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# Still, We Rise: Experiences of Black Women in Leadership Positions at Predominately White Institutions

## Abstract

Despite the educational progress that Black women in the United States have made, they continue to be underrepresented in positions of senior leadership in all sectors including higher education (American Council on Education, 2017, 2023, de Brey et al., 2019). Because of their double minoritized status they also face bigger challenges in their positions than their White female, White male, and Black male counterparts. This narrative qualitative study utilized theory of othering and intersectionality to highlight the experiences of five Black women as they ascend to leadership positions at four-year predominately White institutions. The research questions guiding this study are: What are the experiences of Black women leaders at predominately White institutions of higher education? What are Black women leaders in higher education perceptions of what impacts their advancement? How do race and gender identities impact Black women in leadership experiences at predominately White institutions of higher education? Findings confirm previous research that found that Black women have unique experiences based on the intersection of race and gender such as mammying, and the angry Black woman stereotype, feelings of isolation and lack of support, microaggressions and discrimination. However, having great allies and positive mentoring relationships, helped them to navigate those environments. Other findings, implications for higher education and recommendations for future research are also presented.

## Degree Type

Dissertation/Thesis

## Degree Name

Master of Arts (MA)

## Department

Counseling and Higher Education

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## Keywords

Black women, higher education leadership, intersectionality, othering, race and gender

## Subject Categories

African American Studies | Educational Leadership | Higher Education | Women's Studies

Still, We Rise: Experiences of Black Women in Leadership Positions at

Predominately White Institutions

Dionne Lipscomb

Master of Science in College Student Affairs

## ABSTRACT

Despite the educational progress that Black women in the United States have made, they continue to be underrepresented in positions of senior leadership in all sectors including higher education (American Council on Education, 2017, 2023, de Brey et al., 2019). Because of their double minoritized status they also face bigger challenges in their positions than their White female, White male, and Black male counterparts. This narrative qualitative study utilized theory of othering and intersectionality to highlight the experiences of five Black women as they ascend to leadership positions at four-year predominately White institutions. The research questions guiding this study are: What are the experiences of Black women leaders at predominately White institutions of higher education? What are Black women leaders in higher education perceptions of what impacts their advancement? How do race and gender identities impact Black women in leadership experiences at predominately White institutions of higher education? Findings confirm previous research that found that Black women have unique experiences based on the intersection of race and gender such as *mammying*, and *the angry Black woman stereotype*, feelings of isolation and lack of support, microaggressions and discrimination. However, having great allies and positive mentoring relationships, helped them to navigate those environments. Other findings, implications for higher education and recommendations for future research are also presented.

*Keywords.* Black women, higher education leadership, intersectionality, race and gender

## DEDICATION

Giving honor to my creator and my ancestors, because without them, I would not be where I am today. Mom, you have supported me for as long as I can remember. From encouraging me to always be myself to pushing me to further my education, you have always inspired me to be the best Dionne I possibly can be. I'll never be able to let you know just how much I love you. Dad, thank you for always praying for me, and letting me know you love me. I love you so much! To all nine of my siblings: Lee, Kapria, Tailor, Ebone', Thai, Blessing, Poohter, Wisdom, and Zion. I love y'all! You all are my world and my reason. Being from a big family has taught me so much, and I wouldn't trade any of you for the world. To my nieces and nephews: Harmony, Autumn, Ethyn, Indya, Kyroah, Melody, and Selah. This is to show you that you can do anything you put your mind to. I love you all and I will always be there for you.

Janaea, I could never thank you enough for putting up with me these last two years. From moving to Charleston supporting me in furthering my education, to all of the support and encouragement you give me on a daily basis. You keep me going, and you inspire me more than you'll ever know. I love you to the moon and back. To my friends: Daisy, Alyssa, Jasmine, and Tia. Thank you for being an important part of my support system. Thank you for always reminding me that I was a person as well as a student, for always checking on my mental health, and for always being a listening ear when I needed it. I love y'all down, and I appreciate each of you more than you'll ever know.

Finally, to my mentors, my participants, and to every Black woman who has encouraged me and spoke life to me. All of the kind words and support means the world coming from women who look like me and are doing the damn thing! Thank you for being everything that Black Girl Magic is.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To begin, I would like to thank my thesis chair, Dr. Polydore. You took me under your wing during one of the most pivotal times in your career, and you didn't have to. You saw me and my unique experience in the program, and you helped me in more ways than you will ever know. I am so proud to have worked with you, and as you said, we are now joined at the hip. Here is to an everlasting relationship and partnership. I appreciate you immensely!

I would also like to thank my co-workers. Thank you for supporting me throughout the school year, and creating a study group with me so I could be more focused. Your friendship and support during this last year of graduate school means so much to me, and I'm so grateful for our relationship. Thank you for all the wine nights and study times. Thank you for closing my office door and forcing me to work when I couldn't focus. Most of all, thank you for being you.

Special thank you to my thesis committee, Dr. Davenport, and Ms. Maggie, for saying yes and taking the time to assist me during this journey in graduate school. The talks we've had, and your support meant a lot, and I will forever cherish the advice you've given me. Thank you for your time and your energy in serving on my committee. Thank you to my participants. Without you, this study would not be possible. Thank you for dedicating your time and energy to help me.

Lastly, thank you to my support system. Everything you've done to support me has not gone unnoticed. I love you all, and I will always cherish your support.

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## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

Data from the National Center of Educational Statistics suggests that Black women are outperforming Black men in their attainment of post-secondary education including advanced degrees, in a ratio of approximately 2:1 (de Brey et al., 2019). Recent studies also show that Black women are one of the highest minority populations obtaining degrees in higher education (West, 2018) and this has been consistent for at least a decade (Davis, 2012). However, when it comes to positions of leadership at these very institutions, counterparts who identify as White or male are highly represented in comparison to Black women. In the most recent *American College President Study*, by the American Council on Education (ACE), in 2022, 46% of college presidents were White men, 26% were White women, 15% were men of color, and 13% were women of color (2023). Of the 13% of women of color, 5.4% represented Black women (ACE, 2023). Though this includes Black women under the umbrella of Women of Color, the previous disaggregated ACE data (ACE, 2017) reported only 5% of college presidents were represented by Black women, suggesting that Black women are consistently underrepresented among college presidents. A similar trend can be observed in the corporate world (Lean In, 2018).

Black women face steeper obstacles than their White female, White male, and Black male colleagues (Beckwith et al., 2016) due to the intersection of their race and gender (Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Hauge & Okpala, 2017). Though the barriers to women in leadership positions are well-documented and rooted in outdated expectations of gender, Black women are faced with having to battle both racism and sexism. This can be especially true within predominately White institutions (PWIs) (Gamble & Turner, 2015), where institutional culture may cultivate outdated gender and race-based ideologies which worsens the experience of Black

women (Mitchell, 2021). As a result, they often have to carefully navigate or negotiate oppressive spaces, and work to avert being labeled “angry Black woman” (Kilgore et al., 2020, p. 372). Just as well, Black women remain severely invisible in leadership positions at PWIs, even as Black women outnumber other racial minorities on college campuses (West, 2018).

Understanding and recognizing the challenges of Black women leaders at PWIs is important to research in academia. The need for Black women in these positions is essential to a well-rounded and well represented college campus. Additionally, allowing these women access to greater opportunities and embracing the diverse perspectives that Black women leaders bring to the table is necessary to the future of higher education. Their voices and experiences matter. Their narratives contribute to furthering research on Black women’s experiences in higher education. This study desired to understand the experiences of Black women leaders at PWIs, and how the intersection of race and gender affect said experiences. For the purpose of this research, Black and African American will be used interchangeably when referring to women of African descent.

### **Purpose of Study**

Because Black women experience double discrimination due to their race and gender, it is important to articulate how those racial and gendered identities impact the ascension of Black women to leadership positions in higher education, and to understand the experiences of these women throughout their journey. Therefore, the purpose of this narrative qualitative study was to explore the experiences of Black women as they ascend to leadership positions at four-year PWIs in relation to race and gender by examining their professional lived experiences. This study was primarily focused on Black women who were able to successfully attain leading positions at

PWIs despite the longstanding barriers and prejudices they have faced when attempting to advance in the academy.

### **Research Questions**

This study sought to understand what it means to be a Black woman in a leadership position at a PWI. It also investigated whether race and gender have an effect on the lived experiences of Black women within their professional journey in higher education. To meet this study's purpose and understand individual narratives, I formulated the following questions to drive this study:

1. What are the experiences of Black women leaders at predominately White institutions of higher education?
2. What are Black women leaders in higher education perceptions of what impacts their advancement?
3. How do race and gender identities impact Black women in leadership's experiences at predominately White institutions of higher education?

### **Significance of the Study**

Throughout history, Black women have endured sexism from Black men (Davis, 2016), as well as racism (Townsend, 2021) and class oppression from White women and men (Collins, 2000). Leadership challenges for Black women have included marginalization or being left "outside of the flow of power and influence within their institutions" (Patitu & Hinton, 2003, p. 82). Black women are often denied access and opportunities to leadership positions and are perceived as better followers than leaders (Davis, 2016). With the industry's increased focus on diversity and inclusion among its employees, including those in executive positions, more opportunities are available for Black women to ascend into leadership roles. But, to ensure

success in this endeavor, PWIs should pour resources into understanding how their prevailing campus culture and broader higher education practices are resistant to their new efforts of diversity. Thus, this study is significant as it adds to the research on Black women's experiences, but also sheds light on Black women's lived experiences, specifically in higher education.

In addition, PWIs can use the findings from this study to determine how to best support Black women with aspirations to leadership positions. When they include Black women in strategic planning, they benefit from the richness that their unique perspectives may bring to the table. Furthermore, this study is intended to aid higher education administrators in becoming more aware of the prejudices and experiences of their Black women colleagues, and also makes them conscious of their needs of support. In addition, professionals can utilize the findings to construct significant institution, division, and program practices and policies regarding professional and leadership development for African American Women.

### **Limitations, Delimitations, and Assumptions of the Study**

The limitations of a study can be defined as issues that are not able to be controlled by researchers, however they can significantly affect the study and analysis of the findings (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008). I have identified four limitations that could impact the trustworthiness of the study.

Firstly, researcher bias can cause questioning in this study. As the sole investigator and data collector of this study, I am the instrument for data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2002). It is important to recognize that I identify as a Black woman who attended and is employed at a PWI, with a desire to ascend to a leadership position within my career in higher education. As recommended by Creswell and Poth (2018), I have provided a description of my experiences through researcher reflexivity later in Chapter III. Lincoln and Guba (1985) theorized that

reflexivity is a crucial piece in ensuring that qualitative research is transparent. To counteract bias while researching, I regularly consulted with my thesis director, and I utilized my mentor as a means of reflection on potential influences, and to prevent my own interpretations and assumptions from influencing the study.

Variation of insights of the participants in the location where the data collection will take place relates to the trustworthiness of this study as well. Interviews will take place via Zoom; therefore, each participant is allowed to choose their designated space for the interviews. Some distractions such as levels of comfort, noise levels, internet accessibility, traffic, and more can affect interview quality and have an unexpected effect on the data. Also, due to the nature of their employment, some participants may use their office as a meeting space, and they may not feel comfortable to be truthful in their answers. To control these variations, I asked that participants are in a secluded setting where they can comfortably and openly discuss their experiences, and I was in a secluded area for each participant's interview as well.

Credibility is another limitation to this study. *Credibility* can be defined as “an evaluation of whether or not the research findings represent a credible conceptual interpretation of the data drawn from the participant's original data” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 296). Because of my relationship to the topic, credibility could be questioned. To verify credibility in this study, I utilized member checking. Member checking includes sharing transcriptions of interviews and findings of the study with the participants, and it is a necessary technique to establish credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). When interviews were done, I made sure to email a copy of the transcript to the participants and asked them to review the documents to ensure that their responses were accurately documented.

Finally, the last limitation of this study is transferability. *Transferability* refers to whether the outcomes of a qualitative research study can be applied to other circumstances or populations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba state that significant description of the setting and data presented by the researcher is acceptable in addressing transferability (1985). Hence, I utilized *thick description*, thoroughly detailed accounts (Dezin, 1989) to aid in transferability. This was established by detailing the experiences and stories of the participants. In addition, during interviews participants were encouraged to utilize detailed explanations when describing their encounters.

Regarding delimitations that I have placed on the study, I have limited access to Black women who have obtained leadership positions at PWIs. As someone new to the field, I have not yet had the opportunity to explore and expand my network. This aids well for this study, as it lends to complete uninformed information, making sure data is the least biased as possible. I also limited the scope to Black women who held senior leadership positions such as vice president, associate vice president, assistant dean, and director. Just as well, in order to give adequate recollection of their journey to leadership, participants must have been in their position of leadership for a minimum of three years. A broad spectrum of experience is very important to the study, so participants were chosen from different institutions. However, they are all public, four-year institutions in different regions of the United States. I utilized semi-structured interviews to collect data. To conduct the interviews, Zoom was used to connect with participants. The participants were asked open-ended questions to explore their experiences in higher education and how the intersections of race and gender affected their experiences in order to receive the appropriate data.

For this study, there is an important assumption that I am making: I assume that the narrative of each Black woman will be similar across all of my participants, and that the culture embedded into the leadership of higher education has made it difficult for Black women to ascend to leadership positions, and that this is compounded at PWIs. Because of my identity and transparency, I also assume participants will be honest and thorough in their responses, and they will be comfortable sharing experiences, stories, and lessons they've learned in their journey. Additionally, I assume that Black women leaders at PWIs give additional support and mentorship to Black students and other Black professionals in their field outside of their daily duties, and that they also try to find support and peace of mind in the midst of their chaos. In the event that any of these assumptions are false, the trustworthiness of the data will be threatened.

### **Definitions of Terms**

- **Black or African American:** As defined by the United States Census Bureau (2020), Black or African American is a race classification that individuals self-identify as having “origins of any of the Black racial groups in Africa” (n.p). Although the Black experience is not monolithic, individuals who appear with a darker complexion, but are not Asian, or Hispanic, are considered to be Black. For the purpose of this study, Black or African American is used to describe people of African descent, regardless of their nationality.
- **woman:** Based in gender identity, woman refers to an adult female person. Participants in this study will self-identify as woman.
- **leadership position:** In this study, when referring to the participants, a leader is defined as an employee in a middle to senior level position who hold titles such as vice president, associate vice president, assistant dean, and director.

- **White:** The United States Census Bureau (2020) defines White as a race classification of people who self-identify as having “origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa” (n.d.).
- **predominately White institution (PWI):** Refers to institutions of higher education that traditionally prohibited non-White students in years before 1964 and also have more than 50% of the student population that identifies as White (Lomotey, 2010).

## Summary

Black women are disproportionately represented in the leadership of PWIs due to lack of access and promotion opportunities. Allowing Black women access to greater opportunities and embracing the diverse perspectives that Black women leaders bring to the table is necessary to the future of higher education. It is important to consider the experiences of Black Women’s journey in ascension to leadership positions in order to understand the different avenues of leadership development they need to be successful.

In this chapter, I have presented an introduction and background to the study, including research questions, purpose of the study, the significance of the study, the study’s limitations, and definitions of terms that I believe are key to the study. Chapter II presents a review of the existing research about Black women’s experiences in higher education, highlighting the historical advancement of Black women in higher education, struggles and barriers for Black women in higher education, and support and mentorship for Black women in higher education. It also reviews the theoretical and conceptual framework that guided this study. Chapter III presents methodology and the data gathering procedures that were used in the study. Findings discovered with themes that occurred within the analysis of the data will be found in Chapter IV. Finally, Chapter V includes a summary of findings, a discussion,



recommendations for institutional development, recommendations for future research, and a conclusion.

## CHAPTER II

### Review of the Literature

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of Black women as they ascend to leadership positions at four-year PWIs in relation to race and gender by examining their professional lived experiences. Chapter II contains a literature review of the existing literature on Black women in leadership in higher education. This chapter presents an in-depth review of the literature surrounding Black women in leadership, including coping and support for Black women in leadership in higher education. This chapter concludes with a review of Spivak's (1985) theory of othering, and Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality, which both served as the theoretical and conceptual framework. For the purposes of this study, Black and African American are used interchangeably when referring to persons of African descent.

### Gender and Leadership

Glassdoor (2021) defined a leadership position as a role that requires managing people, situations, and items in an effective and ethical manner. Additionally, a leader is a person who impacts their team to employ their abilities and influence to aid the company's or project's progression (Glassdoor, 2021). Men and leadership have been studied extensively, however, the research on women of color lacks when it comes to leadership development (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). Workplace policies, practices, and norms originated from men's ideologies, and are still practiced today (Beckwith et al., 2016). These norms and practices were created for and because of men's experiences. Traditionally, women and men hold different gender-based roles in society. Respectively, women's place has been in the home, and men had the duty of being employed (Beckwith et al., 2016; Pierre, 2021). Bias and discrimination have separated men and women into distinct societal responsibilities. Because of this, interests and needs of women

continue to be underrepresented since these practices are intensely engrained in the DNA of workplace practice (Beckwith et al., 2016).

Although societal norms of men being the breadwinners and women being homemakers are currently changing, workplace policies are still rooted in these norms, and they have not evolved to reflect the current state of women's roles (Beckwith et al., 2016), which lead to what is called the glass ceiling. The U.S. Department of Labor (1991) defined the *glass ceiling* as “those artificial barriers based on attitudinal organizational bias that prevent qualified individuals from advancing upward in their organization to senior level positions” (n. p.). Furthermore, Pierre (2019) declares that “societal behavior, cultural biases, and gender structures in the United States have resulted in a glass ceiling that prevents a woman's hierarchical progression in the workplace” (p. 6). Data continues to support this claim. In fact, the 2022 Women of CEOs in America stated that 8.8% of Fortune 500 companies have a woman CEO, and less than 1% are women of color (Women Business Collaborative, 2022).

### **Black Women in Leadership**

Historically, Black women have been largely discredited and invisible from leadership positions. Though they have made significant contributions to culture, social justice and advocacy for change, the stories are often told without their perspective and experiences in mind (Asare, 2021; Barnett, 1993; Blakemore, 2017; Dagvobie, 2004; Guy-Sheftall, 2023). Research consistently shows that Black women have been erased and continue to be erased from historical events (Turner, 2020). Black women have continuously used their strength, perseverance, and willpower to fight for people and issues that did not fight for her, however they are continuously left without credit (Asare, 2021).

An examination of historical events reveals that the narrative and retelling of said events exclude the leadership and experiences of Black women (Asare, 2021; Barnett, 1933; Blackmore 2017). Beginning with the women's suffrage movement of the 1920s, Black women advocated for voting rights for all American citizens, however, they receive little to no credit for their contributions (Asare, 2021). Black women Leaders such as Sojourner Truth, Harriet Purvis, and Maria W. Stewart held roles that added to the suffrage movement, but are often still disregarded (Asare, 2021). In addition, suffrage leader and National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) committee member, Alice Paul, welcomed Black women to march alongside them in a suffrage parade, but later considered that the support of southern White women was more important than the joining of Black women, and decided to leave them out of the parade (Jones, 2020). When suffrage ended, Black women were still not able to vote, and their fight carried into the Civil Rights Movement (Alder, 2020).

