

2020

## Examining Barriers Impacting Women's Promotion into C-Suite Positions in Higher Education

Lynette Johnson Nelson  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Management and Technology

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Lynette Johnson Nelson

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Dr. Anthony Lolas, Committee Member, Management Faculty  
Dr. Lisa Barrow, University Reviewer, Management Faculty

Chief Academic Officer and Provost  
Sue Subocz, Ph.D.

Walden University  
2020

Abstract

Examining Barriers Impacting Women's Promotion into C-Suite Positions in Higher Education

by

Lynette Johnson Nelson

MBA, Webster University, 2006

BS, University of Tennessee at Martin, 1993

Proposal Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Management, Leadership and Organizational Change

Walden University

May 2020

## Abstract

The United States Department of Labor indicated that women represent 46.8% and men represent 53.2% of the United States' 16 years and older civilian labor force. An estimated 52% of adult women compared to 48% of men participating in the civilian labor force held a bachelor's degree or higher, and women represented 47% of the management and professional sector's positions. Women occupy 25% of C-suite positions in the Standard & Poor 500 companies. In higher education, 30% of college presidents are women. Women continue to face several barriers as they try to move into senior executive leadership positions. The specific problem involves how women overcome gender, organizational, and societal barriers as they try to occupy senior executive leadership positions within nonprofit academic institutions. There is a disconnect between available qualified women and their representation in senior executive leadership positions. The purpose of this study was to examine barriers experienced by women seeking to enter senior executive positions and methods they can use to overcome these barriers effectively. A descriptive case study approach was used to interview nine female and seven male senior executive participants who represented nonprofit academic institutions located in the Memphis metropolitan area. NVivo Pro 12 was used to help analyze interview data and identify recurrent themes. Participants' responses identified gender bias and pipeline deficit barriers indicated that congruity theory is relevant as women try to increase their presence in senior executive leadership roles. This study will contribute to positive social change by increasing the number of women occupying senior executive leadership positions not only in higher education institutions but also in other professions.

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## Dedication

This doctoral study is dedicated to my parents, Adlai and Beverly Johnson, my sons, Jalen and Joshua Nelson, and to my late paternal grandmother, Mrs. Mildred C. Johnson. Thank you for giving me the encouragement, support, and strength to persevere even through the dark and challenging times. It is because of you that I learned I could not quit, and that if I stay the course, I will succeed. I am forever grateful to all of you.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

### **Introduction**

The promotional path to C-suite positions can be difficult for women. The current research regarding the impact of gender diversity on institutional performance is inconsistent. The United States Department of Labor (2017) reported that the rate of women's participation in the workforce steadily increased from 33.4% in 1960 to 46.8% in 2016. During that same period, women's median salary also increased from 60% of men's median salary in 1960 to 81.9% of men's median salary in 2016. Cook and Glass (2015) stated that increases in gender diversity among leadership are associated with increased pay equity and enhanced mobility opportunities for women.

The Catalyst (2017) indicated that S&P 500 companies located in the United States employ an estimated 20 million people. Of that total figure, women represent 44% of the entire workforce, with 25% holding C-suite leadership roles, which translates to 8.8 million and 1 million individuals, respectively (Warner & Corley, 2017). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2018) reported that 9.5 million women are enrolled as undergraduates in higher education institutions. The American Council on Education (ACE, 2017) reported that the number of female college presidents totals 540, which represents 30% of institutions out of an estimated 1800 institutions within their membership. While these numbers suggest a strong presence of women in the workforce, they also confirm gender inequities among professionals in the higher end of the career ladder.

In Chapter 1, a summary of the background of the study, problem statement, purpose of the study, research questions, nature of the study, assumptions, scope, delimitations, and significance is provided to help build the foundation of the study. The role congruity theory, which is the conceptual framework for the study, is also introduced. Definitions of key terms are also provided to describe concepts specific to this study.

## **Background of the Study**

### **History of Women Leadership**

The historical foundation of leadership, specifically women in leadership, is rooted in a social constructionist/advocacy perspective. Hakim (2016) stated that the barriers affecting women's progress in obtaining leadership roles are the result of a patriarchal-dominated society. Carlyle's great man theory explained that men born with heroic potential could only become leaders (Dobbins & Platz, 1986). The think manager-think male phenomenon supported the idea that men were more equipped with effective leadership traits than women (Schein, Mueller, Lituchy, & Liu, 1996). The introduction and application of behavioral sciences in the 1930s shifted some leadership researchers' belief that leadership is learned rather than a natural characteristic. By the 1960s, the acceptance of behavioral theories notably changed the trajectory of women moving into leadership roles (Antonakis & Cianciolo, 2004).

Several barriers affect women's career paths. Salas-Lopez, Deitrick, Mahady, Gertner, and Sabino (2011) said that institutional culture and structure concerning



recruiting, retaining, and promoting women were significant barriers. Due to the social norms for men and women, examples of these barriers include socially established gender roles and opportunities for effective mentor relationships (Chanland & Murphy, 2018). Although there has been some positive acknowledgment of gender inequities, the obstacles women face as they try to enter senior executive positions remain largely ignored. Devillard, Sancier-Sultan, and Werner (2014) found that a number of men do not agree with the notion that women have difficulty reaching senior executive positions. As the workforce welcomes a new generation of women into the labor force, individuals should understand what the barriers are and why they exist for women.

### **Perceived Barriers for Women Senior Executive Leadership in the Present**

Lack of effective leadership persists as a global issue in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Ravindra (2014) said that current society is burdened with timid, incompetent, and unethical leadership. Despite evolving political and social views, most cultures still believe in the think manager, think male paradigm. This viewpoint is common not only in the older but also the younger generation (Athanasopoulou, Moss-Cowan, Smets, & Morris, 2018). Eagly (2013) indicated that institutions led by women experience less corruption and tend to lean more towards the benevolent causes of society. Negative perceptions regarding gender and leadership not only create constant obstacles for women seeking to advance to leadership positions but also interfere with positive social change within the workplace.

Given past and current history, the women's leadership movement is still insufficient and slow. While various theories and perspectives are in support of women as leaders, a myriad of barriers are still persistent. In 2016, women made up 44% of the S&P 500 labor force; however, recent data suggest that only 25 or 5% of S&P 500 companies have a female CEO (Warner & Corley, 2017). Due to the globalization of the industrial market, diverse and transformational leadership can help institutions stay competitive. Farndale, Biron, Briscoe, and Raghuram (2015) stated organizations that compete globally and have revenue success place a high level of importance on diversity. Ng and Sears (2017) indicated that an institution that understands that management should be able to adjust to changing currents in the market should support diverse leadership to help it remain competitive and forward-thinking.

In keeping with the goals of sustainability and effectiveness, institutions are encouraged to incorporate diversity in their succession planning. Farndale et al. (2015) said that the future of institutions, within professional sectors, depends on their successful execution of a diverse succession plan to help enhance services to their constituents and maintain exemplary human talent. This type of planning helps an institution's culture to continue to improve and strive to achieve a culture of gender equality (Kossek & Buzzanell, 2018).

Transformational leadership is also linked to enhanced institutional performance. Khalili (2016) stressed that transformational leadership and innovative thinking are connected and can enhance institutional performance. This means that when leaders can

articulate a clear vision, followers will know what the goal is and perform accordingly to meet it. Furthermore, women are more likely than men to practice democracy as part of their transformational approach to leadership (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

Some of the barriers that prevent successful promotion into C-suite leadership roles include lack of mentoring, difficulties in balancing work, family, and prejudices regarding women in these types of leadership roles (Cocchio, 2009; Devillard et al., 2014). The goal of this study was to identify perceived barriers and methods that can be used by females to overcome these barriers as they work towards occupying senior executive positions.

Allen (2016) stated that feminist research helps to empower women, challenge societal gender norms, and push for social change. Feminist research shakes up traditional viewpoints and aids in the development of new perspectives. This form of research challenges societal structures that impose gender-type barriers on women and other marginalized groups (Allen, 2016).

Chin, Desormeaux, and Sawyer (2016) defined diverse leadership as not only having diverse leaders, but also includes the diverse leaders' ability to have cultural awareness and the competence to work effectively with individuals who represent different ethnicities, ages, genders, religions, values, and any other differences among individuals. Diverse leadership can help an institution to stay competitive, and individuals become more progressive in its acceptance of change. An effective change agent is someone who can articulate the benefits of new ideas and inspire individuals to

buy in and accomplish new goals. This type of individual exhibits transformational leadership traits, which are the keys to effective change (Khalili, 2016). Gobaw (2017) research study indicated that women more than men practiced a transformational leadership style within a higher education setting.

Women face barriers at all societal levels, including institutional, individual, and social, which can slow their progression towards senior executive leadership positions (Diehl, 2014). Individual barriers can include work-life balance and different communication styles (Hakim, 2016). Roberts and Creary (2017) identified institutional barriers such as tokenism, lack of willing mentors, and exclusion from informal networks. Cultural constraints, associating leadership with masculine traits, and gender stereotyping are some societal barriers (Haveman & Beresford, 2015). These types of barriers help contribute to the glass ceiling phenomenon (Cook & Glass, 2014). The glass ceiling phenomenon is defined as an under-representation of women at the highest earning and leadership positions within all professional sectors (Bertrand, Black, Jensen, & Lleras-Muney, 2018). Burkinshaw and White (2017) found in their study comprising of older and younger women in an academic setting that women in the younger generations are aware of the glass ceiling phenomenon. Therefore, due to the various barriers placed on women, younger women are not as eager to enter senior executive leadership positions as past generations.

The glass ceiling is present across a variety of occupational fields and types of entities including corporations, nonprofits, and educational institutions (Diehl, 2014).

Cook and Glass (2015) stated that demographic diversity among leadership has reduced segregation and increased pay equity and mobility opportunities for women and minorities. ACE (2017) indicated that although women represent more than half of the students pursuing higher education degrees, 70% of educational institutions are led by men. The low number of women holding senior executive leadership positions in higher education has led the ACE to initiate and implement the Moving the Needle campaign to help increase the number of female presidents in higher education institutions to 50% by 2030. Johnson (2017) recommended that research studies and discussions on gender inequities in higher education leadership be initiated to gain insights regarding the impact of diversity on institutional performance.

### **Problem Statement**

The promotional path to C-suite or C-level positions can be challenging for women. C-suite is broadly defined to refer to the most influential senior executive leaders. It derives its name from the titles of top senior executives, such as chief executive officer (CEO), chief financial officer (CFO), chief operating officer (COO), and chief information officer (CIO; Guadalupe et al., 2013). In comparison, higher education's senior executive leadership includes titles like a chief executive, president, chief academic officer, and chancellor (Black, 2015).

The general problem is women who seek senior executive leadership positions experience common gender-driven barriers, such as work-life balance, lack of qualifications, male chauvinism, and organizational culture that prevent them from

moving into these positions. These barriers are relevant to understanding the phenomenon of gender inequality in senior executive leadership. The specific problem involves how women overcome gender, organizational, and societal barriers as they try to occupy senior executive leadership positions within nonprofit academic institutions (Hannum, Muhly, Shockley-Zalabak, & White, 2015).

The United States Department of Labor (2017) indicated that women represented 46.8% or an estimated 74 million of the civilian labor force, which consists of ages 16 and older. Thirty-seven million women (52%), representing ages 25 and older, obtained a bachelor's or higher degree. In comparison, men represented 53.2%, an estimated 84 million of the labor force, and 34 million (48%) held a bachelor's or higher degree. Lastly, an estimated 59 million individuals ages 16 and older, held management and professional level positions.

Warner and Worley (2017) indicated that in 2016, women represented 44% of the S&P 500 companies' workforce; however, they only occupied 25% of executive and senior executive positions. The number of women holding CEO positions within the S&P 500 companies totaled 25. Also, in 2016, the number of undergraduate students enrolled in higher education institutions was 16.9 million, with women representing 56% of that total (NCES, 2018). The percentage of women college presidents was 30%, which represented 540 of approximately 1800 higher education institutions within the ACE's membership (ACE, 2017). Although women have made considerable economic,

educational, and professional progress, data reveals sharp gender disparities in terms of senior executive leadership positions.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive case study was to explore how various gender, societal, and organizational barriers may impact women's opportunities to move into senior executive leadership positions in nonprofit academic institutions and how women can overcome these barriers. Participants were invited from a pool of senior executive leaders from nonprofit academic institutions located in the Memphis metropolitan area. The institutions' sizes are small (less than 3,000), medium (3,000-9,999), and large (over 9,999). Six participants represented small institutions, five participants represented medium institutions, and five participants represented a large institution. A qualitative methodology with a descriptive case study design was used to explore this research problem of how women can overcome barriers to reach the senior executive leadership positions within higher education institutions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine female and seven male senior executive leaders to identify perceived barriers that may hinder women's promotion into senior executive leadership positions. Furthermore, methods that can be used to minimize or remove these barriers were also examined through the collection of interview data.

This study focused on identifying the challenges women face as they strive to enter senior executive leadership positions. Participants included nine females and seven males who are currently in senior executive leadership roles. The purposeful selection of

these individuals was to help provide an understanding, to practitioners and leadership structures within higher education, of the barriers and explored appropriate and reasonable solutions regarding the lack of women in senior executive leadership ranks. Maxwell (2012) stated that purposeful selection ensures that participants are uniquely qualified to provide enough relevant data. Male participants were included to offer alternative interpretations and insights. Perspectives from both genders are important in this study because these perspectives could lead to an enhanced understanding of governing boards within higher education of gender-driven differences regarding the glass ceiling phenomenon.

### **Research Questions**

This study involved a qualitative descriptive case study design. The overarching general research question for this study was: What are the perceived barriers women encounter that prevent them from moving into senior executive-level positions, and how can they be overcome? The specific research questions were designed to provide insight into the general research question.

*RQ1:* What barriers are perceived as impacting women's movement into senior executive leadership positions?

*RQ2:* What similarities and differences regarding barriers are noted between male and female participants?

*RQ3:* What methods have been identified to assist in removing the stated barriers and increase the number of women moving into senior executive leadership positions?



## Conceptual Framework

This study is framed in the social constructivist and advocacy worldviews. Equal employment opportunities legislation has been in place since the late 1960s (Blumrosen 1980). However, s, attitudes regarding women as leaders are still evolving. The role congruity theory illustrated how barriers for women striving to become leaders still exist (Eagly & Karau, 2002). The role congruity theory as a conceptual framework was used to guide this study and help raise questions regarding the existence of barriers, how women can overcome these barriers, and what institutions can do to aid in the removal of these barriers for women seeking to attain senior executive leadership positions.

The social role theory explains the differences and similarities between male and female genders. Heilman (2001) stated that typical gender roles are developed through social norms and are applied to individuals within a specific category or position. Additionally, Eagly and Koenig (2006) said that gender roles derive from two schools of thought: descriptive and prescriptive norms. Descriptive norms are beliefs about the characteristics of men and women. Prescriptive norms are those beliefs regarding how men and women should behave. McNae (2015) stated the shortage of female representation in senior executive leadership positions might be a result of descriptive perceptions (e.g., qualifications) or perspective perceptions (e.g., traits) because these perceptions can hinder women's achievement in terms of moving into these positions.

The role congruity theory stems from the social role theory and explains the congruency between gender roles, paying close attention to positions of leadership. Also,

the theory examines critical factors, which influence the congruity of perceptions and the ramifications of prejudicial behaviors (Eagly & Karau, 2002). The role congruity theory indicated that perceived incongruity between the female gender role and leadership roles leads to prejudice in two forms: perceiving women less favorably than men as potential occupants of leadership roles and evaluating behavior that fulfills the requirements of a leader role less favorably when a woman executes the role (Gupta, Han, Mortal, Silveri, & Turban, 2018).

These prejudices are more likely to occur in situations in which perceptions of incongruity between the female gender role and the leadership role are heightened. Eddy and Ward (2017) said prejudices are more likely to arise when social norms are challenged, and members of a social group display characteristics that are not in alignment with the attributes and behaviors perceived to be required for success for a specific social group.

### **Nature of the Study**

The qualitative descriptive case study design is used to explain a current issue, such as how or why a phenomenon functions. Maxwell (2012) expressed that qualitative research focuses on people, situations, events, and the processes which connect them. The qualitative methodology involves identifying the meaning of participants' experiences rather than measuring relationships between different variables, as is common in quantitative research. The case study design allows the reader to understand the context in which these participants act and how events and actions take place, as well as identify

unanticipated phenomena and influences and develop casual explanations (Maxwell, 2012). In examining the various aspects of the glass ceiling phenomenon, such as the disparity between the number of educated and experienced women within the workforce compared to the number of women in senior executive leadership roles, along with the effect of the role congruity theory and how it affects women's movement into senior executive leadership positions, the qualitative methodology was more appropriate for this study.

