable fit.

### **Dr. Lydia**

Dr. Lydia is the Chief Officer and Senior Advisor to the President. She had been with the organization for eight months during this study. The goals she set for herself when she began her leadership career pathway were to be mission focused and driven, build capacity within her team and the organization, and ensure that the organization's goals aligned with her mission. Dr. Lydia described her experience when applying and interviewing for her current position as interesting: there was no posting as a national search and no search committee and managed internally. Some colleagues working on a project approached her and asked if she might be interested in the opportunity, which she found interesting. Dr. Lydia then had an introductory video interview with the President and was invited for an on-campus interview. During the on-campus interview, she interviewed with members of the President's cabinet and other administrative and academic leaders at the institution, followed by a meeting with the President. From that introduction, she participated in an on-campus meeting and interview, followed by a discussion and a decision, in which she accepted the position. She took this position due to the nature of the integration work, the opportunity to support the successful completion of a merger, and the opportunity to work with institutional partners committed to improving the community's health. Regarding her current position, Dr. Lydia views this role as rewarding. It is a great opportunity to continue doing meaningful work in higher education and lend her skills and experience to advance an initiative that can benefit the organization and the community.

## **Destiny**

When beginning her leadership career pathway in HE leadership, Destiny's goals were to be fair and equal, confident, considerate of those she leads and manages, and most importantly, passionate about her work. During this study, Destiny had been with her organization for nine years and is the Associate Director of Employee Relations. Destiny described her experience when applying and interviewing for her current position as an easy application process, but the interview was slightly different. She participated in three separate interview sessions that included a search committee and professional staff within the organization split into two teams. Lastly, she interviewed with students of the organization, graduate assistants, and student assistants. She recalled the process being tedious and lengthy. She accepted this position for a couple of reasons, the first being that she is an alum of the institution. She shared that it has always been her goal to be the face for those who cannot be in the room, to be present, and seeing that she is one of a few black professional women within the organization, it was of personal importance that she accepted the position.

## **Cooper**

Cooper's current position within her organization is Advertising Director/Project Manager. At the time of this study, she had been with the organization for three years. Cooper described her experience when applying and interviewing for her current position as being the point where her knowledge, skills, and executive leadership recognized her expertise, and she was promoted instead of having to apply and interview for the position. When the position became available for an advertising campaign manager, she felt her skills fit the description and interviewed for it. She accepted the promotion to her current position due to previous experience and knowledge of advertising and marketing.

## **Dr. Janay**

Dr. Janay's position during this study was Director of DEI Training and Community Support. She has been with the organization for nine months. Dr. Janay described her experience when applying and interviewing for her current position as one where she had a small window of opportunity, so she applied for the position and described it as a quick process from that point. She received a call for a phone interview with her current supervisor to visit the campus for an interview within a month of the phone interview. During a visit to her home area, she presented faculty training in her field of expertise to staff and students, and only a short time afterward, she received an offer for the position. She accepted this position as she was nearing completion of her doctorate, and she wanted to be in a director role in the DEI space. Due to the challenges in her state, down south, she found purpose in returning home to do the work as it put her close to family and wanting to progress professionally, which she viewed as a healthy balance. The goals Dr. Janay set for herself when she began her leadership career pathway were to complete graduate-level degrees and identify where she would be most impactful. While in her master's program, she completed graduate-level work in multicultural affairs and identified that as the field where she would have a purpose and what she wanted to do. She wanted to connect with students and staff of color and be mentored on all things in educational leadership so she could hone in on her craft. She also wanted to ensure she used her voice at the table and created agency and space for those behind her.

## **Marie**

The biggest goal Marie set for herself when she began her leadership career pathway was to help her coworkers and the students achieve their goals in their life and make things accessible to assist them in achieving success. Marie's position within her organization is Campus Assistant

Director. She had been with the organization for 24 years during this study and expressed reaching her 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary in a few months. She accepted this position because her supervisors believed in her ability to do the job, and she is also knowledgeable in the company due to longevity. Lastly, taking the position allows her the opportunity to make a difference in the students' lives. Marie described her experience when applying and interviewing for her current position as more of an opportunity she was told she would do, which did not require her to apply and interview. However, she recalled her experience interviewing for the Assistant Director position. The position became available after she had only been with the company for a year and a half. After applying and interviewing, she felt she needed to gain the knowledge to be effective in the role. Three years later, she was placed in that position but has not applied for positions within the organization since then.

#### **Dr. Michelle**

As the Director of Online Learning, Dr. Michelle was with the organization for six years during this study. The goals she set for herself were to be the best she could be, understand the path she needed to take to get to the top and be a part of the decision-making process, and navigate her career pathway to upper-level management. Dr. Michelle described her experience when applying and interviewing for her current position as being uneasy due to the unexpected introduction of the position, and a colleague with seniority also applied for the position, which added tension once chosen for the job. She accepted this position because she felt the culture, care, and concern for students needed enhancement, and she thought she could make a difference in retention as it was an issue.

## **Dawn**

Dawn's current position within her organization was Vice President of Human Resources, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at the time of this study. She had been with the organization for 26 years. The goals Dawn set for herself when she began her leadership career pathway were to obtain her bachelor's degree and master's degree and obtain her SPHR professional certification (senior professional and human resources). Dawn described her experience when applying and interviewing for her current position as being very stressful because she was an internal candidate, and confidentiality was of concern for her as she did not want anyone figuring out the experiences she was pulling from and sharing to speak to her qualifications during the interview was about them. She also received advice that when she became interim not to act like she was "interim," to treat the job like it was her job and hit the ground running, which she viewed as great advice because she was able to talk about the job in terms of what she would do if selected, to continue the trajectory of what she was doing as interim. She accepted this position due to a few determining factors, such as her ability to do the job, having the opportunity to be in a temporary space that allowed her the confidence that she could do the position justice, and understanding that as wonderful as her predecessor was, she was who she was in the role (her predecessor) and now she (Dawn) was going to be the best that she could be and realizing that that was enough.

These 13 participants completed a criteria study demographic questionnaire and a Work Self-Efficacy Inventory (WS-Ei) and participated in individual interviews and focus groups. From these data sources, the phenomenological methodology presented by Moustakas (1994) was used during analysis and presented in the following paragraphs.



## Results

The development of the research questions were guided by the purpose of this study and the theoretical framework. Correspondingly, the same circumstances were used during the data analysis process, thus allowing the examination of the results from the perspectives of the theoretical framework or as direct responses to the identified research questions. According to Lichtman (2013), my role as the researcher was identifying who and what would be studied, the questions asked, who would facilitate the analysis, the information collector and how it would be filtered, and who is experienced, along with comprehending the problem, issues, and methods of the research. I employed the phenomenological process outlined by Moustakas (1994) during the data analysis process. Starting with Moustakas' (1994) Epoche, I remained objective while engaging with participants during the interview and focus group process, avoiding introducing personal biases into the data analysis process. Upon receiving the WS-Ei responses and completing the individual interviews and focus groups, I utilized the NVivo software for sorting codes and subgroups. I was able to identify codes, categories, and frequency of codes as related to the themes for the interviews and focus groups (see Tables 5, 6, & 7 in Appendix M), which allowed significance to be on the responses of participants and the shared accounts of their experiences (Saldana, 2021).

After the data collection process, I was able to analyze the responses of the WS-Ei results and discussion, interviews, and focus groups, reduce those responses using horizontalization, condense them into significant statements, and combine them into themes (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Continuing Moustakas' (1994) process, I transitioned to the phenomenological reduction of data by applying horizontalization, clustering horizons into themes, and clustering horizons and themes into textural and structural descriptions. I continued

analyzing descriptions, known as imaginative variations, thus, identifying various meanings and structural qualities that developed into structural qualities, which generated a composite description (Moustakas, 1994). Concluding this process, three primary themes were revealed, including (a) the development of interpersonal practices for women in higher education leadership, (b) women in higher education leadership and the role of self-efficacy, and (c) barriers for women in higher education leadership (see Table 4). Sub-themes developed within the primary themes further apprise this study's purpose and theoretical framework. These themes and sub-themes are presented throughout this chapter, followed by responses to the research questions that were the focal points of this research.

Table 4

*Research Questions, Themes, and Sub-Themes*

Research Questions	Themes	Sub-Themes
SQ 1: How do women in higher education administrative positions describe their leadership style and its impact on their advancement?	Development of Interpersonal Practices for Women in HE Leadership	Interpersonal Development Importance of Relationships
SQ 2: What experiences shape the self-efficacy of women in higher education administrative leadership roles?	Women in HE Leadership and The Role of Self-Efficacy	Inequity Intrapersonal Progress Impacts on Self-Efficacy
SQ 3: How does one's perceived self-efficacy affect their pursuit of leadership opportunities as a woman in higher education?	Barriers for Women in HE Leadership	Challenges that Impact Self-Efficacy and Hinder the Advancement of Women in HE

### **Development of Interpersonal Practices for Women in HE Leadership**

Participants of this study all expressed having interpersonal skills, along with identifying the importance of possessing and growing these skills as a woman in HE leadership. Advocacy, collaboration, mentorship, relationships, and skill development are all codes that emerged during data analysis about the interpersonal practices of women in HE leadership. As Marie attested: "I have tried very hard to learn everything I can along the way about my position and about the employees that I supervise, about what they do and how I can help them be better to make my life easier. Just to grow with my team instead of just worrying about me growing and it's served me well through the years, you know, whether I'm jumping in the dumpster and bouncing up and down and smashing down cardboard to make it all fit with my employees or whether we're on a really important task that we have to get done right now. It's important to work with those people along the way and support them, so in turn, they support you."

Participants collectively viewed that the way to navigate being a woman successfully in HE administrative leadership is to grow and foster interpersonal skills to be effective when serving as a leader. Dr. Lydia described her implemented leadership style as collaborative. She explained that she manages expectations, is communicative, disseminates essential information, and ensures clarity so that miscommunication is minimal. Similarly, Cooper shared peer interaction as one of the ways she has developed her interpersonal skills: "I can learn and network from my peers, for people who want to give out that information. Some people don't want to give it, they want to keep it to themselves, they like to gatekeep and want to see you fall."

But you know I do, I have been fortunate to be around a lot of women who help uplift if they see, you know, me falling or anything like that." On the other hand, Destiny explained how she encourages those she leads to develop their interpersonal skills: "I'll say more or less all of it is about being intentional and then you know, professional development. You know, I live by that. I tell all the individuals that I manage that it's ok for you not to know everything, but it's not ok for you not to know where to find it. So, seek it out. And so, for me that has always been something that I've lived by, is if I don't know the answer, then I'm going to try to find the answer." The idea surrounding having interpersonal practices while serving in HE leadership as a woman presented the opportunity for women to garner the skills needed to excel in their roles as a leader and build healthy, supportive relationships both inside and outside of the workplace, all while engaging and socialize with those they identify with as having commonalities. The theme of the development of interpersonal practices for women in HE leadership included two sub-themes— (a) interpersonal development and (b) the importance of relationships.

### ***Interpersonal Development***

Participants conveyed the significance of interpersonal development as they described their leadership styles and navigating their career pathways as women in HE leadership. When reflecting on her experience with implemented leadership styles, Kate described her implemented leadership style as empathetic leadership. She perceived her leadership as empowering, fair, and empathetic to ensure that everyone who worked for her received fair treatment as an individual. Regarding any challenges due to her gender status, she shared that she was judged due to being an empathetic leader, which she felt was gendered. Kate shared that a colleague described her as fragile, and again she viewed it as gendered. Kate responded to the gendered comments surrounding her leadership style and behavior by confronting it head-on by

having a conversation to understand why that was the perception, addressing that she felt it was gendered, and defending her character and leadership style. Similarly, Dottie shared that her leadership style reflected advocacy. Regarding any challenges due to her gender status, she shared that being a black female was challenging in particular higher education spaces because she did not want to be perceived as histrionic or as an angry black woman. She acknowledged an awareness of oppressive systems layering on top of each other in the southern states she has worked in, which is why she was cognizant of how she responded and the spaces she occupied. When she stood in those spaces, Dottie responded to being in these situations with self-awareness. She explained that she tried to make sure she was giving people a different perspective of what to think about, especially in instances where she had been the black female leader or the only person of color speaking to her team. As a leader, Dottie expressed experiencing self-doubt all the time; however, she had been fortunate to be a part of a program that supported women in leadership, which the university offered. She shared that imposter syndrome played a part in why self-doubt occurred, which she perceived caused women to get into their heads and think they were not good enough to be in leadership positions. She recounted her experience with barriers and biases as a woman in higher education leadership, such as being a woman in a position typically run by a white man, gender biases that questioned her knowledge and her seat at the table, and ageism, that she looked too young to know what she was talking about. Dottie overcame those perceived barriers and biases by having a good sounding board in her team and a good community of colleagues across the institutions where she worked.

Participants provided suggestions and strategies for women who aspire to be in HE leadership, thus fostering the development of their interpersonal skills. Kimberly suggested that females who aspire leadership positions in HE leadership should believe in themselves, be

strong, surround themselves with strong women, and seek out other women in the profession that could provide tips. She encouraged interpersonal skill development by continuing to develop their skills and knowledge, attending workshops and conferences, and building their confidence. Likewise, Arlee` encouraged women who aspire to be in HE leadership to talk to people, participate in professional development opportunities, be motivated, and dismiss self-doubt long enough to complete and submit the application. She explained that as a black woman, she had to find her community network and suggested that women in HE find community support and resources that could help them get through, help with self-doubt and self-efficacy to succeed, and those who align with their values and identities:

We're learning every day from entry-level and from our seasoned experienced professionals, so finding that mentorship and then when you're ready, offering that same opportunity to the next person. So, when you become that mid-level or that senior opening the opportunity to be vulnerable with the new entry-level or someone else that is looking for a mentor like someone did for you, I think it's definitely something in the beginning that will help continue you on in higher education. I also want to mention keeping up with the best trends, like finding out more information about the field, because that will help continue to evolve your work, to help you continue to have some motivation.

Dr. Janay advised women to be emboldened if they aspire to apply for leadership positions. As they begin to develop interpersonal skills, she stated she would encourage them to think about what they hope to gain from being in a leadership role, identify their true goal of what position they would want to ultimately reach, and pinpoint a strategic plan that is

representative of what they want to be attached to them. Lastly, she would challenge them to stay true to themselves, as integrity is essential in leadership.