While the Civil Rights Movement birthed many influential Black women leaders like Rosa Parks and Coretta Scott King, other Black women were often denied access to leadership positions, or their contributions have continued to go unnoticed (Robnett, 1996). Although this was a fight for racial equality, sexism still played a major role in the leadership of the movement, with women often being denied leadership positions solely due to their gender (Robnett, 1996). In fact, many organizations had women as chairs, but men outnumbered women significantly, and when placed in those roles, women were often left out of decision making (Robnett, 1996). A similar silencing of Black women can be observed more recently in the #MeToo social movement (Asare, 2021) after actress Alyssa Milano began telling people to use #MeToo to tell their stories of assault via Twitter and failed to give credit to Black activist, Tarana Burke, the original movement leader.

## The Concrete Ceiling

Breaking through the previously mentioned glass ceiling is a barrier that White women must endure, however, Black women conquer shattering the concrete ceiling or breaking the concrete wall (Moore & Jones, 2001; Pierre, 2019). Black women have the added barrier of not only breaking through a gender ceiling, but a racial ceiling as well (Women Business Collaborative, 2022), creating a more concrete ceiling. This is a similar phenomenon to the glass ceiling; however, it differs because the *concrete ceiling* is denser and not easily shattered. It reflects the additional and nearly impossible barriers minorities face when aiming to reach top-level positions (Moore & Jones, 2001). Additionally, Pierre (2019) states that the concrete wall represents hurdles Black women endure due to challenges being more difficult to defeat because the concrete wall is harder to break than glass. The sturdiness of the concrete wall permits few Black women to break through it (Pierre, 2019). Furthermore, the concrete ceiling also limits the ability for Black and other minority employees to co-exist among their colleagues (Beckwith et al., 2016), leaving them to be isolated and left out of common ascension practices. Black women seek out leadership positions and are more interested in achieving leadership than their counterparts (Lean in, 2020), however, they are still highly invisible in said leadership, as Lean in (2020) contended that Black women 4.4% of C-Suite positions in 2020. The 2021 Women of CEOs in America (2022) also confirmed this phenomenon, stating that the number of Black women in CEO positions for Fortune 500 companies have increased from three to a whopping five, proving that the concrete ceiling is nearly impossible to hurdle over, and that the representation gap is barely changing. It is important to provide leadership development to assist Black women in breaking through the concrete ceiling of workplace barriers (Green & King, 2001).

In many higher education employment positions, women and minorities possess a lot less leadership positions than their White male counterparts (ACE 2017; Lean in, 2020). When women do achieve a leadership position, they continue to face significant barriers within the position as well. In reality, Glazer-Ramo (2001) asserts that women who earn professional degrees and join male dominated professions experience systemic discrimination, isolation, and exclusion from networking opportunities. Additionally, 49% of Black women observe that it will be more difficult for them to receive a raise or promotion due to their race and gender, in comparison to 3% of White women (Lean in, 2020).

According to the American College President Study, in 2017, women accounted for only 30% of all president positions in 2017; of these, only 5% represent Black women (ACE, 2017). Recent studies show that has increased, with 36% of all president positions being held by women, up 6% from 2016 (ACE, 2023), however, Black women still only represent 5% of college presidents (ACE, 2023). Though women and minorities are present in higher education, White men have consistently dominated leadership positions, and still currently represent 46% of college presidents (ACE, 2013). Because of the underrepresentation of Black women in leading administrative positions, Black women in these positions often face different difficulties than their counterpart and often experience feelings of displacement and discouragement (Glazer-Ramo, 2001). Although these barriers can be challenging and overwhelming, Black women continue to persevere and stay determined, despite the hurdles that occur.

### **Historical Advancement of Black Women in Higher Education**

Historically, Black women have been included in the educational realm because it has been a respectable profession for African Americans to pursue for quite some time (Davis &

Maldonado, 2015). During the 1800s, Black women were teachers in schools before, during and after the emancipation of Black people, however, few obtained positions higher than being employed in elementary and secondary schools (Benjamin, 1997). During the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, African Americans began seeking higher education, but were not welcome in the most prestigious colleges and universities in the United States. One institution, Oberlin College of Ohio, dedicated itself to the higher education of African Americans since its founding in 1833, priding itself on being the historical lead in educating African Americans (Oberlin College, n.d.). In 1862, Mary Jane Patterson, born a slave, received her bachelor's degree from Oberlin College, making her the first Black woman in the United States to receive a bachelor's degree from an accredited college (Journal of Blacks in Higher Education [JBHE], n.d.). Soon after, in 1864, Rebecca Lee graduated from New England Female Medical College, making her the first Black female medical student (JBHE, n.d.). This was the beginning of many other Black women achieving degrees in higher education.

It was not until the Morrill Act of 1890 that legislation forced federal funding of higher education institutions to benefit African American students (Thelin, 2019). The Morrill Act of 1890 provided federal funding for states to either integrate their current land-grant schools, or create equal schooling for students of color, and also provided funding for Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) (Thelin, 2019). To continue, women's colleges known as the Seven Sisters, which included Wellesley, Radcliffe, Smith, Mount Holyoke, Vassar, Barnard, and Bryn Mawr, began to allow Black women to come to their campuses as students, but their policies and practices differed in relation to White women students (Thelin, 2019). Black women were admitted to institutions like Wellesley and Smith, but other institutions in the sisterhood still refused to allow Black women to attend, and if there was a Black woman in

attendance as a student, it was more than likely an accident, or the student was White passing (Thelin, 2019). Black women students were also often not allowed to live in on-campus housing, or eat in dining halls (Thelin, 2019). Be that as it may, Black women who are alumnus of the Seven Sisters universities take pride in their education, and they excelled in high levels against their peers, going on to receive further advance degrees, and obtaining high level careers (Thelin, 2019).

Once degrees were obtained, Black women began emerging into higher education professionally. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES] (2021), Black women represent the largest population of student affairs administrators of color in degree-granting postsecondary institutions in the United States, however, the percentage of the ascendance into leadership position is still difficult for Black women, causing them to be largely invisible from leading positions (Davis & Maldonado, 2015).

The first women to break barriers and obtain leadership positions within higher education did so in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The first African American woman college president was Mary McLeod Bethune, at Florida Cookman Institute in 1923 (Bates, 2007). Following shortly behind her, after becoming the fourth African American woman to earn a Ph.D. in the United States, Anna Julia Cooper became the president of Frelinghuysen University in Washington, DC in 1930 (Columbia University, n.d.). It was not until 1974 that another Black woman was made president of a college or university. Dr. Mable Parker McLean became the first woman president and first Black woman president at North Carolina's Barber-Scotia College (Bates, 2007). These women were pioneers in creating pathways for more Black women and other women of color to achieve leadership status. Many other Black women followed in their footsteps, achieving leadership



opportunities such as vice presidency, presidency, chancellorship, vice chancellorship, and other leadership positions.

Though Black women have persevered and achieved leadership positions in higher education, the number of women who have reached the highest level of positions at PWIs is still modest. Between 1986 and 2016, the percentage of minority college and university presidents doubled. Yet, in 2016, less than one in five presidents identified as a person of color (American Council of Education [ACE], 2017). As of 2023, Black women remain underrepresented in higher education administration, as they make up only 5% of all college presidents (ACE, 2023). Continuing, women of color also only represent 0% of university system presidents, 6% of university Provosts, 8% of academic deans, and 13% of the president's cabinet (Women's Power Gap, 2022). Of this, Black women represent 1.6% of college presidents, 2.3% of college provosts, 4.6% of academic deans, 6.9% of the president's cabinet, 2.8% of college board chairs, and 5.4% of college board members. These percentages are incredibly low when compared to Black men, White women, and White men (Women's Power Gap, 2022). Black women have found it difficult to obtain elevated opportunities because of the many barriers and obstacles they face. (Bates, 2007; Beckwith et al., 2016; Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Townsend, 2021). The lack of leadership development for Black women within higher education positions and the lack of evolving in workplace practices have had a hand in this result.

### **Struggles and Barriers for Black Women in Higher Education**

Black women in elite positions at PWIs have unique experiences that shape their individual journeys, however, despite the oppressive barriers they face, they have persevered and reached leadership status (Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007; Davis, 2016; Townsend 2021). These barriers play a role in preventing more Black women from reaching higher positions in

organizations (Beckwith et al., 2016). Many Black women in higher education who have successfully attained leadership positions have overcome adversity, however, they still confront institutional practices that can serve as barriers to their success (Wilder et al., 2013). Barriers faced by Black women on predominately White campuses include lonesomeness, isolation, and discrimination (Crawford & Smith, 2005; West, 2018).

### ***Discrimination***

Discrimination is a main barrier faced by Black women in higher education (Agosto & Roland, 2018; Holder et al., 2015; Mitchell, 2021; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010).

*Discrimination* can be defined as the unjust treatment of different categories of individuals, especially concerning race, gender, sex, and religious practice (Gardner et al., 2014). Racial discrimination has been heavily cited as a large factor in unfolding the mystery of the underrepresentation of Black women in leadership positions (Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Gardner et al., 2014; Gardner et al., 2015; Holder et al., 2015). Gender and ethnicity-based discrimination still haunt the halls of higher education, and are continuing to invade academia, including in hiring practices (Hyppolite, 2019). Discrimination of race and gender is a distinctive experience to Black women, as they experience a double outsider status while White women or Black men share the commonality of gender or race in with most associates (Jean-Marie et al., 2009).

Discrimination manifests itself into the othering and isolation of Black women in the workplace. Sturnick et al. (1991) concluded that because of gender and strongly patriarchal institutions, African American women are often excluded from informal networks and from building relationships with their White counterparts, and they may face additional forms of discrimination in the workplace. Additionally, Gause (2020) states “gender and racial biases that

permeate the leadership echelons of higher education create challenges and resistance for women who move up and into leadership positions” (p. 76).

Discrimination also contributes to the wage gap between Black women and their White counterparts. When comparing the average pay rate for full time employees in the United States, for every \$1.00 a White man makes, Black women make \$0.67 (Prequitt & Elkabawy, 2022). This wage gap is has led to the national pay gap for Black women, and also relates to the difficulty in achieving generational wealth for their families (Prequitt & Elkabawy, 2022). It also directly affects total wealth hence why, on average, Black women’s net worth is equivalent to about 1% of the average White man’s net worth (Lean In, n.d.).

Hyppolite (2019) inferred that microaggressions, stereotypes, and marginalization are some types of discrimination that Black women often deal with during their journey to ascension in higher education. *Microaggressions* can be referred to as daily subtle verbal, behavioral, and environmental actions that communicate hostility and can cause discomfort for individuals in underrepresented groups (Sue et al., 2007). Often times, microaggressions are so small and discreet, that they can be difficult to identify and harder to prove (Barratt, 2020).

*Marginalization* can be defined as excluding a group due to social identity, often by groups that hold dominant power (Sevelius et al., 2020).

### ***Stereotypes***

Predominately White environments often perceive Black women in a stereotypical manner, which can lend to the idea of them being less capable of leadership then their White male, female, and Black male counterparts (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). *Stereotypes* can be defined as generalized ideas about a certain group of people (Cardwell, 1999.) Because of preconceived notions placed upon them, Black women are often faced with misconstructions by

their colleagues of who they are, which can be informed by stereotypes that negatively depict Black women, which in turn, can cause a threat in their attempt to rise to leadership (Howard et al., 2016; Marbley et al., 2011). Additionally, attitudes regarding Black women have a significant effect in the hiring, training, and promotional process of employment (Davis, 2016). Sexist and racist stereotypes hinder leadership roles and opportunities from Black women, including in higher education (Rodgers & Cudjoe, 2013).

One stereotype that often precede Black women in higher education is the Mammy stereotype. The *Mammy* is a stereotype that has slavery roots, and she is usually depicted as a larger Black woman with nurturing characteristics, normally seen as sacrificing her own happiness for the happiness of the White families she serves (Pilgrim, 2000). The mammy caricature is depicted as being simple minded, and often sacrifices herself for the good of others (Howard-Baptiste, 2014). Additionally, Howard-Baptiste (2014) observed that the unintelligence of the Mammy relates to the stereotype that Black women do not have are not intellectually skilled enough to handle an ascension to a leadership position. This image has aided in how African American female professionals are portrayed in the workplace, causing Black women leaders at PWIs to be viewed as less than capable educators, researchers, and scholars (Walkington, 2017). Furthermore, Mammy's sacrificial characteristic relates to the overworking of Black women and how they tend to care about the needs of others before their own (Howard-Baptiste, 2014). These experiences are conceptualized by Howard-Baptiste (2014) in what are called *mammy moments*, which refer to "the overt and covert ways that students, colleagues, and others communicate disrespect and distrust of Black women's worth and abilities" (p. 765). The expectation of representing the Mammy stereotype for the benefit of others is often an imposition on Black women professionals.

Black women can often be depicted as loud, angry, and assertive (Kramer, 2020; Motro et al., 2022). Hence, the angry Black woman is another stereotype that Black women are often compared to within higher education. The *angry Black woman* stereotype can be described as characterizing Black women as “angry, emasculating, confrontational, loud-talking, and difficult to work with” (Domingue, 2015, p. 461). Beginning as a popular television character trope, the angry Black woman stereotype has followed Black women into the workplace as well. This stereotype is often related to the *sapphire*, which is characterized by being loud and disrespectful, no matter the context (Patton & Haynes, 2018). This stereotype can cause Black women to suppress their anger and monitor themselves in order to appear nonthreatening in the workplace (Patton & Haynes, 2018). The historical context of this stereotype of women must be unpacked to understand how it impacts the unique experiences of Black women in the workplace.

### **Added Responsibilities of Black Women Leaders**

Black students tend to have a greater connection to Black faculty and staff, especially when there is a lack of diversity in faculty, which happens often at PWIs. Therefore, Black students often attach to Black faculty and administrators because of the cultural relation and understanding. (Solorzano et al., 2000). With this comes additional duties of supporting students on campus, such as attending student events, and advocating for Black students, and being a listening ear and means of external support for students (Townsend, 2021). This has been described as cultural taxation, which, in regard to education, links to the additional work and unwritten responsibility Black faculty and administrators commit to for Black students, which can also include being a sole voice of color, mentoring, and discussing issues of racism (Griffin et al., 2011).

The additional task of caring for students of color relates to the idea of *in loco parentis*, which Walker (2018) defines as “the surrogate relationship between faculty members and students” (p. 8). Additionally, Walker (2018) states that faculty and staff members often supplement for parents, guardians, or extended family while students are enrolled in college. For Black women, this concept can also be referred to as *othermothering*, which describes the tradition and practice of African American women who assist in caring for unrelated youth for short- to long-term periods (James, 1993). Mawhinney (2011) describes *othermothering* as a construct intellectualized to recognize how women in Black communities tend to take care of children that are without their mother, as they did when families were separated during slavery. Collins (2000) discussed how this concept of othermothering is taken up by Black teachers and educators, as they tend to be more than just faculty to many students. Student-faculty relationships are necessary for students to succeed in higher education, and it is even more necessary within the Black community at PWIs. However, this can lead to professionals being overworked and overwhelmed.

### **Coping and Support for Black Women in Higher Education**

As one can imagine, the significant barriers and extra workload can cause stress for individuals in these positions. Work culture has different demands and expectations for Black women than their counterparts (Linnabery et al., 2014). Black women in leadership often feel they must show themselves as deserving of their position, so they take on more than enough tasks, causing strain on their mental and physical health (Davis, 2016). Additionally, daily exposure to racial discrimination can be a cause of psychological issues and penalties (Holder et al., 2015). A means for support and coping practices are essential for the development and retainment of Black women administrators because it is important to their personal wellness.

(Linnabery et al., 2014). To continue, Black women leaders employ coping strategies to aid in restoration from difficulties of discrimination (Holder et al., 2015). Holder et al., (2015) explains six methods of coping for Black women professionals: sponsorship and mentoring, spirituality, armoring, shifting, utilizing support networks, and self-care.

Mentorship has become essential for African American women in higher education (Holder et al., 2015; Linehan, 2001; Solorzano et al., 2000). Mentoring needs to start with connecting Black students to Black professionals to strengthen the pipeline for Black women in higher education (Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Townsend, 2021). Mentoring gives African American female administrators greater visibility and can encourage young African Americans to enter into a career in higher education (Crawford & Smith, 2006). Additionally, Mitchel (2021), states mentoring relationships provide invaluable access to industry knowledge through education and networking, serving as beneficial to their professional development and ascendance into leadership (West, 2018).

Mentorship for people of color has been described as the difference between “isolation and integration, failure and success” (Dickey, 1996, p. 73). Linehan (2001) suggests mentoring relationships can aid in facilitating career and personal development,). Just as well, it can aid well to seek mentorship from women who have achieved leadership status especially for Black women seeking academic and leadership positions in higher education (Gardner et al., 2015). Chandler (1996) reflects on mentoring women in higher education as the partnership between a seasoned professional providing guidance and support while preparing and advising a younger or newer professional for advancement in their career. Because the number of Black women is low in these roles, newer Black faculty and staff may not see themselves as able to achieve that status. Mentorship can provide strategies for survival in an environment that is often alienating

and isolating (Green & King, 2001), and can also assist Black women in affirming efforts to survive and thrive at PWIs, where it can be difficult to ascend. Furthermore, mentoring has been cited as a critical professional development strategy, especially for women who aspire to academic and administrative leadership positions in higher education (Gardner et al., 2015).

Engagement in social support networks and external support systems is another method utilized by Black women in order to cope with the stressors of discrimination (Holder et al., 2015). The importance of having colleagues with similar stories and experiences is crucial for Black women student affairs professionals with leadership positions (West, 2016). Due to the lack of Black women in leadership positions, Black women often feel a sense of isolation due to being the only or one of few Black women at their institutions or in their departments (West, 2018). Because of this, it is essential for Black women to be able to engage in meaningful and constructive dialogue with individuals who are relatively familiar with the challenges one faces, and who can strengthen their desire to persist (West, 2016).

Obtaining a support network outside of the workplace provides protection and comfort around negative barriers that happen in the workplace (Everette et al., 2010). These social support systems may come in the form of organizational groups such as sororities, friends and family, and spiritual groups such as churches and fellowship halls as well (Holder et al., 2015). Methods of coping Black women incorporate may include social support within family and community and can also include self-help and self-care coping techniques that are unique to each individual (Linnabery et al, 2014). Whether internal or external, Black women's sustainability relies heavily on coping mechanisms and relationships with others to manage stress that may manifest based on racial and gender stress from their position (Shorter-Gooden, 2004).



Finding healthy coping mechanisms contribute to better mental health and overall support of Black women leaders in higher education. Higher education institutions must be more intentional about supporting and promoting Black women so that the representation of this group does not completely disappear.

### **Theoretical/Conceptual Framework**

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of Black women as they ascend to leadership positions at four-year PWIs in relation to race and gender by examining their professional lived experiences. According to Creswell (2003), a good theoretical foundation is critical to effective research. After deep review of the literature, I have identified the theory of othering and the theory of intersectionality as appropriate lenses through which I can meet the study's objectives.

#### ***Theory of Othering***

The theoretical concept of othering was first coined by Spivak in 1985. The idea of othering was formed systematically in her essay *The Rani of Sirmur* (1985). In this essay, Spivak explored three dimensions of othering present in archive material of the British colonial power in India (Spivak, 1985). The first dimension relates to power and the subordinate, and how the powerful produce the other as subordinate. The second dimension refers to constructing the other as pathological and morally inferior. The third dimension implies that knowledge and technology is the property of the powerful empirical self, not the colonial other (Jensen, 2011). The *theory of othering* asserts that societal norms and expectations influence those who are made to assume a place of superiority as opposed to those who are made to assume a place of inferiority (Spivak, 1985). Furthermore, othering is also described by Spivak as a multidimensional process, in the

sense that it touches upon several different forms of social diversity, as it relates to race and gender (Jensen, 2011). Both race and gender are forms of othering (Snyder & Yancy, 2021).