Cronin (2014) stated that a descriptive case study design involves describing the structure of the phenomenon, analysis, and participants' interpretation of the phenomenon the descriptive case study design is useful for providing insight into a particular problem, which can enhance theory building to solve the problem (Baskarada, 2014). Another possible design is the grounded theory. Additionally, the use of the descriptive case study design allows the researcher to describe the intervention or phenomenon in its real-life context. Sandu (2018) explained that the grounded theory approach allows for a certain level of generalization so that a social phenomenon can be interpreted better.

### **Definitions**

Definitions were included to assist with understanding various terms and how they relate to the study. These are standard terms used within the private, public, and nonprofit sectors.

*Barrier*: A set of conditions to be dismantled or overcome (Watts, Frame, Moffett, Van-Hein, & Hein, 2015).

*C-suite*: C-level senior executives' titles which tend to start with the letter C for chief, such as Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Chief Finance Officer (CFO), Chief Operating Officer (COO), and Chief Information Officer (CIO) (Guadalupe, Li, & Wulf, 2013).

*Chancellor*: The head of a specific campus within a large university system (Seraphin, 2018).

*Gender barrier*: Barriers or obstructions that result from an underlying belief in sex role stereotypes (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016).

*Glass ceiling*: The invisible barrier that many women face as they advance through the ranks of their chosen professions but can progress only so far before being stymied in their efforts to reach the upper levels of leadership (Chisholm-Burns, Spivey, Hagemann, & Josephson, 2017).

*Professional sector*: Different groups of work classifications that distinguishes professionals due to their vocational relationship to formal knowledge. Typical professional sectors include business, education, entertainment, government, health care, and technology (Sass, 1990).

*Provost*: A university's vice-president or chief academic officer who is responsible for the creation and implementation of the academic priorities of the university (Bugeja, 2018).

*Senior executive*: Defined as the top management team, which includes the CEO and senior vice presidents (Glass, 2015).

*Standard & Poor's (S&P) 500*: The index used by market professionals and institutional investors when they need to know what the stock market is doing. While there were several thousand stocks traded in the U. S. market, the S&P 500 covers the most significant ones, representing three quarters of the total value of all U.S. equities (Anderson, Duru, & Reeb, 2009).

### **Assumptions**

Ormston, Spencer, Barnard, and Snape (2014) stated that assumptions, limitations, and delimitations are essential parts of a research project. Hancock and Algozzine (2016) said that assumptions, limitations, and delimitations are boundaries of research because they will keep the researcher focused. It is critical for the researcher to communicate, to the intended audience, these various factors to ensure the credibility of the research.

Ormston et al. (2014) stated that assumptions are the foundations of a research project. Assumptions are ideas which the researcher takes for granted. The first assumption was that the interview process yielded real and accurate feelings and interpretations regarding the lack of female representation in senior executive leadership phenomenon. Interview conversations were led by participants to elicit their experiences. Another assumption was that participants represented a diverse mixture of senior executive leaders within private and public higher education institutions.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

Ormston et al. (2014) said that the scope identifies the focus of the study.

Delimitations are study boundaries that involve what the study will not do. This study focused on overcoming barriers encountered by women trying to obtain C-suite positions within nonprofit academic institutions located in the Memphis metropolitan area.

Participants were limited to senior executive leaders.

The scope was limited to individuals with specific job titles typically considered to be a part of the C-suite definition of senior management such as president, provost, chancellor, Chief Academic Officer (CAO), Chief Legal Counsel, Chief Operating Officer (COO), and Vice President of Academic Affairs to achieve a homogenous and purposeful response group. These individuals share similar leadership responsibilities and career successes. For purposes of this study, both the case study and phenomenological approaches were considered for the research design. The case study design was selected because of its flexibility in exploring this societal phenomenon from the perspective of both genders.

Additionally, this study did not include for-profit academic institutions. The reason for including nonprofit academic institutions is their traditional organizational culture and structure as academic institutions. Levy (2015) said that although for-profit academic institutions are growing in the United States, they are viewed as businesses instead of higher education institutions.

### **Limitations**

Limitations are weaknesses within a study that are identified by the researcher. This planned research explored a subject that involves several interpretations of diverse leadership. Due to the focus of this study, there was a possibility of a low response from targeted participants. Individuals unaware of the concept of diversity could have thought the issue of diversity was resolved, and individuals aware of the lack of diversity within higher education institutions have thought that previous research may not have touched the surface at all.

Another limitation was the demographic distribution. Balanced gender and ethnic representation reflective of the population served was optimal. While achieving a full diverse sample was difficult, that could include younger (40-49) age participants, the study's sample of participants was inclusive. Although the younger generation may be more accepting of diversity, they may not be supportive of women in senior executive leadership.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study helped to fill a gap in understanding the low representation of women in senior executive leadership roles within higher education. The researcher examined the barriers impacting the trajectory of women in senior executive leadership roles, why these barriers exist, and how they can be mitigated and overcome. The researcher believes the study is important because it examined gender differences and similarities in terms of thoughts and attitudes regarding female stereotypes and leadership. The results

of this study could provide insights into how men and women identify barriers affecting the promotion of women into senior executive leadership roles and processes for minimizing or removing these barriers. Insights from this study may be able to assist human resource divisions in developing strategies to mitigate the negative impact of identified barriers.

Chin et al. (2016) defined diverse leadership as how diverse leaders can effectively manage and lead diverse groups and maintain cultural awareness. Initiatives and implementation plans are necessary for growth; however, the CEO of an institution should lead by example and be the one accountable for the change. In addition to commitment from the organization's leaders to practice diversity leadership, a diversity-sensitive orientation (DSO) is important for successful diversity management initiatives (Dreachslin, 2007).

Perrin et al. (2012) said leaders who compete globally and have revenue success place a high level of importance on diversity. Diverse leadership keeps an institution competitive and society forward-thinking. Burroughs (2015) stated that change involves vision and inspiration. By using transformational leadership, an effective change agent is someone who can articulate the benefits of new ideas and inspire individuals within the organization to buy in and accomplish the new goals, which is vital for effective change.

Devillard et al. (2014) said that women and other minorities have different obstacles that affect their movement into senior executive positions. For example, although a woman may be the better candidate for a top executive position, the



incongruent perceptions of job demands, and traditional family responsibilities could cause her not to be considered.

### **Significance to Practice and Theory**

The literature indicated there was still much to be presented regarding why women are not moving into C-suite positions at a comparable rate as men. Willie et al. (2018) identified biological, sociological, structural/cultural, and line experience assumptions that play a significant role in affecting women's movement. These assumptions, along with male dominance, discriminatory language, and gender-based conversations, work together to keep women out of senior executive positions. Chaluvadi (2015) stated although there is an abundance of research immersed in the different leadership styles between men and women, the research observing the factors that hinder women's path and the methods needed to overcome these factors for women to move into senior executive leadership positions is still insufficient.

Beeson and Valeiro (2012) addressed how to decrease the gap between the workforce being over half women, and less than one in five of C-suite positions being filled by women, and identified unwritten rules for advancement, which include non-negotiables, like a consistently strong track record of performance, deselection factors, such as weak interpersonal skills, and core selection factors, which includes strategic thinking skills. Inadequate feedback regarding performance and resistance to women leaders were additional barriers identified. Beeson and Valeiro (2012) said women should receive feedback from individuals who can help them improve their skills, actively

manage their careers, seek allies, and think strategically to assist a company's succession plan.

Pettigrew (2018) stated that conducting studies to aid in men's and women's understanding of various social phenomena is important to changing societal norms. (Pettigrew, 2018). Although there are several prejudices and preconceived thoughts regarding women in senior executive positions, providing valid data to explain these thoughts could change the perceptions men and women have regarding female leadership. Beeson and Valerio (2012) proposed that women need to be able to blend toughness and warmth in order to be seen as credible leaders and overcome the negative perceptions regarding female leaders.

### **Significance to Social Change**

Randolph-Seng et al. (2016) stated that due to the global positioning of institutions, societal pressures, generational differences, and sustainability, research in diversity leadership is still needed. With the number of women currently in the workplace and a projected increase of women obtaining their college education and entering the workplace, the professional sectors' need to close the gender gap within C-suite leadership positions is critical.

Raffo and Holden (2014) indicated with different cultures political views, and some societal changes, the viewpoint of think manager, think male still exists, not only in the older but also in the younger generation as well. Senge (2006) said that an institution should always be in a learning mode to achieve success. Therefore, for leaders,

employees, and board members to be successful, they should be allowed to learn and perfect their skills and talents.

Seng (2006) stated that an institution's culture should support this learning theory and ensure that everyone within the institution understands and accepts this requirement. Organizations' leadership should be willing to embrace the learning institution culture and practice a shift in their beliefs of management, leadership roles, and women's roles in an evolving society. This type of mind shift will help men and women become more accepting of seeing women in senior executive leadership positions.

### **Summary and Transition**

This study examined the barriers experienced by senior executive women within academic institutions located in the southeast region of the United States, specifically in Memphis, Tennessee. The barriers were identified, explained, and discussed in terms of how they could be overcome. Institutions need to acknowledge the presence of these barriers so effective strategies can be developed to help women overcome them. Additionally, this could help answer the overarching question of how gender bias can be removed from the path of success.

In Chapter 1, an overview of the research problem, purpose, and research questions addressed was provided. The role congruity theory and social constructivist and advocacy worldviews were used as conceptual frameworks and are discussed further in Chapter 2. Also, in Chapter 1, a summary of the descriptive case study research methodology and data collection and analysis was provided. Chapter 2 will include an

examination of existing leadership research by reviewing and synthesizing current literature on leadership diversity, women leadership, and higher education leadership.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

The specific problem involves overcoming gender, organizational, and societal barriers as women try to occupy senior executive leadership positions within nonprofit academic institutions. The purpose of this qualitative descriptive case study was to explore how various gender, societal, and organizational barriers may impact women's opportunities to move into senior executive leadership positions within nonprofit academic institutions and how women they overcome these barriers.

Many barriers challenge women as they try to occupy senior executive leadership positions. Bullough and Luque (2015) stated that the implicit leadership theory, which focuses on personal experiences, values, and social influences continues to formulate the idea of a leader or non-leader. Cultural constraints regarding the choices that women make, perceptions that men are the only leaders, and gender stereotyping create barriers that impede women's progression into leadership (Haveman & Beresford, 2015; Stamarski & Son-Hing, 2015).

In the academic sector, the representation of women in senior executive leadership positions is lagging. Hannum et al. (2015) stated that the number of women college and university presidents increased by 3% from 2006 to 2012. This small increase shows how the lack of movement towards diversity in academia is still a problem. MacFarlane (2016) indicated that higher education institutions serve as microcosms of society and provides an example of how cultural values and norms are developed and implemented. The positive social change could be promoted by understanding the experiences of senior women leaders in the context of higher education, (identifying experiences relevant in terms of reaching top leadership levels and analyzing the challenges and benefits of senior executive leadership roles.

The literature review includes several perspectives and methodologies to help explain the glass ceiling phenomenon. The literature presented shows how current and past researchers have explained this phenomenon and could provide the foundation for new research. By using a descriptive case study design, this study attempted to answer the question regarding why women are facing barriers as they try to move into C-suite leadership positions within the nonprofit academic industry.

The current literature included several studies that present women's perspectives regarding the glass ceiling phenomenon. Current literature which included responses from men was limited. It is essential to explore men's thoughts because men often hold positions that can determine who enters senior executive leadership positions. Between 2014 and 2018, an estimated 3,600 peer-reviewed articles regarding women's leadership

were identified. Out of this number, fewer than 10% of the articles included the male perspective. Kalokerinos, von Hippel, and Zacher (2014); Kiser (2015) indicated the inclusion of male senior executive leaders' views of how women can attain C-suite leadership positions could add another element to the literature. Haile et al. (2016) said that with organizations moving into a global economy, researching the reasons that women are facing barriers to becoming leaders should continue to be examined.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

A multidisciplinary approach was used by the researcher to complete a comprehensive review of the relevant literature. The search included business, psychology, and sociology literature that were collected from Walden University and the University of Memphis Libraries. Articles and books were searched and selected using databases such as Google Scholar, PsycInfo, PsycArticles, SocIndex, ERIC, SAGE Journals, Science Direct, Academic Search Premier, Business Source Premier, and Thoreau. The following terms were used to obtain valid and relevant articles: *academia, women, C-suite, leadership, barriers, work-life balance, men, higher education, experience, diversity, global, senior executive, gender bias, social norms, and management*. The majority of the literature cited were peer-reviewed and current; however, some references were published before 2014. A date range between 2014 and 2019 was used to identify current literature.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The historical background of leadership, specifically women in leadership, is rooted in a social constructionist/advocacy perspective. Both the great man and think manager, think male theories focus on males being the only sex that could possess leadership qualities and skills. The social role theory involves accepted social roles, beliefs, and norms that are assigned to men and women (Blakely & Dziadosz, 2015). As more women began to enter the workforce and occupy leadership positions, established leadership theories were being challenged due to new types of leadership traits and styles being introduced by women (Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, & Ristikari, 2011).

The conceptual framework for this study is the role congruity theory. Eagly and Karau (2002) said the role congruity theory explains the congruity between gender and leadership roles as it relates to factors and processes that influence the perceptions and behaviors of men and women. Green (2018) stated that implementing a descriptive case study design should provide an accurate description of the status or characteristics of a phenomenon. In addition, Birchall (2014) said that qualitative research is a practical design that involves exploring meaning, interpretations, and individuals' experiences. The literature was organized using a theme-based focus. Themes included women's leadership history, diverse leadership, female leadership in academia, barriers, and the future state of women in academia.

## Literature Review

### History of Women Leadership

Pooley (2016) stated that in 1935 Arthur Bentley introduced the term behavioral sciences as the study of man. The behavioral sciences help to shift the thoughts regarding leadership from born characteristics to learned characteristics. The think manager-think male phenomenon supported the idea of men being more equipped with effective leadership traits than women (Schein et al., 1996). Jogulu and Wood (2006) stated due to the acceptance of the behavioral theory, which occurred in approximately 1960, the trajectory of women moving into leadership roles increased, and leadership research began to turn toward examining women as leaders.

Toossi (2002) said that due to the rapid growth of the United States' workforce, women increased their participation in the workforce from 34% (18 million) in 1950 to 60% (66 million) in 2000. However, due to the slow rate of growth for the labor force beginning in 2000, with a projected annual growth rate of 0.7% per year, the number of women in the workforce still should reach 92 million by 2050 (Toossi, 2002). The women's share in the workforce could be 48% by 2050. Although these numbers suggest substantial increases of women in the workforce, along with positive byproducts such as more education, financial stability, and self-empowerment, these numbers only reflect statistics and not the barriers women face as they try to progress.

As the 21<sup>st</sup> century progresses, the lack of effective leadership is becoming a global issue. Ravindra (2014) stated that current society is burdened with timid, less than



competent, and unethical leadership. This creates a constant obstacle for changing the perceptions regarding gender norms and move towards positive social change. In research presented by Eagly (2013), institutions that have women dominated leadership experienced less corruption and tended to lean more towards the benevolent causes of society.

Concerning professional and educational experience, women have increased their numbers in both areas. Professional sector data show that women hold 52% of the professional-level jobs; however, they occupy 25% of the C-suite positions in S&P 500 companies (Warner & Corley, 2017). Given the history and current conditions, the leadership movement for women is still insufficient and slow.

### **Leadership Styles**

Bierema (2016) stated that although there were minimal differences between how men and women lead, women still face barriers they need to overcome to occupy senior executive leadership positions. Although women have experienced an increase in educational and career experiences, the barrier of perceived ineffective leadership styles is a possible contributing factor to low numbers in senior executive leadership positions (Arnold, Walsh, Connelly, & Martin, 2015). The importance of leadership style has been examined dating back to the classical period in Rome, where Machiavelli asked whether it was better for a leader to be feared or loved (Raymond, 2017). This early analysis of leadership became the foundation for studies focusing on human relations, management

theories, and defining authoritative and participatory leadership styles (Franco & Haase, 2017).

Leaders can inspire individuals, create a vision, and serve as a catalyst for change. Conversely, leaders can impede progress, stifle growth, and cause employees to leave institutions. In a study conducted among various university librarians, which focused on transformational and transactional leadership styles and included demographics, such as gender, age, and professional experience, the results identified the ability to adapt and maneuver rapid change are indicators of strong leadership. The gender of the individual was not a factor. Thus, the type of leadership style one possesses is critical to an institution's survival (Martin, 2015).

Martin (2015) expressed that *laissez-faire* leadership is defined as no leadership. This type of style provides no encouragement or vision. Individuals who practice this style lack confidence or have abdicated their responsibilities. Transactional leadership resembles a reciprocal of exchange between the leader and employees. Although this form of leadership is acceptable for a limited amount of time, it is not sufficient during times of change and turmoil. Transformational leadership builds relationships between people, gives vision, and helps usher in a significant change (Martin, 2015). Martin (2015) concluded that leaders should be more transformational by sharing their vision, gaining trust, and inspiring individuals to create the type of environment, which could yield positive results.