### *Importance of Relationships*

Leadership involves being a part of multiple groups inside and outside the workplace, communicating regularly, and creating healthy relationships. Participants of this study collectively expressed the importance of relationships, including mentorship, community groups, family, colleagues, and other women in higher education who have walked similar pathways. Dr. Janay disclosed how she navigated being in leadership:

So really branding myself inside the university, outside of the university but just always making sure that I'm looking for support and not defining my work by this position, this institution and allowing people who have seen me throughout years to be the people that I bounce ideas off of and go to for a solace or just affirmation. So, I think I'm just grateful to really have a strong tribe behind me and a community, you know. I'm a part of a sorority, so I think even in institutions I've been able to lean on the, you know, the shield of my sorority like and just really have, really build fortitude to be able to persist in certain spaces.

As participants reflected on how they overcame challenges faced, feelings of self-doubt, or feeling overwhelmed during their leadership experience, participants shared how those relationships fostered their growth and self-efficacy or provided guidance. Again, the theme of relationships was easily seen in their accounts. Arlee` explained: "Yeah, absolutely I think the first thing to begin with would be finding someone of commonalities that you're not on a level with to grab, gravitate towards and find vulnerability, vulnerability opportunities with. So, I'm trying not to say the word mentor, but that's literally what I'm leaning on. I find that if I had or

when you have a mentor in the field that knows exactly what you could be going through at the moment but has surpassed it and is able to pull you out of the situation via their words, their motivation, their stories of what happened to them. I think that is very beneficial for someone in higher ed."

### **Women in HE Leadership and The Role of Self-Efficacy**

Bandura's (1982) self-efficacy theory was used as a lens during the analysis process of the collected data as participants shared their experiences while serving in HE administrative positions. According to Bandura (1995), self-efficacy is defined as one's belief in being organized and the ability to execute actions required to manage anticipated situations successfully. Participants of this study had a healthy sense of self-efficacy and self-awareness as it pertained to their level of self-efficacy as a female leader in HE and how to develop their self-efficacy further. Some codes derived during data analysis included confidence, doubt, failures, growth, male-dominated, success, support, and trauma. As Michelle commented on being in HE leadership and the role of self-efficacy:

Just always working on it, but I also relate to right now you know today I could be a seven tomorrow an eight depending on the project or the situation that I'm actually in. I really rely very heavily on those tools. I pull them out of my tool bag quite regularly based on the experience of experiences I've had with successes and failures, really just learning the lesson, building on those lessons, ok, what happened in this situation? Last time I was going through similarly, and then you know, riding as high as I can, trying and feeling better every day because I'm persistence is my key. You know, getting it done and going above and beyond



constantly because I feel like I just always want to prove and, make that make sure, not prove, really to myself what to be, I want to shine.

The theme of women in HE leadership and the role of self-efficacy presented three sub-themes— (a) inequity, (b) intrapersonal progress, and (b) impacts on self-efficacy.

### *Inequity*

Participants discussed the inequity displayed in HE as applicable to the continued underrepresentation of women in HE leadership and the male-dominated industry, along with the impact on their self-efficacy. With over 40 years in HE, Kimberly recounted: "I've had a lot of experience with white males because in this industry it's predominantly white males that have held leadership positions." She also shared:

So, I think there are a couple of things that I just want to mention, most of the other leaders that I am surrounded by are males. So often times when I'm involved in meetings with other males a lot that I'm the last to be heard. And then what I have to say or contribute is not really recognized, so I have to work a little bit harder because I know that in the end my department does a good job, but I just feel like with the males that I am surrounded by, I am having to prove myself above and beyond and always to be prepared.

Codes such as barriers, challenges, and male-dominated were a few noted during the data analysis process. Participants identified barriers derived from the inequity of being in a male-dominated industry, including women not being chosen for positions, even when qualified, a lack of promotions, and dealing with stereotypes. Dottie's experience with being in a male-dominated organization: "My current department we had a retirement, and two other Deans took roles amazing roles elsewhere, but that left us with an all-white male executive leadership team so,

and they backfilled one of the roles with a black male, but still ok where you lost three women, I know there are three women out there that are good enough for these associate, these assistant Dean roles. Why aren't we looking for them?" Michelle perceives the underrepresentation as: "I think that the society really thinks that women are just not strong enough to handle work, job, kids and to lead a team of individuals to be successful, to make money, to be profitable, and so it's just a male-dominated um industry.

Participants expressed situations where they encountered what a few described as man-explaining and he-peating, where their suggestions, thoughts, or ideas went unheard until presented by a man. Dr. Michelle described her challenge with not having her voice heard: "So that's my biggest challenge, people understanding that I do have something to say, and I do have amazing ideas. It's been many times that I've made what I thought were amazing suggestions that weren't heard, and then months later, here we go, we're doing it, but it's coming up under someone else, if that makes sense. So that has been my biggest challenge." Comparably, Dawn summarized an occurrence of feeling unheard and having her, then male colleague, repeat what she said before it was taken seriously:

About ten years ago. Yeah, somewhere 8 to 10 years ago, I believe I did. And that was the cabinet was very male-dominated. And there was a situation where I was the most expert person sitting around the table. And what I was talking about was, it was a topic that I brought to the cabinet table to discuss. And you know, what's the sad thing right now? I don't even remember what we were talking about now. But I remember how I felt in that conversation. Maybe it was threat assessment, or I don't remember what it was. And my boss, who at the time was the Chief Operating Officer, after I said what I said, he goes and looks at university council,

and university council who's a man, southern, big, booming voice, repeated essentially exactly what I said, and then all of a sudden it was that you know, its, word is bond, yeah that's good stuff. I'm like, you've got to be kidding me.

Kate also shared an experience where she felt a lack of acknowledgment as a woman in HE: "I have felt not considered because I'm a woman or I've been talked over because I'm a woman. I use the term he-peating where a man repeats what you just said, and suddenly everybody agrees with it." As applicable to her self-efficacy Kate explained:

Working in an environment where there weren't any white men in leadership made it so much easier to get half a voice, and I noticed when I was at an institution that had predominantly white men in the leadership that my voice was drowned out a lot more. I think that having that. Gosh, this sounds so I hate how this sounds, but having that those five years where I was on a leadership team where nobody was a white man, so there was nobody kind of sucking that oxygen out of the room.

Others conveyed their perception of the underrepresentation of women in HE leadership due to the inequity surrounding pay. Dr. Charlene said, "And so it's hard that when you know you're working hard and then you know that people because you're a woman, you get paid less." Due to this inequity, Arlee's viewpoint was: "You know, there's a lot more money for people outside of higher education. Um, just that people are leaving the field left and right, getting corporate jobs." In agreement with the perception regarding pay, Dr. Janay's assessment of the underrepresentation of women in HE is:

I think we are in this soft girl, I laugh about this word, but we're in this soft girl era where we're wanting to reclaim our narrative and our time, and we're not you

know, we are not trying to allow an institution to take everything from us. So, I think black women are leaving because they're recognizing their worth. They're leaving this industry to get paid because that's another thing, equity and pay, we know that. But they're leaving to go to organizations that are going to pay them three times more than what they're making in the field now.

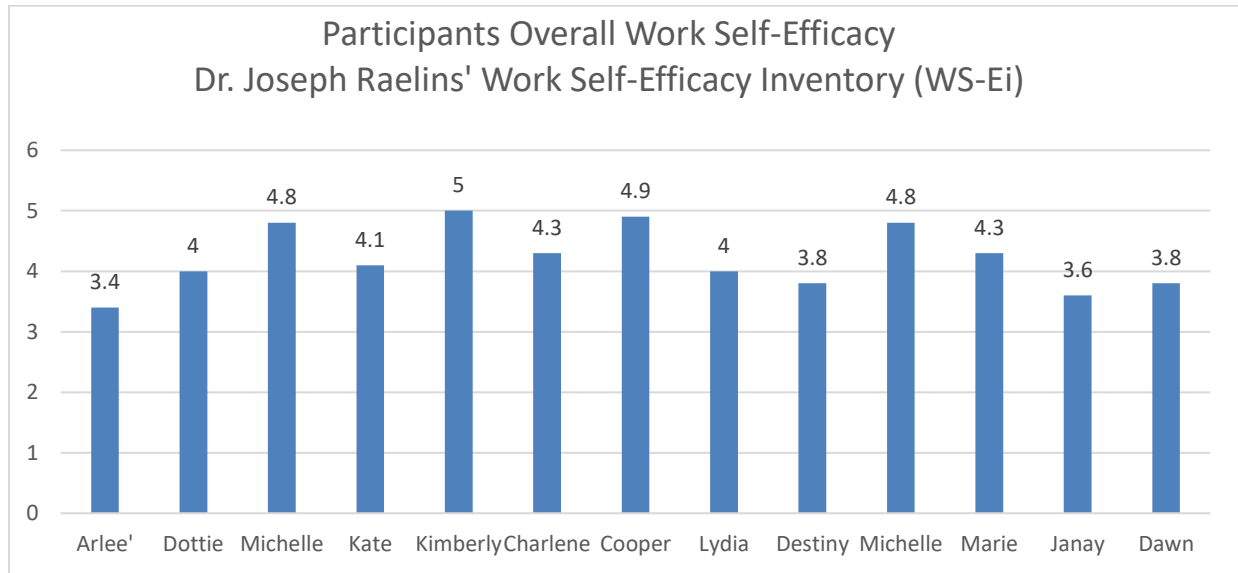
### ***Intrapersonal Progress***

Participants reflected and expressed their perception of how an awareness of their intrapersonal progress assisted in their growth in leadership as women in HE administrative leadership. In addition, participants described their perceived self-efficacy and discussed the results of their WS-Ei assessment. Dr. Michelle explained: "For me it means continually to work with the spirit of excellence. It means to always make sure that I have equipped myself with what I need to be able to fulfill the obligations that I've taken on to fulfill and it also means to have a caring concern for all of the students, faculty, and staff in that process. And finally, for me, it means to ensure that I also have a sense of satisfaction in what I'm doing so that every day I can go home and look in the mirror and say, ok, you did a good job today and if I did not do a good job, I look myself in the mirror and ask and come up with the solution on how to be better the next day."

Each participant took the Work Self-Efficacy Inventory (WS-Ei). This assessment allowed participants to identify their self-efficacy while in the workplace. According to Dr. Joseph Raelin (2010), creator of WS-Ei, this inventory provided participants with a frame of reference about their self-worth and success within the workplace, considering behaviors and practices on the job concerning one's belief in the direct correlation of social requirements necessary for success. Figure 2 below is an overview of the participant's results as a collective,

which they could receive a score that ranged between one and five, with one being the lowest and five the highest.

Figure 2 WS-Ei Chart



Note. From Results of *Joseph Raelin's WS-Ei* as adapted by A. Fulp, 2023.

### Arlee'

Upon completion of the WS-Ei, Arlee` received a score of 3.4. During the discussion, Arlee` described her self-efficacy as evolving. She did not consider herself perfect in the field or her self-efficacy; however, she felt that she had evolved from her first position to her current position in that her work style, how she dealt with conflict, and how she received and gave feedback have all changed dramatically. Arlee viewed the different program experiences; the different setup of various things from her first position to her current one; learning and mastering her new role; politics and the diversity work, and multicultural affairs within her state as having shaped her perceived level of self-efficacy. Upon completing and reviewing the responses given while completing the inventory, Arlee' felt her self-efficacy in the workplace would benefit from attention to how she approached things or how things were presented to her. She felt she could

think more about her responses and not rush to do so much at once. She viewed this as a downfall and viewed her responses as a way to address her approach to response, how she managed her team, and the time taken to effectively supervise them, which she wished she had from her supervisors.

### **Dottie**

Dottie perceived her self-efficacy as being efficient. With a score of 4 on the WS-Ei, she viewed a previous supervisor who moved barriers out of the way for her, mentorship, and seeing things from a systematic perspective as experiences that shaped her perceived level of self-efficacy in her current position. Dottie expressed that participating in this type of assessment exposes areas of opportunity, making her think about her current role and what she needs to do. Upon completion and review of the responses given while completing the WS-Ei, she felt her self-efficacy in the workplace was as she perceived herself to be, so she felt it was nice to see as well as hard to see in black and white, yet essential to ensure that she remained aligned with the important things.

### **Michelle**

Michelle achieved an overall score of 4.8 on the WS-Ei and perceived her self-efficacy to be high. She viewed being observant as having shaped her perceived level of self-efficacy in her leadership role. She attributed observing the successes and failures of the various campuses during her employment to the diverse leaders she had worked alongside, and the different leadership styles she had been able to take pieces from had molded her self-efficacy. Michelle also credited her success and losses as assisting in her self-efficacy. Her takeaway after completing the WS-Ei was the need to evaluate her self-efficacy. She was aware of her self-efficacy but knew she placed barriers and boundaries on herself when expressing herself due to

feeling uncomfortable when sharing with other groups in her organization. Upon completion and review of the responses given, Michelle felt her self-efficacy in the workplace was present but required her to evaluate it.

### **Kimberly**

Kimberly received the highest achievable score on the WS-Ei, 5, and perceived her self-efficacy as being high. She had self-awareness of her capabilities, and high self-efficacy led to personal success and success for the companies where she worked. Kimberly viewed successfully setting and executing those goals as experiences that shaped her perceived level of self-efficacy as a woman in HE leadership. During reflection on her WS-Ei responses, Kimberly expressed that she was pleased with her self-efficacy and how she had maintained it. She described her self-efficacy in the workplace as being on target because of her self-awareness, her ability to separate her feelings so she could remain on point and meet her goals, and she knew she could always learn something new. So, being open-minded and task-oriented, along with past and present success, helped her maintain a high self-efficacy.

### **Dr. Charlene**

Dr. Charlene found the self-ranking aspect of the WS-Ei inventory to be difficult. Although she perceived her self-efficacy to be mid-level, she obtained a 4.3 on the WS-Ei and expressed there is always room for growth. Dr. Charlene shared that she self-reflected and asked herself what she could do better, especially as an African American woman, a first of many generations, and a younger woman in an upper-level management position in higher education. She credited trauma, defamation of character, and insecurities inflicted by both men and women as experiences that have shaped her perceived level of self-efficacy, which she felt was stronger as she had something to prove to herself and the naysayers. While navigating the WS-Ei, Dr.

Charlene learned, regarding her self-efficacy, that she had been effective, a great leader, possessed effective decision-making skills, mentored her employees, and she delegated. Upon completing and reviewing her responses, she felt her self-efficacy in the workplace embodied mentorship and delegation.