For Black women in the workplace, othering contributes to their experience, as their White counterparts are often more recognized for awards and promotions. Studies have exemplified how Black women are often isolated, experience significant adversity and microaggressions, and are faced with discrimination and stereotypes (Beckwith et al., 2016; Glazer-Ramo, 2001; Thorpe-Moscon & Pollack, 2014; Townsend 2021). Black women are a minority in leadership positions, which can result in little to no peers of their race and/or gender in their workplace, especially being at a PWI. Catalyst (2014) recounted this as being the ‘other’ in the workplace. This can produce invisibility and reduce promotional opportunities for Black women in professional settings. Black women in higher education at PWIs are often placed in positions where they are the only one of their race and gender, often experiencing isolation. Catalyst (2014) inferred “people who feel like an ‘other’ not only feel different but also feel separated from the essential group” (p. 2).

Due to the lack of availability in these positions, Black women are often the only ones of their race and/or gender in their department. Thorpe-Moscon and Pollack (2014) explained this feeling as being the ‘other’ in the workplace, and othering can be a form of isolation which may reflect in few work relationships. People categorized as may become an outsider, as they tend to not be included as part of the team and are often excluded from opportunities of advancement (Thorpe-Moscon & Pollack, 2014). Men in positions of power often favor those of similar characteristics, gravitating to other males for promotions and advancement (Grant & Taylor, 2014). In their ascension journey, African American women may encounter institutional norms and practice that can hinder their advancement (Wilder et al., 2013). The difficulty Black women

face when ascending for Black women to obtain leadership positions at PWIs is unique for them in regard to being Black and being female together, which can be described as intersectionality.

### *Intersectionality*

Black women face the double jeopardy of being from a non-White background and being female (Walkington, 2017). To fully gauge the experiences of Black women leaders at PWIs, it is impossible to ignore the role intersectionality plays in their experiences. *Intersectionality* refers to how social and cultural constructs, like race and gender, intersect, and how they aid in better grasping the complications that Black women face in the workplace (Lloyd-Jones, 2009). Although the term intersectionality was coined by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989, the concept originated by Maria Stewart in 1832. Stewart offered ideology that critiqued the function of race and gender together instead of separate, which has since been coined as intersectionality (Jordan-Zachary, 2007). Kimberle Crenshaw created the term intersectionality and argued that Black women experience discrimination in ways similar to White women and Black men, but often they experience double discrimination in ways that race and gender interact to shape the unique experience of Black women in the workplace (Crenshaw, 1989). Crenshaw (1991) stated, “because of their intersectional identity of both women *and* of color within discourses that are shaped to respond to one *or* the other, women of color are marginalized within both” (p. 1244).

Intersectionality aids in the interpretation of the experiences that Black women in leadership positions at PWIs often encounter (Parker, 2005). It is important to recognize the role that intersectionality plays for Black women in the workplace. Stanley (2009) stated that through intersectionality, “the lived experienced of African American women are not located within separate spheres of race, gender, and social class. Rather, these spheres intersect and shape social realities that are not captured within traditional female discourse” (p. 552). To sum it up,

intersectionality gauges the experience of Black women in the realms of race and gender and uses their lived experience to aid in the understanding of the struggles they face in the workplace. Intersectionality also supports the position that African American women's experiences are different because they deal with issues of their race and gender (Hague & Okpala, 2017). Because of the hegemonic culture that lies within the profession of higher education, Black women may experience racial and gender discrimination in their leadership positions at PWIs.

### **Summary**

Recent research regarding the experiences and perspectives of Black women in leadership has provided crucial insight and support to the academy (Agusto & Roland, 2018; West, 2018; West, 2020; Townsend 2020). However, this does not negate the fact that Black women face more difficulties in leadership positions at PWIs, with many facing discrimination due to the double minorities of race and gender. In addition, many experience othering, which conceptualizes who is made to feel superior and inferior in society and can be used to explain how Black women are the other in their careers at PWIs. Furthermore, Intersectionality aids in the interpretation of the experiences that Black women in leadership positions at PWIs often encounter (Parker, 2005). Both highlight the unique experience for Black women in leadership positions at PWIs, including having to pay the Black tax or embody othermothering, which includes having not only to excel and work harder at their jobs but to also be present and supportive for Black students at PWIs, being a token in the Black community on PWI campuses. Consequently, intersectionality shapes the unique experience for Black women in higher education as they embark upon their journeys to leadership. Due to the additional stressors of

discrimination of race and gender, Black women have to utilize different methods of coping, such as mentorship, utilizing social support, and self-care (Holder et al., 2015).

This study encouraged the incorporation of the voices, perspectives, and experiences of Black women in leadership positions. The purpose of this study was to explore the intersection of race and gender for Black women as they ascend to leadership positions at four-year predominately White institutions (PWIs) by examining their professional lived experiences. Amplifying the voice of Black women in these positions can aid in developing a better structure, leadership development, and practices for a richer experience for Black women looking to ascend to leadership in the field.

## CHAPTER III

### Methods

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the intersection of race and gender for Black women as they ascend to leadership positions at four-year predominately White institutions (PWIs) by examining their professional lived experiences. This chapter includes a description of methods that will be utilized in this study, including the study's design, sampling, participants, research site, instrumentation, description of the data collection and analysis, and treatment of data.

#### Design of Study

This study was conducted using a narrative approach to examine the lived professional experiences of Black women who have attained leadership positions within higher education institutions with a majority White student body. Narrative research is “a first-person oral telling or retelling of events related to the personal or social experiences of an individual” (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002, p. 332). Not only does it tell the stories of an individual's lived experiences, but narrative research also allows for the examination of the underlying assumptions that enlighten its readers. I selected participants who self-identify as Black women and are employed at assorted PWIs of higher education in the United States. In this study, I conceptualized a leadership position as being such as vice president, associate vice president, assistant dean, and director.

Given this objective, I employed the narrative approach to inquiry because when doing research on people of color, it is important to incorporate their actual voices and encounters. Narrative inquiry is the study of experiences told through stories and honors lived experiences as a means of gaining knowledge and understanding (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Creswell, 1998;

Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research was conducted using semi-structured interviews. The interviews were completed using Zoom, an online video-chat platform, and interviews were recorded. Participants were asked demographic questions as well as open-ended questions that addressed their experiences as being a Black woman in a leadership position at a PWI.

### **Participants**

Participants included five individuals who identify as Black women who currently hold a senior leadership position at PWIs. Sampling was done via a non-probability random sampling design. Non-probability sampling is where participants are selected based on criteria chosen by the researcher, not probability (Etikan & Bala, 2017). Additional inclusion criteria included: (1) the individual must have held a senior leadership position such as president or chancellor, vice president or vice chancellor, assistant or associate vice president, dean, or director in predominantly White four-year universities in academia at the time of data collection, and (2) the individual must have been in such a position for at least three years. I recruited participants by emailing out to colleagues and mentors for connection to participants they may know, then emailed potential participants with a recruitment email (See Appendix A). Due to the participant criteria, by default, snowball sampling was utilized as well. *Snowball sampling* is where a researcher chose participants, and those participants indicate other individuals from their network that fit the criteria to participate in the study (Martinez-Mesa et al., 2016, Etikan & Bala, 2017).

I also created a post in two Facebook Groups: BLKSAP (Black Student Affairs Professionals) and Student Affairs Professionals Involved with Leadership and Diversity Programs. I shared a call to participation post with a flyer containing participant criteria and research design to attract additional participation. Potential participants were asked to complete an introductory questionnaire to determine whether they fit the criteria for participation. Out of

eight potential participants, five were contacted via email and invited to participate in the study. Participants were emailed a PDF copy of the informed consent form for their review (See Appendix B). Interview times were discussed, and participants chose dates and times that fit their schedules. At the beginning of each interview, participants were asked if they consent to participate in the study, and if they consent to being recorded. They were then asked to sign the consent form and email the form back to me. Ultimately, participation was by informed consent.

### **Research Site**

Though this study originated from a mid-sized four-year institution in the Midwest, participants were chosen from any four-year institution within the United States of America for broader responses and better understanding of leader's experiences, as long as they met participation criteria. For this reason, is no specific state or region for participants to be employed.

### **Instrument**

For data collection, I utilized semi-structured interviews. According to Rubin and Rubin (2012), when interviews are used in qualitative research, data tends to be richer and more detailed for understanding the experiences of participants, and how those experiences affected their narrative. For the semi-structured interviews, I utilized an interview protocol, which is most fitting for semi-structured interviews (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). The protocol was broken into three sections: a demographic and biographic questionnaire, open-ended questions about participants' experiences during their journey to leadership, and open-ended questions reflecting on their current role in leadership.



### ***Demographic and Biographic Questionnaire***

The narrative inquiry is rooted in place and time (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Thus, it is important to gather information about the institutional contexts within which the experiences occurred. Therefore, the demographic questionnaire consisted of closed-ended questions that pertain to the participant's gender, race, length of time in the profession, length of time in a leadership position, current job title, institutional location (e.g., state or region), and preferred pseudonym (See Appendix C). Information that could inadvertently lead to the identification of participants will not be included in research dissemination.

### ***Semi-Structured Interviews***

An interview protocol (see Appendix A) was developed to assist in guiding the semi-structured, one-on-one interviews. Interview protocols aid in confirming that interview questions support the research questions of the study, and they provide better quality of data obtained from interviews (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). Interviews lasted between 35-90 minutes. The questions were designed to gain a better understanding of the experiences that participants experienced during their journey in ascension to leadership positions at PWIs of higher education.

The main portion of the interview was included in parts two and three of the interview protocol. The first part of this portion included open-ended questions geared towards understanding the experiences of participant's journey in ascending to the leadership position they currently hold. Examples of these open-ended questions included: (1) How has the process been to move up compared to your peers? (2) How would you describe the impact of your race and gender on your journey to leadership? (3) Can you describe any barriers or supports that you faced/received along the way?

The concluding portion of this section included open-ended questions regarding the participant's current position in leadership. Examples of these open-ended questions include: (1) Tell me about your experiences as a Black woman leader in a predominantly White institution of higher education. (2) What has been your experience as a mentor to Black students on your campus? (3) What has been your experience as a mentor to others in the field? This structure encouraged participants to provide transparent, truthful answers that spoke to their own individual experiences.

### **Researcher-as-Instrument**

Utilizing the researcher as an instrument and researcher involvement is common in qualitative research (Creswell, 2003; Pezella et al., 2012). Additionally, Pazella et al., (2012) stated that since the researcher is the instrument in interviews, "unique researcher attributes have the potential to influence the collection of empirical materials" (p. 166). While recognizing how my identity, experiences, or knowledge is imperative to the study, I utilized bracketing to ensure that the focus of this study is the participants, not the researcher. *Bracketing* is defined by Fischer (2009) as the researchers understanding that their personal experiences, culture, assumptions, and interests could influence the data collected for the study. Bracketing is beneficial in this range because it forces the researcher to set aside any prior knowledge or information to provide undivided attention to the participants and the study (Fischer, 2009). Watt (2007) inferred that researcher reflectivity is a valuable tool in student research. Furthermore, Berger (2015) inferred that reflexivity enhances the trustworthiness of a qualitative study by describing the similarities between participants and themselves increases credibility of findings and deepens the understanding of the work.

### **Researcher Reflexivity**

As I was exploring topics of research for my thesis project, I wanted to make sure I wrote about a topic I am passionate about, and that relates to my own experiences. I thought back to my undergraduate experience, where I attended a PWI. I remember my junior year of undergraduate studies vividly. It was one of the toughest years I had experienced, both mentally and academically. At that time, I had just lost a friend due to an unforeseen death, and everything seemed to spiral out of control. Life was hitting me hard! I stopped attending classes and stopped turning in my assignments. I lost all care for life.

One day, while I was sitting in my room, I got an email from the dean of students stating that one of my instructors had reached out to him, and he wanted to see me. I went to his office, and before I could even start talking, tears began to flow. I told him everything that I was going through. After I finished crying, he gave me Kleenex to wipe my eyes and told me he had someone that would be able to help me. He felt that I would be able to connect and relate to her and hoped talking to her would be much more helpful to me. Hopeful, I got up and followed him down to the next office. He opened the door and introduced me to another dean, a White woman. After I sat down, I told her the same story I told the previous dean. She looked at me blankly after I had cried again, and said “well, maybe we can get you some services that can offer medication for you.” I realized that she simply did not understand my experiences or my culture, and I never returned to her office.

It later dawned on me that my dean had failed to recognize the intersections of race and gender in my identity. He felt that since I was a woman, getting help from another woman could help because she’d be able to relate to me. He did not think about how my Blackness makes my experiences different from a White woman’s experiences. I cared about my education, and I

wanted to find someone who could not only help me figure out my next steps, but who could understand my struggles and also offer me mentorship. I wondered where I could find Black women with authority on our campus. I began to search to find another person in authority that represented my identities and could better assist me in my struggles. After scouring the institution's website, I finally found one Black woman in leadership that may have been able to help, but that was it. For all of the Black students on campus, there was one person in the leadership of the entire school whose racial identity appear to reflect their own. From that point on, I wondered why it was so hard to find someone on campus who I felt may understand what I was going through as a Black woman, who reflected me and may be able to help. Since that day, one question has haunted me: Where are the Black women in leading positions at PWIs of higher education?

In choosing my research topic, utilized this opportunity to investigate my projected career path, but from the lens of people who share similar identities as me: Black women in higher education. As I enter the field of higher education, transitioning from a student to a professional, I believe it will be beneficial for me to hear the stories and experiences of women who have walked in my shoes. As Black women, we experience similar struggles, no matter the setting. I wanted to understand the struggles and barriers, but also the triumphs and successes of women who paved the way and provided a pipeline for myself and other Black women professionals in higher education who want to ascend to leadership positions. For my research, I chose to amplify the voices of Black women in leadership because their experience is unique compared to others. Utilizing the narratives and experiences of participants of color is important because it humanizes their discourse and honors their truths. The Queens who participated in the study are

incredible Black women who spoke with such intelligence and grace, and I am honored to have them as a part of this study.

### **Data Collection**

Data was collected utilizing semi-structured, one-on-one interviews. The interviews were conducted through an online video chat platform, Zoom. After interview dates and times were confirmed, participants received a Zoom link for their scheduled meeting. Because interviews were conducted virtually, I asked that participants select a secluded setting where they are comfortable to openly discuss their experiences. I also made sure to be in a private setting where the interviews were confidential. Although participants consented to participation prior to the interview, at the beginning of each interview, I again shared the informed consent via email, reminded them that participation is completely voluntary, and they may stop at any time, answered any questions participants had, and requested they sign the consent form digitally and email it back to me. Participants were then asked for their permission to record the interview, were again reminded of confidentiality, and the interview began.

### **Data Analysis**

Upon interview completion, participants were thanked, and interview recordings were stored in a password-protected One Drive file. Then, interviews were transcribed via Microsoft Word within 72 hours after completion, and transcriptions were added to the secure file. I utilized the study's research questions and theoretical framework to direct my reading and examination of the transcriptions. Utilizing Saldana's (2013) method, interviews were first coded, using small phrases or words that symbolized a similar feature of the presented data. Then, coding was categorized, recoded, and recategorized observing different patterns in the data, then turned in to themes. Codes were then grouped into a common theme. Theming data is

a way of organizing the repeated ideas under a like term or phrase and are then consolidated together into a logical narrative (Saldana, 2013). Data was reviewed multiple times to confirm outstanding themes (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Each transcript was coded separately.

### **Treatment of data**

After data analysis was completed, all data was confirmed to be stored in a Microsoft OneDrive folder that is password protected. My thesis advisor and I are the only individuals with access to said folder. To continue confidentiality, I was sure to remove all contact information from the data and place it in a separate file so as not to be connected to participant responses. Each participant has been named using a pseudonym, and their representing institution will be anonymously in the written report. The treatment of data will abide by my institution's IRB protocols, and the records pertaining to this study will be kept for three years per IRB policy. After this timeline is reached, all data and records will be permanently deleted.

### **Summary**

A narrative, qualitative design was used to explore the lived experiences of five Black women in leadership positions at five separate four-year PWIs of higher education in the United States of America. Participants were selected in a non-random design as they fulfilled the criteria of the research objectives for participation in the study. Participation was by informed consent, and data was collected using one-on-one semi-structured interviews. All interviews lasted between 35-90 minutes. Pseudonyms were utilized in order to keep the identities of the participants private. Chapter IV will explore a thorough examination of the conducted interviews, as well as the observed findings.

## CHAPTER IV

### Findings

This chapter presents the findings from the analysis of the data gathered from five middle to Black women who hold leadership positions such as vice president, associate vice president, assistant dean, and director at predominately White institutions (PWIs) in the United States. Historically, Black women's stories and experiences have been removed from significant moments in history (Asare, 2021). In turn, they have also been excluded from obtaining positions of leadership within institutions of higher education (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). Because of the intersection of race and gender in their identity, Black women face steeper obstacles than their White female, White male, and Black male colleagues (Beckwith et al., 2016). Therefore, it is important to recognize narratives of Black women in leadership positions to understand their unique experiences. This study was designed to understand what it means to be a Black woman in a leadership position at a PWI of higher education, and how the intersection of race and gender relates to their lived experience. This was achieved through the exploration of three research questions: What are the experiences of Black women leaders at predominately White institutions of higher education? What are Black women leaders in higher education's perceptions of what impacts their advancement? How do race and gender identities impact Black women in leadership's experiences at predominately White institutions of higher education? The findings of this study centered around these questions. The next section provides a description of the participants at the time they were interviewed.

#### Participants' Profiles

Participants were selected through non-random selection. Each interview took place on Zoom. The participants were asked to be in private spaces where they could openly discuss

content and feel comfortable enough to be truthful. Participants chose pseudonyms that were used to protect their identities.

### ***Aleeah***

With three years in her current position, and even more in the field of higher education, Aleeah is a director of the African American cultural center at a large, public research one, four-year institution in the southern region of the United States. Previously, she held the position of assistant director for the Women's Center. Aleeah found her way into higher education by working in the student activity center during her undergraduate career. She then continued to work in the student center after graduation, and there, she realized her love for working with students. Aleeah identifies as *femme*, which can be defined as "a lesbian who is notably or stereotypically feminine in appearance and manner" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). However, she recognizes she was raised as a Black woman majority of her life, and still identifies with the culture and experiences of Black women because it is important to her identity. She holds a Master of Arts in Clinical Mental Health Counseling and is currently pursuing a doctorate degree.

### ***Dr. Burnham***

As a pioneer with over 10 years in higher education, Dr. Burnham is a vice president for diversity, equity, inclusion, and international programs at a large, public, research-two, four-year institution in the south-central region of the United States. Previously, she held positions such as coordinator for student justice, director of housing, assistant dean of students, and assistant vice president for student affairs. Education has been a value instilled in her by her mother. She found her way into a career in higher education after being very involved during her undergraduate career as serving in a sorority and being president of the Black Student Union at her



undergraduate institution. She also gives credit to her mentors for helping her realize the difference she could make in higher education. Dr. Burnham holds a Doctor of Philosophy in Higher Education Administration.