With the increased diversity and complexity of institutional environments, leaders who practice a combination of agentic and communal leadership styles are preferable (Hogue, 2016). Agentic behaviors include assertiveness, influence over others, and self-initiative. Communal behaviors include showing empathy, being a team player, and building relationships (Hogue, 2016). Although both men and women exhibit these leadership traits, women are penalized for having too much or too little of these traits, Bongiorno, Bain, and David (2014) stated that women are not being penalized for displaying agentic traits; however, if they do not display enough agentic traits consistently, they receive disapproval. Hogue (2016) mentioned that this type of behavior is an example of subtle prejudice in gender leadership. Social norms may have changed slightly, but when it comes to leadership, women are still at a disadvantage (Hogue, 2016).

Owing to the increasing global expectations for equal opportunity, the lack of gender balance within senior executive leadership is becoming more visible (Haile et al., 2016). Maximizing women's contribution and promotion within most institutions is a necessity for survival in today's economy. To achieve an effective strategic global position, leaders will need to provide training, management development programs, and improve policies that remove bias that suppress women's professional growth (Haile et al., 2016).

## **Diverse Leadership**

In 20 years, the United States has witnessed diversity in the highest leadership ranks. Although recent political appointments may cause American citizens to assume that the country lives in a post-racial and post-sexist society, the underrepresentation of women and minorities still exists in senior leadership roles within institutions (Ezzedeen, Budworth, & Baker, 2015). The growing number of diversity within the rank-and-file population is causing leaders to acknowledge the different perspectives of the individuals they are leading. These different perspectives include backgrounds and beliefs, which sometimes differ significantly from their viewpoints (Watts et al., 2015).

Due to the globalization of the industrial market, diverse and transformational leadership can help an institution stay competitive. Current institutional models include the team approach because it incorporates individuals from all over the world and from various social cultures. Curseu (2014) stated for team building to be successful in today's global market, leadership should first realize that there were new parameters in how leaders should think. They identify seven new business perspectives: paradoxical thinking, controlled reflecting, intentional focusing, instinctive responding, inclusive behavior, purposeful trusting, and relational being. Each of these perspectives is necessary for a competent and efficient global team. These perspectives are not money-based, but human-based, which requires individuals to acknowledge differences and capabilities in an active and nurturing state.

Perrin et al. (2012) articulated leaders at higher levels, along with leaders from institutions with wider geographic scope, more employees globally, and higher revenue, placed more importance on diversity. An institution, which understands that management should be able to lead and adjust during the changing currents in the market, could be able to maintain a positive market share. Diverse leadership keeps an institution competitive and forward-thinking. Ng and Sears (2017) expressed that institutional structures and responses are developed by the people in power, who are in the position to make critical strategic decisions. The implementation of diversity management practices provides an example of this form of strategic choice. Choi and Rainey (2014) concluded that an organization that has an ethical culture should be able to yield the benefits of diversity management.

Diversity sensitive orientation is defined as the mental model that influences how senior executive leadership interprets the institution's environment. Gotsis and Grimani (2016) stated that diversity is more than just minority representation, but the buy-in from senior executive leadership to invoke diversity within the institution's culture. Initiatives and implementation plans are helpful; however, the CEO of an institution should lead the charge and be the one accountable for the change. In addition to the commitment from leaders, the article indicated that diversity sensitive orientation is essential for a successful diversity management initiative. Additionally, institutions are encouraged to incorporate diversity in their succession planning. Farndale et al. (2015) stated the future of many institutions is likely to depend on their mastery of diverse succession planning

because building bench strength among women and minorities could be critical in the competitive war for talent.

Sugiyama, Cavanagh, van Esch, Bilimoria, and Brown (2016) indicated that employees are more engaged when they feel included and when they are valued for their differences and have a sense of belonging. Inclusive leadership helps mitigate several negative factors, which include low productivity and high turnover. This form of leadership focuses on empowering individuals by building mutually beneficial relationships, which helps lower the opportunity for conflict and negative outcomes (Sugiyama et al., 2016). The foundation of inclusive leadership is to assure individuals they are valued, and their talents and diverse thoughts matter to the team. Inclusive leadership is in alignment with uplifting women, which includes empowerment leadership.

Sugiyama et al. (2016) compared open enrollment executive education programs to general leadership development programs (GLDPs) and women's leadership development programs (WLDPs) to understand to what extent program descriptions addressed inclusive leadership. Sugiyama et al. (2016) concluded that when a woman embraces her feminine identity, she is in a better position to lead. This form of self-awareness and acceptance empowers women to be themselves and helps yield a more inclusive leader.

## **Women Leadership**

Under some external pressure, institutions have implemented several diversity initiatives, specifically for women, within the past several years. Cook and Glass (2015) vocalized that having more women on corporate boards would increase the number of women in CEO positions as well. Their study also found that institutions with more women on the board of directors and a female CEO performed significantly better than those with male leadership. Additionally, the findings also indicated that women's leadership is needed to increase the professional mobility of women (Cook & Glass, 2015).

Given how women are currently perceived within society, the small representation of women within senior executive leadership positions is not surprising. Burke (2017) expressed that placing women in decision-making positions is not only a good business move but also helps enhance society. More women representation within C-suite positions could help improve society. Burke (2015) identified four areas, which could invoke social change: increased involvement from the government in managing financial, environmental, economic and societal issues, more ethical leadership, social protection and job creation, and attention to women and their unique issues. Nell (2015) stated that women continue to become more involved in the workforce and a significant portion of the economic foundation, society can no longer ignore the discrepancies which exist between men and women.

Women and transformational leadership have been linked in several studies. Stempel, Rigotti, and Mohr (2015) articulated transformational leadership traits, such as support and empathy, are congruent with typical female behavior. Eagly, Gartzia, and Carli (2014) expressed that women's more democratic and transformational approaches to leadership have proven to be crucial to both institutional effectiveness and individual success, while Khalili (2016) stated transformational leadership has a close link to innovation.

Along with the transformational leadership style, the data has also shown women's communal leadership traits are favored more within a female-dominated institution (Collins, Burrus, & Meyer, 2014), and this could indicate a small turn within gender leadership (Patel & Biswas, 2016). Eagly and Chin (2010) expressed although the stereotypical based assumptions regarding the effectiveness of women as leaders, the leadership traits that shape the differences in women's leadership styles are identified as credible managerial practices in the 21<sup>st</sup> century institutions.

The increase in global competition has given women more challenges as they maneuver the international economic stage (Bruning & Cadigan, 2014). Bullough and de Luque (2015) stated that organizations that do not strive to remove organizational barriers, which hinder women's potential to occupy leadership roles. It is incumbent for organizations to enhance their focus on nurturing and developing women for senior executive leadership because this could maximize their global reach (Javidan, Bullogh, & Dibble, 2016).



## **Women Leadership in Academia**

As the culture in higher education continues to evolve, higher education leaders are challenged with formulating different ways to establish their relationships with students, colleagues, institutions, and society (St. John, 2016). This type of mental shift is a viewpoint within the feminist movement, which includes issues of social justice and social change for women (Allen, 2016). The 2017 College President Study, ACE (2017) indicated there were 540 female presidents within their membership of 1800 higher education institutions. Johnson (2017) stated that women occupy 26% of the chief academic officer positions in higher education institutions that grant doctoral degrees. Women continue to struggle to find their professional stance within all business sectors. Due to the difficulty of trying to overcome the various barriers women face as they try to move up on the professional career ladder, their professional and intellectual talents are wasted because of the over-representation of men holding senior executive leadership positions (Thompson, 2016).

Khwaja (2017) stressed that women feel more effective in the workplace when they have autonomy, flexibility regarding their work schedule, supportive leadership, and equal access to opportunities for advancement. The culture of an institution should seek to understand the barriers women encounter as they try to develop professionally and work towards mitigating the culture of negative bias (Hurley & Choudhary, 2016). Senge (2006) stated that the art and practice of the learning institution are essential for all leaders, managers, and scholar-practitioners. An institution's culture should support this

learning theory and ensure that everyone within the institution is on board with this requirement. In addition to becoming a learning institution, the organization's leadership should be willing to have a mind shift in their beliefs of management and leadership roles.

Moura, Leicht, Leite, Crisp, and Gocłowska (2018) articulated that leadership includes being able to minimize self-doubt, along with managing conflict, anxiety, disappointment, and stress. The inner conflict that women face as they try to determine if they want to battle societal and institutional norms regarding women in leadership roles can make a position in senior executive leadership a blessing and a curse at the same time. Higher education leadership can involve several conflicting affiliations, resignations, and less than sound interactions hierarchy and power structures (Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015). This type of instability can lead to restrictions, which can stifle institutional and individual growth and creativity.

Allen and Flood (2018) stated that leadership in higher education is difficult for women to attain. One of the conclusions expressed was that women realized that their leadership position was not limited to just their education, gender, and society's perception of women. Other traits like surgency, conscientiousness, agreeableness, adjustment, and intellect were also studied (Allen and Flood, 2018). Gasman, Abiola, and Travers (2015) stated the participants in their study had the education and work experience to meet the leadership qualifications; however, they still needed to maneuver and overcome gender and ethnicity discrimination. The findings helped them to

understand both men's and women's perceptions better and produced effective strategies to establish their active presence within their institutions.

### **Barriers to Leadership**

Several barriers affect women's career paths. Haile et al. (2016) said that gender stereotypes, institutional culture, and social norms are the major contributing factors to the under-representation of women in senior executive leadership positions. Roebuck et al. (2013) examined the work-life balance barrier experienced by a cross-generational sample. The researchers found that the work-life conflict is still a significant barrier for all age groups. The findings indicated by other research studies focusing on women and leadership, stated women face obstacles to moving into senior leadership positions due to the patriarchal structures that are in place (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016). Burke and Major (2014) expressed that the constraints of family obligations and lack of positive championing mentors also play a role in the institutional obstacles, which hinder women's leadership trajectory. Although technology has made work life a little more flexible, many of the women in all the generations felt it also deteriorated their work and personal life balance. This is due to the expectation of always being available to perform work duties.

Salas-Lopez et al. (2011) stated institutional culture and structure concerning recruiting, retaining, and promoting women are significant barriers. This article indicated an example of the research approach and method which were used for this study. It also identifies some barriers affecting women moving into senior executive leadership

positions within an academic setting. The researchers use a purposeful sampling of women in a case study qualitative inquiry framework. Interviews were conducted for the collection of data. The population was diverse, and all the individuals held a senior executive leadership position. The women interviewed expressed that because they were women, they had to work harder to achieve recognition and advancement. The participants also indicated emotional and institutional intelligence, along with relationship building, aided in their success as leaders.

Diehl (2014) explored how 26 participants interpreted the meaning of various barriers, and the adversity experienced as they moved into their senior executive positions. The results yielded 21 different types of adversity, which included discrimination, unsupportive leadership, relationship conflict, and family challenges. Hill, Miller, Benson, and Handley (2016) stated that barriers and obstacles experienced resulted from their gender, which included exclusion from informal networks, workplace harassment, and salary disparities.

Watts et al. (2015) provided a different perspective. Their research found that among a sample of undergraduate co-ed college participants, women had more drive in pursuing senior executive leadership positions than their male counterparts. The findings indicated that resiliency, stability, and mentorship play a role in accomplishing the stated aspiration of advancing into C-suite positions (Roebuck et al., 2013).

The lack of confidence in mastering office politics, a perceived gender stereotype, is another barrier, which keeps women from moving into senior executive leadership

positions. Hoyt and Murphy (2016) indicated that when both men and women engage in the same type of hard-nosed political tactics, it is the women who suffer. This example continues to fuel the stereotype that women should be soft to be more accepted. However, being accepted does not necessarily turn into being promoted to a senior executive leadership position. Devillard et al. (2014) expressed institutional culture as an enormous barrier for women to overcome. If the culture is not encouraging diversity, the opportunity for women to advance into C-suite positions is slim. Also, the role of institutional culture is significant because it determines the compatibility between how women lead, communicate, and its leadership culture.

Chauvinism is another barrier affecting women's promotion into C-suite positions (Haile et al., 2016). Re and Rule (2016) expressed that the expectations and thoughts developing the blueprint for leadership are formed using masculine characteristics. Women's ability to overcome prejudicial thoughts regarding leadership is difficult. To remove the barriers affecting the success of women obtaining senior leadership positions, it will take all leaders, regardless of gender, to move the needle towards more female representation in leadership roles (Re & Rule, 2016).

### **Future State of Women in Leadership**

Although women are becoming more educated, making some strides in the workforce, and gaining a political voice, the idea of reaching career goals still seems elusive for the younger generation. Research conducted by the Pew Research Center indicated that two-thirds of young women between the ages of 18 and 32 were interested

in becoming a C-suite executive. By comparison, 75% of young men reported wanting a C-suite position (Tseng, 2013). Wolfe and Dilworth (2015) stated that establishing an institutional culture that focuses on health and well-being could yield better competitive performance and increase access to those groups that have experienced limited access in the past.

Klemm (2017) conducted a quantitative survey study that included, men and women were asked if they aspired to obtain a senior executive position. The results showed 74.1% of the men responded in the affirmative, versus 41.1% of women. In the same study, 37% of women indicated that their gender would be a barrier to achieving a C-suite position. Maxwell and Broadbridge (2014) reviewed research spanning over 25 years and found many still view leadership as a man's domain. Their article indicated that the current idea within many institutions is that there is not an issue regarding the glass ceiling. The individuals interviewed assume women are given the same opportunities to advance as men. Additionally, many millennials expressed the lack of female senior executive leaders is not due to the institutional and societal culture, but rather the lack of drive and ambition of women.

As leadership styles change with each generation, millennials look toward a more personable approach concerning leadership. Maier et al. (2015) stated that the younger generation leans more towards value-centered leadership. Value-centered leadership's main principles include valuing the individual and working to improve their confidence through trust and humility. Value-centered leadership is rooted in transformational

leadership, which states that leaders are called to a higher standard of morality, which yields enhanced outcomes for all stakeholders. Mortensen et al. (2014) expressed young women leaders, who were high school age exhibited different attitudes with regards to knowledge levels regarding leadership, the ability to share their ideas, handling their new status, and power and willingness to collaborate. The young ladies expressed that anyone could be a leader. This study emphasized the fact that women need to feel empowered so they can speak and believe their voices will be heard.

Institutions can also review and enhance their hiring and promotional policies to help increase the number of women being considered for C-suite positions. Johnson (2017) stated that it is challenging to promote women if human resource policies and procedures are barriers. Cundiff and Vescio (2016) expressed that second-generation bias is the subtle way of gender discrimination. Second-generation discrimination is using gender to continue the stereotypes regarding leadership. For example, women are advised to take less demanding or competitive projects. Educating men and women about this form of discrimination could help improve turnover and the ability to attract and retain quality employees (Cundiff & Vescio, 2016).

### **Summary and Conclusions**

Due to the global positioning of institutions, societal pressures, generational differences, and sustainability, the need for additional research in leadership will enhance the knowledge. With the number of women currently in the workplace and the projected increase of women obtaining their college education and entering the workplace, the need

to close the gender gap within C-suite leadership positions is critical. Tully (2017) stated that institutions spend millions of dollars on operational enhancements for equipment and employee training. However, without knowledgeable and capable leadership, these initiatives could operate either inefficiently or not at all. Therefore, the role and composition of C-suite executives are important factors in an institution's success.

An effective change agent is someone who can articulate the benefits of the new and inspire individuals to buy-in and accomplish the new goals. An institution's culture plays an essential role in how women leaders are accepted; it is only reasonable to conclude that to improve women's representation within C-suite positions; the institutional culture should be changed.

The literature shows there is still much to be discussed regarding why women are still not moving into C-suite positions at a comparable rate as men. Cocchio (2009) study identified biological, sociological, structural, and cultural assumptions as impeding the progress of women moving into senior executive leadership positions. These assumptions, along with barriers such as the dominance of male leadership, gender norms, and honest conversations work together to continue the lack of a female presence in senior executive positions in higher education institutions.



## Chapter 3: Research Method

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive case study was to explore how various gender, societal, and organizational barriers may impact women's opportunities to move into senior executive leadership positions within nonprofit academic institutions and how they can overcome these barriers. Furthermore, methods that can be used to overcome these barriers were examined. The qualitative descriptive case study design was used to explore the barriers women may face and need to overcome as they pursue senior executive leadership positions within nonprofit academic institutions located in the Memphis, Tennessee metropolitan area, through the context of real-life perceptions and examples from selected participants.