### **Kate**

Kate perceived her self-efficacy as evolving due to the growth and authenticity she had seen in her leadership over the past eight years. She expressed being confident and comfortable with leaning into being a woman in leadership and embracing that there is a place for empathy and authenticity while serving in leadership as a woman. Kate viewed having leaders who have emulated how not to be, understanding that leadership entails relationship building, working in higher education environments where white male leaders do not dominate, and working in environments where it felt like a safe space as experiences have shaped her perceived self-efficacy level. Upon completing and reviewing her responses, Kate received a 4.1 on the WS-Ei and stated she was able to reflect on some things. She found it interesting as she could assess, sort, and catalog her responses.

### **Dr. Lydia**

Dr. Lydia perceived her self-efficacy as being confident and grounded in reality. She viewed her job as to advance a focused initiative within a set timeframe. Dr. Lydia also viewed her self-efficacy as being healthy as she was aware of what options are and how to collaborate and communicate with others to solve problems and succeed. Overall, she believed self-efficacy is a crucial concept and ties into agency and an individual's belief that they can get things done. She also viewed her self-efficacy as being shaped by having a healthy sense of self-worth tempered with humility and recognizing the ongoing need to invest in her relationships and



maintain sensitivity to context and sub-context. Based on the WS-Ei, Dr. Lydia obtained a score of 4 and learned about her self-efficacy, that even in the areas she felt she was strongest, there was always room to grow because there would always be what she considered a frontier aspect. Upon completing and reviewing her responses, she felt her self-efficacy in the workplace as being confident, and she could do the research, find experts to collaborate with, and work alongside consultants to optimize the outcome or optimize what should occur next in the process.

### **Destiny**

Destiny perceived her self-efficacy as being confident. She felt she had achieved a lot and could achieve more. As a leader, she felt respected and trusted by those she led, so she did not display a lack of confidence if she was not sure because her employees would get on board with her directions, and they were watching for her response; therefore, she remained positive and willing to try whatever it took to get things done. Destiny viewed the lack of seeing people such as herself in leadership as an experience that shaped her perceived level of self-efficacy, influenced by the lack of mentorship and models. Having someone she could relate to and having takeaways was a crucial determinant of where she was and who she was as a leader, to be that mentor or model for the next person. Upon completion of the WS-Ei, Destiny learned about her self-efficacy, that she was more confident than she thought and had made progress, with more progress to achieve. She received a score of 3.8 and viewed her self-efficacy in the workplace as progressive as she not only wanted to be present in the room, but she also wanted to be vocal. She explained that seeing and answering the questions from the inventory allowed her to see changes within herself. She was confident about her responses and progress with the various challenges she experienced over the years.

## **Cooper**

Cooper perceived her self-efficacy as being high and received a 4.9 on the WS-Ei. She viewed her leadership as effective due to her team's acceptance of her leadership, as they recognized that her directions benefited the team and that she was working in the trenches with them. She was confident and met her goals due to her high level of self-efficacy in her role. Cooper identified getting the job done, meeting deadlines, being knowledgeable in the job, and being thorough as experiences that shaped her perceived level of self-efficacy. As she completed the WS-Ei, she learned, as it pertains to her self-efficacy, she was knowledgeable in her position, that she did her job effectively, and that she was confident in the workplace. Upon completing and reviewing her responses, Cooper felt her self-efficacy in the workplace was confident. That was an ah-ha moment, acknowledging that you are doing it right.

## **Dr. Janay**

Dr. Janay viewed her self-efficacy as being effective, resilient, evolving, and supportive of her ability to show up in her role. She identified being self-motivated and team-oriented, a lack of onboarding experience, building a fairly new department, listening, and analyzing data as experiences that have shaped her perceived level of self-efficacy. Additionally, in tandem with those identified experiences, she expressed that trusting her expertise and leaning into everybody needs a foundational level as having shaped her perceived level of self-efficacy in her role. Dr. Janay liked the WS-Ei assessment as it allowed her to think about how she had evolved as a leader, practitioner, and person. She found the WS-Ei telling, as she identified being in a place of advocacy and empowerment that she possessed the tools to cultivate an experience that she wanted for herself and was actively doing that. Upon completing and reviewing her responses, Dr. Janay received a 3.6 on the WS-Ei and felt her self-efficacy in the workplace was one where

she gave herself grace, knowing that she was still learning and that the state she resided in and the things that were taking place could impede her self-efficacy. However, she was able to preserve and protect her mental as she could show up and do the work.

### **Marie**

Marie's perception of her self-efficacy reflected confidence due to her longevity in the company and acquired knowledge of the company. She understood her role and responsibilities well and how to help others succeed. Marie attributed other women in leadership whom she had worked alongside over the years who had guided her, imparted knowledge, and assisted with her success as experiences that shaped her perceived level of self-efficacy. Based on the WS-Ei, Marie obtained a 4.3 and felt she had room to grow. Upon completion and review of the responses given, she felt her self-efficacy in the workplace was where it needed to be for continued growth. That said, she remained confident about where she was and what she was doing in her leadership position.

### **Dr. Michelle**

Dr. Michelle perceived her self-efficacy as being confident as she could and was committed to getting the job done. She felt she possessed the necessary leadership abilities and skills for her position, as supported by her level of self-efficacy. Dr. Michelle credited her military experience, education, care and concern for the students and her team as experiences that shaped her perceived self-efficacy level. As a result of taking the WS-Ei assessment, she learned about her self-efficacy, she had much confidence in her abilities within the workplace. Upon completion and review of the responses given, Dr. Michelle earned a score of 4.8 and felt her self-efficacy in the workplace was effective as she was confident in her performance and had what it took to be a fantastic leader in her position.

## **Dawn**

Dawn perceived her self-efficacy as a four and a half out of five due to her belief in the room for continued growth. Due to changes at her university, growth would occur for her as she navigated the upcoming changes, including new leadership. She viewed being in senior leadership; being a part of the President's cabinet; having a presence at board meetings, having to be knowledgeable even when the answer was not there; understanding new spaces would occur and being able to navigate them, and her ability to collaborate effectively as experiences that shaped her perceived level of self-efficacy. Based on WS-Ei, Dawn learned, after reflecting on past years and her self-efficacy during the time of this study, was a four and a half due to feeling a loss in connection with her employees because her physical location has changed. Upon completing and reviewing her WS-Ei responses, she received an overall score of 3.8 and felt her self-efficacy in the workplace had been affected by the lack of connection she felt with her team members as people. She described herself as a walk-to-your-area leader, whereas during her interview, she had to call them, and she felt a loss of connection in that space. Dawn also expressed feeling insufficient in recognizing and appreciating because she was spread thin in her responsibilities, and not being in the same physical space did not allow her the opportunity to be the spontaneous appreciator and leader that she was known to be. She was aware of the space constraints that led to the decline of spontaneous appreciation, and the task of working harder to ensure the acknowledgment of how much she valued and appreciated the people on her team was visible.

### ***Impacts on Self-Efficacy***

While reflecting on their self-efficacy as women in leadership positions of HE administration, participants shared the impact on their self-efficacy due to both positive and

negative experiences. Participants described the experiences that affected their self-efficacy and the capacity to approach situations, provide leadership, and engage with their colleagues and employees. Dr. Michelle shared that mentorship positively affected her self-efficacy: "I would like to add that one of the positive things that have definitely helped me to work on me is everywhere I've went I have found someone that was doing what I wanted to do with the spirit of excellence, and I've always had a mentor, I've never been afraid to ask for help. I've never been afraid to come up under someone. So, I think that has been a positive for me. I've had some amazing, amazing mentors that have kicked me when I needed to be kicked, lifted me up when I needed to be lifted up, and slowed me down when I needed to be, you know." However, Dottie reflected on what triggered a negative self-efficacy: "On the negative side, I wrote reorganizations have triggered my impostor syndrome. So, you know I was hired into one position and for one reason or another, a reorg happens."

On the other hand, Destiny explained how one of her experiences included positive and negative effects on her self-efficacy. Destiny explained:

In terms of that question, I would say both positive and negative my answer would be the same. It would be unrealistic expectation, and one, that unrealistic expectations positively because you know that they think that we're not able or that I'm not able to do the job and do it well, and so but when you prove them wrong then, but what happens on the negative aspect of it is when you are doing the job and you're doing it well, then it becomes an expectation that this is going to be without the background behind it, the Saturdays and Sundays I'm here or the late nights or weekends, or how many games I missed for my kids or how many times I've had to say no I can't attend because I've got work to. Doing that

becomes the expectation that I'm going to do it every time and that it's easier for me to do the job because I'm missing out, missing out on so many things. But that's when you have to be intentional about the job you're doing, how you're doing it, and why you're doing it, and when all those things align, then it makes a lot more sense.

### **Barriers for Women in HE Leadership**

Participants resoundingly expressed barriers they experienced as women during their career pathway in higher education. Kimberly recounted experiences with biases while serving as a woman in higher education leadership, such as the difficulty with the industry being more favorable towards men. Entering the business in the 70s, she shared occurrences where she was the only female, black female, and sometimes the only person of color in the room. Challenges to her leadership style occurred due to her race, gender, and age throughout the years, and her response to those challenges was to push even harder and show that regardless of her age, race, or gender, she could still do a good job. Likewise, Dr. Michelle disclosed she had been challenged slightly in a gendered manner because her direct supervisor was a male and her staff was all females. He disagreed with the way her department showed respect and loyalty to her first and foremost as their direct supervisor. She also recounted an experience where her supervisor tried to choose the position he wanted her to serve in versus the one she knew she would thrive in and be most successful. She felt he was trying to suppress her growth in leadership and challenge her in many ways. Dr. Michelle overcame those perceived barriers by understanding where her self-efficacy and abilities would best serve the institution, continuing to educate herself, remaining in good standing with the policies and procedures of her department and the organization, and having faith in the difference she made for the students and those

around her. Dr. Janay also recalled challenges as a female in HE leadership. She explained intersectionality and microaggression due to not just her gender but also her race and age have been a part of her experience. She disclosed that her institution was predominately white, whereas historically, those systems and structures have white heteronormative ideologies. She viewed her challenge as identifying the best way to show up as a black feminist who wanted to be a disruptor as she wanted to call out anti-racism and all other things of inequality; however, her institution was not there yet, in her opinion. Dr. Janay also felt she was seen as a black woman first, even with her level of privilege in having a doctorate. Her response was to remain calm, be trustworthy, build relationships, and remain a servant leader who did whatever she asked those she provided leadership to do. The theme of barriers for women in HE leadership presented two sub-themes—(a) challenges that impact self-efficacy and hinder the advancement of women in HE and (b) solutions that foster the advancement of women in HE.

### ***Challenges that Impact Self-Efficacy and Hinder the Advancement of Women in HE***

Lent et al. (1994) explained how individuals determine their career path through the development of vocational interests, setting career goals, building self-efficacy, and the intent to persevere in educational and work environments, as presented in the social-cognitive career theory. As participants reflected on their experiences in HE leadership throughout their careers, they described barriers that could affect women's advancement and lack of interest in HE leadership, including emotional well-being, deficiency in numbers, stereotypes, and lack of structure to support women. Arlee viewed the advancement of women in HE administrative leadership as hindered due to the perception that women emote too much. For those women who had not risen to the top, she felt someone had kept them down because of the viewpoint that they were too emotional or incapable of fulfilling tasks due to being people pleasers. Arlee` also

perceived the lack of female leadership in HE was because of money and entrepreneurship. Likewise, Michelle's viewpoint on the hindrance of the advancement of women in HE administrative leadership was due to the idea that women were too emotional, viewed as being weak due to emotions, and incapable of leading an A-team. She summed it up as society believed women were not strong enough overall. As perceived by Michelle, there was still an underrepresentation of women in administrative leadership positions in HE because society perceived women as not strong enough to handle work, kids, lead a team of individuals to be successful, make money, be profitable, and it was just male-dominated.

Dottie attested that the lack of women's presence in higher education leadership was why there were not enough women in those positions. Dottie perceived the continued underrepresentation of women in higher-education administrative leadership positions was due to the idea that women viewed the missing 10% qualifications as the reason they should not apply. However, men who were 30 to 50% meeting qualifications were putting their resumes out there. Kimberly shared the same sentiments as she described that the lack of women's presence in HE leadership accounted for the insufficient number of women in those positions. She added that other women preventing women from having the opportunity to move up and the idea that women were expected to be caregivers and have families, thus making them incapable of fulfilling leadership roles, also contributed to the need for more female presence in HE leadership roles.

Kate's perceived imposter syndrome, balancing work and parenthood and continuing education, and obtaining the degrees to be competitive contribute to the continued underrepresentation of women in administrative leadership positions in HE. She expressed the lack of structure in place to support women with children, the perception that the female



leadership style is weak, and the perception that leading while having empathy is weak as a hindrance to the advancement of women in HE leadership. Along those lines, Dr. Lydia described the lack of advancement of women in HE administrative leadership as being multifactorial, including women being primary caregivers; time constraints with competing demands; women with self-limiting beliefs; lack of support and access to mentors and sponsors, and an overall level of psychic opposition, realistic time constraints, and competing demands.

Participants also described the challenges work-life balance had on selecting women for HE leadership positions and women choosing to be in HE administrative leadership. Some of these challenges, as perceived by participants, depicted why there was a continued underrepresentation of women in HE leadership, including lack of job opportunities, women not applying for positions, and challenges they had experienced, such as having families and a work-life balance. Kate explained: "I had a job interview where I was asked if I planned to have kids, which I don't believe is a legal question, but I have been asked that in interviews before. Um, I've been in searches where I've been on the search committee and had members of the search committee say things like well, you know, she's reproductive age, so, you know, if she has kids, she'll, she may go on leave or things like that. So, so many. Things that you just think higher ed would be more enlightened on that they're not." Dr. Charlene expressed the other end of the spectrum: "I think that has been an issue for women, being not a lot in their senior level, because they're still trying to work like they don't have a work-life balance, they don't have children at home or take care of themselves or you know, that time that we need to decompress and to take self-care. I really like, I think that's the biggest thing." When it came to work-life balance, participants also identified what it looked like for them as women in HE leadership and how it posed to be a challenge, which Cooper shared: "I think my biggest challenge has been being

overlooked to the point where when you finally look and see my capabilities, now you want to exploit it and then I then have no work-life balance because you expect me to be on call 24/7 now that you know that I was always like that." Likewise, Dr. Michelle recounted:

Work-life balance is a huge challenge for me because I am the type of person, I will stay at work to get it done, and not just get it done, but get it done with the spirit of excellence. Come in early, stay late, work on the weekends to fulfill the mission on the plan that the organization has.