***Dr. Harriston***

With over seven years in her position, and even more in the field of higher education, Dr. Harriston is a director of civil rights and diversity and a Title IX coordinator at a mid-sized, public, liberal arts, four-year institution in the midwestern region of the United States. Previously, Dr. Harriston held the position of associate director of student standards. Dr. Harriston found her way into higher education after her friends encouraged her to pursue a master's degree. While pursuing her degree, she accepted a graduate assistantship as a hall counselor, and decided to stay in higher education upon graduation. Dr. Harriston currently holds a Master of Science in Education and a Doctor of Philosophy in Higher Education Administration.

***Mel***

Another pioneer in higher education after serving for 18 years, Mel is an associate vice president of health and well-being at a large, public, research-one, four-year institution in the midwestern region of the United States. Previously, Mel held positions such as associate dean of student health and wellness, director of the office of health & wellness promotion, and health education specialist. Mel found her way into higher education as a peer educator. She was chosen for a graduate assistantship by her mentors, and they convinced her to continue her education. After that, she applied and was accepted into graduate school. Mel holds a Master of Arts in Health and Wellness, and a Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership and Management.

### *Monique*

With nine years post-doctorate, and over four years in her current position, Monique is an assistant dean and director of the office of recruitment, diversity, and inclusion at a large, public, research-one, four-year institution in the southeastern region of the United States. Previously, Monique held the position of education and outreach coordinator. Monique returned to higher education after her postdoctoral fellowship, where she recognized her own academic needs as a student, and that students often came to her for help and support. It was in this position that she recognized her love for working with students. Monique currently holds a Doctor of Philosophy in Genetics, Bioinformatics, and Computational Biology.

### **Research Question #1: What are the lived experiences of Black women leaders at predominately White institutions of higher education?**

Participants were asked about their lived experience as a Black woman in a predominately White institution, how they made their journey to higher education, and what impacted that decision. Participants discussed several aspects of their lived experiences such as being *Called into Higher Education*, *Unreasonably High Expectations*, and *Support and Celebrations*.

#### ***Called into Higher Education***

This theme described participants' explanations of how and why they decided to enter into a career in higher education. Three of them discussed receiving a calling, either from a higher power, from friends or family members, or from the ancestors and felt that they were expected to follow that calling. Dr. Harriston reflected on how she remembered receiving the calling from some of her friends:

Senior year [I was] getting ready to graduate from university. I was just ready to get a bachelor's degree and a lot of friends who had already graduated... Two of them were in a master's program, and one had completed their master's program, and they both said "Why don't you go get your master's degree? One of them was a good friend of mine, and she was telling me about the program she was in, and the other two, what they were telling me about was the assistantship that would help pay for it. So, I ended up applying to the master's in counseling program, and my emphasis was on community counseling.

Aleeah reflected on how she felt her call from a more spiritual factor. She was focused on finishing her dissertation for her Ph.D. when she heard the calling:

I didn't even know I wanted to be in this position... My primary goal was to finish this dissertation... but I could not ignore a call of the ancestors, and of the people around me to know that I needed to know into this position. I know enough about myself to know that I do not fight my intuitions, and I do not fight my ancestors because I'm going to lose every time.

Aleeah knew that applying for her role as the director of the cultural center was meant for her. She knew that the path was paved for her, and if she did not listen to her calling, she would regret it:

I knew, if anything, the path was laid out for me. When I looked at the application, and I looked at the supplemental questions, the answers literally came to me... But that's also how I believe that God and our ancestor's work. God will always lay a path out in front of you. It's up to you whether or not you're going to take it.

Receiving a call to do this work is not the experience of many. However, Mel received the calling twice, both from her mentors, friends, and from a spiritual factor:

I actually got a graduate assistantship before I applied to grad school. How the peer education graduate assistantship was attained was it was passed. So [my friend] was the graduate assistant. She was like “let’s go to lunch!” And I was like “Okay!” And then she was like “I’ve selected you as the next GA.” I was like “So see, what happened was, I didn’t even take the GMAT, or applied for grad school. I don’t even know what I’m gonna do with my whole life.” She was like “You the GA. Get yourself together...” [It was] because of [my friend] and my mentors co-conspiring for me to stay.

When it came to receiving a spiritual calling, Mel reflected on that as well:

For me, while this is my profession, this is also my ministry, and I don’t take it lightly for the calling... I’m very mindful in asking God to make it clear that I’m doing what he’s asked me to do... I told God, I say, I know that you’ve prepared me for this path.

Regardless of where the calling came from, Aleeah, Dr. Harriston, and Mel all felt that they had landed in higher education by being told of the opportunities or being called by a higher power to enter into the field. Participants have reflected and recognized that their current destiny was placed upon them because they listened and did exactly what they were supposed to do, and ended up exactly where they were meant to be.

### ***Unreasonably High Expectations***

Some participants reflected on their experiences with colleagues or their supervisors expecting much more from them because of their existence as Black women. Participants recalled different instances in how others expected them to do additional work, have expected them to take the lead, or expected them to work harder than others. Aleeah reflected on her graduate assistance experience, and how in that role, her overworking was due to the lack of representation amongst the staff, causing a lack of diversity among services offered to students:

I worked in the women's center... and they were doing fantastic work, but there was still this gap for Black and basically endarkened women and femmes, as well as nonbinary folks, to see themselves represented in the work of either of these centers. So, that became my primary work, which means I'm now, even as a GA, supposedly working 20 hours a week, and I'm working 30 and 40 hours a week.

She then reflected on her role, once she was officially a full-time employee of the women's center, and was expected to overwork and had high expectations from her supervisor by saying:

You all are coming to me. Y'all are f\*\*\*ing adults, and you can research and look into this... but then you're capitalizing on my work. I am now teaching my supervisor. I mean, I learned the word managing up from my supervisor, who was just like 'oh, you're really good at managing up,' and I was like "Is that what that is?" So, now I know that you see it, and you recognize it, but you're comfortable with it because you're coming to me for thought partnership to help you think through things, and to make administrative decisions. Well, you're making double, if not more than me! I am now laboring for you, and I ain't getting none of the benefits of that.

Later, Aleeah reflected on how, because of her identity as a Black woman, working harder than others is going to be an expectation, as it comes with the territory:

Your work could literally be works that benefits everybody, but because you're a Black woman or femme doing it, you're going to automatically have to labor harder for it.

Aleeah then reflected on her current role, and how she was expected to perform tasks during a global pandemic:

When I came, I had to spend my first-year hiring, and this is also in the midst of a pandemic. This is towards the beginning of when COVID-19 was at its high, and the

[job] market was (thumbs down gesture). There were not a lot of candidates, and so there were just a lot of pieces. But I'm also expected to fully program and to still make things happen, change the layout of this center (the cultural center), and rebuild relationships and connections because all of those things had been severed with the previous leadership. Then, there are things that I didn't know, like the pieces that have been so deeply buried. So, I'm unearthing them, and having to navigate as well without them.

She then reflected on how peers always expect her to take the lead, and put decision making on her, when other opinions could be benefitted from, just as much as hers:

I've seen it happen. I can say something, then everybody just falls into agreement. And I am like, what about the other possibilities? I don't want to be the only voice in the room. For me to be the only voice in the room and the only thing that someone is engaging with, to let that be the way things go only allows one possibility. And yes, what I said could have been dope. It could have been great, but also maybe someone else has something to offer that is also fantastic and can move us, and maybe still move us in a similar direction, or maybe a completely different one, but we have to offer those things.

Monique also reflected on expectations of Black women in leadership, and how this is often higher than expectations of others:

I had a conversation with a friend yesterday, and I was telling her that what's interesting for other people who don't look like she and I, which is women of color, is that people have the luxury, when taking roles, to have that – I'm going to call it a grace period, right – of three to six months to explore and learn, and get everything, and know all of the pieces and players. I told her, I said, "that's cute and everything, but have you ever been able to do that?" She's like "No!" I don't know any job, I can't think of one, even Ph.D.,

everything I've had to do has been go, and accelerate, and gas up the car before you even start it! So, that's how my whole life has been, just recognizing this high expectation. It's funny because it's high expectation... usually of those who also supervise and manage because they don't know how to supervise and manage people that look different than them.

### ***Support and Celebrations***

One of the most common experiences of the participants in this study is receiving support from others and celebrating their accomplishments. Because of their identity, Black women deal with more stressors at work, and lack of self-care and self-reflection can be detrimental to their livelihood. This support heavily contributes to their success in higher education. Four participants spoke on aspects of support they receive from others, and how they take care of themselves. This theme was separated into four sub-themes: *Allyship and Colleague Support*, *Support from Loved Ones*, *Self-care*, *Self-reflection and Self-celebration*, and *Spiritual Support*.

**Allyship and Colleague Support.** Participants heavily reflected on how allyships and having the support of other women in the field have felt like a sense of support for them. Two participants reflected on a specific ally: White males. Two participants reflected on how White men have aided in their ascension to a senior leadership position. Dr. Burnham spoke at length about the support she received from White men in her positions:

The most support that I receive primarily has been from Black women and White males.... As a matter of fact, the people who would advance me and would say, "Hey, I want to promote you" were all White guys. It's crazy... All my bosses have been White men who have hired me, and they were the ones who would promote me and say, "Hey, here's this opportunity..." One of my vice presidents, when I was an assistant vice

president, he left, and he became the chancellor at a system office. He would say “hey, whenever you’re ready to be a vice president, tell me, so we can get you moving in that direction,” you know? It makes sense. They got the power and the connections.

She talked about how, when she needed it, White men have supported her, even in tough situations:

I had so many complaints filed on me... and what helped was having the support of those white dudes above me who had promoted me and hired me, who had the best interest in me. So that was helpful because they were a part of that system. They understood that system.

Dr. Burnham went on to talk about allyship, and how White men have been great at providing that allyship to her in the field and have encouraged her to pursue other opportunities:

I taught in the student affairs, higher education program, and my dean [was] the reason why I started teaching. He is a white dude, and he said “hey, I want you to reach in my college.” I was like “I don’t even want to teach.” And he was like, “No, I think you should. Plus, it’ll be good on your [resume], right?” So, I started teaching in the college, and he let me create my own courses.

She then continued:

When I would have an important meeting where I needed support, I would go to my allies, my White allies, and say, “I need you here because I’m trying to push this thing out,” and they knew what the job was. Like my dean would say, “you just need me to be there, be the old White dude?” And I would just say “Yeah, your support!” And he would say, “I know my role.” So, I have developed those kinds of allies... I knew I’m still going to get to these White dudes because nobody’s going to push back with them.



Dr. Burnham then began to reflect on her current position and her boss. She reflected on her hiring process, their relationship, and his trust in her abilities. She shared:

Working for a White male who basically says “you were my number one pick...” They did a national search for the position through an executive firm, you know? I competed with 10 other people. Got to the third, final round, and then he said “You were always my pick. I just had to make sure who you were on paper, was who you would be in person, you know, and that we would click.” He’s been pretty much like all my other White male bosses. He just gets out of the way. He’s like “you’re the expert, which is why I hired you to do your job.” And he says, “You give me cover, I give you cover, and that’s how we do!”

Similarly, Monique reflected on how her mentor, a White man, aided in her success as well. Although mentorship is discussed later on, Monique’s mentor is different from others as her mentor differs in both race and gender. Monique reflected:

Support would definitely be, and I still rely on, my Ph.D. advisor. He’s a White male, but he’s from a different country. That training, that experience you have with them [thesis advisors], I think that loyalty and sounding board that you’re able to get from a person who has seen you mature [is great] ... I started grad school at 22 for my Ph.D.... now I’m 36. So, it’s knowing someone’s seen how you matured, how you narrow your focus, and how you’ve grown and integrated that training and your other interests. That’s one person I would say is highly supportive.

Other participants also reflected on how allyship with other colleagues in the workplace have aided in them feeling supported and uplifted. Aleeah reflected on how using colleagues as support can be a positive addition to the job:

There are pockets of folks on campus, when you can actually access it... but just knowing that they exist somewhere is like this lovely thing. To know that there is someone that, if you really need to, you can call on them. Unfortunately, it's usually about work, but that is a source of support to know that we can do this work collectively, together...

Similarly, Dr Harriston reflected that colleague support is one piece that keeps her grounded:

Aligning myself with some people that are at the institution where we can get together, and we can have our own support group is good... Just connecting with other people helps me to stay uplifted, you know? Colleagues at the university, just being able to get together with them outside of work, or even if we just go to lunch, you know, just being able to laugh and hear other people talk about some things that they're going through.

Mel acknowledged how she believes the sponsorship of allies is important in the ascension process:

Yes, you need mentors who look like us, but a big reason why I'm here is those sponsors who don't look like me. Those sponsors who also saw me, who were in those spaces, made sure they put my name at the table and on the docket. That is something that I don't think we talk enough of. And then also, [it is important to] find mentors who don't look like you to have those tough conversations of how to navigate spaces as you ascend.

Monique also acknowledged that allyship and support from people who don't look like her has aided in her support as well:

Know that there's allyship and support from people who look completely different than me, and that has been some of my stronger advocates have been a White woman or a

White man who could see the sincerity, the genuine, the focus, and that there's no need for handholding.

Participant's reflections on White allyship demonstrate how it is an important asset in the ascension journey of Black women to senior leadership. Burnham's reflection demonstrates how White men can be critical to the ascension of Black women in higher education. Mel's reflection added to the same sentiment. White men are in the position and have the power to aid Black women in navigating higher education and promoting them to senior leadership positions.

Participants also recognized that other women, mostly other women of color, have been great support systems in keeping them uplifted in the field. Forming social groups, such as sister circles have shown positive results in the support of Black women leaders. Another means of interpersonal support that participants discussed was the importance of having mentors. In this study, mentors refer to other women of color who have provided a supportive role to participants, outside of their daily job duties. Committing to and solidifying these relationships has displayed a great means of support for participants. Dr. Burnham discussed how she leans on her mentors, sorority sisters ,and sister circles:

The support I received overwhelmingly from was from Black females overwhelmingly... [also from] my sorority. You know, my sisters... Black women were the ones who would help me to understand the people politics. Black women were the ones to help me to understand what to say. Like, pay attention to this, or watch the dynamics between this person and that person, or I want you to pay attention to this, or here's what I want you to focus on in this role because this is an important power move for you. So, that's what Black women would do because we're navigating those spaces, and they had navigated them before me, and were levels above me... that is really invaluable.

She then reflected on her mentors, giving them credit for being an asset to her success:

I had some good mentors. I had some Black female mentors at the university, and that's where I know I wanted to be a part of that system of education. Because that's where I feel like I can make a really big difference... as a matter of fact, my biggest supporters were my Black female mentors... the support I received overwhelmingly were from Black female mentors.

Dr. Harriston similarly reflected on how surrounding herself with people who share her identity has been a means of support. Some of those women became mentors for her:

Other African American women in the field, I definitely receive that support. After doing my housing assistantship, I was encouraged to apply for the full-time position as hall director, and I did. But I was ready to move around then because I had been at the institution since I was a freshman. So, I already had two degrees, and worked full time. So, I'm like I need to go get a different experience, so at each place that I've gone, I think I've connected with women who I would be able to consider like a mentor at those institutions. They definitely have encouraged me along the way to say what do you want to do, and how do you want to get there? They have helped along the way. I think they've provided some advice on how to approach situations. I had to learn the art of negotiations. People would talk about it, and I'm like nobody's telling me how to go and negotiate... they were able to provide some of that support. When you're on a predominately White campus, because every university I've worked at has been a college or university that was predominately white, so I've definitely aligned with other women of color or other people of color to have that comradery connection and that collegiality.

So, you can have someone to go to. Although the people I've connected with haven't all been people of color, but just having that connection has definitely helped.

Mel also reflected on how her mentors have aided in getting her to where she is today. When asked about the support she's received in her journey, she stated:

My mentors that I've been able to acquire [have been supportive]. Early in my career, I had my mentors who were also health educators. Then, when I became the graduate assistant (GA), [NAME REDACTED]'s best friend was over at the school of medicine. She offered me another GA because I didn't have any tuition remission or health insurance that came with mine. I was an hourly graduate assistant. So, I had two GA-ships. So, she ended up becoming my other mentor. And so, I really had a strong circle of mentors... and they helped me through out, I would say, the first decade of my career as a health educator. Then, after that, I became a director, and they still helped me... they were very pivotal in me finding myself in that process, and being able to show up authentically in those spaces, because they saw it long before I did... I wouldn't be here if I didn't have mentors.

Similarly, Monique reflected on how her relationship with other women has grounded her in her journey:

There's definitely been a network of, I used to call them 'the women,' women, whether it was women in higher roles, in my post doc, at another school... they don't all necessarily look like me and you, but I make sure to form those relationships because I know they have aspirations beyond that being their endpoint... to me, supporters look like different women in different positions.

Participants recognized that building support systems with individuals who share their identities has aided in their support and success. They also recognize that mentorship was an important piece of their leadership development and their ascension process. Being able to destress and connect with individuals who can relate to common experiences is important to the ascension of Black women to senior leadership positions.

**Support from Loved Ones.** Interpersonal connections within their institution have proven to be one means of support for participants. However, it is important to acknowledge the support they receive outside of the institution. Participants reflected on how important their relationships are with friends, family, and significant others. All five participants spoke about important relationships they have with loved ones, and how those relationships keep their foundation strong. Aleeah reflected on her current position, and how her wife helped her in making the decision to take the role:

My wife, she was the reason [I took this job]. I tell people how she was the reason I took the position. I would have been fine.

When asked what keeps her uplifted, Aleeah reflected on how her significant other praises her.

While smiling, she stated:

My wife is probably my greatest supporter. She's going to hype me up every day, and she's going to tell everybody. She's going to tell everybody, everything, every single time. I can always count on her to be like "let me tell you what Aleeah is doing right now!"

When Dr. Burnham reflected on the support she receives from loved ones outside of work, she talked about family:

My siblings and I, we have a group chat, and every morning, every single morning, we are in contact with each other. Good morning! We'll send out memes, and my sister, she does all Black history month things. I also call my mom and dad.

Dr. Burnham also reflected on her friendships:

My girlfriends, we celebrate each other. When someone makes an accomplishment, we're all going out to dinner, and we go celebrate and just spend time with each other, love on each other, and recognize one another for what we've been through because we've been through!

Dr. Harriston then reflected on how friendships have been a means of support for her, even when the goings get tough:

Talking to people, talking to my friends, just being able to have that sounding board, or be able to decompress [has been support for me]. Even in those situations when it's something that we were just talking about the stressfulness of it. Just connecting with other people helps me to stay uplifted.

When Mel was asked about support outside of the institution, she reflected on her family:

I'm big about my family... my family will [celebrate me].

Just as well, Monique reflected on the support she received outside of work as well. She stated:

Thinking about support, I would probably put family first before all of these other people. Definitely, as you go through and navigate, they may not necessarily know what you're trying to do, but they can just help you. They know the authentic you.

Monique also reflected on her biggest supporter, her six-year-old son. She stated:

I would say that most recently, I have my son. I have a six-year-old, and a lot of my decisions, the drive for that, and also why I shifted to administration from the traditional faculty path [is my son].

Participants appreciated the relationships they hold with loved ones and counted them as their foundation, their reason, and their why. The importance of having support from family and friends helped participants sustain a healthy environment.