This chapter begins with a rationale for selecting the qualitative methodology and a discussion of the descriptive case study design. The logic used for selecting participants, data collection instruments, and procedures followed for recruiting participants, participation, data collection, data analysis process, and data coding and computer-assisted software were presented. The trustworthiness of data validation and ethical procedures used is discussed at the conclusion of the chapter.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

The following is the general research question that drove this study: What are the barriers women may encounter that prevent them from moving into senior executive positions, and how they can be overcome? The study's research questions were:

*RQ1:* What barriers are perceived as impacting women's movement into senior executive leadership positions?

*RQ2:* What similarities and differences regarding barriers are noted between male and female participants?

*RQ3:* What methods have been identified to assist in removing the stated barriers and increase the number of women moving into senior executive leadership positions?

### **Qualitative Versus Quantitative Methodologies**

In selecting an appropriate research methodology, the researcher examined both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. Yilmaz (2013) said that the structure of the design of the study should be addressed before selecting either a qualitative or quantitative approach. Information should be gathered in the following areas, such as in the worldview that could dictate the design, who or what could be studied, the research strategies that could be used, and the research tools that could be used to collect and analyze the data. Although the quantitative method can be used to explain a social phenomenon and human issues by using variables and numerical statistics (Yilmaz, 2013), qualitative scholars focus on people, situations, events, and the processes that connect them (Maxwell, 2012).

The qualitative method is used to understand the meaning of participants' experiences, understand the context in which these participants act, determine how events and actions take place, identify unanticipated phenomena and influences, and develop casual explanations (Maxwell, 2012). Qualitative researchers have a constructive

worldview and explore societal issues through real-life lenses, incorporating flexibility, and obtaining holistic and sensitive descriptions of the phenomenon (Yilmaz, 2013). The constructive worldview involves expanding researchers' knowledge of a phenomenon by providing new perspectives.

With the quantitative method, the researcher uses a standardized instrument such as a survey that has predetermined responses and categories. Surveys typically require large random samples of data to ensure the validity of their findings. McCusker and Gunaydin (2015) stated that the qualitative method allows researchers to collect a significant amount of data and concisely present the data. Yilmaz (2013) stated that qualitative methods require involvement with the sample from the researcher. The focus of qualitative research is to understand a phenomenon by capturing and communicating human experiences via participants' own words and interpretations; therefore, interviews and observations are used to collect the data.

Participants in this study included nine females and seven males who were currently in senior executive leadership roles within nonprofit academic institutions, located in Memphis, Tennessee. The purposeful selection of these individuals helped to provide data identifying actual barriers along with solutions regarding how women can overcome these barriers and increase their numbers in senior executive leadership positions. Maxwell (2012) said that purposeful selection ensures that participants are uniquely qualified to provide enough relevant data. Male participants were included to capture gender differences in terms of perceptions, interpretations, and experiences

regarding various barriers women face as they try to move into senior executive positions. Studying both genders enhanced men's and women's understanding of this phenomenon. McCusker and Gunaydin (2015) indicated that using qualitative research is appropriate to understand how men and women perceive an issue. Therefore, the use of male and female participants within this study did help enrich the research.

### **Descriptive Case Study**

Qualitative researchers strive to answer questions regarding the experiences and attitudes of people and communities. Qualitative scholars try to answer the what, how, and why of a phenomenon (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015). A qualitative descriptive case study design was used to examine barriers affecting women's promotion into senior executive leadership positions. Yin (2017) stated that a case study is appropriate for investigating a current in-depth phenomenon within the confines of a real-world context.

Maxwell (2012) said that qualitative researchers focus on people, situations, events, and the processes that connect them, while quantitative researchers identify the world as different variables and how the variables relate. The qualitative method is appropriate for this study due to its ability to examine various aspects of a social phenomenon. Different variables examined include disparities between the number of educated and experienced women in the workforce, compared to the number of women in senior executive leadership, and how the role congruity theory affects these numbers.

The phenomenological research design was also appropriate for examining a phenomenon; this design is specific in terms of studying homogenous participants who

share the same experiences (Smith, 2015). The phenomenological design involves describing the structure of the phenomenon, analysis, and participants' interpretations. Another possible approach was the grounded theory. Sandu (2018) said that the grounded theory is used to develop a general theory regarding a social phenomenon which does not have an existing satisfactory theory.

Although both research designs were appropriate to study a phenomenon, in-depth questioning allowed the researcher to obtain a holistic and real-world perspective, which could aid in achieving positive social change. The use of the descriptive case study design allowed the researcher the opportunity to describe the intervention or phenomenon in its real-life context. Social change can occur by engaging both men and women in the discussion regarding barriers impacting women moving into senior executive leadership positions.

Scholars use the case study design to examine concurrent events where behaviors cannot be exploited (Yin, 2017). Researchers use case studies to explore individuals or institutions through complicated interventions, programs, relationships, or community settings (Yin, 2017). In keeping with the central focus of constructivism, Yin (2017) stated that a case study should focus on *how* and *what* of a situation, not compromise the participants, and discuss various conditions that are important to the study. Additionally, Baxter and Jack (2008) stated that a qualitative case study includes different data sources to provide different perspectives on the research. These data sources can include archived records, interviews, and observations.

Case studies are identified as explanatory, exploratory, or descriptive. An explanatory case study is used when the researcher wants to answer a question regarding casual links within real-life interventions that are too complicated for surveys or experimental designs (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Scholars use an exploratory study to explore situations where interventions being evaluated do not have precise results. The descriptive case study is used to examine a real phenomenon and its impact on individuals (Maxwell, 2012).

### **Role of the Researcher**

The researcher is an instrument of data collection and analysis in qualitative studies. The presence of the researcher is a fundamental aspect of conducting the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). Taylor, Bogdan, and DeVault (2015) said that qualitative research describes the world through individuals' thoughts and the researcher's observations. Although the emotions of the researcher regarding the study can be present, it was vital for the researcher to maintain a healthy and appropriate balance between emotions and personal bias. This means the researcher should acknowledge their biases at the beginning of the research, state the facts, and work to manage or alleviate any personal interpretations.

As researchers engage with participants, they need to address the opportunities and challenges of serving as an observer, listener, and conductor. Qualitative research involves deep and complex perspectives that the researcher should be able to navigate. Yin (2017) indicated that being flexible allows the researcher to be sensitive to

contradictory information and enhances the credibility of a study. The researcher should not try to elicit responses that line-up with previous data or theories. The researcher should allow the answers to lead them to additional understandings.

During this study, the researcher's role could be an observer-participant. The researcher is an African American woman who has worked in the academic setting and held progressive leadership roles for over 10 years. The researcher has been affected by various career impeding barriers and has used different strategies to overcome these obstacles. The researcher has mentored several women who have successfully overcome the barriers, as documented in the literature review, to advance their careers and obtain leadership roles.

Although the researcher could be considered a candidate for this study, the researcher listened with an inquisitive and unbiased ear. Yin (2017) expressed that the researcher should curtail the need to share over and be able to use unplanned opportunities to help broaden the depth and reliability of a study. As a member of the in-group, the researcher was able to identify with the women participants, which helped in recruiting participants. The researcher's out-group status with the men gave the researcher new insight on their thoughts regarding this feminist/gender phenomenon and how it affects the women seeking senior executive leadership roles.

The interview questions were asked in a manner that required some additional follow-up and introspection to ensure the study was valid and impartial. The researcher listened, to the participants, with an open mind, free of personal ideas, and preconceived

thoughts. The interviews were led in a structured manner but could allow the free flow of thoughts to avoid bias, so accurate data can be collected.

### **Personal and Professional Relationships with Participants**

The researcher did not have a personal relationship with any of the participants. The professional link, with the participants, is only through working in academic environments. Therefore, the data collection and analysis phases were not compromised due to possible conflicts of interest and familiarity.

### **Researcher Bias and Power Relationship Management**

The researcher disclosed that she could be a member of the participant group, a mid-level female leader within an academic institution. The researcher had the opportunity to communicate with the participants as a peer. The researcher's position of power as the researcher was reflected during the set-up of the interview process. East (2016) stated that it is essential to use non-experimental designs to study phenomena and present valid findings.

## **Methodology**

### **Participant Selection Logic**

The participants in this study included both women and men who are currently in senior executive leadership roles in academic institutions located in the Memphis metropolitan area. To ensure those in senior executive leadership positions were selected, the information on each academic institution's website was used to locate the participants who held the selected titles. The selected titles included president, vice, executive, or



senior president, provost, chief administrative officer, chief financial officer, chancellor, vice-chancellor, chief information officer, and chief legal counsel.

**Sampling strategy.** A purposive sampling technique was used. Also known as judgmental, selective, or subjective sampling, this type of nonprobability sampling technique focuses on selecting a sample based on inclusion criteria and the judgment of the researcher (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). The purposeful selection of these individuals assisted in providing data to identify barriers women encounter while seeking senior executive leadership positions. The data allowed the exploration of solutions regarding the lack of women in senior executive leadership positions. Maxwell (2012) stated that purposeful selection ensures that participants are uniquely qualified to provide relevant data.

The male participants were included because they provided additional insight by sharing their interpretations and perceptions of the identified barriers, which led to an enhanced understanding of this phenomenon. Other demographics of the participants included diversity in age, education, ethnicity, and marital status. Sung and Parboteeah (2017) expressed that ensuring there is enough diversity within the selected sample could raise discussion and enough different responses that could provide sufficient data to perform comparisons between the participants' data and secondary data.

Participants for this study included 16 participants, nine women and seven men from non-profit academic institutions located in the Memphis, Tennessee metropolitan area of the United States. Participants were senior executive leaders within various

participating institutions. Table 1 in Chapter 4 gives a breakdown of participants' gender, ethnicity, and the institution's size. By exploring this topic, causes and resolutions for this feminist/gender phenomenon could be revealed. The initial contact with the participants was with an e-mail. In the initial e-mail, the participants received a brief description of the study and a request to confirm the meeting date and time. After obtaining their agreement to participate in the study, each participant received a meeting request to confirm the interview.

### **Instrumentation**

In a descriptive case study, the inquisitive mind is the driving force for enhanced data collection. Maxwell (2012) stated that converting research questions into interview questions is not an easy or logical process. The case study researcher should structure and ask questions that could yield a strong and robust dialogue with the data by identifying discrepancies between what was expected and what was discovered (Yin, 2017). The data collection process followed a formal interview protocol that tested the researcher's interpretations and pushes for more answers, which produced a credible study.

A descriptive case study's data collection process should begin with the researcher possessing the desired skills and willingness to conduct the case study. Yin (2017) expressed that preparation to conduct a case study should include training for the case study and develop a protocol for the study. Baxter and Jack (2008) said that a case study is an approach used to explore a phenomenon by using several data sources. The researcher should ask focused questions, listen well, be flexible, understand the issues to

be explored, and mitigate bias (Yin, 2017). Incorporating these factors into the data collection process could yield multiple facets of the phenomenon to be disclosed. Also, the data being interpreted through many lenses could increase reliability within the data.

The researcher and study participants are both required to participate during face-to-face interviews. The researcher was responsible for asking practical questions, which piqued the participants' interest and helped them become more comfortable with sharing honest and candid information. Maxwell (2012) said that this type of collaborative partnership would lead a study towards data that can expand the study.

The interview protocol used was semi-structured to enhance the reliability of the study (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). Gentles, Charles, Ploeg, and McKibbon (2015) indicated that interview questions should be structured to obtain relevant insight into the participants' perceptions regarding the study's focus. Maxwell (2012) recommended testing potential interview questions on individuals similar to the participants. A practice session, with similar participants, was conducted to test the interview questions and make sure they were reasonable and straight-forward. The interview was initiated with a small number of broad topic questions, which helped the participant relax and created a positive setting. These initial questions were related to the topic and aligned with the interview protocol. The interview script used by the researcher is shown in Appendix A.

**Demographic questionnaire.** The participants completed a pre-interview questionnaire (see Appendix B) about various demographic information that included age, gender, ethnicity, and the number of years in the position. The questionnaire was

sent to participants in emails 2 days before the interview. The demographic information assisted with data analysis and triangulation of the findings.

**Additional documentation collection.** Archival data were collected via publicly available reports, biographies, press releases, company websites, and published information on the participants' leadership journey. This information provided additional supportive information. The information collected assisted during the triangulation phase during the data analysis.

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

After receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, 03-05-19-0253185 on April 9, 2019, each potential participant received an e-mail requesting their cooperation in this study (See Appendix C). In the email, the researcher requested a telephone conference with the participants to address any questions or concerns. The participants represented senior executive-level leadership in academic institutions. Maxwell (2012) stated that qualitative researchers usually have a small number of participants in their studies, which allows them to maintain the uniqueness of each participant in the data analysis.

Using the in-person interview method yielded honest and positive responses. Although there is a risk of individuals feeling tense about the in-person interviewing process, talking with each participant and addressing their concerns, along with obtaining informed consent, helped mitigate the risk. The interviews were scheduled in coordination with the participants' preferred availability. The researcher was the only

interviewer. The complete interview session lasted no more than an hour. To avoid potential scheduling conflicts and when possible, the interviews were scheduled at least two weeks in advance. A reminder e-mail was sent out one week before the confirmed interview date. If a participant needed to reschedule, a new interview time based on his or her availability was scheduled.

All interviews were recorded as stated in the Walden University's approved IRB signed consent form. Interviews were transcribed and reviewed for completeness and accuracy by professional transcribing software. Each participant received a copy of his or her interview transcript for review and approval. Marshall and Rossman (2014) stated that having the participants review their interview transcripts aids the researcher with triangulation and member checking the data. These processes helped to ensure the data is correct.

Field notes and statistical data from various data warehouses, such as the Department of Labor, Department of Education, and Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research Datasets, were used. Using these additional data sources could enhance the research findings by providing additional credibility (Yin, 2017).

### **Data Analysis Plan**

Maxwell (2012) said that data analysis should be a component of the research design because the construction of the data analysis is directly related to how a study is conducted. Houghton, Murphy, Shaw, and Casey (2015) stated that the data analysis phase has four stages: comprehending, synthesizing, theorizing, and re-contextualizing.

The comprehending stage involved the initial coding of data by providing a broad descriptive label. This initial coding, called broad coding, used the different texts to develop concepts, which broadened the information and exposed the various ideas and their meanings.

During the synthesizing stage, the different perceptions and cases were merged to describe emerging patterns. Morse (2015) expressed that a reliable study is achieved by using a reliable coding system. A reliable coding system is developed by developing possible answers (codes) to all interview questions. Participants answered the same questions, in the same order, to reveal a pattern in the responses (Morse, 2015).

Another strategy used during the synthesizing stage was writing memos. These memos were used to summarize key information developed from the coding system, which laid the foundation for the additional interpretations of the data. Theorizing builds a complete and coherent account of the data by examining the correlation between the different data categories. Re-contextualizing is the process of developing different perceptions that could be relevant to different settings and populations (Houghton et al., 2015). These stages assisted the researcher in enhancing the rigor and quality of the data.

Data coding, management, and analysis involve several steps and levels. The data collected was organized, so common themes were developed for analysis. Handwriting codes or using color coding can be labor intensive and not deliver the best results when organizing. NVivo, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), was used to help with the organization of the data.

Humble (2015) stated that CAQDAS assists researchers by making methodological processes more visible, which can help increase the level of truthfulness within a study. The foundation for these software tools is to provide efficiency for storing and locating data. There are different software programs available that provide basic storing and coding functions, along with a couple of unique features.

CAQDAS are identified as code and retrieval or theory-based software. Code and retrieval software allow the researcher to index and sort data quickly. Theory-based software does the same code and retrieval process; however, they also have an added feature of linking different codes to produce themes (Humble, 2015). Atlas/ti, Nudist, and QSR NVivo are theory-based CAQDAS.

NVivo is suitable for uploading data source documents, for example, interview responses, field notes, and newspaper articles into its system. The software allows the researcher to pick out keywords and store them in different categories, such as demographic information. Interview tapings (video or voice) can also be uploaded. When using different participant groups and source documents, the researcher can build specific categories, which will separate what interviewers stated versus what was written in a newspaper article. Sepasgozar and Davis (2018) stated that NVivo allows the researcher to analyze the data as it is collected and keep the data source intact. This gives the researcher the flexibility to view data individually and then connect the information.

The Nudist CAQDAS is more structured than Atlas/ti. Nudist has a sequential, linear structure. It is not very intuitive, and thus a little more challenging to learn. Nudist

represents a sophisticated coding and theory building package and is predominately based on verbal input (Gilbert & Stoneman, 2015). Nudist excels in organizing multi-site and complex research projects. It has advance institutional, sort, and retrieval capabilities. The structured framework and individualism may not feel so overwhelming to the researcher. However, due to its vast data compilation activities, learning all the required functions may prove to be daunting.