### ***Solutions that Foster the Advancement of Women in HE***

Kobler (2019) argued the necessity of solutions in response to gender equity in high-level leadership roles; leaders should provide additional opportunities for women should be afforded due to the innovation which will come about as a result of diversity and not just to manufacture equality as a statistical resolve. Participants presented their perceptions of how HE institutions could resolve the underrepresentation of women in HE senior-level leadership and their viewpoints on how women can advance in HE leadership. Solutions included institutional support in skills and leadership development, work-life balance, and hiring, pay, and promotion; women in leadership supporting one another through advocacy, mentorship, modeling leadership styles, and being a support system; and lastly, women having a sense of self-efficacy, developing goals, and creating a support system. Kate felt the solution was more intentionality in the hiring process, supporting women with children and cultivating an understanding of different leadership styles, and intentionally having a diverse representation of leadership styles. Moreover, Dr. Lydia felt that leadership development programs, an institutional infrastructure that supports academic promotion and leadership for women, networking, mentorship, and sponsorship would resolve the underrepresentation of women in administrative leadership positions. Dawn attested

intentionality; reaching out to other women and providing them with a seat at the table could be a solution to increasing the number of women in HE leadership. She maintained that women who see talents in other women should pull them into those spaces, give them the opportunity and support, and help build their confidence. She shared that many women deal with imposter syndrome, so providing the opportunities and allowing them to either accept the opportunity or decline it was ok but building one another up and providing the opportunities was important. Similar to the solutions to the underrepresentation of women in HE leadership roles, participants shared strategies to foster the advancement of women in HE leadership.

Participants also shared their viewpoints on ways the advancement of women in HE leadership roles can be fostered, including advocacy, institutional practices, relationships, and self-efficacy. Kate explained having more women in leadership, having a work-life balance where the community of people surrounding the female leader was supportive and assisted with extra duties outside of the workplace, and higher education institutions' presidents and boards making a concerted effort to incorporate inclusivity and diversity when hiring as ways the advancement of women in senior-level leadership roles could be facilitated. Additionally, Dr. Lydia believed the advancement of women in HE leadership could be promoted as: "I think a supportive environment, I think a, a clear understanding of what they need to do. I think self-efficacy is key. But everybody gets to a point where their self-efficacy waivers, so you not only need your own sort of internal self-efficacy, but it's very helpful to be in a supportive environment. It's helpful to be, you know, they're doing cluster hires now where you have a group, a cohort, colleagues, you're working together, you're pushing each other." Furthermore, Destiny believed other women in higher education leadership, women advocating for one another, and when invited to have a seat at the table, not simply being in the room but being

vocal and heard encourages the advancement of women in HE leadership. Lastly, Dawn felt the advancement of women in these roles could be facilitated by male and female leaders recognizing and appreciating the value women brought to the organization.

As previously stated, the research questions answered during this research were developed by the stated purpose and theoretical framework of this study, thus resulting in the three primary themes of (a) development of interpersonal practices for women in higher education leadership, (b) women in higher education leadership and the role of self-efficacy, and (c) barriers for women in higher education leadership were revealed during data analysis. Within the respective themes, sub-themes emerged, which further informed this study's purpose and theoretical framework.

### **Research Question Responses**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore how women serving in HE administrative leadership positions describe their experiences while advancing in higher leadership. Implementing Bandura's (1982) self-efficacy theory as the primary theoretical framework, this study attempted to answer a central research question and three guiding questions. The sample for this study included 13 women, all of whom held senior-level administrative leadership positions in various higher education institutions. The participation of these women in HE leadership allowed me to explore the research questions as they completed the WS-Ei assessment, individual interviews, and focus groups (research and interview questions crosswalk matrix, see Table 8, Appendix L). The central research question asked: *How do women serving in higher education administrative leadership positions describe their experiences while advancing in higher leadership?* The response to this question is apprised by the findings pertaining to the three guiding questions below.

Sub-question 1 asked: *How do women in higher education administrative positions describe their leadership style and its impact on their advancement?* This question examined participants' perceptions of their leadership style and its impact on their advancement in HE leadership. This guiding question produced data that largely informed the theme of developing interpersonal skills for life, learning, and work. Participants echoed the importance of development, including continuing education, collaboration, communication, conflict and resolution, networking, professional development, and support systems. Participants identified their approach to leadership and the challenges they have faced due to their implemented leadership. Destiny described her implemented leadership style as managing the people rather than the job. Her leadership style treated her employees as who they were as a person, so what worked for one only worked for some, and that was her way of providing effective leadership. As a result of her gender status, she shared that as a female leader, women tend to nurture a lot, or so it is perceived to be that way. She felt the expectation was for women to be stern and more of a disciplinarian rather than pamper their employees; however, she viewed it as coaching and not pampering. Destiny did not find being harsh or disrespectful beneficial and preferred the opportunity for everyone involved to learn. She did not take a more masculine approach or display characteristics of aggression or assertiveness, causing others to question her leadership. Her response to this expectation was that she had not received any complaints from those she managed, but instead, they had responded in appreciation and respect to her leadership style because she did not manage the job; she managed the people. Along those lines, Michelle explained during the focus group that women in leadership faced challenges such as:

We're seen as emotional creatures being female, that nurturing. And so, I have to be aware of that all the time. Although I'm very passionate about education, I eat,

breathe, and sleep education and wanting students to learn skills so they can go to work and stand up on their own take care of their families. I have to be very careful with not reacting. So, I tend to just hold in and not speak up so that can be a challenge definitely for females. And I heard someone, I think it was Dr. Charlene mentioned, you know, so we don't come off aggressive. Seeing previous women in roles such as mine who were just, had that iron fist, you know, as was mentioned and they were seen as being too aggressive because they were female but had a male figure made those same comments or taken that same approach that they would have just been getting the job done and putting some structure and some accountability in place. So, I think those are definitely challenges that I have seen in my profession.

Kate advised women who aspired to be in HE leadership to avoid the imposter phenomenon dictating their decision to be in HE leadership and encouraged them not to feel like they must have a masculine leadership style. When developing their skills and best practices as a leader, she considered the best leadership style most authentic to women new to HE leadership. Lastly, she would urge them to lean into other women in higher education and find trusted colleagues and friends that could help problem solve and talk through challenges they may have experienced.

Sub-question 2 explored: *What experiences shape the self-efficacy of women in higher education administrative leadership roles?* This question aimed to describe participants' interpretations regarding their self-efficacy and the experiences that have formed these perceptions. All participants described their self-efficacy as adequately reflecting their ability to fulfill their leadership role in HE administrative leadership successfully. Self-efficacy for

participants of this study serving in HE leadership roles reflected confidence, evolution, perseverance, skill development, and strength. As a woman in what participants referred to as a male-dominated industry, most expressed how this inequity affected their self-efficacy. However, they each revealed ways in which they were able to overcome those challenges. As Bandura (1982, 1995) asserted, the foundation of the self-efficacy theory identifies how one is motivated, achieves accomplishments, and the emotional welfare and how individuals can impact the occurrences that affect their situation. During the focus group, participants described their self-efficacy, reflecting on their experiences as women in HE leadership. Cooper reflected on the previous state of her self-efficacy in comparison to her self-efficacy at the time of this study: "I think as of right now, it's stronger than it has been before because I think that being young and naive and getting, not getting, just feeling as though, I wasn't educated enough to be with my peers, and you know, be part of the conversation. Now that I've been through that and I see, you know, as I reflect, I'm like, no, you had a voice you just chose not to, you know what I mean because I was embarrassed, I was young. Now it's like listen, so what are we doing, and let me just tell you from my experience how I think that this can work, and I offer, I mean you know just give me all of your you know input." Dr. Michelle described her self-efficacy and experiences:

I believe that mine is strong now in my career. I believe that every role that I've gotten into, I have had the capability of fulfilling that obligation. But I also feel that there have been roles and roles in leadership positions where I've had to dig down deep and find that and continue to push forward and educate myself to be able to do an amazing job. I also feel that now in the leadership position that I am in at this moment in time, I have the capabilities and I have everything that I need

to be able to do it well, but again, I do have a lot, I feel like a lot of blockage in that position as well still, but for the most part I think I am pretty much fully equipped to be able to go forward and do what I've been called to do in this current position.

As applicable to gender biases, most of the participants expressed experiences that impacted their self-efficacy and how they overcame those challenges. During the individual interviews, Kate recounted an experience with barriers and biases, such as a previous male boss referring to the women in his department as his harem, not being taken seriously because she was a woman, encountering "he-peating" where a man repeats what a woman has said, everyone gets it or is in agreement, and being in a room of nine men and four women, and when a male moves on, there were gripes that the cabinet was female dominated because a woman was selected to fill the vacant position (despite the ratio being eight to five). Lastly, Kate shared when she was asked during an interview if she was planning to have children. She overcame those perceived barriers and biases by remaining at the table even when she felt she was being pushed away, speaking up for herself and other women when "he-peating" took place, addressing gendered feedback in real-time, and being ok with risks that accompanied standing up for herself and others. Dr. Lydia echoed having experienced barriers and biases, such as seeing white men retire. A job was waiting for them because they were in a favored group. However, it was not the same for women; white men stepped over the line, but no matter the line, policy, or procedure, there was always a soft landing for them and the negotiation of salaries for men where women were underpaid for the same job as a man who was making more. Dr. Lydia acknowledges those barriers and biases as being ever-present. She overcame those perceived barriers and biases by being committed to excellence. No matter the low ceiling others placed over her head, she did



not allow it to discourage her and decided to change the minds of naysayers with her success, which she achieved with persistence, optimism, and hard work.

Sub-question 3 inquired: *How does one's perceived self-efficacy affect their pursuit of leadership opportunities as a woman in higher education?* Similar to research sub-question two, this question intended to gauge how participants describe the experiences of their career pathway and advancement as they perceive it as a woman in HE administration. Many participants expressed opportunities that had afforded them advancement during their career pathway, such as being appointed to positions, promotions, and references from others were shared as participants expressed how those avenues leading to their advancement positively affected their self-efficacy. Dr. Lydia viewed her professional opportunities, faith, and track record of developing trusting relationships as factors that shaped her perceived level of self-efficacy. As postulated by Bandura (1982) the third factor of his self-efficacy theory, verbal persuasion, has an on self-efficacy, describing as social interactions can verbally persuade individuals to believe their ability in achieving or mastering a given task, thus assuring the completion of the task. As described by Dr. Lydia:

I would say some of the best strategies for building a career in higher Ed. Is to be committed not only to personal excellence. Intentionally cultivating a network. If you are fortunate to have a mentor in your organization. Right. But you need peer mentors. Ideally, if you have a supervisory mentor or you have a professional mentor who is further down the career trajectory than you are. Be intentional about how you use your time at professional meetings. Going strategically to sessions, to people with and meeting people who may be doing some of the things that you want to do. So, you begin to cultivate relationships so. Cultivating

relationships, building network. Having a long view. Building relationships in your organization and navigating those relationships with supervisors. Cultivate your skills in managing up.

Destiny explained how she perceived her self-efficacy throughout her career pathway in HE leadership: "I think I'm more, I'm stronger now. I've been at this institution now for nine years and have had the opportunity to serve in several leadership roles and most currently I think in this current role, I see myself a little bit more adequate and prepared for it, and that's because I've been a little bit more intentional about my personal awareness and self-awareness, but I've also been able to take some time to reflect on myself and my journey here and what I have learned and what I can instill in others to learn as well. But more importantly, it's more of the understanding of the barriers that we frequently are faced with and understanding that it's not my battle alone. So, it's not for me to take on and to identify and dismantle alone. So that's why I seek support, strong support structures and familiar relationships, and healthy relationships, and other women in leadership. And so that, in turn, makes me stronger, but it also makes my institution and my community of women in leadership stronger because we identify that we're not in this alone." Similarly, Marie expressed how she valued teamwork and being hands-on with the daily tasks alongside her employees, which she perceived as positively impacting her self-efficacy. She attested that her leadership success reflected how she works with her team instead of being over her team. That she worked alongside them and made them feel worthwhile and important, which helped her be a better leader and helped her team grow as well:

I think on the positive side I have tried very hard to learn everything I can along the way about my position and about the employees that I supervise, about what they do, and how I can help them be better to make my life easier. Just to grow

with my team instead of just worrying about me growing and it's served me well through the years, you know whether I'm jumping in the dumpster and bouncing up and down and smashing down cardboard to make it all fit with my employees or whether we're on a really important task that we have to get done right now. It's important to work with those people along the way and support them, so in turn, they support you.

### **Summary**

Chapter Four included an introduction of the participants of this study and data analysis findings using a phenomenological research design guided by the self-efficacy theoretical framework. As provided throughout this chapter, an introduction of themes and sub-themes that surfaced during the data analysis process provided responses to the research questions. In the guise of composite textural and structural descriptions and a description of the essence of women in higher education leadership experience, this chapter ended with a final summation of this study's findings.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION**

### **Overview**

This transcendental phenomenological study explored how women ( $N = 13$ ) serving in higher education (HE) administrative positions describe their experiences while advancing in higher leadership. The research study was designed to understand the phenomenon of women's experiences and answer questions surrounding their leadership and advancement, self-efficacy, and the influence of self-efficacy concerning the pursuit of leadership roles in HE administration. A review of this research includes a discussion; interpretation of findings; and practical, theoretical, and empirical practices, along with a discussion showing the correlation between this study's findings and the literature reviewed in Chapter Two. The chapter ends with a discussion of the study's limitations, recommendations for future research, and a final summary of this research.

### **Discussion**

Through the implementation of Moustakas's (1994) transcendental phenomenological methodology, the attainment of the results of this research and textural descriptions developed as a result of participants' descriptions of their experiences as women in HE administrative leadership as well as structural descriptions illustrated as they identified the conditions, situations, and context of their experiences throughout their career pathway (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The findings presented in Chapter Four are summarized throughout this chapter as the synthesis of the textural and structural descriptions using phenomenological reduction and imaginative variation depicts the essence of women's experiences in HE administration.

Utilizing purposeful and snowball sampling garnered the selection of participants most appropriate for describing the experience of being a woman in HE administration while

advancing in HE leadership. The 13 participants of the study all derived from the East Coast of the United States, serving in leadership roles in both universities and career schools. As a criteria requirement, all participants were females serving in HE senior-level leadership and included three White American and ten Black American women. Regarding time served in the industry, some participants had been employed in HE institutions for 25-45 years, others 10-19 years, and the remaining 3-9 years, and of those years, participant's experience in leadership roles ranged from 1-41 years (see Table 1). Participants completed a Work Self-Efficacy Inventory (Mind Garden, 2023) and participated in individual interviews and a focus group as they recounted their career pathway experiences in HE leadership.