**Self-care, Self-reflection, and Self-celebration.** Although receiving fulfillment and supplement from other relationships is important, taking care of self is also detrimental to the support and the success of Black women leaders. Self-care and self-reflection aid in being able to remember their reason for doing their work in higher education participants talked about self-support and refilling their cup based on their love language. Learning to celebrate self along the journey has been something that some participants responded to as well. Aleeah reflected on how she's working on learning to celebrate herself:

I am learning to celebrate myself and my accomplishments. I'm getting a little bit better. I'm taking baby steps. I used to not really celebrate anything. I've always been so busy that it's like I didn't have a moment to comprehend or understand what had just happened. Like, I can hear it around me. Like, I can hear other people. But it's always been hard for me to be like, Oh, here's a moment of celebration for yourself. So, I've been learning to do that. So, when I passed my proposal hearing, I was like we're going to plan a little dinner. We're going to celebrate the fact that I passed this proposal hearing because I did that! And so, it's taking those little moments.



Aleeah also reflected on having a sense of home and the life she's created there with her wife as being her comfortability as well. On the other hand, Dr. Burnham spoke immensely about her love for self-care:

I prioritize my self-care. Let me tell you that. One of my highest priorities is taking care of myself. So, I get up in the mornings, and I work out. I do yoga, then I do strength training, and then I just dance. Then, I do my money. Then, I do my meditative practices, so I do my meditation and my breathing. I do some journaling... I was a single mom. I raised my son... I knew if I was gonna show up for him the way that he needed me to show up for him, I had to first show up for me... I went through a divorce, and I was really going to have to home in on myself and make myself a priority. So, that is something that I absolutely live by because you cannot give what you don't have, and an empty vessel cannot pour into anybody else, and that's a fact. So yes, I prioritize myself.

Dr. Burnham also talked about how she releases stress in traveling and how she makes sure her home stays a sanctuary for her:

Yes, I do celebrate my accomplishments, and I love to do so with travel. I love traveling. I love international travel. One of my line sisters... her side gig is she's a travel agent. She'll come up with trips for us. She'll be like, let's do a Bahamas trip, or let's go to the West Indies. So that's one of the ways that I like to celebrate is I love to travel and experience new cultures and also experience my blackness and other spaces... I'm always thinking about vacations.

Dr. Burnham also reflected on home, and how she is sure to prioritize that home is a safe and comfortable space for her:

Everything around here [my home] is Black. All of my art, everything, because I want to surround myself with myself because when I go out there, I'm not surrounded by myself, right? That's not what's out there. So, what's in here? I have to make this my sanctuary. So, this is my sanctuary. I do my work out here. I do my meditation here. I do all the things of self-care right here in my own place, and I go out in the world to render my gifts and do what I've been called to do in this world. But my house is always my sanctuary.

Always. That is why I'm particular about who comes in because people have energy.

Different from Dr. Burnham, Dr. Harriston reflected on worrying, and how self-reflection and processing things is one of the ways she supports herself. For her, this is needed. Although she calls herself a worrier, her position entails heavy attention to detail:

Unfortunately, I'm a little bit of a worrier. I tend to kind of process it. I kind of worry about it a little bit, like, did I forget to do something? Did I forget to cross the T or dot an I? What could I have done, you know? Let me go back and replay it, and just try to think about it. So, I end up overthinking it sometimes or trying to explain some of those things because nobody wants to make a mistake. But I always say in my current role in what I do, is this is a position that you don't want to make a mistake in or forget something in a process because it can definitely be detrimental to me or to the office or to the university.

So, I tend to worry about it a bit, and then, I usually talk to people.

Mel also discussed how she is learning to celebrate herself externally and in that, it supports others:

I celebrate my successes outwardly, so I may make a post on my social media because I've learned that if I don't celebrate me, nobody else will. I've also learned as I share things outwardly, I get a lot of inboxes saying thank you for sharing. I think a lot of

people don't know what's possible, and that this can be attained. So, I've learned the more accomplishments I share, I get more people [to connect to].

Monique reflected on how her uplifting is internal, and she uses self-reflection and seeing others succeed to move forward. She reflected:

A lot of that is internal, my uplifting... my uplifting moment is more of where I self-reflect and be like, Okay! What's next girl? Where are we at? What are we doing, you know? And having that planned vision, and then moving towards the vision. So, I feel more uplifting, excitement, and renewal through that reflection on what can be, and sometimes that's actualized through me seeing others that look like me announce that they've gotten VP positions. Those kinds of things uplift me.

Monique also reflected on how her cup stays full because of appreciation from her students. Celebrations and acknowledgment of her contributions from her students really helps her to appreciate herself:

Those kinds of things uplift me, as well as the students. I get so much stuff from students all the time. I get plants, cards, all kinds of sweet emails, and just knowing, even if it was a one-hour interaction, a five-hour interaction, or a whole semester interaction, that it meant something to them. I could be from the reaching side or my administrative work... just having students just acknowledge it. It doesn't have to be a gift. They give great gifts; some will email a great card. It means a lot to me.

Similarly, Mel reflected the same. How, when she's feeling overwhelmed, her self-reflection included utilizing things students have done for her or said to her in appreciation:

My love language and appreciation language is words of affirmation. So, when I get those emails and those text messages, or I hear from those [students] I've engaged with

“thank you,” those are the emails and text messages that I even go back and read when my cup is empty.

Self-care, self-reflection, and self-celebration are all means of staying sustained in what can often be a stressful work environment for Black women. Being able to look into self and recognize your own strengths and weaknesses is a great skill to have. Utilizing that reflection to aid in your development as a leader is a commonality between participants.

**Spiritual Support.** The final sub-theme of the category of support is spirituality. Four participants discussed a spiritual relationship with a higher power as a source of support and sustainability for them. Aleeah reflected on how her spiritual relationship has aided her in her calling, as discussed earlier:

The path was laid out for me. But that’s also how I believe that God and our ancestors work because God will always lay a path out in front of you. It’s up to you on whether or not you’re going to take it.

Dr. Burnham also reflected on her spirituality, and how she celebrates her identity in her spirituality as well:

I’m a spiritual person. I’m very particular about that. I’m also an ordained minister... So, for ten years, I co-pastored a radically inclusive ministry with my sister. So, I’m a very spiritual person, but I’m very Afro-centric in my spirituality. That’s really important to me. I have the Africana bible. One of my mentors... she’s been somebody that’s been really instrumental in my spiritual development and continuing development in terms of really centering black identity within my spirituality.

Dr. Harriston also reflected on her spiritual support:

I am a spiritual person. I get my Christian connection with my church family and that time for devotional worship and things of that nature. That definitely helps [stay uplifted].

Mel reflected on how her spiritual support has aided her in staying sustained, but she also believes that the work she does is her ministry:

I said I am a woman of faith. I'm a Christian, and I couldn't do this work without being tied to a higher power. I'm also a spiritualist, and I believe in spirituality of the work that we do within health and wellness... I openly talk about my faith. In my interviews, in my speeches. If you know me, you know who I serve. And so, that's the other part of it.

Every time I get the chance to share those opportunities of blessings, I also thank God at the same time.

Spiritual support was an important piece that aided study participants in sustaining themselves and their environments. Relationships with a higher power allow participants to utilize their faith to decompress and also give them an outlet to retreat to and feel uplifted.

**Research Question #2: What are Black women leaders in higher education's perception of what impacts their advancement?**

Participants were asked to reflect on their journey and think about their perception of what impacts their advancement as a Black woman in a predominately white institution.

Participants described several experiences that they believe impacted their advancement to senior leadership positions, such as *It's All About Who You Know*, *Having to Prove Your Worth*, *Performance Evaluations*, and *Lack of Support*.

*It's All About Who You Know*

Upon reflection on their ascension processes, participants reflected on often seeing colleagues who did not have to put in as much work to ascend to leadership positions. They reflected on the difficulties of seeing others promoted, even without the necessary credentials to do so. Aleeah reflected on how this is a widespread practice at her institution for everyone but Black women:

Most of my peers are white... there are people who I can see, and they will jump milestones. I see charismatic Black men going to institutions that allow them to be able to move into positions that they're not yet ready for, and they're going to finesse their way through it because charisma can take you a very long way. I see White men automatically being promoted because, you know, it's the thing that they do for one another. You don't have to have any skills. They may have a few things, but it doesn't have to relate to the actual work they're doing. I see White women who get promoted based on relational values, and they might actually have the skill set to do the thing... but they have no knowledge or background, but they knew the right person. Then, I see Black women, who climb steadily.

Similarly, Monique had like experiences with ascension at her institution:

I do believe relationships and interactions play a role in your trajectory... we've seen others skip steps based off relationships and so forth. So, this is the world of who you know.

She later stated:

[People will ask] How did you get to where you are, when others don't have the background by any means to be doing this work, but it's who they know. Others can

maybe have one of the three [degrees: bachelors, masters, Ph.D.], and usually not the same credentials.

Often times, Black women are left out of these opportunities because they are not invited into the spaces where these networking chances and promotions are often mentioned and offered. Hence, this can be a barrier to their ascension due to lack of known possible opportunities.

### ***Having to Prove Your Worth***

When discussing their ascension processes, participants reflected on often having to prove their worth to their colleges. Dr Burnham noticed in her career that she always had to validate herself to others within the workplace:

What I noticed was they [White women] were presumed to be qualified. They were presumed to be the expert in whatever their respective area was, and for me, I was second guessed. I always had to prove, and I had to re-do it again and again. Like, okay, we had this conversation before. Haven't we had this debate and settled it? But I felt like I was always having to re-legitimize myself, and in every space, whereas it was presumed that my colleagues, if they were White males and females, that they belonged there.

Dr. Burnham then reflected on different instances where she felt her credentials were not acknowledged, or that there was a lack of respect when addressing her:

I would have people who didn't know me. We didn't have a personal relationship; we just had a work relationship. They would refer to me in a very informal way, by my first name, and then they would call other people Dr. so-and-so. I was always having to correct people. Sometimes, I would say, "do we know each other? Have we met before?" They were like, "no." And I would say "okay, so just like you refer to so-and-so as Dr.

so-and-so, in this professional setting and capacity, I prefer to be referred to as Dr. Burnham, unless we're friends.

Similar to this experience, Dr. Burnham shared:

[I was] constantly, what I feel like, was getting cross-examined, like if there's a decision or something, or there's an initiative, or there's something that I'm advancing. I felt like with other people, it would just be presumed. I felt like with me, particularly if I'm leading a team, a committee, or my boss had appointed me to be over this team, then it was constant push back from certain people on the team, like, why is she leading the team? And [they'll] sort of find ways to pick apart whatever I'm trying to do.

Dr. Burnham also reflected on having to explain why she expected to be addressed with her earned prefix:

Sometimes people would say, "well, why do you always have to use doctor? Your staff seems very formal. They always call you Dr. Burnham, and some other people's staff don't do that." Well, a lot of my staff were people of color. We understood that I earned this title. I earned it! Not only that, this is an academic space, and I'm engaging with a lot of academics, scholars, whatever, right? And when you're in this space, especially as a Black woman, you need to start off letting folks know, signaling them. I got the same credentials you do!

She has also been questioned by others within her hiring practices:

If you're a Black female in a position of authority, then people, they become suspicious when they look at who you're hiring... People are like "why is she hiring all those people of color?" But nobody says that when it's a White person hiring all the White people.



Mel reflected on having to go through normal hiring channels in regard to applying for jobs and ascension:

I always say I have applied and interviewed for every position I ever had. In comparison to many of the Assistant Vice Presidents of health and wellness were shoulder tapped and promoted into their position, where I had to interview.

Monique reflected on her first post-doctoral position, and how she was mistaken in a disrespectful manner:

I remember my first few days there, somebody thought I was a custodian... I'm just like why did you think that? And I'm like "no, actually, I'm Dr. Monique, and I'm going to be researching here." Yeah, I was the one [black person] there because the other ones had like staff or more auxiliary roles.

Monique also reflected on having to prove her worth and being challenged at work due to choosing to work at the same institution she received her Ph.D. from:

As a grad student, it's different. But I would say as a professional coming back, I think you have to initially prove yourself... despite the male dominance that just happens at many meetings. I'm just like, are you finished or done, because I'm still going to get this point across.

Monique then reflected on how colleges will often go over her to her superior, instead of relying on her for solutions. She called this *go-around*:

The *go-around* is annoying. They'll go above me, and then I get the email. I'm like, okay, such-and-such knows that I'm the person to go to, so I'm going to be petty. I'm going to sit on it. I got plenty of emails coming in. Don't worry about it, right?

Sometimes, that's my response. Or I will stop, pause, don't reply right then until I get my spirit adjusted to be back to my true brand and self.

Finally, Monique reflected on how her credentials are often ignored or questioned. She shared:

When people don't know me, they'll be like, "Oh, Dr.?" It's not an Ed.D., no shade to Ed.D.'s. Or [they'll say] "where did you get your Ph.D. from?" And then I'll say, "Oh, yeah, research one, PWI." Then all of a sudden, it changes. Like, "oh yeah, it's public. You can find my dissertation if you want." And so, you have to just list those credentials... Sometimes, we have to back it up with both, and make sure they complement the experiences and credentials with the experience.

Not being recognized for the work they've done or the education they've worked hard to get is a common issue for Black women in senior positions. Hence, proving self is often additional work Black women leaders have to do to verify their worth in a senior position. Black women leaders should be able to show up and do their job, but them having to constantly prove themselves can often be a distraction from them performing their actual job duties.

### ***Performance Feedback***

Performance feedback is one area where Black women can receive information from others about how they're doing at their job. All five participants were asked how they felt about performance feedback throughout their journey, and they all responded. Some participants reflected positively about performance, and some reflected negatively. Aleeah talked about performance feedback, and how her evaluations from her supervisor usually bode well as she deserves:

I'll say all of my assessments and evaluations, I usually get all the marks cause, I mean, try me if you want to. I already know I do my job, and I know this because I do it all day

and all effing night! I don't even say that proudly. I don't strive to be working as much as I work but try me. I want my supervisor to try me.

Aleeah also reflected on some informal pieces of feedback that come from her colleagues, and how she felt it meant that she needed to do all of the intellectual labor:

We have these kinds of reviews that our colleagues give us from different areas. It's not like an assessment or an end of the year evaluation. It was just one of those things that came up... I remember getting a comment on one of them that said "well, I really wish she [Aleeah] would say more sometimes. Sometimes she'll sit back, and she'll wait to speak, and then she'll say something that, you know, we could have figured this out if she had said it at the beginning..." It was anonymous, so I really don't know where it came from, but I also think about the people who want me to think for them and do their intellectual thought labor because they don't have the range for it.

Dr. Burnham reflected that most of the feedback that she received was good and honest feedback from Black women and White males, who were her biggest supporters. However, she didn't receive the same from White women:

So, I overwhelmingly, up until I had a White female supervisor, I had really good evaluations and I got really good feedback. So, I had a Black female who was a supervisor for me. She always gave me really good, honest, feedback... and [she] would give me really good advice. The president that I report to now (a White male), he gives me really good feedback... his feedback is more constructive... He said "I'm not worried about you. You know what you're doing. You got it..." When I had a White female supervisor, though, it was constant scrutiny. She had no expertise, and I did... It would

always be this nitpicking. She would be like, “you’re doing a good job, but...” I could never just be “you did really great at this.”

She also reflected on feedback she’s gotten from her boss about her time at her current institution:

He said, “I get so much positive feedback from everything that you’re doing. He said, you’ve already made a difference on this campus. You’ve only been here a year and a half... the culture’s already changing. You’re doing really good work.”

Dr. Harriston also reflected on positive feedback she has received over the years:

I’ve received really good feedback. My current supervisor has given me a great evaluation on my work performance and the work that I do. Even my previous supervisor when I first got to this position gave me great evaluations... It’s always kind of that push and encouragement to say, “Okay, you’ve done this. What do you want to do differently though? What do you want to do when you enhance the office?” When I was interim, it wasn’t my office. Once I became permanent, my supervisor said, okay, now what do you want to do to make it your own?” So, very positive evaluations and feedback.

Similar to Aleeah and Dr. Burnham, Dr. Harriston has also received feedback from others on campus, stating:

Last year, I was a part of the 360 evaluations, and so, I got positive reviews from the people that I’ve worked on campus with, and that just contributed to a positive evaluation from my supervisor.

Mel reflected on her performance feedback and how many people had similar ideas about her.

She also reflected on what she learned from it:

Over my career, I've kept all my evaluations. I think earlier in my career, it was "Mel, slow down. You don't have to do everything." When it came to supervising my students, my GA's, it was "slow down so that they can process the information and learn the lesson." So, I had to learn that skill set. Then, when I became an administrator, a lot of the feedback was "remember that this is a marathon, not a sprint." So, I have ADD, so my brain runs faster than a lot of people around me. So, learning how to navigate space when I'm probably two or three steps ahead of folks.

Mel also discussed her positive performance feedback from a Black woman supervisor. Mel reflected:

When I was with [NAME REDACTED], she was my AVP at another institution when I was director over health emotions. Her evaluations were meant to grow and stretch me... She focused on growing me and she challenged me like nobody's business.

Mel reflected on how the feedback she often receives at her current position, however, have not been that positive:

"The ones here [evaluations] are about keeping me in my place... my evaluations feel a little bit more personal... it's out of left field. It's stuff that's never come up in any previous ones before. It's passive aggressive, and I know what it is... I can call a spade a spade. Before, I did not challenge my evaluation. I didn't respond. I didn't do any of that. But now, oh baby! Paper trail! [I ask] what does this mean? What does that mean?"

Monique revealed that she does not receive much performance feedback often in her position.

She did share her sentiments about the lack of feedback she receives, however. She stated:

The feedback part, it's only there for when stuff hits the fan. Like, once you're in a faculty position, there's no real review if you aren't tenured track, which I'm not.

I can count on probably one hand how many one on one's I've had, and if so, I've had to ask for it. Because they know you're fine, you're doing what you're supposed to, you know? I appreciate and am perfectly content with people leaving me alone, let me say that. Believe me. But it shouldn't be a bother if you are to engage in a real conversation about productivity, goals, and mindset. But those types of things never take place.

Performance feedback is tangible evidence of being ready to ascend to leadership positions. Good feedback has been given to most participants and has aided them in their trajectory in ascension. Although some participants experienced negative feedback, they did not allow the negativity to stop their path. Instead, they learned from it, applied it to their work, and ascended to better.

### ***Lack of support***

The final piece of how participants perception of what impacts their advancement is lack of support. With lack of support in their roles, ascension is nearly impossible, because that lack of support usually comes from a supervisor and holds them back. Participants shared instances where they could remember lack of support from different groups including Black men and White women. Aleeah discussed how the lack of support she receives in her roles have affected her. She first reflected on her work in the women's center:

[As a GA], I'm working full time, and this is probably a decision I made because I knew it was something I believed in. So, then, next thing you know, I'm working full-time in the women's center. So, now I'm an assistant director for the women's center. This is now my work, and there, I really began to see how unsupported I was, because, in that moment, I was like, I'm the only person in here doing this labor, and it feels like work to me because it feels good. But it also feels like labor because I am the only one doing it.

Then, Aleeah reflected on the lack of support she's received in her current role in the cultural center:

The previous director [of the cultural center] hadn't done anything for the center. There was no framework. There was no guidepost. There was no real leadership happening... When I came into the center, there was no one left. Everyone had left. I was the first person to be hired... What I really would love is to have worked with someone smarter than myself, to be around people who can help support, to help guide. But I'm still in this position trying to clean up and create space and reimagine this center specifically for Black folks. I don't have anybody around me who can help me really think intentionally and deeply and with care about the work that we need to rebuild this community... I've never felt more unsupported in my life.