QSR NVivo, Atlas/ti, and Nudist are all reputable and effective CAQDAS. They all operate on Windows PC; however, Nudist can operate on a Mac as well. Although they are all theory-based CAQDAS, Atlas/ti is simple software and can handle simple projects (Paulus & Lester, 2016). QSR NVivo and Nudist are more robust and can manage complex projects. Technology is only useful and better when the correct tools are used, and the user understands how to use the tools.

The Nvivo Pro 12 qualitative data assisted system was used. Antonaidou (2017) vocalized NVivo allows the researcher to keep an audit trail, along with facilitating the interpretation process. The data collected during this study was coded by NVivo to detect and develop various themes regarding women's leadership barriers. Using a thematic analysis coding method provided a sound and logical framework for coding the data and how it relates to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2015). Thematic analysis of the data allowed the researcher the ability to identify themes, which occurred in real gender bias leadership situations (Vaismoradi, Jones, Turunen, & Snelgrove, 2016).



## **Issues of Trustworthiness**

### **Credibility and Transferability**

The concept of validity has been causing disagreement in qualitative research. Many researchers expressed that validity was too closely related to quantitative assumptions and thought validity likened to the real-world and was not in line with the constructivist approach (Cope, 2014). The validity of qualitative research is the final component of the research design. Maxwell (2012) stated that it is the direct correlation between the researcher's conclusions and reality. It is not the assurance that the research methods used are themselves valid. Kornbluh (2015) expressed that validity threats are neutralized through evidence and not methods. The methods are used to collect evidence.

Although qualitative research has increased its acceptance in the research world, the quality of the data is still a question that permeates the design. To increase the level of trustworthiness of the data, Kornbluh (2015) stated that the use of member checking is the best tactic for determining trustworthiness. Member checking involves the researcher following up with research participants to ensure the data they shared is their correct interpretation and response to the interview questions.

Member checking is performed to decrease the possibility of research bias, explore additional perspectives, and to gain a complete understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Kornbluh, 2015). The member checking protocol consisted of compiling the participants' responses, placing them in descriptive categories, and identifying similar responses. All participants were sent a copy of their responses. If needed, a telephone

discussion was completed. During this session, any questions or ambiguous information was clarified.

Triangulation was also used for analysis. Yin (2017) expressed that a case study's validity is enhanced by using more than one source of data collection. With several sources of data, the level of triangulation increases by how the data sources support the findings. The participants' responses, observation notes, and data collected by the datasets were used to identify the similarities of the results and thus achieving an accurate interpretation of the data (Yin, 2017).

The transferability technique was used to obtain a thick description of the participants' various remarks. Morse (2015) mentioned that using a thick description helps other interested parties to use the findings to another phenomenon or individuals. The use of thick description allows the researcher to identify replication within the data and contributes to the internal validation of the data (Morse, 2015). The thick description was used in the write-up. Additionally, participant variation was used as a part of the participant selection. The participants selected for this study represent a small network of individuals within a specific industry and leadership classification.

### **Ethical Procedures**

The requirements of the approved IRB were followed to ensure appropriate protection of the participants' privacy and confidentiality. Participants signed consent forms, which outlined their rights and expectations with regards to participating in this study. Participants were notified again in the consent form that their interview(s) would

be recorded to ensure the accuracy of data collected. The participants were informed that their rights included, but not limited to, withdrawal, having restrictions on the use of their information, and either written or voice recordings. Participants were informed that their names would not be published in any format, and their data would be a part of a collective, which includes the other participants' data. Demographic profiles were submitted without any identifying attributes.

Interviews were conducted in a location of the participant's choice or at a neutral and mutually agreed upon location. The interview sites were comfortable and private to ensure the privacy of the participant. All interviews were conducted face-to-face to establish a rapport. Maxwell (2012) stated that interview questions are used to help understand the phenomenon. In keeping with privacy and confidentiality, any names of other individuals used by the participants were also unidentifiable. Pseudonyms were used to maintain confidentiality.

All digital recordings of the interviews are saved on an encrypted password-protected USB drive, which is kept in a locked safe in the researcher's home office. The recordings serve as one of two transcript versions. The other is a verbatim transcript of the digital recording, signed consent forms, and demographic data. These files are stored on a USB and password-protected to ensure confidentiality. This information will be destroyed after five years from the approval of the dissertation defense. Additionally, a modified transcript and demographic data form, with various identifiable coding tied to the participants, are saved on an encrypted password-protected USB drive. This version

was used for additional data analysis, and the files will be deleted five years after the approval of the dissertation.

As a woman who is trying to excel professionally and has a goal to occupy a C-suite position possibly, personal biases and experiences were acknowledged. The researcher is not employed at any of the institutions that the participants represent. The selection of the institutions was purposeful to eliminate a conflict of interest or bias concerns. Although many of the participants are in the position of influence and power at their respective institutions, each participant was thoroughly informed of the possible ramifications that could be realized with their participation. All participants were reminded that his or her participation in this study was strictly voluntary. Additional steps, such as collaborating with participants during the interpretation and write-up phase, were followed to ensure information was accurate, and confidentiality was not breached.

Participants were able to request the recording be stopped and information deleted from the recording and transcript. The participants were also able to request a review of the recording. All participants received a copy of the final transcript to ensure their data was represented accurately. At the final reading of the transcript, participants were given the final opportunity to be removed from the study. If a participant decided to be excluded from the study, a formal letter would be sent to Walden's IRB informing them of the participant's removal from this study, and all their data would be destroyed. All nine women and seven men remained in the study. A recruitment size of 30-40 female and male senior executives were recruited from the various participating organizations

approved by the Walden University IRB. From the recruited group, nine women and seven men were interviewed for this study, to maintain the integrity of this study and account for attrition. As an incentive for participating in the study, the participants received a \$10 Starbucks gift card and an executive summary of the research findings as a token of thanks for their contribution and time.

### **Summary**

In Chapter 3, the reasons for selecting the descriptive case study were discussed. An explanation was given on how the research participants were selected. A description was given on how the data was collected, and an explanation regarding the data analysis plan was presented. Lastly, trustworthiness concerns and ethical procedures were outlined. By using the case study design, the participants' thoughts and experiences were transcribed regarding the barriers affecting women from occupying senior executive positions within academic institutions and how women can overcome these barriers.

In Chapter 4, the data collection and analysis are explained in more detail. Chapter 4 also will include demographic information for the participants, along with demographic information for the participating academic institutions. Results include excerpts from interview transcripts from participants, a detailed interpretation of participants' answers to research and interview questions, and statistical results of participants' responses to interview questions.

## Chapter 4: Results

### Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive case study was to explore how various gender, societal, and organizational barriers may impact women's opportunities to move into senior executive leadership positions in nonprofit academic institutions, and how women can overcome these barriers. The following is the general research question that drove this study: What are the barriers women may encounter that prevent them from moving into senior executive positions, and how can women overcome these barriers? The specific research questions that guided this study were:

*RQ1:* What barriers are perceived as impacting women's movement into senior executive leadership positions?

*RQ2:* What similarities and differences regarding barriers are noted between male and female participants?

*RQ3:* What methods have been identified to assist in removing the stated barriers and increase the number of women moving into senior executive leadership positions?

This chapter presents the interview results from nine female and seven male participants. Participants' demographics are provided to describe the sample population, data collection procedures, and analysis procedures applied to the data. This information is followed by a review of the evidence for trustworthiness. Each research question is addressed using the interview findings. The chapter closes with a summary of the research findings.

## **Demographics**

The data collection phase included a total of nine female and seven male participants. They are current senior executive leaders in higher education institutions located in the Memphis, Tennessee metropolitan area. Demographic data were collected from participants (see Appendix B). The demographic questionnaire was developed using the main ethnicity categories established in the United States Department of Labor statistics.

The ethnic representation was an even 50-50 split between African Americans and Caucasians. There were no Asian or Hispanic participants. Cahalan, Perna, Yamashita, Wright-Kim, and Jiang (2019) expressed that the current higher education student enrollment indicates comparable numbers for African American and Caucasian students. The ethnic breakdown of the study participants' in relation to the ethnic representation in higher education's student population was similar; however, there were not any Hispanic and Asian participants. Table 1 includes participants' gender, ethnicity, and academic institution enrollment sizes. Individual participant codes are used to protect participants' confidentiality.

Table 1  
*Participants' Gender, Ethnicity, & School Enrollment Demographics*

Participant Code	Gender	Ethnicity	School Size (no. of students)
P1	Male	African-American	Small (<3,000)
P2	Female	African-American	Large (>9,999)
P3	Male	African-American	Med. (3,000-9,999)
P4	Female	Caucasian	Med. (3,000-9,999)
P5	Female	African-American	Med. (3,000-9,999)
P6	Male	Caucasian	Small (<3,000)
P7	Female	Caucasian	Med. (3,000-9,999)
P8	Female	Caucasian	Med. (3,000-9,999)
P9	Male	African-American	Small (<3,000)
P10	Female	African-American	Small (<3,000)
P11	Male	African-American	Large (>9,999)
P12	Male	Caucasian	Large (>9,999)
P13	Male	Caucasian	Small (<3,000)
P14	Female	African-American	Large (>9,999)
P15	Female	Caucasian	Small (<3,000)
P16	Female	Caucasian	Large (>9,999)

Additional participant demographics are identified in Table 2. Participants were analyzed based on the following characteristics: age group, education level, marital status, job title, and years in the current position.

Table 2  
*Participants' Age, Educational Level, Marital Status, & Position Demographics*

Age	Educational Level	Marital Status	Position Rank	Years in Position
51-60	PhD	Married	VP	5-10
41-50	JD	Divorced	Chief	1-5
61-70	PhD	Married	VC	20
51-60	PhD	Married	VP	5-10
41-50	EdD	Married	AVP	1-5
51-60	Master's	Married	VP	5-10
51-60	PhD	Married	Chief	1-5
51-60	PhD	Married	P	1-5
51-60	PhD	Divorced	VP	20
41-50	PhD	Never Married	VP	1-5
41-50	PhD	Never Married	VP	1-5
61-70	PhD	Married	Pro	1-5
51-60	PhD	Married	Pro	1-5
61-70	PhD	Married	VP	1-5
41-50	Master's	Married	VP	11-15
41-50	Master's	Married	Chief	1-5



**Age Group**

The age group of participants between 51-70 represented 62% of the participants. The range of age groups indicated generational diversity within participants. Although the majority of the participants are in the 51-70 age group, participants between the ages of 41-50 were 38% of the participant population, which suggests that participating institutions are welcoming the younger generation in senior executive leadership.

**Education Level**

All participants held graduate or postgraduate degrees. Sixty-nine percent of the participants hold PhDs. Hannum et al. (2015) stated that academic credentials, such as a PhD are expected for women wanting to move into senior executive leadership positions within higher education. The high numbers of PhDs are indicative of standard criteria for senior executive leadership positions in higher education.

**Marital Status**

Participants were more likely to be married. In this study, 78% of females were married compared to 71% of males. Johnson (2017) stated that female presidents and chief academic officers were less likely to be married. The female participants' of this study fare better than the research's married percentages.

**Position Title**

Data indicated that 69% of participants were in vice president or chief positions. There was a diverse representation of ages, gender, and ethnicity within the vice and chief ranks.

### Years in Current Position

Traditional advancement to senior executive positions in higher education institutions typically takes 20 years (Woollen, 2016). Thirty-seven percent of participants have been in their current positions for at least 5 years or more.

### Participant Organizations' Demographics

Demographic graphs for participating organizations were analyzed based on the following characteristics: student enrollment by gender and number, the gender and number of senior executive leaders, and the gender and number of board members.

### Student Enrollment

Participating organizations represent a diverse range of academic institution sizes within the Memphis, Tennessee metropolitan area. Numbers reflect enrollment in participating organizations in 2018. The total number of females enrolled in the participating organization was 58% of total enrollment.

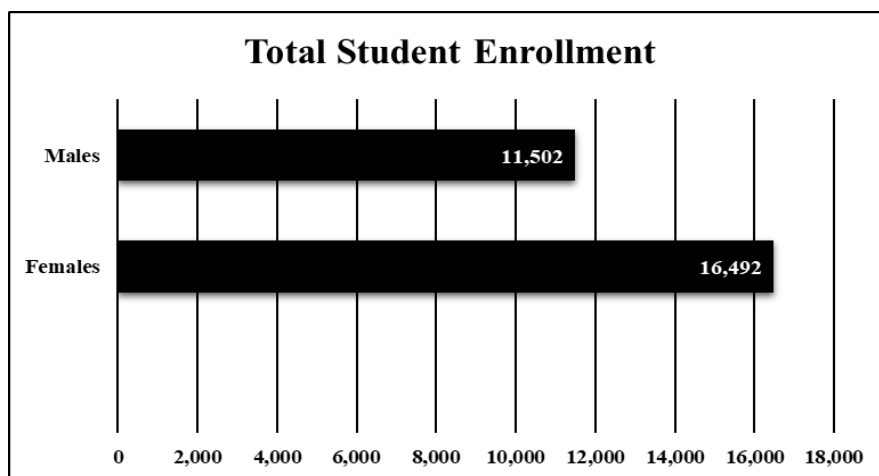


Figure 1. Student enrollment chart.

### Senior Executives

Johnson (2017) stated that female representation in higher prestige roles is not in correlation to the number of women obtaining the required educational levels. The chart below shows that the participating organizations support the current research data. The total number of senior executive leaders within the participating organizations is 50. For every one female senior executive leader, there were two male senior executive leaders.

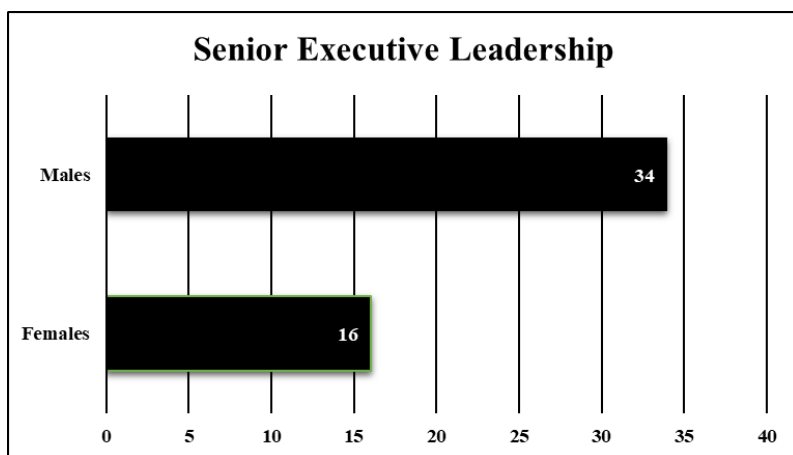


Figure 2. Senior executives chart.

### Board Members

Although the numbers for women holding positions on higher education governing boards have improved since 2010, there were two males to every female in senior executive leadership positions (Johnson, 2017). The chart below shows that the participating organizations are in-synch with the researched data. The ratio of men to women on the governing boards is 2:1.

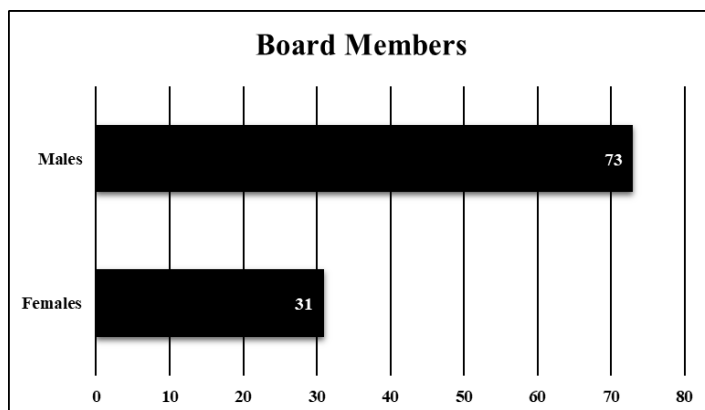


Figure 3. Board members chart.

### Data Collection

Upon receiving Walden University's IRB approval (IRB #03-05-19-0253185), email invitations (Appendix C) were sent to 33 senior executive leaders from the five participating organizations, as stated in the procedures outlined in the Methodology section. The e-mail invitation also included the consent form. Each participant responded to the email invitation within 10 business days. The participants sent back the signed consent form to indicate their confirmation of participation. Once the researcher received the confirmation e-mail, an Outlook meeting request was sent, which included a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix B) and a request for their resume. The researcher collected the demographic questionnaire and resume at the beginning of the interview.

The number of participants recruited was higher than the number of participants for the study. More participants than required were recruited to account for the number of potential participants who would decline or had to cancel their interview after scheduling. The original target sample size was approximately 15-20 participants, with at least 15

participants representing the saturation point. Nine females and seven males agreed to participate by signing the consent form and confirming their interview time.

A semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix A) was the primary data collection tool. Participants were allowed to give two dates and times for their interview to be scheduled. All interviews were conducted in-person at a mutually agreed upon time and location. Face-to-face interviews were scheduled for up to an hour, although most interviews were completed within 30 minutes. The interviews were conducted from April 30, 2019 until August 23, 2019.

Interviews were recorded via the Microsoft video recorder and Google Docs on the researcher's Dell laptop. The transcription software used was Temi and Google Docs to transcribe the recorded interviews. Audio recordings were uploaded into the transcription software and transcribed. Transcripts were coded with each participant's specific code and were then emailed directly to related participants to review for accuracy.

Participants were able to make edits as they deemed appropriate. Participants were also reminded that they could remove themselves from the study. Three participants made minor revisions to their transcript. The other thirteen participants approved their transcripts. None of the participants decided to remove themselves from the study. Participants' approved transcripts and interviews are saved on the password-secured USB drive. Both interviews and transcripts were coded with each participant's specific code for identification.

All of the collected data, the consent forms, questionnaires, resumes, and transcripts, are stored on the password-secure USB drive, to maintain the confidentiality of the participants and ensure data security. The researcher has placed this USB drive in a secure security lockbox. The researcher is the only one with a key.

### **Data Analysis**

A qualitative descriptive case study design allows for the investigation of a current, in-depth phenomenon within a real-world context (Yin, 2017). The interview protocol was used to assist in organizing the data collected. The three research questions were the foundational frame for the study. The interview questions were specific guides to obtain the research data. The thematic analysis method was used to examine the barriers affecting women's promotions into senior executive leadership positions. Braun and Clarke (2015) stated that using a thematic analysis coding method would provide a sound and logical framework for coding the data and examining how they relate to the research questions. Additionally, the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) NVivo Pro 12 to assist with analyzing and organizing the data. Sepasgozar and Davis (2018) stated that NVivo allows the researcher to analyze the data as they are collected and keep the data source intact.

In NVivo Pro 12, the nodes function was used to develop the coding framework. Nodes can be viewed as containers that are used to hold data; they were used during the analysis phase. The research questions were used to develop three distinct broad nodes. The next step was to import the interview transcripts into NVivo Pro 12 and began

coding the transcripts. The researcher read through each transcript, selected information from each transcript, and placed the information in the three broad coded nodes. After reading through the transcripts, the initial coded data was reviewed, and thick descriptive codes were generated. The descriptive codes were used to develop various themes. After two iterations of coding the 16 transcripts, the nodes held over 100 files and over 120 references. Table 3 shows the initial broad codes and descriptive codes. The descriptive codes were generated after the review of the transcripts and identifying similar and frequent phrases.

Table 3  
*Coding Process*

<b>Broad Codes</b>	<b>Descriptive Codes</b>
Barriers	Gender-bias
Why Exist	Pipeline Deficit
Methods-Initiatives	Organizational Culture and Structural Change

During the synthesizing stage, a query was completed to present the various themes retrieved from the data. The data coding came directly from the interview questions, which were paired with the respective research question and participants' responses. Each participant was asked the interview questions in the same sequence. A reliable coding system was developed by developing possible answers (codes) to all the interview questions. Following guidelines recommended by Morse (2015), participants answered the same questions in the same order to reveal a pattern in the responses.

The use of memos in the NVivo system assisted with obtaining additional insights into the data. Information, such as answers to follow-up questions, was entered into the NVivo system as memos. The memos helped me to enhance the data by including

information that the participants used to expound on their responses to the specific interview questions. Nowell, Norris, White, and Moules (2017) stated that thematic analysis helps examine the various perspectives of the study participants, which can lead to unanticipated insights regarding the data. The memos enriched the data and gave it more of personal characteristics, which helped to explain the glass ceiling phenomenon.

During the transcription phase, the researcher listened to each participant's recorded interview. The participants' transcripts were loaded into Nvivo and read line by line. Three different colors were used for the three different sets of interview questions that supported the three main research questions. Orange was used for interview questions 1 and 2 responses; light blue was used for interview questions 3 and 4 answers; yellow was used for interview questions 5 and 6 responses. The researcher deleted repetitive words and word fillers from the transcripts; therefore, the final transcripts were not verbatim.

Follow-up questions were asked to each participant to give additional perspectives to various responses. After identifying similar phrases, the data presented distinguishing similarities and differences between the participants and created sub-themes. The multiple phrases expressed by the participants were also coded in the colors pink and green. Tables 7 and 9, in the results section, identify the various phrases mentioned by each participant.

The final steps of theorizing and recontextualizing were completed. The various color-coded information created a visual of the data that showed how the themes



correlated with the general problem statement and the phenomenon. The thematic analysis of the data was the framework detailed in the write-up, which indicated how the participants responded to each interview question. A word cloud (see Appendix D) was developed to give a visual of common terms used by each participant to describe the glass ceiling, which is a gender-inequality phenomenon.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

#### **Credibility**

The validity of qualitative research is the final component of the research design. Maxwell (2012) expressed that it is the direct correlation between the researcher's conclusions and reality; it is not the assurance that the research methods used are themselves valid. Kornbluh (2015) stated that validity threats are neutralized through evidence and not methods. To ensure that the data collected was valid and trustworthy, the researcher reviewed and made minor edits to the completed transcripts after receiving them from Temi and Google Docs. The minor edits included deleting conversation fillers, such as “um,” “and,” and “you know.” The researcher also transcribed words that were difficult to understand.

Once the researcher completed the review of the transcripts, the member checking process was initiated. The researcher sent each participant their transcript and requested that they review, make any necessary changes, or approve as stated. The researcher also informed them that if the transcript did not reflect their thoughts, the researcher would contact them so that we could discuss the discrepancies. Three of the

participants had minor edits and approved their transcripts. The other 13 participants sent their approval without any changes.

The participants were given two deadlines to approve their transcripts. The researcher contacted the participants after each deadline to receive approval. If no reply was received within seven business days after the final deadline, the researcher considered the transcript to be approved.

### **Dependability**

Korstjens and Moser (2018) stated that dependability involves the study's consistency. The researcher described the data analysis process and how it supported the descriptive case study design. The data presented were derived from several forms of data sources, such as questionnaires and the participants' responses to the interview questions. The responses represented the participants' perspectives.

During the interview sessions, additional follow-up questions, which are listed in the Results and identified as follow-up questions 1 and 2, were asked for clarification and expansion of the participants' responses. The researcher took notes to record enhanced information. As the researcher closed the interview session, information was repeated to ensure the participants' responses were in the context they wanted to convey, which can add new insights to the glass ceiling phenomenon (Kalu, 2017).

### **Confirmability**

Neutrality, which means the research data is free of any bias from the researcher, aids in ensuring that confirmability is present in the research study (Korstjens & Moser,

2018). The triangulation methodology was used to achieve confirmability. Fusch and Ness (2015) stated that triangulation involves using several methods to collect the data. The data collected was derived from face-to-face interviews, interview observation notes, transcribed interviews, and the demographic questionnaire.

All the sources, such as audio recordings, transcripts, researcher observation notes, and demographic information, were used during the data analysis phase and aided in the reliability of the results. Table 4 identifies each participant's interview time and transcript length in single lines. The researcher created an audit trail by discussing how the data was collected, analyzed, and secured. The various demographic and data analysis charts and the actual interview results are examples of confirmability (Connelly, 2016). The participants could complete the demographic questionnaire (Appendix B), along with reviewing and editing their interview transcripts to ensure the information was from their perspective.

Table 4  
*Participants' Interview/Transcript Information*

<b>Participant Code</b>	<b>Interview Minutes</b>	<b>Transcript Lines</b>
P1	24:03	189
P2	23:33	179
P3	26:32	319
P4	22:53	221
P5	29:00	454
P6	25:59	220
P7	27:09	374
P8	21:00	212
P9	28:13	276
P10	24:05	219
P11	20:00	155
P12	30:03	449
P13	29:46	330
P14	20:10	201
P15	35:01	427
P16	26:09	316

## **Transferability**

Transferability was achieved by using the thick description of the data to demonstrate replication within the data. Morse (2015) expressed that the replication of data enhances the data's validity. The researcher also gave a detailed description of the methodology used to collect the data. Connelly (2016) stated that being transparent regarding the context and the people recruited for the study is also a form of transferability. Participant variation was a part of the careful selection of the participants. The participant sample came from several organizations and represented a diverse quantity of senior executive positions.

Additionally, transferability indicated how the results could be used in another study setting (Kalu, 2017). Although this study focused on senior executive leaders within co-ed higher education institutions, the research methodology and design can be used in a non-coed or religious-based academic institutions. The findings presented could also be reached in a study conducted within a non-academic setting.

## **Results**

This research study attempted to answer three research questions regarding the barriers impacting women's promotion into senior executive leadership positions in higher education. The interview questions (see Appendix A) were based on the research literature and the current state of female leadership. Walden's IRB approved the interview questions. This section presents the summary of the results and themes and their relationship to the research questions, with supporting quotes from the participants.

## RQ1

*RQ1:* What barriers are perceived as impacting women's movement into senior executive leadership positions? Interview questions 1 and 2 served as the foundation of the data collection for this question and the development of the different descriptive codes and themes.

*Interview Question 1:* Which societal, gender, and organizational barriers do you believe hinder women's promotion into senior executive positions?

*Interview Question 2:* Which of these barriers that you have identified is more prevalent in your academic institutions?

**Descriptive Code: Gender-bias.** Nine female and six male participants stated that gender bias is the dominant barrier that women face as they try to move into senior executive leadership. One participant did not perceive any barriers for women, so the numbers reflect the 15 participants and their insights. Due to the responses, three themes were developed: work-life balance, patriarchal society, and field prestige. The themes and participants' responses are presented in Table 5.

Table 5  
*Responses to Gender Bias Descriptive Code*

Interview question	Theme	Females	%	Males	%	Total %
1	Patriarchal Society	5	33%	4	27%	60%
1	Work-life balance	4	27%	2	13%	40%
2	Patriarchal Society	6	40%	3	20%	60%
2	Work-life balance	4	27%	1	7%	33%
2	Field Prestige	0	0%	1	7%	7%

**Theme: Patriarchal society.** Nine (60%) participants indicated that the patriarchal society is the primary barrier that women face as they try to move into senior executive

leadership positions. P2, P3, P7, P8, P9, P10, P11, P13, and P14, shared their views of how the patriarchal society is still prevalent in organizations' culture. P2 stated, “We live in a male-dominated society, and it’s just the idea that men should run things.” P3 stated that “there seems to be a little bit of a double standard when it comes to what it takes for consideration of those roles.” Finally, P8 stated that “one last thing I'll say is that men get hired for their promise, whereas women are much more likely to have to get hired for their accomplishments.”

Although more women are enrolled in higher education institutions and are receiving more college degrees on all levels, the culture of academia continues to favor men achieving senior executive positions. The patriarchal society barrier weighs heavily on society and organizational cultures. Sharafizad, Brown, Jogulu, and Omari (2017) expressed that the academia setting is still promoting men while excluding women in their leadership hierarchy. This type of behavior leads to an unequal balance of opportunities and career growth.

***Theme: Work-life balance.*** Six (40%) of study participants cited work-life balance as the next influential barrier. Participants P4, P5, P6, P12, P15, and P16, discussed their experiences regarding how work-life balance can hurt women’s career trajectory. P6 said, “Women are the primary caregiver, I think it may add to personal stress, may diminish their time on tasks, and I think that is disheartening.” P16 expressed, “There are still family issues, and some women take "time-out" to raise their families.”

The work-life balance struggle is one of the leading barriers women need to overcome to achieve career success. Due to the societal gender roles, which assign women's primary responsibility is to manage domestic and childcare responsibilities, it is hindering them from making substantial progress professionally (Toffoletti & Starr, 2016). This negative dynamic typically forces women to either settle for less challenging projects or get overlooked for any career advance-worthy responsibilities.

**Theme: Field Prestige.** One (7%) participant expressed that field prestige was a significant barrier and is prevalent within their organization. In other words, women in a more traditional female field, such as education, can face additional barriers as she tries to ascend to senior executive leadership. P12 stated:

Normally people coming from education or nursing will not have the field prestige, and maybe some of that's correlated with whether it's male or female historically. But the areas where there were more women historically were not the places where they went looking for future academic leaders.

The issue of field prestige places a heavy burden on women. Bernhagen and Gravett (2017) introduced the phrase pink collar labor to indicate less important work or the role of women. This stigma is impeding women's promotion into senior executive positions because it infers a position or field is less prestigious. Although women are earning more college degrees, their representation in the more prestigious disciplines, such as STEM and business fields, continue to reduce their chances for enhanced visibility and opportunities for senior executive leadership positions.

## RQ2

*RQ2:* What similarities and differences regarding the barriers are noted between male and female participants? This research question expanded on RQ1. The interview questions centered around why the barriers that the participants identified were still in existence. The participants also identified which barriers were more prevalent at their institution.

*Interview Question 3:* Why do you think various barriers still exist?

*Interview Question 4:* Why do you think barriers are more prevalent at your academic institution?

**Descriptive code: Pipeline deficit.** Nine women and seven men gave responses to these interview questions. The themes developed from these interview questions included historical traditions, commonalities, and inadequate qualifications. Table 6 represents the participants' responses to each theme.

Table 6  
*Responses to Pipeline Deficit Descriptive Code*

Interview Question	Theme	Females	%	Males	%	Total %
3	Historical Traditions	8	50%	6	38%	88%
3	Inadequate qualifications	1	6%	1	6%	12%
4	Historical Traditions	6	38%	5	31%	69%
4	Exclusion	3	19%	2	13%	32%
4	Inner confidence struggle*	7	47%	5	33%	80%
4	Generational differences*	1	7%	2	13%	20%

*Note.* \*sub-theme.

**Theme: Historical traditions.** Fourteen (88%) participants, specifically P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10, P11, P12, P13, P14, and P15, cited historical traditions as the reason why barriers for women are still in place in higher education institutions. P9



expressed that, “I think the conventionality and sort of allegiance to tradition in higher education work against women.” P10 stated that:

I think there are historical traditions. I think that companies, colleges, and universities are often slow to change. Where you see change occurring, it's often from the bottom up. And so, you still have, in terms of college presidencies, still a lot of males.

Within any organizational structure, it can be difficult for individuals to accept women in senior executive leadership roles. Davis and Maldonado (2015) stated that it is difficult to see women in a position of significant power and authority. Traditional organizational structures, for instance, tenure-track accomplishments that give preference to men, continue to keep women at a disadvantage as they try to move into senior executive positions (Hannum et al., 2015).

***Theme: Inadequate qualifications.*** Although women are currently receiving more degrees than men, this theme was mentioned because of the pipeline deficit in higher education. Two (12%) of the participants, P1 and P16, shared their thoughts on this theme. P1 mentioned, “Trying to obtain those levels in higher education; you've got to have the credentials. Credentials are more important in higher education and then the experience; this means most of those opportunities require, terminal degrees, professional degrees.”

P16 stated, “Interpersonal skills play an important part in becoming a leader. Since higher education is credential focused, an individual knows that they need that certain degree; however, they overlook the ability to be able to relate to people.”

Higher education leadership requires both educational credentials and interpersonal skills. As a leader in higher education, one should be able to work with all types of people and be able to relate to a diverse team at their local university, regionally, and nationally. Women in higher education, who want to move into senior executive positions, are challenged with keeping on track with obtaining the required credentials and learning the necessary leadership skills to be successful. Dopson, Ferlie, McGivern, Behrens, and Fischer (2016) stated that poor interpersonal skills are an area that requires additional training for those who desire to lead.

**Theme: Exclusion.** An accompanying theme to historical traditions is exclusion. Thirty-one percent of the participants stated that it was a barrier, which continues the barrier of historical traditions. Five (32%) of the participants, P2, P3, P4, P7, and P14, gave their insights on this theme. Participant P4 expressed,

What I see is that it's more about our natural affinity groups. So, when the leadership and my peers are majority male, there's an affinity towards males being in those senior executive positions. They have a common experience. They will talk amongst themselves more often, sometimes exclude me, not intentionally, but because they have commonalities.

P7 mentioned, “A lot of decisions are made around the table with everyone at the table, but some conversations over a golf game or having a coke after the golf game can really impact that inclusion of women.” It is difficult to be considered a leader and an important piece for success if you are excluded from the unofficial meetings. These meetings are usually taking place during a social event, for example, a sporting event. Diehl and Dzubinski (2016) expressed that this type of barrier tries to discount women’s leadership contributions and therefore limiting their leadership effectiveness.

Additional sub-themes inner confidence struggle and generational differences were generated under the descriptive code pipeline deficit. These sub-themes were the results of follow-up questions surrounding interview question 4. Table 7 includes a list of similar phrases expressed by the participants. The additional sub-themes gave a more real-life context to how individuals view and manage the various barriers identified. Fifteen of the participants gave a response. One participant did not provide an answer.