Participants of this study share the everyday experience of being a female in what they and other research studies (Castano et al., Fowler, 2019; Harris, 2019; McLendon, 2018) deemed as a male-dominated industry, HE leadership. Despite experiencing the same phenomenon, participants experienced it in separate, unique ways and deduced their meaning of the experience. Nonetheless, the common element among participants' experiences was relationships and how those relationships either created or blocked opportunities, brought about challenges, empowered or impeded self-efficacy, or were a support system. As a result of the participants' experiences described during this study, the essence of being a woman in HE leadership means understanding and navigating the various barriers, biases, interpersonal and intrapersonal development, and work-life balance. Participants expressed growth throughout their career pathway in developing their leadership, gaining confidence in their abilities, and overcoming barriers as women in HE administrative leadership. As leaders, colleagues, role models, women, and as a person, participants of this study each experienced an evolution of who they were as a woman in HE leadership in their distinctive way. These women saw the value and the

essentiality of developing and fostering relationships that supported their endeavors of attaining and sustaining leadership in HE, supported those to whom they provided leadership, encouraged women in HE leadership to support other women and unearth ways to address systemic barriers to minimize the underrepresentation and advancement of women in HE leadership.

As postulated, participants shared the essence of what it means to be a woman in HE leadership through descriptions of their experiences of being a woman in HE leadership. Some participants shared experiences that spanned a decade or more, and others were still acclimating to what it meant to be a woman in leadership with five or fewer years. All shared similar sentiments of having desired to excel in their roles, continue to grow, experience equal opportunities, and have a work-life balance. Some participants expressed the challenges of being the first in their role or creating or fixing a situation before settling into their roles, which was challenging. Participants shared experiences, and previous research shows that women who choose a career pathway in HE leadership achieve success. Nevertheless, the progression of a balanced scale of gender diversity in HE senior-level administrative positions is still far from ideal.

While reflecting on the progression of women in HE leadership, participants addressed there being more inclusivity in women in HE leadership roles. However, they considered the progress slow, which Nakku (2021) echoed as she argued that the gender imbalance in HE leadership is still a worldwide topic, with a slow and uneven progression toward any resemblance of fairness or impartiality. Cheung (2021) identified a worldwide progression of women in leadership positions at top institutions at 19.5%, as 39 out of 200 of those institutions' women lead. A recent study identified women obtaining HE presidency positions at 32% (Fuesting et al., 2022). As participants reflected on their experiences, they shared their

perspectives on the progression of women in HE leadership, which they acknowledge seeing a progression, albeit rather slowly. Most participants spoke about experiences within their organization and the progression witnessed due to their longevity with the respective HE institution, and others spoke mainly about what they have seen in the industry on a larger scale. Participants felt the progression of women in HE leadership could happen if there is an interest and investment in women being more present in those senior-level roles where they have a more active role in decision-making, their voices can be heard and input valued, and influence policies and practices to ensure the roles in HE leadership are more inclusive and equitable for women. As presented in the following interpretation of findings, participants shared their experiences of being a woman in HE administration while advancing in leadership, yielding the themes (a) development of interpersonal practices for women in higher education leadership, (b) women in higher education leadership and the role of self-efficacy, and (c) barriers for women in higher education leadership.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

As outlined in Chapter Four, the findings of this research addressed and answered the research questions of the stated purpose and theoretical framework of this study, thus bringing about the three primary themes of (a) development of interpersonal practices for women in higher education leadership, (b) women in higher education leadership and the role of self-efficacy, and (c) barriers for women in higher education leadership were revealed during data analysis. The seven emerging sub-themes further informed this study's purpose and theoretical framework.

## Summary of Thematic Findings

### Women's Approach to HE Leadership

Developing interpersonal practices was the first theme presented as participants described how developing their interpersonal skills impacted their career pathway to attaining their senior-level positions. As they explained their approach to leadership, some participants attributed their leadership style as collaborative, communicative, and inclusive, while others described their approach as empathetic, mentorship, delegation, and advocacy. The influences on their chosen leadership style varied, deriving from observing others who were successful in leadership, observing the failures of previous leadership, having a mentor to model and provide guidance, and being the type of leader they desired along their career pathway. In favor of the findings distinguishing relationships as significant, Mohrfeld (2020) asserted that women who have obtained HE leadership can assist women with becoming a leader in HE by serving as mentors and role models. Likewise, Kobler (2019) maintained that developing leadership skills, mentorship, support groups, and the overall development of women in HE leadership would be advantageous to increase the number of women obtaining HE upper management positions. Correspondingly, this research yielded two sub-themes supporting this first primary theme, which outlines strategies that could increase the number of women in HE leadership as utilized by women navigating a career pathway in HE leadership and women aspiring to be HE leaders. Interpersonal development and the importance of relationships were additional findings of this study described by participants as ways they overcame biases, barriers, imposter syndrome, self-doubt, and finding a balance between their responsibilities at work and those outside of work. These two sub-themes are suggested for present and future women, using them to navigate and sustain a career pathway in HE leadership through relationships including mentorship,



community groups, family, colleagues, and other women in higher education who have walked similar pathways.

### **The Importance of Having a Sense of Self-Efficacy**

The second theme, women in HE leadership and the role of self-efficacy, resulted in the identification of how one's belief in their ability to fulfill the responsibilities of a leadership role, the level of confidence possessed to resolve conflicts and effectively overcome challenges, and the effects of the relationships within the workplace impacts women's decision to pursue a career in HE leadership or remain in the industry. Reflective on the theoretical framework of this research, Bandura's (1982) self-efficacy theory, the findings of this study, and the role of self-efficacy in the attainment, retention, and sustainability of women in HE administration roles, participants reflected on the growth of their self-efficacy throughout their career pathway as a leader. They attested to how being a woman in the industry positively and negatively impacted their self-efficacy. As informed by sub-themes, inequity, intrapersonal progress, and impacts on self-efficacy derived the theme of women in HE leadership and the role of self-efficacy.

All of the participants of this study related to the inequity in HE leadership as applicable to it being a male-dominated industry, an imbalance when hiring and promoting women, unequal pay, unrealistic expectations regarding work-life balance, and stereotypical behavior that is not acknowledged or reprimanded. The findings of this study suggest that the inequity which embodies the HE infrastructure hinders the advancement of women in HE leadership. Due to the barriers and biases, participants explained how developing their intrapersonal skills fostered their ability to work around and overcome the inequities faced during the career pathway. Participants expressed that having goals, encouraging themselves, repeating motivational mantras and quotes, their faith, self-reflection, and not becoming wrapped up in other people's perceptions allowed

them to develop and nurture their intrapersonal development. This research implies that women serving in HE leadership can thrive as HE leaders with a healthy sense of self-awareness and possess the tools to successfully and professionally manage the challenges faced as a woman in the industry. Lastly, the impact on self-efficacy examined participants' attestation of having their self-efficacy affected positively, negatively, or both. Hagan and Olivier (2022) argued that challenges to women's sense of self-efficacy occur when barriers and complications arise while navigating their career pathway in leadership. According to Hagan and Oliver's assertion, participants voiced feelings of self-doubt, imposter syndrome, incapable, overwhelmed, and overextended, which indicates a negatively impacted self-efficacy. With that said, participants were able to achieve success as a result of positive impacts on their self-efficacy as well as despite the negative, and attributed the end results to self-confidence, having a support system, their mentor(s), and reaching out to other women in HE leadership.

### **Navigating Barriers as a Woman in HE Leadership**

This study's final theme reflected the barriers women faced in HE leadership, such as the lack of gender diversity; unacceptance of their leadership style; biases about race, gender, and age; lack of mentorship, and not having a voice amongst male colleagues. Participants' response to these barriers echoes previous strategies such as building relationships, educating themselves, trusting their ability to achieve success, securing mentorship, and relying on their self-efficacy. Sub-themes that added to the primary theme of the barriers experienced by participants of this study included challenges that impact self-efficacy and hinder the advancement of women in HE and solutions that foster the advancement of women in HE. As a result of the experiences described by participants, findings suggest barriers can affect the advancement of women in HE

leadership as well as deter women from seeking a career in HE leadership. Moreover, these challenges also impact self-efficacy.

The decision to advance to senior-level positions in HE leadership is forfeited when women's advancement conflicts with the harsh reality of politics, sexism, and work-life balance (Eliadis, 2018). To the point made by Eliadis, participants of this study also identified barriers that hinder the advancement of women in HE leadership as not having the support needed to be both a leader and a caregiver for family, the male-to-female ratio in those positions, being accused of possessing a male leadership style, along with being emotional and not being allotted the same opportunities and graces as their male colleagues. Due to the belief that women do not possess the required leadership skills to be influential leaders, imposed gender and leadership stereotypes and not having a mentor are barriers that hinder women from securing senior-level positions (Nahabedian, 2020). These barriers, also experienced by participants of this research, have a negative impact. As described by one participant, she shut down from being subjected to biases and the effect of those biases on her self-efficacy, which she felt slowed her growth and advancement and made her ineffective in her role due to taking a step back to avoid being reprimanded.

Consequently, these findings allude to why previous research, including the perceptions of participants of this study, view the progression of the advancement of women in HE leadership as being present yet slow. Nakku (2021) argued that the gender imbalance in HE leadership is a continued issue worldwide, with a lagging and uneven progression toward any resemblance of fairness or impartiality. Keeping this in mind, researchers continue their pursuit of identifying solutions to the ongoing underrepresentation of female leaders in HE leadership. Similarly, the findings of this study suggested solutions for HE institutions, women who serve in

HE leadership, and women who aspire obtainment of HE administrative positions. Facilitating the increase of gender diversity in these leadership positions requires the participation of institution leaders who influence the practices to promote the hiring, promotion, and retention of more women; women who have made it advocating for other women, assisting in career pathway development, and mentoring, and lastly, women aspiring to be in these roles building their interpersonal skills, self-efficacy, and support system as a foundation for their experience upon obtainment of a career in HE leadership.

The results of this research identified implications for practice to improve and increase the progression of women attaining HE leadership roles. The results of this study identified ways in which HE institution leaders, women serving in HE leadership, and women who aspire to have a career pathway in HE leadership can facilitate lessening the gap in the ratio of men to women in HE administrative leadership.

### **Implications for Practice**

Nahabedian (2020) asserted that despite the increase in HE opportunities to obtain senior-level administrative positions, the grim amount of women who attain these positions continues to be a serious matter. That said, practical implications for this study add to the current literature surrounding the experiences of women in HE leadership as results of this research identified ways in which HE administrators, women serving in HE administrative positions, and women who aspire to a career pathway in HE leadership can advance the opportunity and successful attainment of leadership roles for women in HE administration. Participants resoundingly expressed their belief that leadership opportunities generate from the intentionality of HE leadership recruitment, hiring, promotion of women, and supporting women through coaching, support groups, and work-life balance.

## **HE Administrators**

Kobler (2019) asserted the necessity of understanding the various ways in which women experience a career in leadership, including guidance, environmental factors, and career pipeline. Taking that into account, the findings of this research confirmed and expanded the literature regarding the experiences of women in HE leadership and how HE administrators can work from the top down to facilitate change in how they recruit, interview, train, mentor, and retain women in HE administration. Participants of this study shared experiences of their career pathway in HE leadership, identifying both barriers and opportunities as parts of their journey, which allowed them a chance to provide their perspective on what hinders the advancement of women in HE leadership as well as explain what they felt the solution would be to address the underrepresentation of women in these roles. The findings of this study add to the current body of literature; as Hagan and Olivier (2022) argued, having an understanding of the specific encumbrances women face in HE leadership positions and the effects on their self-efficacy allows HE institutions the opportunity to create a standard of acceptance, a cultural shift in diversity, and increase leadership roles for women, and as contended by Kobler (2019), provides an understanding of the developmental practices carried out to expand the presence of women in HE leadership. As noted by Kobler (2019) understanding the career pathway of women and what guided them to their leadership level presents more opportunities for women seeking a career pathway in HE leadership, thus increasing the number of women seen in HE leadership. The first implication for practice is how HE leaders can increase the presence of women in HE leadership positions, thus ensuring a more diverse and inclusive depiction of leaders in HE leadership. The results of this study associated intentional recruitment and hiring, career development in leadership, interpersonal skill development, mentorship, networking opportunities, and work-life

balance support with addressing the underrepresentation of women in HE leadership for decision-makers. As posited by Kobler (2019) increasing the number of women in HE upper management roles could be attained by developing their leadership skills, providing mentorship, and building a network of supporters. Likewise, Harris (2019) maintained that women's leadership success depends on their qualifications and the skills and strategies supporting their advancement. Therefore, institutional infrastructures and the lack of enlistment processes, leadership development, and mentor support to facilitate inclusivity and diversity when hiring and promoting women in HE leadership contribute to the need for more female representation and advancement in HE leadership.

### **Women in HE Leadership**

As women serving in HE leadership, participants described their experiences of having female leaders in administrative roles mentoring, training, and providing them with opportunities at the beginning and throughout their career in HE leadership. Women who have successfully navigated a career pathway in HE leadership are in a position to enhance the number of women in the industry, as noted by Mohrfeld (2020), through mentorship and modeling for women who aspire to become leaders both inside and outside of HE. With the implementation of Bandura's (1982) self-efficacy theory as the theoretical framework for this study, women who are leaders in HE administration can impact future women with aspirations of a career in HE leadership. Bandura's explanation of vicarious experience reflects the practical implication of this study that when individuals observe others' successes or failures similar to theirs, they are vicariously experiencing others' experiences. For women seeking guidance on how to navigate being a woman in a male-dominated industry, according to Bandura (1982) as they observe women in HE leadership, what is seen, heard, or modeled has the potential to enhance their self-efficacy,

notably due to them having the desire of being in those leadership positions, learning how to advance to their desired level of leadership and embody the learned strategies to overcome biases or barriers they may face.

During this research, participants explained how their relationships with women in the industry impacted their self-efficacy, advancement, and sustainability as female leaders in HE. The importance and value of building and nurturing relationships with women serving in leadership echoed throughout the interviews and focus groups as participants described ways in which they view how the minimalization of underrepresented women in the HE leadership as well as the advancement to upper-level leadership can occur with the assistance of women who have successfully navigated their career pathway as a HE leader. This research suggests that women in HE administration are in leadership positions where they can facilitate hiring other women, advocate for policy and practice change in developing interpersonal skills and work-life balance, and support through mentorship and networking opportunities.