Dr. Burnham discussed how her White women colleagues have not appreciated her ascension in the field:

What I've experienced with White females was the higher I rose in my career ladder, the further along the career ladder I got, the higher my positionality became within, is it would create tension in the relationship I have with them. See, as long as they felt they had a position that was a level above me, or they were in an authority role... they were comfortable, and it was fine, more, or less. But the further I moved up the ladder, the more strained those relationships became. And I was like what the heck! What's the deal with this? Because it would be somebody I had been in sort of a friendship with, kind of.

Mel talked about how she doesn't feel supported by her supervisor, who unfortunately, is a fellow Black woman:

I would say early in my career, it was the traditional white people, white peopling who were my initial barriers, and you can kind of plan for that. You can plan for the systems that were created to create injustices for us. I was working to navigate those systems and create space for me and those who worked alongside me, and those who came behind me. But, I think as I moved up in position from director to now, AVP, it's not just being the white people, it's the people that look like us, and that's a different type of hurt... for me to be at this place, and for them to treat me that way, it is a touch place to be because it ain't that many of us, and to get it from people who look just like me, and they do it with any regard? Those are the things that keep me up at night... So, now, I'm back in a place where I got a Black woman who's my boss, and who's supposed to uplifting me trying to dim my light. I told God, I know that you've prepared me for this path... but it don't feel good to be at a place in my career where I'm now climaxing and being able to achieve a lot of things as a first-generation college student, and I'm at a place where I have my senior vice president not being a huge supporter of who I am.

In each participant's experience, the lack of support has been harmful in past and current leadership positions. Without support, Black women leaders can feel isolated or feel alone in their work, which can be another stressor they deal with in the workplace. Lack of support can also cause leaders to be overworked, which can be detrimental to participants mental, physical, and emotional health.

**Research Question #3: How do race and gender identities impact Black women in leadership's experiences at predominately White institutions of higher education?**

Participants were asked to describe how race and/or gender impact their leadership experiences. Black women leaders discussed four major themes including *The Master's Tools*,



*Identity Matters, Supporting Others, and Paving the Way for the Future.* To begin, participants were asked to discuss barriers or challenges they have faced in their ascension journey.

### ***The Master's Tools***

The master's tools is a concept from author Audre Lorde (1984). It is a metaphor used to describe the systems of oppression that were created to continue to eradicate Black and Brown communities (Lorde, 1984). Two participants reflected on the full statement from Lorde. Aleeah reflected, stating:

Whiteness values a lot of things, and those values are typically not my values, because the master's tool will not dismantle the master's house, says the lovely Black feminist warrior and poet, Audre Lorde, and I believe that wholeheartedly. So, what I recognize is that people want you to just talk, and they don't want you to really know what you're talking about. They just want you to speak.

Similarly, Dr. Burnham reflected on her thoughts about the master's tools:

What I learned is that I needed to be formidable, and I had to do it my own way, based on my own gifts and strengths... It's kind of like master's house master's tools: master's tools will not dismantle the master's house, right? So, I learned that I had to use the gifts that I had in order to be formidable in the space.

When referring to higher education, especially PWIs, the master's house refers to the institution.

The master's house in this study, is a harbor for wanting to keep outsiders outside, and it also inhabits negative workspaces for Black women leaders, allowing things like discrimination and microaggressions to fester, and they're constantly reminded that this space was not made for Black women to succeed. Aleeah reflected:

There is always a tide coming against you, and so, what you end up doing is laboring every day. Laboring from morning to night trying to get all the barriers, all the obstacles, around all the policies and rules and regulations that privileged folks who don't look and feel nothing like you, so that you can just do this one little, tiny thing for your people, or for the people that you know your work is for, and that can be for everybody.

Many participants reflected on different discrimination they have faced while in the workplace. Aleeah reflected on being offered a ridiculously low pay rate for a job that was supposed to be promotional:

A big barrier is being offered the position at the lowest f\*\*\*ing pay rate I've ever seen, and I was just like, are you kidding me?!... So, that pay rate, I was like you gotta be f\*\*\*ing kidding me, because I already know I'm going to be the strongest person on your team, and I'll have to carry these people... You want me to do this, understanding where you've been, and I know what everybody makes because that's public knowledge, and then being one of the most qualified people... And then it was a COVID issue. We can't increase it [the salary] due to COVID, and I was just like, well, you're going to have to figure out how.

Participants also reflected on experiences they felt race, gender, or both have affected their journey. Regarding gender discrimination, Dr. Harriston reflected being a female can be a barrier:

I think in some ways, being a female has also had some barriers because sometimes, depending on what table you're sitting at, you're not seen as a strong voice. People kind of talk over you or around you sometimes, and I have had that experience. Some of it, I thought was maybe because I'm a young professional at the time, but then I realized,

okay, I'm not a young professional at this one position, but yet because of the culture of nature of it, I felt like that was a barrier that was look at like I didn't know what I was talking about. I think a few other females felt that way too because we kind of talked about it.

When it comes to racial discrimination, two participants felt that race was a bigger factor than gender in their environment. Mel reflected that because her position has a health background, women are the majority present. However, race still presents an issue:

I would say race played a bigger issue than gender. There's a lot of women in health. Period. We make up the largest number. When you look at public health, and that includes clinical, non-clinical, women make up the largest number of workers. But I would say my race has played even more of an issue because when I come through the door, they can't get that out of their head. They can deal with me in an email, but when they have to deal with me face to face sometimes, they can't get over this lovely black melanin and skin, and then I get you know "you came off aggressive, Mel." "You need to be careful what you say and how you say it." And so, then I become the angry black woman. And so those have created more barriers than me being a woman, because now, when I'm in that place, I have to overthink it think two steps up before I say or do something, and so in in my time as an as an administrator, at my race has played a bigger part than anything. Because usually there's other women at the table. But there's not a lot of other black people at the table.

Utilizing stereotypes like the angry black woman for seeming aggressive is unacceptable because women of other races and backgrounds can just get angry and have no negative connotation

along with it. Like Mel, Monique also reflected on an instance where race was bigger than gender:

When I did my post doc, that was at a PWI, and for that one, it was... oh goodness! I thought I was prepared because I went to a PWI for my Ph.D. I thought I had seen it all, but I hadn't seen it all... I recognized early on that race, I don't think it was gender at that place, but race was a huge factor... I saw the misuse of power... [students would be] asking for help, and I can't mentor. They would ask me how they should help other people, but they didn't really want to help. It was a sabotage, controlling power thing, using intimidation, which worked for everybody but me.

Regarding racial and gender discrimination, participants reflected on different experiences that they felt were due to both. Dr. Burham reflected on emotional lifting, and how Black men aren't expected carry it:

There're even some things with Black men that, because they're men, they get away with because it's still a patriarchal system, right? So, there are still things they can get away with as a Black female. They're not expected to carry the emotional burdens of White people and the rest of the community. Black women are expected to do the heavy emotional lifting... we feel responsible for the community, for everybody. Even when they get to be the face of the community, we are the backbone of the community. We will be the ones that most frequently put ourselves out there.

Dr. Burnham then reflected on a stereotype she has had to deal with during her tenure, the mammy:

The thing that is maybe most unique to the experience as a Black woman in these spaces in leadership [is] people don't just expect you to be the leader. They expect you to be

people's mamas. They expect you to be taking care of everybody and making everybody feel good. And, you know, I can do that with students, but grown people? [rolled eyes] ... with grown people needing you to show up as their mother, like, you were all raised, and I also. But I also found that... Black men don't feel that responsibility.

Monique also reflected on being expected to be a mother within her position:

We as a group, Black women, we tend to give to so many people that we have to turn it off with some people and be like, "why are you expecting me to be caring for you? Like, why? Because I'm a mother? Because I'm a woman? No.

Participants also reflected on how being a Black woman leader at a PWI can also be isolating.

Aleeah reflected:

Working at a predominately and historically white institution is one of the most isolating things you can do as a Black woman and femme. I'm trying to think if there is anything else I need to even add to that. It is wanting to do intentional work, knowing that your work is intimately tied to who you are, to which you believe that you want to see something [done]. You know what your work is, and you know what you want to do, because tell me a Black woman or femme who's moving intentionally and doesn't know what was laid out in front of them?

Dr. Harriston also reflected on isolation and tokenism in her position, and how that can be difficult:

A lot of times, especially in my department, I was the only one. I can remember maybe one... [long pause] One time specifically, where I was not the only African American woman that was there, but other than that, one of the experiences is I tend to be the only

one in my department or area. Sometimes, you get called to serve on different things because you are that person of color, and they need someone to serve.

Monique reflected on how she only knows one other Black woman in a leadership position at her institution:

Looking at that ascending path, I think it's more important to look for others doing it, and at my institution, there is, I would say, one other Black woman who is in a higher leadership role other than my own. We can count it. We can see the tiers, the levels of who's there and how did they get there.

Discrimination, stereotypes, and isolation are three aspects of how the system of oppression continues to keep Black women away from leadership positions. By imposing these preconceived thoughts and ideologies on them without even getting to know them, it hinders Black women from ascending to leadership positions. Discrimination and stereotypes often come from those who differ from the receiving group. Participants demonstrated that this issue is far from over in higher education, and it needs to be eradicated to aid in the ascension of more Black women leaders.

### ***Identity Matters***

It is important to recognize that all participants identify as Black women or femme, however, it must also be acknowledged that although their experiences are similar, their backgrounds, personalities, and individual narratives matter. Each participant spoke about how their individual identity matters to who they are and matters with the work they do. Beginning with Aleeah, she discussed how her body image matters to the work she does because it's not invisible:

It doesn't matter what room I walk into; I'm coded as a woman. The first thing you can see is that I'm Black, and then, as a fat Black woman, and if you happen to know I'm queer, then that's gonna show up too, right? And most of the time, those things follow me. Like people know me, and I don't know them. So, those things, they proceed me. And so, to show up in a room as a fat, Black, queer, femme, and then as soon as you talk, you know I'm country, It's gonna be the first thing that you witness, and the first things you witness is going to be the things that begin to form your assumptions or the ways that you think you want to show up with me.

Because of this, Aleeah has one specific thing she does when she enters a room:

So, what I typically do is, when I walk into a room, I'm gonna just sit and see. I'm gonna listen, and I want to understand how you see me, and how you regard me, and what that means for both of us, and how we're going to embark on a relationship together.

However, this doesn't stop Aleeah from being who she was born to be. When asked how she keeps herself uplifted, she said:

Being authentic and showing up as myself 100%, that's something I am not willing to compromise, and when I really get the opportunity to lean into that, I do that.

Aleeah also reflected on how she's learning to celebrate who she is more and more:

I am learning to celebrate myself and my accomplishments. I'm getting a little bit better. I'm taking baby steps. I used to not really celebrate anything. I've always been so busy that it's like I didn't even really have a moment to comprehend or understand what had just happened. Like, I can hear it around me, and I can hear other people, but it's always been hard for me to be like "Oh! Here's a moment of celebration for yourself. So, I've been learning to do that.

Dr. Burnham also reflected on how her roots have aided in her identity and who she is in her role:

I'm a first-generation student and the oldest of nine.... I integrated my elementary school. So, I was the first Black student, first student of color, and I grew up in Oklahoma, to integrate my elementary school... It was very important to my mother that I would go to school... my involvement as an undergrad was really around issues related to blackness because I was at a PWI, and so that was just really important to me, and had been impressed upon me from my family.

She continued with what being Black and female has done to her consciousness:

Being Black and female in higher education has been one of hyper consciousness is what it's done. My race and gender make me hyperconscious in every situation, particularly when it's a white space. It also has required me to be very politically astute, to be formidable, to be intentional around the development of allies, and to pick and choose when I won't fall on my sword, for whom I'm gonna fall on it for, and to put students at the center of everything because ultimately, that's why we're here.

Dr. Burnham then reflected on how her identity speaks to who she hires in a positive way:

I always knew my responsibility was to create opportunities for other people of color... the research bears this out, that Black women hire more diverse teams than any other demographic, and that's across all demographics. So, we hire more. We will be the ones to hire more of our not only Black people, but Latinos, LGBTQ, Asians, all of that. And it's that consciousness you have of the intersection, right? There, we feel that sense of responsibility to make spaces inclusive. We do it for each other. We support each other because we know what it means to feel on the outside.



Dr. Harriston reflected that she feels that her identity has helped her more than hindered her:

I want to say that what sometimes could be a hinderance I think can also be a blessing, and that is being a minority, a person of color, and being female because people are always looking to diversity, and when you can get a person of color and a female in one hire, you know? That's usually worked, I think, more so in my favor versus against me.

Akin to Aleeah, Dr. Harriston reflected that she likes to sit back and watch as well, to learn her surroundings and how people perceive her:

I'm an introvert, and so in meetings, I might be sitting back. I'm quiet. I'm observing. And so, sometimes, I think that has been a detriment because then people either take it as you're not vocal or you're not interested. When I have a thought, or I have an opinion, or I have an insight, I do know what I'm talking about and I will say it, but don't take that quietness to be that either I'm not into it or I don't have much to say because I'm an observer. I'm trying to listen and hear what everybody has to say.

Mel reflected on how her identification as a first-generation college student has aided in her work with students:

I'm a first-generation college student... I am the first Black AVP of health and wellness with a public health background. My favorite thing is when I'm walking through campus, and they see my name tag and I'll get [double take]. When I get that double back, it's like wait a minute. She's an associate vice president. Wait a minute. And then they would be like hair, nails, face, YESSS!! And I'm like yes, I know. Come on, let's talk. Once they see the title ain't me-and yes, I say ain't-I am from North Carolina, I'm from the trade. Once they know who I am at my core... they have to know what's possible.

She continued:

When I show up, I try to show up authentically. So, they don't believe that I am what they see. They see Dr. Mel, and I'm always in a suit, but I remind them that no, I'm Mel from the trade. First generation college student. Mama had me at 18, a set of twins. My daddy was an addict. I'm an outcome of the crack epidemic. Now, let's talk. I set the standards for them that they haven't set for themselves, and once they see somebody invested in them, they'll come back.

Like Aleeah, Mel also talked about how her identity as a Black woman has caused her to be humble, and she's working on unlearning that:

I got over that being humble means not being meek and mild... but I'm having to lean into [celebrating myself] because we've been conditioned to be humble and to be meek with this, but God wasn't out here meek and mild. He was out here like "I'm God!" He was knuck if you buck before knuck if you buck was even out there! And so, I think, for me, learning how to walk in it more boldly has been another reason to be outwardly with it [celebrations and success] because people who also know my journey get to see the blessings, too.

Monique also reflected on how her identity and humility has added to who she is at work:

I have a pretty dominant personality force, but that is how I've been. My sister's the same way; my dad. That's how my family is. And I'm learning this humility. Know you can still be humble in other ways.

She then stated the importance of your brand as a Black woman:

Name is one thing. Your name proceeds you for sure... How do people experience you?

Monique also reflected on how her identity as a Black woman has caused her the need to protect herself:

I started putting wood and stuff in place to structure this house of how I'm going to protect myself, my mental health, my well-being to where I'm most comfortable, and I feel like that's how I can be balancing that piece as where I'm at in my place of being.

Black women's identities are not synonymous, other than the fact that they are Black and woman. So, whether that's where they're from, their body type, or their tone of voice, it is important to recognize that different pieces of their identities create diverse perspectives in how they do their jobs and help students. Their individual experiences contribute differently to the conversation.

### ***Supporting Others***

Participants were asked if they felt their identity contributed to their support for others, specifically other Black women coming into higher education or Black students on their campus. Participants first responded with their feelings about mentoring others in the field. Aleeah reflected on her feelings toward mentorship:

I think that mentorship is reciprocal because I lean into their theory and philosophy of how we teach and learn together. Like, everyone has something to share. But, if you don't think that you have anything to share, and you can only see me in a high position, then that definitely limits the scope of what our relationship can be. And so, I found that's the case. So, now, I'm very careful about how I engage in that because realistically, I get the sh\*t end of the stick on that when we don't have clear expectations and ways of our relationship.

Aleeah also spoke about how she has experienced that mentorship, both in an indirect way:

I find that I've been a mentor without people telling me I'm their mentor.... And then there's people who I mentor because they've asked me, and we can engage in mentorship. That feels good because we have set up a quality relationship that has specific needs and boundaries, and I can say this is how I can show up. These are my expectations; what are yours? And that's great. But then, there are a whole lot of people who I think I mentor, and I didn't know that's what I was doing, and that's a little weird for me.

When asked about supporting other Black women in the field, Dr. Burnham expressed her excitement for being a mentor to others:

Yes! Oh my gosh! That is one of my favorite things to do is mentor, especially young Black women in the field, young education professionals. That makes me so happy. I just love doing that because I want sistas to have the benefit of all the mistakes I made all the lessons I've learned, but also the support! I want sistas just to know how amazing they are. I want sistas to know that they already have everything it takes. It's already in here [points to inside]. My job is just nudging them and cheering them on and helping them to navigate the systems when they run into a roadblock or hurdle; for me to help them understand. Let's strategize on that. Let's figure out how you can get around that. Or let's figure out what the next step needs to be. That's really important to me. That's one thing I can never pay back. It's the way that I honor our ancestors by saying, you know, these are my babies too. Right? These young sisters, these are my babies, because I'm at this point, and I want them to get beyond even where I am. I want them to surpass me. I want them to do it earlier. I want them to know stuff earlier than I knew, and so, I'm such a firm, intentional, and committed believer in mentoring and making space at the table,

creating opportunities. I believe when you level up, you're supposed to bring people with you. You're supposed to open the door, create more opportunities, and literally, that's what I've done. I can honestly say, my whole career, I've always mentored, and it's hard for me to turn down people [because] I know how hard it is for our sistas out there to find somebody who will invest in their careers, invest in their well-being, and invest in their advancement. So, I take particular in that. That's where one of my greatest joys meets one of the world's greatest needs. We have to be our own hype people, our own hype men, so to speak. And so, I love hyping up the sisters. That's so important to me.

Similar to Aleeah, Dr. Harriston has also experienced indirect mentorship, and likewise to Dr. Burnham, Dr. Harriston also expressed love for mentoring others coming up in the field:

Sometimes it can just happen, you know, without it even being that. It's like all of a sudden, you have a good relationship with somebody, and they see you as we're coworkers, maybe work in the same office, or we're colleagues because we work on the same campus. Then, you just end up having conversations, and the next thing you know, they start calling you a mentor. And I'm like oh, okay, that was no problem, you know... I don't always have all the answers, but I try to give some direction and some advice to others, especially when I see potential in them. I always try to encourage them... I just try to be as open as possible. I'm a person who tries to look at situations [from both sides]. My approach is, I might say, okay, well that was foul or inappropriate, but let's see how we can handle it, or how can you approach it, and what's some other ways to look at it? Just being able to be that listening board, that sounding board.

She then reflected on a time when indirect mentorship turned into direct mentorship, and it has been a great relationship between the two, more of like a partnership:

A friend of mine just sent me a text because she was looking at a title change at her job, and we were talking through some things. She sent me a text because it went through, and she's like, "you inspire me to be my better self" ... She's a peer. Like, we've been friends for quite some time, and so just seeing those things is good. I kind of smiled when I saw that it [the title change] went through because the track that she was on was not where she wanted to be. I've been in education; she got into education. Never really talked about being a dean or anything like that, and now she literally kind of almost followed in my footsteps. Not purposely, but that's where the job led. So, she did housing, the next thing you know she was doing some conduct stuff, and then the next thing you know, she's an assistant dean/director of student conduct. So, yes, we're able to have some good conversations now because we can kind of bounce things off each other, so it's good.