*Follow-up Question 1:* How do you think this barrier, you have identified as being more prevalent at your institution, affects the women on your campus as they try to move into senior executive leadership?

Table 7  
*Participants' Responses that Developed Sub-themes*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Phrases</b>
P1	Personal confidence
P2	Self-worth
P3	Baby boomers/Millennials
P4	Relationship building
P5	Perseverance
P6	Millennials
P7	Individual confidence
P8	Inner strength
P9	Inner confidence
P10	No response
P11	Persistent
P12	Persistent
P13	Personal confidence
P14	Interpersonal strength/Faith
P15	Relationship building
P16	Older generation

***Sub-theme: Inner confidence struggle.*** Twelve (80%) participants, P1, P2, P4, P5, P7, P8, P9, P11, P12, P13, P14, and P15, shared additional perspectives on how inner confidence friction can harm women from moving into senior executive leadership positions. P9 said, “You cannot do this work and make a difference, and not take some risks. You cannot be scared. You will get some criticism; however, you cannot be overly preoccupied with that criticism.” P4 stated, “Being able to move out of your comfort zone and build collaborative relationships can sometimes be difficult.”

Confidence plays a significant role in being a successful leader. The many societal, gender, organizational, and internal barriers women face can put additional stress and negatively impact a woman’s confidence. Diehl (2014) stated that during times

of adversity, many women leaders suffer from loss of self-confidence, which leads to feelings of insecurity. The insecurity increases the stress level and causes additional issues, such as anxiety and self-exclusion. These types of scenarios continue negative thoughts regarding women's ability to lead.

Although leadership entails overcoming adversity and challenging moments, Duckworth (2016) stated that an individual's grit will get them through the inner confidence struggle. Duckworth defines grit as a combination of genetic, educational, behavioral, and psychological factors that will help individuals persevere. Additionally, grit gives a sense of hope and re-establishes self-confidence (Duckworth, 2016). As women continue to enhance their confidence, they will be able to build relationships with colleagues, which will help in their advancement (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016).

***Sub-theme: Generational differences.*** Three (20%) of participants, P3, P6, and P16, commented that generational differences are causing women's movement upward mobility to remain stagnant. P6 stated, "Unfortunately, the younger generation, entering the workforce, are accustomed to receiving awards without challenges. This will cause problems going forward because there are only a few positions at any given level." P16 said, "I think we will continue to go through generational change. We will need to wait until those who have been in the workplace 30-40 years have left before real change regarding women as leaders are accepted."

In today's workplace environment, there are three different generations: baby boomers, generation X, and millennials. Each generation sector has its ideas and biases.

Therefore, organizations' senior executive leaders need to manage generational differences for the success of the organization (Rudolph, Rauvola, & Zacher, 2018). To bridge the generational divide and promote diversity and inclusivity, Thompson and Miller (2018) stated that emotional intelligence is a vital trait for leaders in higher education. Building relationships and being flexible is how the 21<sup>st</sup> century organization achieves success; therefore, women in key leadership positions are necessary. Young (2016) stated that organizations realize that women are more collaborative, empathetic, and are open to change.

### **RQ3**

*RQ3:* What methods have been identified to assist in removing the stated barriers and increasing the number of women moving into senior executive leadership positions?

*Interview Question 5:* As a senior executive leader in an academic institution, what are two methods that you think can be implemented to aid in mitigating or removing these barriers?

*Interview Question 6:* Are you currently involved, or would you be willing to develop an initiative, which includes these methods you have identified, to help mitigate/remove these barriers that we have discussed within your institution?

**Descriptive code: Organizational culture and structural change.** Nine women and seven men responded to these interview questions and gave reasonable recommendations and existing initiatives that they believe would help mitigate and

potentially remove the various barriers identified. Table 8 identifies the participants' responses.

Table 8  
*Responses to Organizational culture and Structural Change*

Interview Question	Theme	Females	%	Males	%	Total %
5	Leadership Training	6	38%	2	12%	50%
5	Mentoring	2	13%	1	6%	19%
	Search Committee					
5	Composition	1	6%	2	13%	19%
5	Succession Planning	1	6%	1	6%	12%
6	Leadership Training	6	38%	2	13%	50%
6	Mentoring	4	25%	4	25%	50%
6	Flexibility*	8	62%	5	38%	100%

Note. \*sub-theme.

**Theme: Leadership training.** Eight (50%) participants, P2, P4, P5, P10, P12, P13, P14, and P16, gave their perspectives on how leadership training would enhance and increase the number of qualified women who would be ready to move up the ranks and into senior executive leadership. P14 stated:

I implemented an academic leadership academy, specifically for women and people of color. The academy focused on individuals who were currently in leadership and those who aspired to be in leadership. I also think you need to have specific conversations to determine if someone actually wants to be in a senior executive position.

P16 said:

I think, as an institution, we need to do a better job of training people to be managers. I say that, and this is a larger conversation we've discussed. There's the

saying that people who are good at a job get promoted to manage other people doing that job.

Preparing individuals to be leaders is critical to the organization's success. The traditional environment in higher education is changing. Leaders are responsible for data-driven results, managing enrollment as tuition cost increase, promoting diversity and inclusion at all levels, and committing to being transparent in all its business dealings (Thompson & Miller, 2018). For many women in higher education organizations, obtaining proper leadership development is typically not a priority. Hannum et al. (2015) found that in organizations that had a formal leadership development program, women who aspired to be senior executive leaders felt more supported by the organization.

**Theme: Mentoring.** Eight (50%) participants, P1, P6, P7, P9, P10, P13, P14, and P15, gave personal accounts of and recommendations for mentoring. P13 discussed how organizational culture and structure became a focal point of mentoring at their organization. P13 stated:

These are things that need good training, need good networks, people who can support you. That is where I think as long as people are willing and interested in continuing to pursue that avenue for their work and their careers. We need to be a place that helps them get there.

P15 said, "I realized that all my peers when I look to see who my closest friends are personally and professionally; they're all males. I think that I saw the way to be successful was to have a more male approach to things. I have lots of male mentors."



Mentoring is another critical method to mitigate barriers for women seeking senior executive leadership roles. Diehl and Dzubinski (2016) found that women leaders who served as mentors were able to provide support and encouragement to other women who were seeking leadership positions. Male mentorship gives women an additional advantage. Since the majority of leadership positions are occupied by men, obtaining their sponsorship opens doors more quickly (Davis & Maldonado, 2015).

***Theme: Search committee composition.*** Three (19%) participants, P3, P8, and P11, discussed their thoughts on how search committees play an essential role in improving the trajectory of women into senior executive positions. P5 stated, “I’m saying being intentional about who is on the search committee, the look of what you have should reflect diversity. So, I think leadership is the biggest driver of that and showing me how I do that.”

P11 said:

I think that it all boils down to not only the decision-makers at that highest-level but also the search committee composition, and how search committees are trained and prepare to serve in that role because they are often the first line of defense in terms of reviewing resumes.

Search committees are used to present a neutral review of candidates for a position. However, search committees are made up of people who bring their own biases. Leske (2016) stated that to reduce bias against viable candidates, they need to discuss them up front and decide to manage them as needed. Johnson (2017) recommended

ensuring that the pool of candidates and the search committee for all leadership positions is diverse, and the search committee has organizational data regarding women in leadership positions.

***Theme: Succession planning.*** Two (12%) participants, P7 and P12, gave their thoughts on how to improve succession planning in higher education. P7 said:

We just did a leadership program, and all three of the nominees were women.

When you look at succession planning, if somebody is going to retire, who could take her place or his place, and then you start helping that person develop the right skills.

P12 said, “You need a good leader to establish the culture and then hire individuals who believe in the culture (diversity) and continue to build upon it.”

With the changing landscape in higher education, leaders in higher education institutions will need to be able to continue to operate effectively and efficiently. The pipeline for many senior executive positions continues to be inadequate; therefore, the need to tap into internal personnel resources is vital to operations (Wu, 2015). A comprehensive succession plan that includes women ascending to senior-leadership roles will improve higher education institutions’ innovation, productivity, and profit (Teague, 2015).

An additional sub-theme was developed under the descriptive code organizational culture and structural change. This sub-theme expanded on interview question 6. Table 9 gives a list of similar phrases expressed by the participants.

Participants were asked to give their thoughts as current senior executive leaders regarding what initiatives they practice or should be practicing that would yield the most impact with regards to mitigating or removing identified barriers. Thirteen participants gave a response. Three participants did not give a response.

Table 9

*Participants' Responses that Developed Flexibility Sub-theme*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Phrases</b>
P1	No response
P2	Flexibility
P3	Flexible
P4	Open-Mind
P5	Open-mind
P6	Flex-time
P7	Flexibility
P8	Flexible
P9	Open-mind
P10	Patience
P11	No response
P12	Open-minded
P13	Flexible
P14	No response
P15	Flexible
P16	Flexible

***Sub-theme: Flexibility.*** Thirteen participants stated that flexibility with regards to time and career management could improve morale and increase the number of women trying to achieve senior executive leadership positions. P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10, P12, P13, P15, and P16 shared their experiences when flexibility was supported. Participants stated that when individuals were given the support to have flexible schedules and personal autonomy, productivity increased. Each participant who

responded has an internal flex-time policy. P2 expressed, “Having the flexibility to manage both work and personal allows you to be true to who you are.” P15 commented, “I told my staff to select a day where they can either come in late or leave early, as their flex day. This practice has decreased absences, stress, and enhanced productivity.”

Although phrases such as parental leave and flextime carry a connotation of being female-friendly, these workplace policies support both men and women. As participants pointed out, when an organization believes in being flexible, with regards to time and career planning, it allows its employees to be their authentic selves, and productivity flourishes. Rochon, Davidoff, and Levinson (2016) stated that several higher education medical institutions are becoming more aware that women’s career path may not be a straight-forward line. The medical institutions are being flexible with how they are evaluating women’s contributions and achievements. This type of flexibility increases the number of women eligible and willing to move into senior executive leadership roles.

### **Summary**

This qualitative descriptive case study was conducted to answer the research questions. Participants gave detailed, honest, and reasonable answers to interview questions. Each participant was able to share their perspectives regarding gender bias, pipeline deficit, and organizational culture and structural change.

RQ1 asked what barriers are perceived as impacting women’s movement into senior executive leadership positions. The descriptive code gender bias was created to be in alignment with interview questions 1 and 2. These interview questions asked

participants to identify societal, gender, and organizational barriers and why they believe these barriers hinder women's promotion into senior executive leadership positions.

Themes presented were as follows: patriarchal society, work-life balance, and field prestige. These themes were developed from participants' responses to interview questions 1 and 2. Participants gave specific real-life examples, such as in a male-dominated society, women are either overlooked or not considered at all because of their gender.

RQ2 asked what similarities and differences regarding barriers were noted between male and female participants. The descriptive code pipeline deficit to explain why the barriers exist was created to align with interview questions 3 and 4. Historical traditions, inadequate qualifications, and exclusion were themes. Responses for each theme were identified for females and males. Both females and males shared the same thoughts regarding why the barriers existed. There was a follow-up question that created two additional sub-themes: inner confidence struggle and generational differences. The follow-up question gave additional insights into how the existence of these barriers is affecting women in the respective participants' institutions.

Responses to RQ2 gave a more in-depth perspective from participants with regard to why barriers are still relevant and specifically prevalent at their institutions. The follow-up question helped participants explain how the impact of these barriers is taking an emotional toll on women. Interview questions 3 and 4 and the follow-up question turned the barriers from thoughts into real-life experiences.

RQ3 asked what methods have been identified to assist in removing barriers and increasing the number of women moving into senior executive leadership positions. The descriptive code methods initiatives were created to correspond with interview questions 5 and 6. Participants identified different methods they thought would mitigate or remove barriers. They also identified various initiatives they were involved in or willing to assist in developing in mitigating or removing various barriers they identified, which were hindering women's movement into senior executive leadership positions. The themes presented included following leadership training, mentoring, search committee composition, and succession planning.

Participants gave examples of how they are currently or have previously mentored women who expressed wanting to be in leadership. They also discussed various leadership training activities they have conducted or developed. There was a follow-up question that asked participants to identify the initiative they have instituted or think should be an institutional policy. The participants stated allowing their staff to have the flexibility to manage their work schedules and projects has resulted in higher productivity and better morale.

Data given by participants in Chapter 4 identified various barriers impacting women's movement into senior executive positions in higher education institutions. Participants also gave methods as to how these barriers can be overcome. Nine women and seven men gave responses and personal accounts as they described the glass ceiling phenomenon within higher education institutions.

In Chapter 5, the researcher will present a thorough explanation of the study results. The researcher will compare the results to the findings stated in the literature review. The study's limitations, along with its practical and theoretical implications, will be discussed. Additionally, potential positive social change this study could promote will be presented. Lastly, the researcher will provide future recommendations for additional research and a conclusion.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this descriptive case study was to examine barriers hindering women from moving into senior executive positions in higher education and what methods can be used to overcome these barriers. The main barriers identified by the nine female and seven male participants were gender bias, pipeline deficit, and organizational culture and structure. These barriers were used as descriptive codes. General and specific problems were addressed by analyzing interview data from participants who were senior executives in higher education.

Key findings revealed from this study were based on various themes produced from participants' interviews. A total of ten themes supported three research questions that guided the study. Three sub-themes emerged from the participants' responses to two follow-up questions that expanded on interview questions 4 and 6. Data shows how female and male participants responded.

RQ1 focused on identifying the barriers. Table 5 identified the themes related to RQ1 and interview questions 1 and 2. The themes of patriarchal society, work-life balance, and field prestige were developed from responses to interview questions.

RQ2 focused on participants' perspectives regarding why barriers still exist, and which barriers were more prevalent at their academic institution. The descriptive code pipeline deficit developed the themes of historical traditions, exclusions, and inadequate qualifications. Table 6 identifies how female and male participants responded to



interview questions 3 and 4. A follow-up question was also included, which developed two additional sub-themes: inner confidence struggle and generational differences.

RQ3 focused on how barriers could be mitigated or removed and increase the number of women in senior executive leadership positions. Responses to interview questions 5 and 6 materialized the descriptive code organizational culture and structure change. This descriptive code generated four themes: leadership training, mentoring, search committee composition, and succession planning. The participants also gave responses to a follow-up question, which was identified in Table 9. The sub-theme flexibility emerged from these responses.

### **Interpretation of Research Findings**

The findings from this study reinforced the findings of related studies in the literature review. Various research-based barriers were identified in Chapter 2. Some of the barriers mentioned were work-life conflict, institutional culture and structure, and exclusion from formal networks. The study's findings substantiated previous literature and showed that women are still facing these barriers. For example, P8 stated:

People still when they imagine a leader, they do not imagine a person of color typically. There's certainly not imagining a woman, and you know, it's often more of a compilation of little barriers than it is in this day and age overt we will not hire a woman or person of color. But there are so many small decisions that get made along the way that impacts people who don't fit the standard model.

In contrast, P1 stated, “I believe the only barriers facing women leaders in higher education are the barriers that they place upon themselves.” The study findings are discussed in alignment with RQ1.

### **RQ1: Gender Bias**

Fifteen participants discussed several barriers that impact women’s promotion into senior executive leadership positions in higher education institutions. Duan (2019) said that gender bias is like a social contract that governs traditional norms for men and women’s behaviors and expectations. Barriers generated themes of patriarchal society, work-life balance, and field prestige.

**Patriarchal society.** Five females and four males identified this barrier as the most consistent barrier women face as they try to move up into senior executive leadership. Yoon et al. (2015) said that patriarchy is associated with a social system of male dominance and female subordination. A patriarchal society relies on maintaining the status quo and historical social norms through beliefs and social systems. P14 said, “People are comfortable and familiar with how things were done in the past, which means men were the leaders.” Participants discussed actual experiences they had either witnessed or were the target of involving this form of gender bias. Participants were between 41 and 70, and 60% of participants agreed that the patriarchal society barrier is still prevalent within their institutions.

Participants’ statements corresponded with data presented in the literature review. Various leadership theories such as, the great man, think manager-think male, and social

role, still have an impact on women being viewed as leaders. Diehl and Dzubinski (2016) stated that although some societal viewpoints and changes have occurred, patriarchal structures within current society and the workplace still present obstacles for women trying to move into senior executive positions.

**Work-life balance.** Four females and two males stated that work-life balance is still a prevalent barrier for women trying to obtain senior executive leadership positions. P5 said, “The family structure is still a barrier because many women place family as the first priority.” Work-life balance is still a challenge for women within all generational sectors.