### **Women Aspiring to be in HE Senior-Level Administration**

Kobler (2019) communicated the need for a solution to the continued issue of gender imbalance in HE leadership, along with career strategies imposed to address the lack of female presence in HE upper-level leadership roles in HE organizations and institutions for current and future implementation to facilitate women with achieving their goal of having a career in HE leadership. As a systemic issue, past and present research is ongoing to identify ways to bridge the gap of the numerous inequalities found in HE leadership regarding gender, pay, promotion, accepted leadership styles, and overall acceptance. With that being said, this research, along with other studies, has identified ways in which women can create, obtain, and sustain their career pathways in HE administrative leadership. As the final implication, the findings of this study,

accompanied by other studies, suggest that women with aspirations of being in HE administrative leadership roles establish ways of determining their trajectory and the strategies and support needed to accomplish their goals of having a career pathway in HE.

Previous research conducted by Selzer and Robles (2019) argued that attaining HE leadership positions could be achieved by women who distinguish themselves as rising leaders, identify moments for career assessment and reflection, and progressively execute strategies for promotion supported by women who are successful in senior leadership. Findings of this study on ways that women with aspirations of being a HE leader included strategically planning what a career and future advancement in HE leadership means; being a leader before becoming a leader; being amongst women in leadership to learn and grow, and developing the skills and support needed for work-life balance. For women who aspire to be in HE senior-level administrative positions, the results of this research identify ways in which women can attain and sustain a career pathway in HE leadership. Participants were vocal regarding women who aspire to have a career in HE leadership and their responsibility of facilitating those aspirations coming to fruition. They identified leadership opportunities for women who desire a career pathway in HE leadership are achieved when women have goals, continue their education, participate in professional development, network, build a support group, and secure mentorship. Of the strategies presented by participants, mentorship resounded throughout interviews and focus groups as participants were adamant about the vitality of mentorship and the impact of having a mentor throughout their career regarding their leadership development, advancement, self-efficacy, and overall ability to overcome the challenges they faced and remain in the industry. Participant's perspective, backed by Kobler's (2019) assertion, having a working knowledge of how to achieve the goal of being in HE leadership as imparted by women who have achieved



success as upper-level leaders, the practices and strategies they employed during their career pathway included, will facilitate women's decision to pursue a career in HE leadership. Once attaining the desired level of leadership, findings show it can be maintained by continuing to grow in knowledge and skill development as a leader; finding and using their voice; becoming an advocate and mentor for the next woman seeking a career pathway in HE leadership; and implementing and adhering to a work-life balance that supports being an effective leader, manage family responsibilities, and overall supporting healthy boundaries.

### **Theoretical and Empirical Implications**

The results of this research have theoretical implications for HE researchers, experiences of women, and self-efficacy. Utilizing Bandura's (1982, 1995) self-efficacy theory as the primary theory of this the experiences of women who serve in HE administrative positions were explored as participants provided insight into their career pathway by describing their experiences of entering HE leadership, navigating their career pathway, and sustaining their self-efficacy. Bandura (1982) described how one's beliefs or social interactions can affect how they perceive their self-efficacy. Considering the barriers and biases experienced by women in HE leadership, participants expressed the various way their self-efficacy was affected and the ways they overcame and developed a strong sense of self-efficacy. The findings of this study identified how participants' experiences influenced the role of self-efficacy and the impacts on self-efficacy during their career pathways.

Research suggests HE senior leadership comprises mainly men, accounting for the underrepresented women. As a foundation for feminist studies and activism, Smith's (1974) feminist standpoint theory facilitated identifying how women could advance amongst the male gender. Participants of this study reflected on their success in HE leadership. They identified

ways in which the advancement of women could take place through opportunities provided by HE administrators, support from women in HE leadership, and women aspiring to HE leadership positions being proactive. Applicable to supporting the enhancement of women's self-efficacy, the identified recommendations for the advancement of women in HE could increase the number of women in those leadership roles.

Lent et al. (1994) explained the social-cognitive theory as one of the essential career development theories describing how people form vocational interests, set career goals, and build self-efficacy and intention to persevere in the educational and work environments. Participants of this study expressed their experiences from the beginning of their careers to their current status at the time of this research. As they described their career pathway, they identified having goals; being presented with opportunities; encountering challenges; experiencing self-doubt; overcoming said challenges and having a stronger self-efficacy, and sharing strategies that assisted them in their successes, which they also perceived to assist current and future women in HE leadership.

Empirically, this research adds to the current literature surrounding the underrepresentation of female presence in HE institutions in senior-level administrative positions. As the continued underrepresentation of women in HE leadership remains a concern due to the dominance of men in senior and executive leadership positions at HE institutions, this study contributes to understanding the experiences of women serving in HE leadership and the factors that led to their success. There is no refuting that there has been progress over the years, and women successfully obtain upper-level leadership positions, as this study attests to women attaining these roles and having longevity. However, the number of men in HE leadership still outweighs the number of women, and the longer this imbalance remains, the more it hinders the

advancement of women in HE leadership. This study examined how women described their experiences as leaders in HE administrative positions and their advancement. Understanding the phenomenon of these women's experiences, including their career pathway, leadership, advancement, the status of their self-efficacy, and the effects of perceived biases and barriers on their leadership and their self-efficacy has empirical implications applicable to HE administrators, women serving in HE leadership, and women aspiring a career pathway in HE administrative leadership.

For HE administrators, the results of this study indicate the need for reassessment of the recruitment, hiring, and promotion processes; internal and external support of work-life balance; leadership development; and mentorship programs to increase the number of women in leadership roles. For women serving in HE leadership, these findings expand the literature utilized to assist in closing the gender gap by advocating for the hiring, promotion, and equal pay allotted to women in HE leadership; mentoring other women and helping them develop a career pathway, including strategies to help them navigate the challenges of being a woman in an industry dominated by men, and assisting women with developing a support system and work-life balance to ensure they have a healthy self-efficacy. Lastly, for women who aspire to have a career in HE leadership, the findings of this study demonstrate ways of obtaining HE senior-level leadership positions through defining goals, skill development, and building relationships.

Fowler (2019) sought an overall understanding of women leaders, including the environmental and personal mechanisms that supported their successful careers. The study's primary findings identified formal leadership training, supportive networks, and leveraging internal strengths as the environmental and personal mechanisms that fostered the participants' success. Likewise, this research identified women who have achieved a successful career

pathway and advancement to senior-level administrative leadership roles. Findings suggest that developing interpersonal skills, understanding, nurturing, and developing self-efficacy, navigating barriers, a commitment to work-life balance, and building a support system can foster the advancement of women in HE leadership.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

This study was an exploration of women's experiences in HE administrative leadership. Using a qualitative research approach, the data collection was primarily open-ended to capture a descriptive, in-depth, detailed, holistic, and real-life context of participants' experiences (Patton, 2014). The limitations of this study included participants: (1) understanding and responding to the questions presented in the Work Self-Efficacy Inventory (WS-Ei), (2) participants' candor expressed while answering interview questions and participating in the focus group, (3) potential bias held by participants of their colleagues, and (4) diversity. Research can potentially be limited due to the lack of money or time required in the dedication of a phenomenological research design, specifically, the time needed to conduct the individual interviews and focus group discussion (Merriam, 2009). The first limitation of this study related to the responses during the completion of the WS-Ei, reflection, and discussion with participants, as the findings relied solely on the candor expressed and their perceptions of their self-efficacy in the workplace. Similarly, data collected during the individual interviews and focus groups were participants' personal experiences; therefore, limitations of the findings occurred due to the reliance on participants' self-disclosure. As another limitation of this study, results were dependent upon participants' perceptions of the effects or impacts caused by their colleagues as they recounted their experiences as women in HE administrative leadership. Of the last limitations presented for this study, there was limited diversity in that participants were of either

Black American or White American ethnicities. In addition, the findings of this research are limited due to the delimitations in the study sample (discussed below).

Delimitations are parameters used purposefully by researchers with the intent of minimizing space (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). The boundaries, known as delimitations, set at the beginning of this study, included: (1) only women in HE senior-level administrative leadership positions from Southeastern Virginia institutions invited to participate, and (2) only participants who serve in the administrative department leadership positions invited to participate. This research began with restrictions to the site selection of institutions in Southeastern Virginia; however, the implementation of snowball sampling led to participants who are residents of Virginia, Georgia, and Florida and employed at six different universities and one career school organization; therefore, it was not limited in transferability and application due to the expansion of the study site. However, it was delimited as all participants were in the Eastern United States. As the final delimitation, the criteria only included participants who served in senior-level leadership positions to expand the possibilities that participants would have had substantial insight into the phenomenon.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This study explored the lived experiences of women serving in HE administrative leadership as they described their career pathways in HE leadership and how they navigated the obstacles, both externally and internally while achieving their climb to senior-level positions. During reflection on the results of this study, the following suggestions for future research emerged.

This study focused on women's experiences in HE leadership and how they described their experiences as women in HE administrative leadership. Participants reflected on their

pathway, leadership, self-efficacy, and how they view the advancement of women in these leadership roles can be facilitated. A future study incorporating the perception through the lens of males who hold executive and senior-level positions, those in positions to hire, promote, and incorporate strategies for the advancement of women in HE leadership could add to current literature as ways women can foster a career pathway in HE leadership from the male perspective.

Next, this study included women in senior-level leadership positions such as Executive Director, Associate Director, Vice President and Chief Officer, Chief Officer and Senior Advisor to the President, Associate Director, Director, Assistant Director, and Vice President. Future research replicating this study with women rivaling for mid-level positions in HE administration, such as Coordinator, Department Chair, Manager, and Supervisor, could identify if the experiences of women are similar, regardless of the level of leadership sought, as well as identify strategies in navigating achievement of that level and the effects it has on deciding to pursue senior-level leadership.

Additionally, participants of this study all shared the commonality of serving in senior-level HE administrative positions. As reflected by the requirements, participants were employed in HE administration at the time of this study, not including those who have experienced a career pathway in HE leadership but are no longer in the industry. Future research that includes participants who did not continue their career pathway in HE leadership could unveil vital insight into the point of their career where they decided they no longer wanted to remain in the industry and the circumstances surrounding their departure. Findings could expand the literature on retaining women in HE leadership, further addressing women's underrepresentation in HE administration.

Lastly, after the individual interviews, participants were allowed to share if any questions should be asked in future interviews, which three participants provided. Additional research questions asked of participants in future research include:

1. What made you stay in higher education?
2. Did you like it once you reached your goal of becoming a senior-level director?
3. What is the one thing you tell yourself to keep you going? Do you have a belief, quote, or mantra?

### **Conclusion**

This research explored how women serving in HE administrative leadership positions describe their experiences while advancing in higher leadership. The findings of this study fulfilled the purpose of this research as ascertained from participants' shared experiences of their career pathway and advancement in HE leadership. All participants shared experiences that began with having a goal, the challenges they faced, how they overcame those perceived barriers, their viewpoint of why there is still an underrepresentation of women in HE administrative leadership and concluded with their solutions to this inequality. Data collected, utilizing a qualitative transcendental phenomenological approach, included responses and discussions about participants' experiences in HE leadership using Dr. Joseph Raelins' Work Self-Efficacy Inventory (WS-Ei) and open-ended semi-structured protocols employed during individual interviews and focus groups with a purposeful and snowball sampling of 13 women serving in senior-level administrative leadership positions were conducted and of the women who participated in this study, their years in senior-level administration ranged from 1 to 41 years (see Participant Screening and Demographic Questionnaire Table 1).

Bandura's (1982) self-efficacy theory was used as a theoretical guide to examine further women's experiences as leaders in HE and was accompanied by Dorothy Smith's (1974) feminist theory and Lent et al. (1994) social-cognitive career theory (SCCT). This study extended the body of information surrounding the underrepresentation of women in HE senior-level leadership roles by unveiling (1) how one's belief in their ability to achieve goals, navigate challenges, respond to biases and barriers, complete tasks, interact with others, learn from success and failure, and embody self-confidence can affect how women experience being the minority in a male-dominated industry (2) and impact whether or not women aspire to have a career in HE leadership. The primary themes relevant to the participant's career pathway experiences appertained to (1) the development of interpersonal practices, (2) the role of self-efficacy, and (3) barriers. Through their experiences, participants expressed that nurturing and evolving interpersonal skills were adequate and one of the factors attributed to their success as a woman in HE administrative leadership. Relationships built amongst family, friends, colleagues, support groups, mentors, and other women in higher education were considered vital when faced with challenges, experiencing self-doubt, or feeling overwhelmed. A discussion surrounding self-efficacy and how participants perceived their ability to serve effectively in administrative roles occurred as participants reflected on the positive and negative experiences that impacted their self-efficacy. Barriers described as women's lack of interest, including emotional health, continued underrepresentation, stereotypes, and an insufficient support system provided by HE institutions, could potentially affect an increase in women's presence in HE leadership.

This research adds to the previous literature by offering insight into the experiences of women in HE senior-level leadership positions, including how they navigate it; the value of interpersonal and intrapersonal development; how to grow, protect, and sustain self-efficacy, and



practices to advance the opportunity and attainment of leadership roles for women. Substantial efforts to close the gender gap in HE senior leadership have yielded numerous studies as researchers seek ways to address the phenomenon of the underrepresentation of women in HE leadership roles. The endeavors of identifying the solution that resolves this inequality through the lived experiences of women who have obtained these roles, such as the participants of this study, add to the body of knowledge as the inclusivity of women in HE administration continues, and numbers increase, thus being a source of inspiration for women, present and future, who aspire to a career pathway in HE senior-level leadership.

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## APPENDIX A: LU IRB APPROVAL LETTER

# LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.

## INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

March 21, 2023

Avel Fulp  
Dina Samora

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY22-23-842 Career Pathway of Women in Higher Education Leadership: A Qualitative Transcendental Phenomenological Study

Dear Avel Fulp, Dina Samora,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met: The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

**Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB.** Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of

## APPENDIX B: STUDY SITE APPROVAL LETTER

Avel Fulp, Doctoral Candidate, PhD in Higher Education Administration: Educational Leadership  
Liberty University

March 29, 2023

Dear Ms. Fulp,

Thank you for your protocol submission entitled "Career Pathway of Women in Higher Education Leadership: A Qualitative Transcendental Phenomenological Study". As a non-affiliated researcher, your protocol has undergone an administrative review within the Office of Research at [REDACTED]

Everything appears to be in order with your IRB submission and approval from Liberty University. Administrative approval from the [REDACTED] Office of Research is granted. Please note that this only confirms that appropriate human subjects approval has been obtained from your home institution for your project. You may need to secure additional approval from the administrative unit at [REDACTED] in which you intend to recruit participants before you begin recruitment and data collection.