Mel reflected on how important mentorship is to her. She talked about how it's been engrained in her since childhood, and how it's one of her values:

[Mentorship] is what grounds me. I wouldn't be here if I didn't have strong mentors. I did my dissertation on mentorship. It is what I watched my mom and my grandmother, who were both nurses, do, and it is what me and my twin sister do. So, mentoring to me is naturally innate, but also a core value. And so, it is imperative for me to mentor because I got so much poured into me earlier in my career and life, that I believe it is like an ethical requirement for me to pour back into others because people so willingly and freely gave it to me. It ended up being an outcome of my dissertation; I did it on mentoring for women of color in higher ed who are health educators, and everybody said they felt that it was a necessity to pour back and create those pathways for others. So, me mentoring now is to make sure I'm bringing people up to be WITH me. Making sure that pathway is

clear, it's present, and it is not opaque. It's not gonna be no super-secret how to get to this type of seat... I've learned over time that some people gatekeep, especially us, and they don't want to pass down the information. That's not me, that's not me at all. I help with resumes, cover letters, attire. Let's get your PowerPoint ready, and then you get the job. Let's go! Let's negotiate, let's get your coins. I think that's the part of the leadership journey, especially as a Black woman, that I'm very intentional about, because you can't do one without the other.

Mel also discussed how, because this is so important to her, she expects her those she mentors to pay it forward as well:

I don't mentor anyone who doesn't and is not willing to mentor anyone else. They know if they come into my circle as a mentee, that if I pick up that phone and say hey, I've had a request, and I don't have capacity, and I need to place somebody with you. Unless you got something drastic going on, I should get a yes.

With glee, Mel talked about how much her mentors appreciate her, and how that has made her a mentor to everyone, not just Black women:

My way of mentoring is authentic. It is unwavering, and my mentees are very protective of me. They be like "no new mentees!" They've been with me as I've gone up, before I was Dr. Mel, when I was just Mel. My mentees have went from many of us, that look like us, Dionne, to every race, every gender, every identity, so my mentee group has expanded to every angle.

Monique chatted about how she mentors others that want to walk in her footsteps, similar to other participants:

The people I tend to mentor are actually current graduates who want to do something similar [to what I do]. I can kind of let them know things I would have done differently, or to hopefully help them with some life lessons or steppingstones so they can have a quicker jump to whatever their end goal may be. So, I try to find opportunities that help. For example, let's say it's a publication, right? I probably have other things I could do with my time besides help draft that, but if I'm going to be a good mentor and leader, I have to be a team player in that, right. I have to help guide it. I have to give concise comments. I have to put in the work because they put in the work to get to that point... You can send me feedback from your [publication] advisor because you trust me. I can reach into my network and ask my English professor friend "they need help with their English stuff, I need you to edit this for me." For me, they be like "I got you. I'm gonna look at it for your student. Actually, if your student wants me to be on their committee, I'll do that."

She then discussed what she things are come characteristics of a good mentor:

I think a good mentor is selfless in the sense and can put others needs before their own... I think you have to have at least one candid conversation and make sure it's a match as far as, you know, working style and expectations of what mentorship can be. Because to me, it's in addition to my role. They may initially want it because of my tole, but to me, it's an addition... but I'm not going to tell a student no because I know they need it, and they may not be able to get it anywhere else... I think mentorship is a way to feed into student retention, as well as help them see more clearly what their next goals are. It's beyond encouraging... It takes it to the next level of not just saying it but showing it... There also needs to be a point where people understand the role of the mentor and



mentee. Unless that can be clearly hashed out because we've all seen where it fails if that doesn't happen.

Similarly, when asked about mentoring Black students on their campus, all five participants expressed the joy and love they have in mentoring students. Aleeah talked about how great students are, and how, if she's not enough, she will help students find someone who is:

Students are usually pretty great! Like, the students are a little bit more respectful. They will show up, they will ask... So, that [student mentoring] is done with more intention, and I love when intentional work is done. It's also like, I enjoy working with students; I love that piece, like, I love student engagement. They're so fun, and they're brilliant, and they bring a whole lot... So, it's nice to be able to sit and think through what it is that you need, and am I the right person to be able to meet those needs? And if I'm not, let me help you get connected to someone who is because they may not know all the Black folks on campus. They just see me, and they heard me say this one thing and really loved it and connected to it. Sometimes, it's like let me give you some more resources, some more people because I don't know everything, and your experience is more than being Black, right? Like, we're connecting because we're Black, maybe, but also, this is more than just that, and there's other people who can help move you.

Dr. Burnham also expressed how mentoring students is just as important to her as mentoring upcoming Black women in the field:

[Mentoring students] is another place of joy. That experience is a labor of love because your students are gonna disproportionately seek you out. They see you, you know, especially when you go to a PWI. They see you and they gravitate towards you, quite frankly. Here's the thing: I wouldn't be in this position if it wasn't for the students

because the students on our campus were the ones who were like “we want to see some people looking like us on that cabinet.” The students were the ones who insisted, and the president was like, “you’re right...” So, Black students and, in particular, Black females will gravitate, you know? And I make it a point to be in their spaces. I’ll go to their spaces and just show up for their stuff because I want them to know, hey, I’m here. I see y’all, and I’m approachable. That’s important to me so they don’t be like, “oh, she’s that VP way over there.” No, I like to be in their spaces and then tell them to come up to my office. I have snacks, got a popcorn machine, so come up to our suite because I want them to feel like I belong to them, a part of their community. I mean yes, the president told the whole campus “She’s everybody’s VP, not just the people of color’s VP.” He was really clear about that, but I just want them to know, and it’s important that they know Dr. Burnham is ours.

Likewise, Dr. Harriston shared similar joy to being a mentor to students on campus:

I definitely think I’ve been that [mentor], you know? I advised a student org for a number of years, a predominantly Black sorority. So, I definitely have been in that role, and I can definitely say that I believe I’ve provided that mentorship for them. Now, they definitely don’t always use the word mentor. I’ve heard it all: “You’re like my mother, my auntie, you’re my older sister” I’ve gotten all of that. I get, “Dr. Harriston, you know we call you Tee-Tee?” And just outside of that, I know that some of the students that I’ve encountered even when I was in student conduct, if they [Black students] came into my office. It just seems like sometimes there was a different connection because they come in and they see “Oh wow! This is a person of color!” And so, I tried to have some real conversations with them. Not that I didn’t with other students, but it was just something

different when you were talking to or mentoring other students of color, especially African American students. I'll just say that because I just connect that way. So, even in a student conduct relationship, I was able to build those relationships... I definitely have done some of that leading, guiding, mentoring, and I would say chastising.

Because of this, Dr. Harriston reflected on the respect she receives from students:

One student, you know the whole pants sagging kind of thing. He would come into my office, and as soon as he comes in, he'll pull them up. He already knows, pull them up pull them up. You can push them back down when you get out of my office, but when you're in here [pull them up.] So, just that level of respect when they came in, or if they saw me on campus, they [motions pulling up pants], you know? They pulling them up already before I even say something, so I can appreciate it.

Like Dr. Burnham, Mel expressed how mentoring students is just as important as mentoring others in higher education:

Mentoring the students is just as much a necessity for me as those who are in my field because they have to know what's possible. So, I love showing up and engaging with students and mentoring students, even if it's through a situation, or through a workshop, of if it's short term or long term. Presence is also mentorship because it provides an opportunity for them to see what's possible. So, I love it!

Mel also talked about the importance of seeing students:

Do you actually SEE your students? The thing is, when I'm in the presence of students, I see them. If I'm in a room and they have the stadium seats, if I'm presenting, I'm walking the seats. I'm walking the stairs, both sides. I'm going to look everybody in the eye... After a presentation last semester, they emailed me and asked me to do it again with my

colleague. They said, “Dr. Mel, some of the students were crying.” Because I saw them. You get one time at this. Either you do your job, and for me, it’s around health and wellbeing, which is healing work, so you do your job, or you lose the opportunity... A lot of times that is that Godly work that I get to see immediate impact when I get to work with the students.

Monique also talked about how she goes above and beyond to assist Black students on campus:

Most have my cell phone number. Should they have it? Not at my level, but if you need me, I’m really gonna be there to assist you. Doesn’t matter, whatever it is. I had one student who had COVID. I was like “you need food?” I dropped off a humidifier, and I’m not gonna ask you to pay me for it. These are things I’m gonna do out of support for students to let them know I’m here for them. But I’ve also had to establish this line of support, mentorship, and not be great of where they feel it can be this lazy, complacent type of attitude, knowing that it contradicts the hard work I had to do as well as the hard work that is coming from other students. So, I’ve had to be clear on that. I’ll [also] support you. You’re doing a drive? I’ll donate money. I ain’t gone come, but I will give you money. I try to support different initiatives.

Monique also discussed that because she works in inclusion and she loves her work with students, she does not exclude students from other backgrounds, and how it’s important to set boundaries:

Be mindful of I can’t be biased and do more for one group versus another. I meet with all students. Many of them look like me, but not all do. So, I feel like to be in a unit focused on inclusion, I cannot be exclusive by giving more than I have. I have to be 100%. I wish mentors were clear with me on that when they didn’t have the capacity. So, I have to let

them know that I'm there, but what that there looks like is they may not be able to find it all in me.

All participants expressed that because of their identity of being Black and woman, they felt the need to be mentors to both Black women in the field and to Black students on their campus, both for the same reason: because Black individuals need support and need representation. They need to see what is possible. Black women leaders take on the added support piece of their job in mentoring others, simply out of the goodness of their hearts.

### *Paving Way for the Future*

Participants were asked if there is any advice, they have for others coming into their field wanting to ascend as well, or any lessons they've learned in their journeys. All participants left a piece of advice for future Black professionals wanting to ascend in higher education. Beginning with Aleeah, her advice was:

Determine what your values are, knowing they can shift. They can change and grow as you grow as a human. Dedicate yourself to those values in some way. Stand in whatever your principles, your values, your guidepost, however you want to define it. You can even call it your purpose. But stand in those things and allow that to be your politic in the way that you move in life... Surround yourself by people who are smarter than you, who love you, who care for you, who can be honest and intentional with you, who will not mishandle you, and also require that from people around you. If they can't meet that, ask for what you need. You gotta teach people who you are... you gotta teach people what you need and how you want to grow and what your desires are. This is in work and in life in general, but sometimes, people really just don't know how to be in a relationship with

you, and if you value the relationship, if that's something you want to grow, then you have to be willing to ask for what you need.

Dr. Burnham's advice is as follows:

I don't believe you have any business in the business of student development if you're not in the business of self-development... your own development is so important because you will reap the dividends from it. We develop ourselves so that we can give ourselves to those we love and walk in our calling to serve, but you can't serve if you're resentful because you haven't attended to yourself. So, I would say just continue [self-development] and that never stops.

One of Dr. Harriston's barriers was herself and not wanting to move far from home, so her piece of advice reflects that:

One lesson learned has been to not be afraid to step out and go anywhere, and that anywhere could still be within a certain defined area... Don't be afraid to branch out and not stay within the confines of the state, but maybe just a couple of surrounding states... As great as it is to be loyal to your job and your institution, and staying and being connected to it, it's okay to move around. It's okay to not stay in a position for twenty years.

She also discussed negotiation and using her voice.:

Another lesson I learned is the art of negotiation. I'm still not that good at it, but I probably do almost the minimum. I'm like, "how'd you go in there and you go the position, you got to teach, you got a bump in salary when you get your Ph.D. Like what happened? How did I not know that?" But I've learned some of those things. You have to go in and ask for what you want, you know? And you can't be afraid to do that. All they could do is say no, and maybe you don't get that, but maybe there's a way to meet in the

middle... I've also learned to speak up and not be afraid to do so... If you don't speak up, say something you want... It's like closed mouths don't get fed. So, you gotta open your mouth and say what you want.

Mel's piece of advice was about knowing yourself and knowing where you're going, and she also discussed negotiating:

The other part about leadership is preparing for where you're going. I used to get picked on all the time because everybody was wearing T-shirts and everything to work, and I was always business casual, period, as a health educator. I never wear anything less than business casual except on Friday, and people used to be like "what you doing?" Then, I started wearing suits as I bought more suits. I knew where I wanted to go, so I bought the attire for where I was going... I learned that because of how I walk into a space, I could also dominate the space by what I carry myself in that space. People talk about code-switching and not code switching. I'm not seeing that you don't have to code-switch. You have to learn how to code switch as part of the process to get to where you're going. I still code-switch when I'm at cabinet, and at board meetings. I ain't stupid. Don't have these people thinking that you don't have to do those things. There's a time and place for everything, but even at the board meetings and cabinet, I still authentically show up as Mel as much as possible, but I want to keep these benefits and have a job... But I don't think we teach you all how to navigate those lines in the transition, how to advocate for yourself, how to negotiate. Most of my mentees make more than me as AVPs now because I helped them negotiate. It's making sure you all know how to navigate those things.

Monique's piece of advice also reflects knowing your values and knowing your boundaries:

It's a sacrifice, in some ways, of yourself for the greater good, but know what's your limit on this sacrifice. We ain't no sacrificing lambs around here. You gotta have a threshold for knowing what that is, and not let stuff build up. Also, knowing to use your power to your advantage versus how others want to make it a disadvantage. Using that power to advocate for those Black women that aren't at that level within your institution. How are you going to do that? What is going to be your stamp? What's your legacy going to be within the work you do?

Paving the way and creating spaces for other Black women was important to all participants. The importance of letting others know of the path before them was also evident in the responses of the participants. They felt it is their ethical duty to make that pathway clear and to make sure to be a person of support for upcoming Black women who want to take a similar path.

### **Summary**

Chapter four discussed the findings of the semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with five participants about their experiences as Black women in leadership positions at PWIs. The study focused on Black women who were able to successfully attain leading positions at PWIs despite the longstanding barriers and prejudices they have faced when attempting to advance in the academy. It also illuminated the support, joy, and celebrations Black women have had along their journeys of ascension as well. In connection to the question "What are the lived experiences of Black women leaders at predominately White institutions of higher education?" themes such as *Journey into Higher Education*, *Unusually High Expectations*, and *Support and Celebrations* arose. Support & Celebrations was separated into four sub-themes: *Allyship and Colleague Support*, *Loved Ones*, *Self-care*, *Self-reflection and Self-celebration*, and *Spiritual Support*. With regards to the question "What are Black women leaders in higher education's perception of what



impacts their advancement?” the themes that were discovered were *It's All About Who You Know, Having to Prove Your Worth, Performance Evaluations, and Lack of support*. In support of the question “How do race and gender identities impact Black women in leadership’s experiences at predominately White institutions of higher education?” the themes uncovered were *The Master’s Tools, Identity Matters, Supporting Others, and Paving the Way For the Future*. These themes impacted the comprehending of how Black women in senior leadership positions have navigated their ascension journey in higher education. The findings in this chapter will further be discussed in Chapter V.

## CHAPTER V

### Discussion, Recommendations, and Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of Black women as they ascend to leadership positions at four-year predominately White institutions (PWIs) in relation to race and gender by examining their professional lived experiences. This chapter includes a discussion of how previous research relates to this study's major findings on Black women's experiences in ascension to leadership, the barriers they face, the support they receive, and how they support themselves and others. These findings are discussed within the framework of Spivak's (1985) theory of othering and Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality. Furthermore, the limitations of this study, recommendations for institutional development, and recommendations for future research are also given.

This chapter reveals discussion and future research concepts to help answer the research questions: (1) What are the experiences of Black women leaders at predominately White institutions of higher education? (2) What are Black women leaders in higher education's perceptions of what impacts their advancement? (3) How do race and gender identities impact Black women in leadership's experiences at predominately White institutions of higher education? Although the findings presented many themes of Black women leader's experiences, three prominent themes were revealed: (a) Isolation and lack of institutional support (b) discrimination and microaggressions, and (c) outside support and uplifting. These findings relate to participant's individual experiences in the workplace and in their personal lives. All of these factors contribute to beginning to create an inclusive environment in predominately White spaces where Black women can ascend without issue.

## Discussion

Though thoroughly educated and skilled, Black women remain underrepresented in positions of leadership in higher education (Gamble & Turner, 2015). The number of Black women leaders at PWIs will continue to lack if institutions do not begin to respect, welcome, and value Black women's contributions and participation in the academy. A qualitative study to learn how Black women leaders' coworkers and colleagues feel about their ascension and leadership may provide valuable insight to institutions in getting to the root of why Black women are so scarce in leadership positions.

Many theories could have served as appropriate guides for this study; however, I chose Spivak's (1985) theory of othering and Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality as my theoretical and conceptual lenses. In the theory of othering, Spivak (1985) asserts superiority in society is determined by societal norms and expectations that influence who is made superior and inferior. Othering is also multidimensional, meaning it reflects many different forms of social difference, including race and gender (Jensen, 2011). The theory of othering ties directly into Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality, as it refers to how social and cultural constructs, like race and gender, intersect, and how they aid in better grasping the complications that Black women face in the workplace (Lloyd-Jones, 2009). Intersectionality argues that Black women experience double discrimination in ways that race and gender interact to shape the unique experience of Black women in the workplace (Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectionality aids in analyzing Black women's experiences in positions of leadership in predominately White organizations (Parker, 2005). These aspects relate to the participants of this study lived experiences during their ascension to a senior leadership position. The following discussion is presented within this framework.

### *Isolation and Lack of Support*

Although the study presented several findings, some were better suited in relation to Black women's ascension journey to senior leadership positions. While many professionals may desire to achieve leadership positions within their careers, Black women may have less opportunity and development to ascend to senior-level positions. Without a good means of support in their role, Black women can often feel alone and isolated. Participants shared that they often feel a lack of support when it comes to their jobs. This is consistent with previous findings that hegemonic leadership practices can contribute to the lack of support that Black women feel in the workplace (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). Participants admitted that this lack of support has been an issue in past positions before their leadership experiences, however, as they have ascended, support has not gotten better. They discussed how a lack of support can come from fellow colleagues, coworkers, and from their supervisors. This lack of support is difficult and disappointing for participants, and it often causes them to have to go out of their way to find solutions on their own, leading to them being overworked, which is also consistent with previous findings (Howard-Baptiste, 2014).

Lack of support directly ties to isolation, which is another theme participants heavily spoke about. Participants expressed how lonely it can be as a Black woman leader because often times, they are the only Black woman of their caliber in their department, and some participants even revealed that they are one of the only Black women leaders at their institution. They also noted that it can be difficult to call on help when help is not available or unwilling to do so. In consistence with previous findings, Crawford and Smith (2005) reveal that isolation is a significant barrier for Black administrators on White campuses. Lack of support can make Black women feel alone, leading to feelings of isolation in their positions of superiority.

### ***Discrimination and Microaggressions***

Trying to get ahead in a space that was not created for Black women to succeed can be challenging, and many factors can attribute to that such as discrimination and microaggressions. Although the barriers can be challenging and overwhelming, Black women continue to persevere and stay determined, despite the hurdles that occur (Townsend, 2021). Participants greatly reflected on discriminations and microaggressions they have experienced. They can include hardships such as being underpaid, having to correct and dismantle specific stereotypes, and the additional burden of feeling like they have to protect themselves.