If you make any modifications to your project that require approval by your IRB, you must submit those changes to [REDACTED] upon receipt of approval by your IRB. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or require any additional information regarding your data collection at [REDACTED].

Regards,

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Research Compliance Coordinator

## APPENDIX C: E-MAIL INVITATION TO POTENTIAL PARTICIPANTS

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{Date}  
{Recipient}  
{Title}  
{Company}  
{Address}

Dear {Recipient}

As a doctoral candidate at Liberty University, I am conducting research to fulfill the requirements for the Ph.D. in Higher Education Administration degree. The purpose of my research is to explore how women serving in higher education administrative leadership positions describe their experiences while advancing in higher education, and my correspondence is to invite you to participate in my study. Participants must be women who currently serve in senior-level higher education administrative leadership positions, such as president, vice president, executive assistant, director, provost, vice provost, assistant to the president, or chief of staff.

If you accept this invite, you will be asked to complete a work self-efficacy survey (10 mins), be interviewed (30-45 mins), be part of a focus group (1-1.5 hrs.) and participate in member checking (20-30 minutes). Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate, please select the link below to be redirected to the screening document. If you meet the criteria, you will be able to schedule an interview appointment with me at the end of the document.

A consent document is provided via the link below. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you meet the criteria and wish to proceed with your voluntary participation in this study, you will need to print and sign the consent document, scan or take a picture of it, and then return it to me via email prior to receiving the work self-efficacy survey and scheduling the interview.

Sincerely,  
Avel S. Fulp, Ed.S., M.Ed.  
Ph.D. Candidate, Higher Education Administration: Educational Leadership

Screening and Demographic Questionnaire, click here:

[https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScAo5HPvFRcfJYkGNh78kakMn77eimwQ\\_3nC3BZZa53\\_ajug/viewform?usp=sf\\_link](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScAo5HPvFRcfJYkGNh78kakMn77eimwQ_3nC3BZZa53_ajug/viewform?usp=sf_link)

Voluntary Participation Consent Form Acknowledgement, click here:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1ZlmxMGrJ6ekHG4FQmRoCWAXHhisIqU3VSmabrEnfdDU/edit?usp=sharing>

## APPENDIX D: SOCIAL MEDIA RECRUITMENT POSTING

### Social Media Recruitment

ATTENTION FACEBOOK FRIENDS: I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Ph.D. in Higher Education Administration degree at Liberty University. The purpose of my research is to better understand how women serving in higher education (HE) administrative positions describe their experiences while advancing in higher leadership. To participate, you must be a woman serving in senior-level higher education administrative leadership positions, such as president, vice president, executive assistant, director, provost, vice provost, assistant to the president, or chief of staff. Participants will complete a work self-efficacy survey (10 mins), be interviewed (30-45 mins), be part of a focus group (1-1.5 hrs.) and participate in member checking (20-30 minutes). A screening survey will determine if you meet the criteria of this study. Please select the link below to be redirected to the screening survey. If you meet the criteria and wish to proceed with your voluntary participation, you will be able to schedule an interview appointment with me at the end of the document.

A consent document will be emailed to you one week prior to receiving the work self-efficacy survey and scheduling the interview.

Screening and Demographic Questionnaire, click here:

[https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScAo5HPvFRcfJYkGNh78kakMn77eimwQ\\_3nCb3BZZa53\\_ajug/viewform?usp=sf\\_link](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScAo5HPvFRcfJYkGNh78kakMn77eimwQ_3nCb3BZZa53_ajug/viewform?usp=sf_link)

## APPENDIX E: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

### CONSENT FORM

**Title of the Project: Career Pathway of Women in Higher Education Leadership: A Qualitative Transcendental Phenomenological Study**  
**Principal Investigator: Avel Fulp, Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University**

#### Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be a woman who is **in a senior-level administrative leadership position in higher education such as either a president, vice president, executive assistant, director, provost, vice provost, assistant to the president, or chief of staff.** Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

#### What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to explore how women serving in higher education (HE) administrative positions describe their experiences while advancing in higher leadership. The central phenomenon is defined as the explored experiences of women in higher education leadership and the effects of those experiences on their self-efficacy while following their career pathway in leadership.

#### What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1. Participate in a Work Self-Efficacy Inventory by Joseph Raelin via a link provided to the participant's email, to be completed within 1 week of notification. 10 minutes.
2. Participate in a virtual one-to-one interview via Zoom. To be conducted within a week of acceptance of voluntary participation. The interview will be audio recorded. 30-45 minutes.
3. Participate in a virtual focus group via Zoom. To be conducted within 2 weeks of acceptance of voluntary participation. The focus group will be video and audio recorded. 60-90 minutes.
4. Participate in member checking to ensure the accuracy of the transcripts, which will be provided electronically and conducted via email. Member checks will take place upon completion of the data analysis process. 20-30 minutes.

#### How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Although there may be no direct benefits to you, benefits to society due to your participation in the research, as you share your experiences, strategies, and fortitude, may provide encouragement for women who are deciding whether they want a career in higher education leadership and may provide insight into navigating a career pathway for women currently in higher education that are seeking senior-level administrative positions. Lastly, for those serving in higher education administrative positions, your experiences can foster an understanding of the



sustainment of women's self-efficacy while navigating their career pathway as an administrative leader in higher education.

**What risks might you experience from being in this study?**

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

**How will personal information be protected?**

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. The results of this research study may be used in reports, presentations, and publications, but if data collected from you is shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared.

- Participants' responses will be kept confidential, along with the confidentiality of your records, using pseudonyms to protect the name of participants and their place of employment.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years and then erased. Interviews will be conducted via Zoom or by telephone and in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation. Video and audio recordings of the interview will be recorded and transcribed. Zoom recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- The focus group meeting will be conducted via Zoom. Video recordings of the focus group will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

**How will you be compensated for being part of the study?**

Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

**Is study participation voluntary?**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

**What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?**

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

**Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?**

The researcher conducting this study is Avel Fulp. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Dina Samora, at [REDACTED].

**Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at [REDACTED].

*Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.*

**Your Consent**

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

*I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers.*

The researcher has my permission to audio- and video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Subject Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature & Date

## APPENDIX F: SCREENING AND DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

### VOLUNTARY PARTICIPANT SCREENING & DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

#### *Career Pathway of Women in Higher Education Leadership Qualitative Transcendental Phenomenological Study*

The purpose of this study is to explore how women serving in higher education administrative positions describe their experiences while advancing in higher leadership. The intent of this questionnaire is to capture demographic information, confirm your higher education leadership position, and evaluate your perceived level of ability to recall and discuss your career pathway while advancing in higher education leadership experience.

If you respond yes to the question below and meet the criteria, please respond to each item in the following sections: Personal Information, Education Background, Professional Information, and Self Reflection.

Do you currently serve in a senior-level administrative leadership position in higher education?  
(yes/no)

What is your current title? (Participants of this study must be in a senior-level administrative leadership position in higher education as either a president, vice president, executive assistant, director, provost, vice provost, assistant to the president, or chief of staff)

Gender (Participants of this study must be a woman)

#### **Personal Information**

Name (First, Last):

Telephone number:

Email address:

#### **Educational Background**

Highest Conferred Degree:

Program of Study:

#### **Professional Information**

*Higher Education Career Pathway*

How long have you been employed in higher education?

How many years of experience do you have in senior-level administration leadership?

*Previous Higher Education Employment*

Have you served in multiple leadership positions (e.g., director, provost, executive assistant, chief of staff, or president)? **(yes/no)**

Title of previous position held (if applicable):

Years served in this position?

Title of previous position held (if applicable):

Years served in this position?

Title of previous position held (if applicable):

Years served in this position?

**Self-Reflection**

**Use the scale below to respond to the following statements.**

5= strongly agree    4= agree    3=unsure    2=disagree    1= strongly disagree

I am confident that I can reflect and discuss details about my experiences in higher education leadership.

I am confident that I can reflect and describe how my experiences in higher education leadership have shaped my self-efficacy.

Please identify the time of day that is best for scheduling an interview:

# APPENDIX G: INTERVIEW GUIDE

## INTERVIEW GUIDE

### I. Interview Briefing

1. Feel free to be candid as well as comfortable during this interview, viewing it more as a discussion.
2. As you share the accounts of your career pathway in higher education leadership, I would like to remind you that the information provided is essential to this study.
3. As mentioned in the introductory letter, the information disclosed will be kept confidential and abide by all ethical considerations.
4. Please be reminded, this interview will be recorded.

### II. Start of Interview

1. Are there any questions or concerns regarding the study you might have prior to us beginning?
2. Do you require clarity on any aspect of the study?

If you are ok with me starting the recorder, I would like to begin. Thank you for your voluntary participation in this study. My name is Avel Fulp and it is \_\_\_\_\_ (time), \_\_\_\_\_ (date). \_\_\_\_\_ (participant's name) will participate in this interview by reflecting on her time as a leader in higher education. \_\_\_\_\_ please take the time needed when answering the questions you will be asked as you reflect on your journey as a woman in higher education leadership.

3. Interviewee Asks Questions

### III. End of Interview

As we conclude the interview, do you have any questions, concerns, or additional comments you would like to express prior to stopping the recording? Your responses will be analyzed and transcribed, and you will be provided a copy via email for member checking review. This process allows you the opportunity to review your responses and confirm, correct, and/or add comments to accurately represent your experiences.

This concludes the interview, and your participation in this study is truly appreciated. I will be in touch with the Focus Group date and time, which will also take place via Zoom.

## **APPENDIX H: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

### **INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

Questions asked of participants during the interview data collection process as an exploration of their experiences while serving in senior-level higher education administrative positions are as follows:

#### ***Opening Questions***

1. What is your current position within the organization?
2. How long have you been with the organization?
3. What were the determining factors that led to you accepting this position?

#### ***Questions Related to Women in Administrative Leadership Experiences***

4. As you reflect on your journey into leadership, please describe the goals you set for yourself when you began your leadership career pathway.
5. Please summarize your leadership career pathway, the positions you have held.
6. Elaborate on which of those positions met your expectations and if any, those that were not as rewarding?
7. What was your experience like when you were applying and interviewing for your current position?

#### ***Questions Related to Women in Leadership Self-Efficacy***

8. How do you perceive your self-efficacy as a woman who holds an administrative leadership position with your organization?
9. What, in your opinion, are the experiences that have shaped your perceived level of self-efficacy in your current position?
10. Share with me what you learned about your self-efficacy in the workplace, based off of the Work Self-Efficacy Inventory. How do you feel about your self-efficacy in the

workplace after completing and reviewing your responses to Joseph Raelin's Work Self-Efficacy Inventory?

11. Tell me your experience with implemented leadership styles, and if you have been questioned or challenged due to your gender status and if so, can you elaborate on how you responded?
12. Share any moments where you experienced self-doubt in your ability as a leader and what caused it?

***Questions Related to Barriers and Biases Faced by Women in Leadership***

13. Please elaborate on any barriers or biases you may have encountered while serving as a leader or anytime during your career path as a woman in higher education leadership?
14. What helped you overcome perceived barriers or biases you may have faced during your career pathway in higher education leadership?

***15. Questions Related to the Perceptions of Women in Leadership and Diversity***

- What, in your opinion, hinders the advancement of women in higher education administrative leadership?
16. What, in your opinion, fosters the advancement of women in higher education administrative leadership?
  17. What would you say is the reason there is still an underrepresentation of women in administrative leadership positions in higher education?
  18. What would you say is the solution to resolve the underrepresentation of women in administrative leadership positions in higher education?
  19. Discuss the progression of women in higher education leadership administration.
  20. What advice would you give females who aspire to apply for leadership positions?

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21. As we conclude this interview, I would like to thank you for your time, candor, and participation. I would like to conclude by asking, is there anything else you wish to share on this topic or feel I should ask in future interviews?



## APPENDIX I: FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

### FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

The focus group for this study will be a 90-minute discussion on participants experiences as women in higher education administrative leadership. Questions asked of participants during the focus group data collection process as an exploration of their experiences while serving in senior-level higher education administrative positions are as follows:

1. What does it mean to be a woman in higher education leadership?
2. What has been your most challenging experience(s) during your career pathway as a woman in higher education leadership?
3. How do you describe the current status of your self-efficacy as you reflect on your leadership pathway journey?
4. What has affected your self-efficacy as a woman in a leadership position within the administrative department of a higher education institution? Positive? Negative?
5. Please describe what you believe to be the best approach to beginning and sustaining a career pathway in higher education leadership?

## APPENDIX J: MEMBER CHECK REQUEST

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### MEMBER CHECK EMAIL

Dear Voluntary Participant:

Thank you for your time and candor during the interview/focus group as you shared your experiences as a higher education leader. Attached is a summation of the responses provided during the data collection process. Please review the transcribed document in its entirety, thus ensuring your documented responses have thoroughly captured your experiences as a senior-level administrator in higher education leadership.

Upon review use tracking changes on the Microsoft Word document to add any corrections or comments to further elaborate or clarify your experiences; however, please refrain from editing the document in any other way. Feel free to address clarifications or additions using the tracker or print the document and make notations/corrections to the hardcopy and upload as an attachment and return via email. You are kindly asked to return your response and the document to me within 48-72 hours of receipt of this email at [REDACTED]. If your response is not received, I will proceed with the documented accounts of your interview/focus group responses as having captured the essence of your career pathway as a woman in higher education leadership.

I look forward to hearing from you and if you have any questions or concerns, feel free to contact me via email at [REDACTED].

Sincerely,  
Avel S. Fulp, Ed.S., M.Ed.  
Doctoral Candidate  
Liberty University

## APPENDIX K: REFLECTIVE JOURNAL

### **Monday, March 27, 2023**

I have received notifications of interest, and along with excitement it has been slightly overwhelming. Juggling the email notifications, responses from social media, monitoring the screening and demographic questionnaire responses, and preparing to collect consent forms, schedule interviews, and enroll into the work self-efficacy inventory (WS-Ei) has been a bit much at time.

I am hoping to receive some consent forms soon so I can begin scheduling interviews. I will use this time to prep and review my instrumentation and data collection spreadsheet.