In connection to previous research, predominately White environments often perceive Black women in a stereotypical manner, contributing to the misconstrued conception of Black women not being as capable in leadership as their White male, female, and Black male counterparts (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). These characteristics are negative, unprofessional, and untrue. However, they are ideas held by people who have the power to promote then hence why preconceived ideologies placed on Black women cause them to be overlooked when attempting to ascend to senior leadership positions. Participants reflected on times they have been called angry or aggressive, even when they were not meaning to be. This relates to previous research which suggests that they can be depicted as angry Black women (Domingue, 2015). Participants also recalled moments where they were expected to perform motherly duties for coworkers and colleagues, but also how they are often questioned, second-guessed, or overlooked as a leader by others. This is persistent with the previous findings of the mammy stereotype that Black women are not skilled enough to be a leader (Howard-Baptiste, 2014; Pilgrim, 2000).

It could be assumed that upon reaching senior leadership levels, that the discrimination would subdue, however, that is not the case for Black women leaders. Participants reflected on

instances where they continue to experience discrimination while in their leadership positions such as correcting stereotypes placed upon them, unfair expectations placed upon them, being overworked, having to prove themselves, having to protect themselves, and having to prove themselves. Black women leaders have the additional burden of correcting people and teaching people how to treat Black women, in addition to actually performing their professional duties.

This is not to say that all White women, White men, and Black men in higher education are against Black women becoming leaders, however, it must be acknowledged that it is more challenging for them to do so. It is important to specify that participants heavily spoke about the importance of having allyship in the workplace. Because White women, White men, and Black men hold more privilege than Black women, it is important that their counterparts recognize said privilege and use it to assist in creating fair and just workplace practices for Black women to ascend at the same levels that their counterparts do.

### ***Support and Uplifting***

Black women face higher levels of adversity in their daily lives than any other race. Because of the barriers and stressors that they deal with, it is important to discuss how Black women cope and keep peace of mind amid their daily difficulties. It is important for Black women leaders to utilize healthy ways to cope since the stressors of their daily struggles can cause issues with their health (Holder et al., 2015).

Holder et al (2015) discussed six methods of coping for Black women professionals: sponsorship and mentoring, spirituality, armoring, shifting, utilizing support networks, and self-care. Participants of this study exemplified in their responses utilizing one or more of these methods as a means of support, both in and out of the workplace. The most prevalent methods of support that participants discussed were sponsorship and mentoring, spirituality, support

networks, and self-care. Participants in the study discussed how they appreciated sponsorship from colleagues that do not look like them and gave appreciation, as that has helped them in their ascension journey. Allyship is important in Black women's ascension journeys as white employees hold more power (Lean In, 2020). Allyship includes challenging racism in the workplace, using privilege as power, and speaking out against racism in the workplace (Lean In, 2020).

Mentoring is also another piece of support that participants valued. Whether receiving assistance from mentors or being a mentor to someone else, participants felt that mentoring is a piece of their journey that is worth their time and energy and shows them their worth. Participants gave honor and thanks to the mentors that have helped them along their journeys. Although the pipeline is not very strong for Black women in higher education, all participants expressed that they did have mentors who were Black women and helped them navigate unwelcoming spaces. Mentoring provides access to industry knowledge that isn't available through education (Mitchel, 2021). Because of the mentorship they were shown during their ascension journey, participants expressed how they felt it is their duty to do the same for others in their path, especially people of color. Participants found great joy in serving as mentors to Black women wanting to become leaders in higher education and to Black students on campus as well.

It is known that people tend to gravitate towards others that represent their identity. This lends true at PWIs, as Black students tend to have greater connections to Black faculty and staff. Hence, Black women feel an added responsibility for Black students on their campuses, which is also referred to as othermothering. Othermothering is often reflected in the close relationships Black students have with Black faculty and staff, as they tend to care for students in the absence

of their families (Mawhinney, 2011). Participants reflected on their love for Black students and how they often go above and beyond for them and offering them support, nurturing, love, and care.

Connection to a higher power or spiritual well-being was also a means of support and sustainability for participants. Churches, fellowship halls, and spiritual groups have been cited as one way that Black women find support and comfort from the hardships they may face at work. Participants expressed that having a relationship with a higher being has helped in their well-being. Self-care was also a common method of support from participants. They discussed learning how to celebrate themselves and their accomplishments because they earned the right to do so. Participants discussed how they had issues with celebrating their achievements in the past, but now express their celebration of themselves even if others refuse to do so. Self-care needs to be unique to each individual to best serve them (Linnabery et al, 2014). Methods of self-care participants discussed were prayer, traveling, posting their achievements on social media, spending time with loved ones, going out to eat, and simply doing nothing, as they should have the luxury to do.

### **Recommendations for Institutional Development**

Higher education as an employer can provide resources, support, and appreciation that are beneficial to Black women wanting to ascend to senior leadership positions. Below is an explanation of recommendations for practice.

- **recognize and act against longstanding barriers Black women face:** The Black women in this study are still enduring standards and ideologies that are outdated and false. Institutions need to make a commitment to addressing and abolishing barriers that are keeping Black women from senior leadership positions. They also need to recognize



that Black women are discriminated against by both race and gender together, not one or the other. When gender and race are treated separated, Black women can be forgotten. Finally, institutions need to set clear goals for targeting and recommending Black women for promotion. Allyship is imperative for Black women in higher education, and committing to being an ally to Black women needs to be a more common practice to assist Black women in their ascension journey.

- **develop practices that prioritize leadership development for Black women:** One of the biggest impacts on Black women's careers is professional development opportunities. If Black women do not have access to mentoring, sponsorship, or social development groups, institutions need to take the proper steps to make these opportunities more available to Black women. Policies and practices need to include access to pathways for growth, and it should be clearly defined to Black women, so they can make progress in their leadership journeys.
- **utilize diverse candidates in the hiring, promoting, and ascending processes:** One of the biggest issues causing Black women to be invisible from leadership positions at PWIs is because Black women or women of color are often not doing the hiring for these senior leadership positions. Yes, Black women hire other people of color and work to create diverse and inclusive spaces, but for senior leadership positions, the hiring committee often does not reflect diversity. Hence, there is often no one available to vouch for or support the Black woman candidate. Hiring, promoting, and ascending should be done through proper channels, not by just shoulder tapping someone into a position because that often does not include Black women, giving them a less than fair chance at

ascending. Everyone deserves the same opportunity, and to be offered a position based on merit, reputation, and qualifications, not their race or gender.

- **create a tone of appreciation and value for Black women's leadership:** Black women need to be shown that their contributions and leadership are both welcomed and valued. They should be rewarded for any progress they make and recognized for any achievements or accolades they receive. Black women should also feel safe in the workplace and feel a sense of belonging. They should not be made to feel uncomfortable in a position they earned. Institutions need to make sure that all employees receive diversity training, and that they need to speak up when they witness discrimination, and action needs to be taken when it happens. Institutions can also implement a no-tolerance against racism policy, so that racism is not only talked about, but real action is taken when it happens.
- **create affinity spaces for Black women:** Understanding that people of diverse groups may need to meet with people who identity with them is important in creating affinity spaces for Black women. Institutions need to allow Black women to gather together and support each other without it being seen as secretive, racist, or exclusionary. Creating spaces like this (e.g., sister circles (Howard et al., 2016; Neal-Barnett et al., 2011)) can aid in the isolation and loneliness Black women leaders may feel in their workplaces.
- **develop Black women mentoring programs:** Mentoring can be cross-race or same-race and can be within the campus community or across campuses but designed with the development of Black women leaders in mind. If institutions lack Black women leaders, there needs to be a better effort to connect Black women to other Black women in higher

education for mentoring. Having a mentor is essential in the ascension process, and necessary for Black women wanting to be leaders.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

This study was conducted to expand on existing literature and research by examining the lived experiences of five Black women in senior leadership positions at four-year, PWIs in the United States. Further research is needed to expand the understanding of why Black women want careers in higher education, what challenges they face, what support they need, and how they sustain themselves in their journeys of ascension to senior leadership positions. The following describes recommendations for future research.

- **conduct this study in specific regions in the United States:** The Black women in this study were from different regions in the United States. Therefore, it is possible that geological location contributed to their experiences. By conducting this study and choosing participants in the same regions could give a more singular and common experience among the participants.
- **conduct this study at various types of institutions:** For this study, participants could be located at any four-year institution. By choosing participants from similar institution types, information could arise on how their experiences may be more parallel. Potential participants located at historically Black colleges and universities, private institutions, public institutions, religious institutions, small institutions, and others could have different experiences than potential participants located at public institutions, and vice versa.
- **conduct this study amongst a singular type of senior leader:** This study focused on Black women in different leadership positions. Perhaps a study could be conducted on

Black women presidents, vice presidents, directors, and others as a singular study.

Conducting the study amongst potential participants with the same job title could lend information on specific pathways that were taken by these women, and how their pathways differed from one another.

- **conduct this study on a different race/ethnicity:** Although this study was focused on Black women due to their intersection, it could also be done on White women, Asian, women, Hispanic/Latina/Latinx, indigenous women, or any other group of women because they too are largely invisible from senior leadership positions at PWIs, and also face hardship and exclusion when attempting to ascend in the workplace.

### **Limitations**

After completing my research, I still believe that a qualitative study was the correct choice as it is important to use narratives and experiences from participants when studying people of color, thus, a quantitative study would not suffice. This study identified three limitations. The first was the researcher as the instrument (Pazella et al., 2012). Using the researcher-as-instrument is common in qualitative research, however, this does give potential for the researcher to influence material collection (Pazella et al., 2012). Aspects of the research such as participant selection, topic selection, data collection, and data analysis are conducted by the researcher as well. The second limitation is time constraints and location. As the researcher, I only conducted one semi-structured 35–90-minute interview virtually. Therefore, the researcher was not able to observe participants in their academic settings. Furthermore, the researcher was not able to verify if geographic location had an effect on participant findings. The final limitation is transferability. This study focused on Black women leaders at predominately White

institutions, so their experiences do not transfer to all Black women leaders in higher education.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the intersection of race and gender for Black women as they ascend to leadership positions at four-year predominately White institutions (PWIs) by examining their professional lived experiences. Furthermore, I wanted to understand how racial and gendered identities contribute to the ascension of Black women to leadership positions in higher education. Regarding my first question “what are the experiences of Black women leaders at predominately White institutions of higher education?,” findings corresponded with the previous research, which found that Black women have a passion and desire to achieve leading positions however, they have unreasonably high expectations placed upon them. Though that is true, Black women make sure to practice multiple means of support for themselves both inside and outside of the workplace. I conclude that Black women often follow in the footsteps of other leaders before them, however, they face some barriers during their journey, and have to fight to break through the glass ceiling, giving them a unique experience.

With regard to my second question “what are Black women leaders in higher education’s perceptions of what impacts their advancement?,” findings also related to the existing research in that promotion is based on improper channels, Black women often have to prove their worth, and they receive inadequate support in the workplace. I conclude that Black women face additional hardships in the workplace, which causes them additional stressors in the workplace. They also suffer from a lack of support from their colleagues and superior leaders. Additionally, Black women deal with discrimination, racism, and microaggressions on a daily basis, and they often have to correct colleagues and teach them how to treat them respectfully.

Finally, regarding my third question “how do race and gender identities impact Black women in leadership’s experiences at predominately White institutions of higher education?,” findings highlight the importance of Black women’s love for supporting others. Black women enjoy mentoring Black women in the field of higher education, and also being a mentor or additional support to Black students on their respective campuses. They believe that representation is important, and having an ally that reflects self-contribute to one’s success.

As a qualitative researcher, I have taken great learning and lessons from this study. Conducting this study with the five participants touched me, and I believe that I touched my participants as well. This study has provided me with a more impacted researching experience, and I am forever grateful for what I have learned and gained from this process. I have gained a love for research, and even though it is challenging, the findings and feeling of contribution to my field is overall rewarding.

The findings of this study are important to me because I wish to one day become a Black woman in a senior leadership position in higher education. It was amazing to hear the stories and experiences of the participants and to see how my own experiences are parallel to theirs. However, it was disheartening to hear that my sisters are still enduring such hardships after so many of our historical figures fought for us to have our seats at the table. I did not expect to hear how some participants have had disappointments from their own kind, but with that came great advice for if that should happen to me.

Black women are resilient, strong, and powerful. Although they are highly qualified and educated, there is still a small percentage of Black women college presidents in the United States. The struggles and barriers they encounter in the workplace hold them back from achieving senior-level status, and for the ones that do make it, they still have to deal with unfair

prejudices from coworkers. It is important for institutions to understand the struggles Black women face in their professional environments. Change is needed, and institutions need to work to deconstruct outdated norms and policies and welcome and value Black women's leadership and experiences. Until then, PWIs will continue their hegemonic behavior, which will inflict no change. Change is imperative for the sake of the success of Black women.

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## Appendix A

### Recruitment Email

Dear Dr. \_\_\_\_\_

My name is Dionne Lipscomb, and I am a graduate student in the College Student Affairs Program at Eastern Illinois University (EIU). I am currently working on my graduate thesis, and my topic is regarding the experiences of Black Women in Leadership Positions at Predominately White Institutions (PWI). My research is being overseen by Dr. Polydore, chair of the Counseling and Higher Education Department at EIU.

I would be interested in hearing about your journey in higher education, and your experiences as a Black woman at a PWI. I believe your voice can aid in the strength of my research, and together we can help further research on Black women's experiences in higher education. My study aims to understand the experiences of Black women leaders at PWIs, and how the intersection of race and gender affect said experience.

I would greatly appreciate a conversation based on your experiences. For this study, you would meet with me one time via Zoom for a 45–60-minute recorded interview to speak about your story. Please respond to this email with your agreement or decline to participate by January 7, 2022. I would like to schedule interviews for dates between December 27, 2022 – January 31, 2022, however, the sooner you are able to meet, the better.

Participation is open to African American/Black women currently employed in a leadership position at a predominately White Institutions and must have held said position for at least three years.

If you are interested, please review the attached informed consent form. Then, use the QR code or click the link below to fill out the introductory questionnaire.



<https://forms.office.com/r/wdTR13V07u>

This research has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Eastern Illinois University, #22-156. The findings may be shared at conferences or published in a peer-reviewed journal. If you have concerns about the ethical conduct of this study, please contact the EIU IRB at [eiuirb@eiu.edu](mailto:eiuirb@eiu.edu) or (217) 581-8576.

Thank you so much for considering my request. I look forward to hearing from you soon!



## **Appendix B**

### **CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH**

Still, We Rise: Experiences of Black Women in Leadership Positions at Predominately White Institutions

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted Dionne Lipscomb and Dr. Catherine Polydore from the Department of College Student Affairs at Eastern Illinois University. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Please ask questions about anything you do not understand, before deciding whether or not to participate. You have been asked to participate in this study based on your answer to the call for participants sent to you about your experience as a Black woman leader at a predominately White Institution.

#### **• PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the intersection of race and gender for Black women as they ascend to leadership positions at four-year PWIs by examining professional lived experiences.

#### **• PROCEDURES**

Data will be collected utilizing semi-structured, one-on-one interviews. The interviews will be conducted virtually through an online video chat platform, Zoom. After their consent is received, participants will receive a Zoom link for a scheduled meeting. Because interviews will be conducted virtually, I will ask that participants are in a secluded setting where they are comfortable to openly discuss their experiences. I will also be in a private setting where the interviews will be confidential. Interviews will last between 45- 60 minutes long. They will be recorded, with consent of the participant.

#### **• POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

This study is not intended to cause you more than minimal risk. You may be uncomfortable, and it may cause some mental discomfort in discussing some of your experiences. I believe this to be a short-term risk and will provide adequate resources such as information prior to and after the interview related to self-care and counseling services.

#### **• POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY**

You may benefit from this study in the satisfaction that your story, voice, and experience have been amplified, and have aided in the betterment of professional development for Black women in higher education. Additionally, it can help higher education administrators become more aware of the prejudices and different leadership experiences of Black women colleagues. In addition, professional can use the findings of this study to construct significant institution, division, and program practices and policies regarding professional leadership development. Overall, the results of the study are intended to be evidence for change and can lead to other future research endeavors.

**• INCENTIVES FOR PARTICIPATION**

No incentives will be provided.

**• CONFIDENTIALITY**

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained as all files will be saved and stored on a password protected EIU server. All information will only be seen by research team members and only name files will be seen by principal investigator. Recordings will be viewed only by research team members. Data will be stored in a OneDrive folder that will be password protected. My thesis advisor and I will be the only individuals with access to said folder. The treatment of data will abide by the researcher's institution's IRB protocols, and the records pertaining to this study will be kept for three years per IRB policy. After this timeline is reached, all data and records will be permanently deleted.

**• PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL** Participation in this research study is voluntary and not a requirement or a condition for being the recipient of benefits or services from Eastern Illinois University or any other organization sponsoring the research project. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind or loss of benefits or services to which you are otherwise entitled. There is no penalty if you withdraw from the study, and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

**• IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS**

If you have any questions or concerns about this research, please contact:

Dr. Catherine Polydore

Email: [REDACTED]

Phone: [REDACTED]

Dionne Lipscomb

Email: [REDACTED]

Phone: [REDACTED]

**• RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS**

If you have any questions or concerns about the treatment of human participants in this study, you may call or write:

Institutional Review Board  
Eastern Illinois University  
600 Lincoln Ave.  
Charleston, IL 61920  
Telephone: (217) 581-8576  
E-mail: [eiuirb@eiu.edu](mailto:eiuirb@eiu.edu)

You will be given the opportunity to discuss any questions about your rights as a research subject with a member of the IRB. The IRB is an independent committee composed of members of the University community, as well as lay members of the community not connected with EIU. The IRB has reviewed and approved this study.

I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation at any time. I have been given a copy of this form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

I, the undersigned, have defined and fully explained the investigation to the above subject.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Investigator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## **Appendix C**

### **Interview Protocol**

Introduce yourself and welcome and thank the participant for volunteering their participation. Ensure the participant's comfortability. Ask the participant if they have received the informed consent and have had a moment to overview it. Retrieve the informed consent form and use the screen sharing feature on Zoom to review the form with the participant. Answer any questions the participant may have.

### **Introductory Questionnaire**

I: Do I have your permission to take audio recording of this interview?

I: The following questions are simply to gather demographic information about all participants in the study. They will not be used to identify you.

1. What would you like your pseudonym to be?
2. What gender, if any, do you identify?
3. What are your pronouns?
4. How do you identify racially?
5. What institution are you employed at?
  - a. The name of the institution will not be used in my study.
6. What is your current title?
7. How long have you held your current position?

### **Interview Questionnaire**

II: These next questions are to gather information about your journey to a leadership position.

8. Can you talk about your journey to in higher education?
9. How has the process been to move up the ladder compared to your peers?

10. Can you describe any support you received along the way?
11. Can you describe any barriers you faced during your journey?
12. Tell me about your experiences as a Black woman in a predominantly White institution of higher education?

III: Now, these next questions reflect on your experience with leadership and your current position in leadership.

13. How would you describe the impact of race and gender on your journey in higher education?
14. What feedback have you received about your job performance?
15. What is your feeling around the impact of race and gender on your feedback and performance evaluations?
16. What has been your experience as a mentor to others in your field?
17. What has been your experience as a mentor to Black students on your campus?
18. What does it take to feel uplifted and what keeps you going?
19. How do you cope with the disappointments and difficulties you face in your position, if you face any?
20. Are there any other stories you are willing to share about lessons learned?

I: Thank you again for taking the time out of your busy schedule to share your experience with me.