### **Wednesday, March 29, 2023**

I am extremely excited as I have my first interview scheduled. I am nervous and hoping the nerves will be gone by the day of the interview. I am looking forward to this first step of actually starting the data collection regarding having the WS-Ei completed and hearing the experiences of the first participant.

### **Friday, April 7, 2023**

**Interview 1-** Today I conducted the first interview, which lasted 42 minutes. I made sure I checked my Zoom, reviewed the interview questions, and had the interview protocol ready prior to the interview. Participants of this study are allowed to pick their pseudonym, so I will use the pseudonyms throughout my journaling.

Arlee's experiences in HE leadership was detailed and raw as she was very candid during the interview. At the end of the interview, Arlee shared she had someone she felt would be a great for providing information as a woman in HE leadership and asked if she could forward the information to the individual, thus fostering snowball sampling.

\*\*The individual has reached out and completed the screening and demographic questionnaire; however, she has not taken any other steps.

### **Friday, April 7, 2023**

**Interview 2-** Yes, I conducted two interviews in one day! I was not as nervous as the first interview, but I am not ready to say I am more comfortable. The two back-to-back were a little overwhelming, but not due to the time it took. In conducting these interviews I am learning early that other's experiences can be internalized, and I have to remain removed and not react to what is being said and maintain composure, body language, and facial expressions. Dottie was very straightforward and open about her experiences in HE administration. At the conclusion of the 29-minute interview, she recommended another young lady and stated she would share the invitation letter with the links to the screening and demographic questionnaire and consent form.

\*\*The young lady recommended by Dottie meets the criteria and is moving along with her voluntary participation. She does have time constraints, so she will not be able to do the interview right away; however, she is committed to being a participant.

## APPENDIX L: RESEARCH AND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS CROSSWALK MATRIX

Table 8

*Research and Interview Questions Crosswalk Matrix*

<p><b>Participant Screening and Demographic Questionnaire</b></p>	<p>Do you currently serve in a senior-level administrative leadership position in higher education?          What is your current title?          Gender          Name          Contact Information          Highest Conferred Degree          Program of Study          How long have you been employed in higher education?          How many years of experience do you have in senior-level administration leadership?          Have you served in multiple leadership positions?          Title of previous position held (if applicable)          Years served in this position.          Using a scale (1=strongly disagree to 5= Strongly Agree)          I am confident that I can reflect and discuss the details about my experiences in higher education leadership.          I am confident that I can reflect and describe how my experiences in higher education leadership have shaped my self-efficacy.</p>
<p><b>Opening Questions</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What is your current position within the organization?</li> <li>2. How long have you been with the organization?</li> <li>3. What were the determining factors that led to you accepting this position?</li> </ol>
<p><b>Central Research Question</b></p>	<p><b>Interview Questions</b></p>
<p>How do women serving in higher education administrative leadership positions describe their experiences while advancing in higher leadership?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. As you reflect on your journey into leadership, please describe the goals you set for yourself when you began your leadership career pathway.</li> <li>2. Please summarize your leadership career pathway, the positions you have held.</li> <li>3. Elaborate on which of those positions met your expectations and if any, those that were not as rewarding?</li> <li>4. What was your experience like when you were applying and interviewing for your current position?</li> <li>5. Please elaborate on any barriers or biases you may have encountered while serving as a leader or anytime during your career path as a woman in higher education leadership?</li> </ol>

	<p>6. What helped you overcome perceived barriers or biases you may have faced during your career pathway in higher education leadership?</p>
<b>Sub-Question One</b>	
<p>How do women in higher education administrative positions describe their leadership style and its impact on their advancement?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Tell me your experience with implemented leadership styles, and if you have been questioned or challenged due to your gender status and if so, can you elaborate on how you responded?</li> <li>2. Share any moments where you experienced self-doubt in your ability as a leader and what caused it?</li> </ol>
<b>Sub-Question Two</b>	
<p>What experiences shape the self-efficacy of women in higher education administrative leadership roles?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How do you perceive your self-efficacy as a woman who holds an administrative leadership position with your organization?</li> <li>2. What, in your opinion, are the experiences that have shaped your perceived level of self-efficacy in your current position?</li> <li>3. Share with me what you learned about your self-efficacy in the workplace, based off of the Work Self-Efficacy Inventory. How do you feel about your self-efficacy in the workplace after completing and reviewing your responses to Joseph Raelin's Work Self-Efficacy Inventory?</li> </ol>
<b>Sub-Question Three</b>	
<p>How does one's perceived self-efficacy affect their pursuit of leadership opportunities as a woman in higher education administration?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What, in your opinion, hinders the advancement of women in higher education administrative leadership?</li> <li>2. What, in your opinion, fosters the advancement of women in higher education administrative leadership?</li> <li>3. What would you say is the reason there is still an underrepresentation of women in administrative leadership positions in higher education?</li> <li>4. What would you say is the solution to resolve the underrepresentation of women in administrative leadership positions in higher education?</li> <li>5. Discuss the progression of women in higher education leadership administration.</li> <li>6. What advice would you give females who aspire to apply for leadership positions?</li> <li>7. As we conclude this interview, I would like to thank you for your time, candor, and participation. I would like to conclude by asking, is there anything else you wish to share on this topic or feel I should ask in future interviews?</li> </ol>

<b>Focus Group Questions</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. What does it mean to be a woman in higher education leadership?</li><li>2. What has been your most challenging experience(s) during your career pathway as a woman in higher education leadership?</li><li>3. How do you describe the current status of your self-efficacy as you reflect on your leadership pathway journey?</li><li>4. What has affected your self-efficacy as a woman in a leadership position with the administrative department of a higher education institution? Positive? Negative?</li><li>5. Please describe what you believe to be the best approach to beginning and sustaining a career pathway in higher education leadership?</li></ol>
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## APPENDIX M: CODE TABLES

Table 5

*Organization of Themes, Codes, and Sub-themes from Data*

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Codes</b>	<b>Sub-Themes</b>
Development of Interpersonal Practices for Women in HE Leadership	Advocacy Barriers Challenges Collaboration Confidence Consistency Leadership Style Mentorship Preparation Relationships Trust	Interpersonal Development
		Importance of Relationships
Women in HE Leadership and The Role of Self-Efficacy	Barriers Challenges Confidence Doubt Growth Imposter Syndrome Inequity Inequality Knowledge Male-dominated Mentorship Stereotypes Success Support Trauma	Inequity
		Intrapersonal Progress
		Impacts on Self-Efficacy
Barriers for Women in HE Leadership	Advocates Barriers Biases Confidence Doubt Growth Hard Work Imposter Syndrome Inequality Inequity Inspiration Intentionality	Challenges that Impact Self-Efficacy and Hinder the Advancement of Women in HE          Solutions that Foster the Advancement of Women in HE

	Opportunity Preparedness Mentors Networking Support System Work-Life Balance	
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Table 6

*Organization of Codes, Descriptions, and Frequency of Codes from Interview Data*

<b>Codes</b>	<b>Description (if applicable)</b>	<b>Frequency of Codes</b>
Advocacy	Self-Advocacy, Women advocating for other women	45
Barriers	Challenges	111
Biases	Ageism, Gender/Gendered, Racism, Stereotypes	93
Confident	Ability, Capability, Self-Efficacy	77
Consistency		10
Doubt(s)	Ability, Capability, Self	59
Evolve	Evolution, Growth, In Leadership, Personal, Self-Efficacy	37
Experience(s)		42
Goals		42
Imposter Syndrome		7
Inequities	He-peating, Male-dominated, Man-xplaining, Money, Opportunity, Promotion	35
Inspiration		9
Intentionality in Leadership	Hiring, Mentoring, Promoting, Recruiting, Supporting	39
Leadership		63
Motivated		16
Network		17
Opportunities		82
Skills Development	Certifications, Collaboration, Continuing Education, Hard Work, Knowledge of Industry, Post-Secondary Education, Professional Development	116
Success		29
Support System	Community, Family, Mentor, Relationships, Support Groups	89
Trauma		23
Trust		12



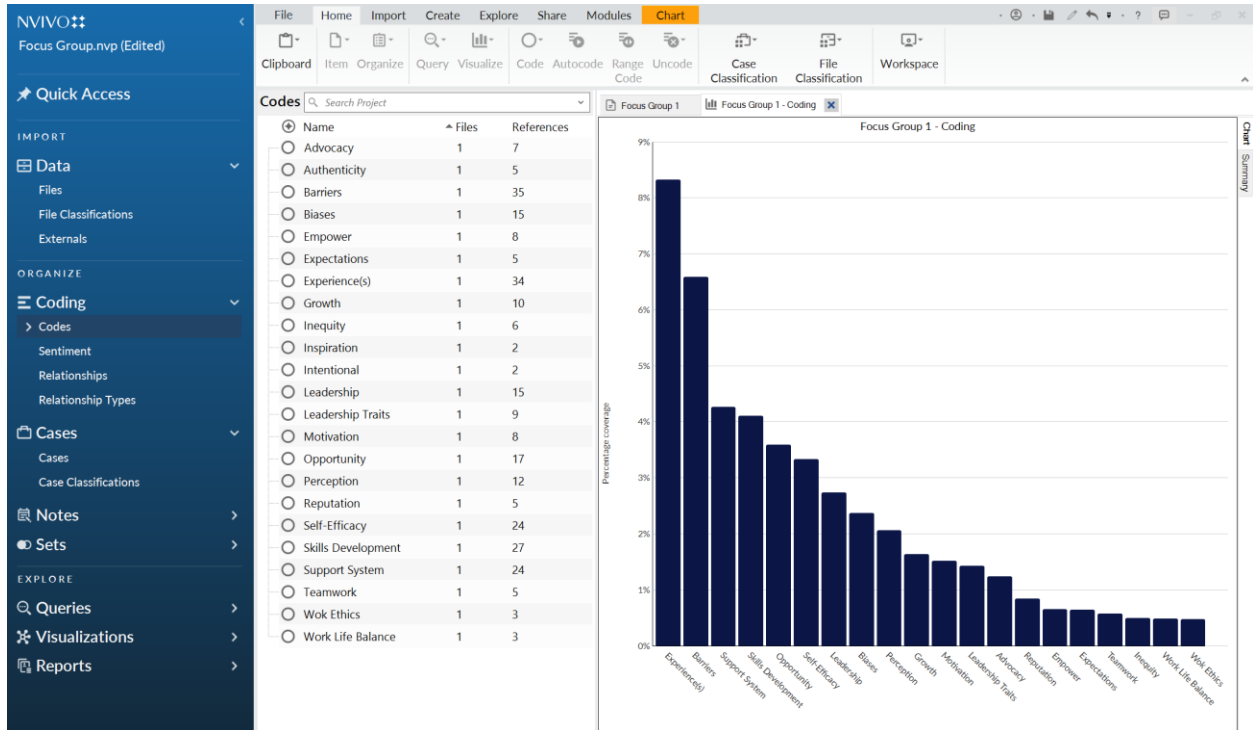
Work-Life Balance	Home Life, Community Engagement, Self-Care Work Life	22
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Table 7

*Organization of Codes and Frequency of Codes from Focus Group Data*

<b>Codes</b>	<b>Frequency of Codes</b>
Advocacy	13
Authenticity	11
Barriers	70
Biases	17
Empower	8
Expectations	19
Experience(s)	48
Growth	16
Inequity	8
Inequality	2
Inspiration	8
Intentional	14
Leadership	27
Leadership Traits	24
Motivation	8
Opportunity	25
Perception	22
Reputation	6
Self-Efficacy	51
Skills Development	48
Support System	52
Teamwork	10
Wok Ethics	12
Work Life Balance	10

## APPENDIX N: EXAMPLES OF CODING USING NVIVO



## APPENDIX O: WS-Ei REQUEST CORRESPONDENCE

**From:** "Fulp, Avel" [REDACTED]  
**Subject:** Dissertation Research- WS-Ei Request  
**Date:** March 1, 2021 at 11:55:27 AM PST  
**To:** [REDACTED]  
**Cc:** [REDACTED]

March 1, 2021

Good Afternoon [REDACTED]

My name is Avel Fulp, and I am a Doctoral Learner at Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA. I am trying to attain permission to use your **Work Self-Efficacy Inventory (The)** for my Qualitative Case Study Self-Efficacy of Women In Higher Education Leadership and Gender Bias. I have exchanged email correspondences with Dr. Raelin, and he was kind enough to point me in your direction.

Below are some of the details of my study, and if there is any further documentation needed or if there is someone else that should be contacted regarding this matter, please let me know.

If there are any questions or concerns, please contact me at [REDACTED], or [REDACTED].

I look forward to hearing from you,

Avel S. Fulp, Ed.S.  
PhD Candidate, Higher Education Administration: Education Leadership

**Title:** Self-Efficacy of Women in Higher Education Leadership and Gender Bias Qualitative Case Study

**Purpose:** This study will use a qualitative case study approach to explore the perceived self-efficacy of women in higher education leadership and the perceived influence of gender bias as a challenge or having an affect on their self-efficacy during their career pathway in leadership.

**Design:** The methodology utilized for this study will be the qualitative method, with a case study design.

**Participants:** This study will use purposeful sampling, with voluntary participants who meet the criteria being those who serve in higher education leadership positions, such as president, vice president, executive, senior executive, assistant executive, director, and managers for 5+ years. This study seeks to recruit a sample size of between 10-15 females in higher education leadership. Participants will be identified by pseudonyms, which they will be allotted the opportunity to select their pseudonym.

**Data Collection:** This study will employ a qualitative case study design, collecting data using a criteria survey, a self-efficacy inventory, self-esteem scale, interviews, post-interview member checks and a journal prompt.

- Criteria Survey will be attached to the participant consent form.
- Self-Efficacy Inventory and Self-Esteem Scale will be submitted electronically.
- Interviews and post-interview member checks can be done via Zoom and/or telephone conferences due to the current pandemic.
- Journal Prompt can be submitted electronically.

Response from Mind Garden Inbox x



Mind Garden Inc [REDACTED]

Mon, Mar 1, 2021, 3:49 PM ☆ ↶ ⋮

Hello Avel,

Thank you for your interest in the WSEI.

As you may know, the WSEI is a copyrighted instrument and commercial product -- a license purchased from Mind Garden is required for each use/administration of the instrument. As I understand your plans, you wish to administer online which would require the [Remote Online Survey license](#).

If your research is for a **thesis or dissertation** and is **unfunded**, you are eligible for a 20 percent Student Discount on the **license** purchase. For more information about receiving a Voucher Code for the Student Discount, [please click here](#).

Let us know if you have any questions.  
Best regards,

[REDACTED]  
Mind Garden, Inc.