**Field prestige.** One participant mentioned field prestige as a barrier. Field prestige falls under gender bias because it identifies women-dominated academic fields as not having the prestige to be considered for senior executive leadership. This barrier was a new barrier presented in the study. P12 stated, “College presidents do not typically come from the female areas, such as education and nursing.” Eddy and Ward (2015) said women in low prestige disciplines, for example, education and nursing, are rarely considered for leadership opportunities, which could lead to senior executive leadership positions within higher education institutions.

### **RQ2: Pipeline Deficit**

All nine women and seven men participants gave their insights regarding why they thought various barriers that they each identified were still in existence. Responses were evenly distributed between females and males. Themes generated under the pipeline

deficit descriptive code were historical traditions, exclusion, and inadequate qualifications. A follow-up question materialized two sub-themes: inner confidence struggle and generational differences.

**Historical traditions.** Eight females and six males stated historical traditions were the reason the various barriers identified are still in existence and are prevalent at their academic institutions. Eagly and Karau (2002) explained the role congruity theory, as using historical female and male roles and how each should behave; therefore, enforcing the traditional historical norms with regards to only men can lead. P3 stated, “I think part of it is the historical evolution of things. I think people tend to want to hire people that look like themselves.” Hakim (2016) also agreed that historical traditions are key to maintaining the barriers affecting women’s movement into senior executive leadership roles.

**Inadequate qualifications.** One female and one male indicated that inadequate qualifications could also hurt women’s trajectory into senior executive leadership. Inadequate qualifications can include not having the required degree, not reaching certain required milestones, or not enough leadership experience. P16 stated, “The pipeline needs to start with assistant professors, with associate vice presidents, with people that are mid-career to get them ready.” Thompson (2016) indicated that women’s intellectual and professional talents are not being utilized or appropriately recognized. Therefore, the over-representation of men in senior executive leadership positions in higher education continues to be a barrier to women’s upward mobility.

**Exclusion.** Three females and two males indicated that exclusion from formal or informal network circles as a reason the barriers against women seeking senior executive leadership positions are still in place. The participants also stated this barrier is more prevalent at their academic institutions. P2 stated, “Individuals call on people they know.” Studies conducted by Robert and Creary (2017); Diehl (2014) also found exclusion from helpful career networks was a key reason for barriers impacting women’s promotion into senior executive positions.

**Inner confidence struggle.** Seven females and five males gave their insights on how the inner confidence struggle women go through, as they try to overcome the barriers identified, is an obstacle as they try to move into senior executive leadership positions. P11 stressed, “Women are allowed to occupy certain senior executive positions; however, they are not the positions that have less sweeping decision-making power and authority.” Diehl (2014) stated that this type of barrier causes women to experience self-doubt and lowers their willingness and desire to pursue senior executive positions.

**Generational differences.** One female and two males shared their thoughts on generational conflicts, how each generation has different expectations, and how each generation views the value of women in the workplace. P3 stated, “There seems to be a double standard as to what is needed to occupy senior executive positions, because in the past if you had the qualifications, you could get the job.” However, in prior generations, the typical leader was considered a man. Sharafizad et al. (2018) said due to women

outnumbering men in obtaining all levels of degrees, the younger generations (lower end of Gen X and the millennials) want the career opportunities that will yield mobility upward and into the senior executive leadership.

### **RQ3: Organizational Culture and Structural Change**

Nine women and seven men participants mentioned how they are assisting in mitigating or removing the various barriers identified. The responses given by the participants could be implemented to help mitigate or remove identified barriers and how women can use these methods to overcome the stated barriers. Senge (2006) noted that all organizations should strive to be learning institutions. Senior executive leadership needs to include this into the organizational culture. P10 stated, “the institution itself needs to change structurally to create an environment where people can thrive as leaders and make it a place that people want to be.”

The themes developed under the descriptive code organizational culture and structural change were leadership training, mentoring, search committee composition, and succession planning. An additional sub-theme, flexibility, was developed from the responses of the follow-up question that’s asked the participants to identify the most positive impactful initiative they have implemented as a leader.

**Leadership training.** Six females and two males identified leadership training as an essential and effective method to mitigate the barriers identified. The eight participants also shared their involvement in developing and conducting leadership training. P4 said, “Leadership training based on relationship building, would help lower the feeling of

exclusion.” Haile et al. (2016) said to achieve an effective strategic global position; leadership will need to provide training, management development programs, and improve policies that remove bias that suppress women’s professional growth.

**Mentoring.** Four females and four males indicated the importance of mentoring is and how they are currently or have been mentors in the effort to alleviate and remove the barriers discussed. P6 expressed, “I had this conversation just last week, a young woman, probably five or six years of experience. She's trying to make some decisions regarding her path to be a director or dean or vice president someday at another college.” Roebuck et al. (2013) stated, mentoring plays an important role in women advancing into senior executive positions. Additionally, Davis and Maldonado (2015) stated that mentoring and sponsorship by males was vital in a woman’s career advancement because men are usually included in the final decision regarding who will be hired.

**Search committee composition.** One female and two males stated that the search committee composition should reflect diversity. P8 commented, “It's very important that every search committee has somebody on it who is explicitly trained and prepared to engage in issues around diversity and inclusion.” Johnson (2017) stated that to achieve an effective strategic global position, leadership will need to provide training, management development programs, and improve policies that remove bias that suppress women’s professional growth. This study is in alignment with this finding and supports diverse search committees.

**Succession planning.** One male and one female stated that improved succession planning is essential to mitigating or removing the identified barriers. P12 expressed, “When you look at succession planning, including women as apart of senior executive leadership must be an institutional priority.” Farndale et al. (2015) stated that the future of many institutions depends on their successful execution of a diverse succession plan to help enhance services to their constituents and to maintain exemplary human talent. Although only two participants gave support for more diversity in succession planning as a way to increase the number of women in senior executive positions, the data from this study can boost additional research in this area of women leadership.

**Flexibility.** Eight females and five males expressed being flexible as the most impactful initiative to increase productivity, morale booster, and enhanced willingness to pursue the leadership track. P9 said, “I always engaged in conversation that would help improve the plight of minorities and women, basically push for culture change that would give more flexibility for these two groups to excel and move upward.” In today’s higher education business sector, exercising flexibility in organizational operations and personnel management is critical. Due to the increasing number of women in the workforce, the more flexibility higher education leadership allows personnel; the more success women will be able to realize (Thompson & Miller, 2018).

RQ1 was answered with the development of themes that identified specific societal, organizational, and gender barriers that hinder women’s movement into senior executive positions. RQ2 gave more insight into why the various barriers identified from



RQ1 are still in existence and prevalent in most higher education institutions. The methods and initiatives identified with RQ3 can assist women with higher education leadership support in overcoming the identified barriers. As the number of women in senior executive positions increases, they will show that they are qualified to lead and bring unique and diverse experiences to the senior executive ranks.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Limitations are weaknesses within a study that may or may not be identified by the researcher (Ormston et al., 2014). The limitations of this study became evident during the credibility and transferability phases. The researcher used member checking to ensure the information transcribed in each transcript was the sentiments of the respective participant. The researcher received approvals, via e-mail, from each participant.

Due to the type of participants who were selected to be included in the study, the findings may not be the same as other senior executive leaders. The senior executive participants represented higher education institutions within the Memphis, TN, metropolitan area. The study's findings could apply to other senior executives at higher education institutions outside of Memphis, TN.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Research questions focused on barriers perceived by the participants, the reason why the barriers exist, and what methods or initiatives could be used to mitigate or remove the identified barriers. Participating organizations were traditional and secular coed, so the findings are focused on this type of higher education environment. To further

the research regarding the barriers impacting women as they try to move into senior executive leadership positions, studies using participants from non-traditional higher education institutions, for example, a non-coed or religious-based higher education institution. Longman and Lafreniere (2012) stated that women face a more complicated trajectory into senior executive leadership within religious-based higher education institutions.

Another recommendation for future research is the expansion to other regions within the country. This study was based on higher education institutions within an urban metropolitan area in the south region of the United States. Several participants made comments regarding how the barriers identified would probably not be barriers in another region of the United States.

Research in the barrier of field prestige would enhance research in women's leadership in higher education. Eddy and Ward (2015) stated that field prestige is a barrier because many of the disciplines that women dominate are not viewed in the same manner as non-female heavy disciplines. Research to determine why this form of gender-bias exists could help shape the career choices of women who desire to be a senior executive leader and diminish the pipeline deficit.

Lastly, future research in the inner emotional stress women battle as they try to overcome the barriers identified should be investigated more. The inner confidence struggles identified by several participants is another barrier that should receive more acknowledgment. Mayer and Surtee (2015) expressed that organizations should create a

culture that practices awareness and emotional intelligence, which helps individuals handle mental conflict.

### **Implications**

In this section, the researcher provided the possible implications of the study on positive social change for individuals, organizations, and society. The researcher also discussed the theoretical and practical implications of the study. The implications regarding social change are in alignment with the study's findings.

#### **Positive Social Change**

Although higher education institutions are considered the center points for higher learning, the findings produced from this study revealed they are still operating under restrictive historical, societal norms with regards to gender roles. There are more women enrolled in higher education institutions, and the number of women in the professional sector is growing. The findings of this study show that the need for change is critical.

The study included nine females and seven males to obtain perspectives from both genders regarding diversity leadership, specifically females becoming senior executive leaders. The findings indicated that both female and male participants support and want more females in leadership roles. Many participants expressed different methods and initiatives to increase the number of females in senior executive positions effectively. The methods and initiatives mentioned included purposeful leadership training and mentoring networks. Several of the male participants indicated that change sometimes should be forced because there are too many men who do not want to accept change.

Randolph-Senge et al. (2016) stated that due to the global positioning of institutions, societal pressures, generational differences, and sustainability, research in diversity leadership is still needed. As several participants commented, the barriers women face as they try to move into senior executive leadership have taken generations to form; therefore, current organizations should stay committed to the mission of diversity and removing the barriers every day.

### **Theoretical Implications**

The current research study did enhance diversity research. The study helped to progress the role congruity theory, which served as the framework for this study. The problem of this study was how women could overcome the gender, organizational, and societal barriers they face as they try to move into senior executive leadership positions. Conducting this study gave additional observational data related to the role congruity theory and its purpose in opening more opportunities for women to obtain a senior executive leadership position in higher education institutions.

Women leadership research practitioners should acquire an enhanced understanding of the barriers women face as they try to occupy senior executive leadership positions. The practitioners should receive more information regarding why these barriers still exist and how these barriers have a negative impact on women's inner confidence. Additionally, practitioners can learn about the methods that can be used to assist women in overcoming these barriers within a higher education institution setting.

The study added to the body of knowledge by hearing from both women and men on how the identified barriers stifle the growth of women and also an organization.

### **Practical Implications**

The study offers helpful perspectives and methods to higher education institutions as they try to increase the number of women in senior executive leadership roles. The findings revealed several individual, societal, and organizational barriers that keep women from moving up the ranks. Although the barriers are many, and the historical traditions regarding gender roles are deeply entrenched in organizational and societal structures, the study participants gave practical solutions as to how these barriers could be overcome. This study could increase and enhance women's opportunities in leadership discussions in higher education, corporate, and governmental organizations.

### **Conclusion**

Barriers impacting women as they try to move up the ranks to senior executive leadership positions, also known as the glass ceiling phenomenon, were under review in this study. This phenomenon is experienced by any woman who decides to attain a prominent leadership role within any organizational structure. The goal of the descriptive case study design of this phenomenon was to provide a real-life context of this phenomenon in higher education institutions, specifically those located in the Memphis, TN, metropolitan area. The study focused on perceived and real barriers, which women encounter daily, and how they can overcome these barriers. Barriers like exclusion, work-

life balance, and field prestige continue to uphold the gender-bias within organizational structures.

Participants in the study who were senior executives at the higher education institutions gave perspectives that were objective about the lack of women in senior executive leadership. Participants also gave hopeful and realistic methods for how women can overcome these barriers. Additionally, participants gave their testimonies regarding how they are actively a part of the solution.

Leadership is a fluid discipline. The findings in this study and other leadership research studies are changing the conversation and dynamics regarding females and leadership. The primary result from this research indicated that support from men, who understand the importance of looking past gender and promote leadership diversity, will help remove those gender-bias barriers and push society and organizations closer to true gender equality.

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## Appendix A: Interview Protocol

### **Before Interview Session:**

1. At least one week before the date identified by the participant for their interview, the interviewer will send an Outlook meeting request with interview date, time, and place. Follow-up with a reminder e-mail one day before the scheduled meeting.
2. In the meeting request, the interviewer will include my questionnaire with various demographic information for the participant to complete. Demographic information will include, for example, place of employment, sex, ethnicity, marital status, education, age, job position, and years of experience. The interviewer will also request a copy of the participant's CV or resume. The interviewer will also obtain general information about the participating institutions' student body and Board of Trustees/Directors composition.

### **Day of Interview:**

#### **The beginning of Interview Session:**

Greet the participant and thank them again for agreeing to the interview.

The interviewer will remind them of the research topic and the interviewing process, which will include voice recording. Ask the participant if they have any questions or concerns.

Answer any questions/concerns the participant may have if no concerns/questions will proceed with the interview.

#### **Record logistics information and interview**

Date and Time: Monday, February 25, 2019, at 8:00 am CST

Interviewer-Lynette J. Nelson

Interviewee: Dr. XX

Place: Interviews will be performed at the participant's office or public venue

#### **Begin the official interview:**

#### **Research and Interview Questions:**

**RQ1. What barriers are perceived as impacting women's movement into senior executive leadership positions?**

- IQ1: Which societal, gender, and organizational barriers you believe hinder women's promotion into senior executive positions?
- IQ2: Which of these barriers, that you have identified, is more prevalent in your academic institutions?

**RQ2. What similarities and differences regarding barriers are noted between male and female participants?**

- IQ3: Why do you think the various barrier(s) exist?
- IQ4: Why do you think the barrier(s) is more prevalent in your academic institution?

**RQ3. What methods have been identified to assist in removing the stated barriers and increase the number of women moving into senior executive leadership positions?**

- IQ5: As a senior executive leader, within an academic institution, what are two methods, you think, can be implemented to aid in mitigating or removing these barriers?
- IQ6: Are you currently involved, or would you be willing to develop an initiative, which includes these methods you have identified, to help mitigate/remove these barriers that we have discussed, within your institution?

**After Interview Session:**

The interviewer will ask if there are any additional comments and record these comments.

The interviewer will ask if there are any additional questions and answer these questions.

The interviewer will inform the participant that a rough draft transcript will be sent to them for their review and questions within three days after the interview session. If there are questions regarding the information, we will schedule a follow-up session to review the information and obtain a clear understanding. All revised transcripts will be sent back to the interviewee for their review and final approval.

The interviewer will remind them again of their anonymity, thank them for their time, and give them their gift card.

## Appendix B: Demographic Questionnaire

Name:

 Male  Female

Birth City:

County:

State:

Age:  30-40  41-50  51-60  61-70  Over 70Ethnicity:  African American  Caucasian  Asian  Hispanic  OtherThe highest level of Education Achieved:  Bachelor's  Master's  Doctorate  PhDMarital Status:  Never Married  Married  DivorcedCurrent Professional Title:  Chief Academic Officer  Chief Financial Officer  Chief Legal Officer  Chancellor  President  Provost  Other \_\_\_\_\_Number of years of current position:  under 5 years  5-10 years  11-15 years  16-20 years  over 20 years**Organization's Information: (Researcher will obtain information from the institution's public website)**

Name:

**Public or Private Academic Institution:**

No. Students: # Females \_\_\_\_\_ # Males \_\_\_\_\_

**No. of Employees:**

- # of Males in Senior executive leadership positions:
- # Females in Senior executive leadership positions:

**No. of Board Members:**

- # of Males; # of Females

### Appendix C: Email Invitation to Participate

**Title of Study:** “Examining Barriers Impacting Women’s Promotion into C-Suite Positions in Higher Education”

**Principal Investigator:** Lynette Johnson Nelson, Department of Management and Technology, Walden University

**Dissertation Committee Chair:** Dr. Teresa Lao, Department of Management and Technology, Walden University

Hello XX,

I am conducting a study to examine the barriers affecting women seeking senior executive leadership roles in higher education institutions. As a member of the C-suite (senior executive leadership) within higher education, you have unique experiences and knowledge regarding this subject. Therefore, I would like to invite you to participate in this research study.

The purpose of this study is to explore the barriers impacting women’s opportunities to move into non-tenure senior executive leadership positions, along with how women can overcome these barriers within higher education institutions located in the Memphis, Tennessee metropolitan area. Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to be available for a minimum of one face-to-face interview session. The in-person interview session will last 15-30 minutes and will be audio recorded. The interview will take place at a mutually agreed upon date, time, and location. If needed, a follow-up session, which is for clarification of your interview transcript will last no more than thirty minutes.

The expected interview phase will be April 29 – August 1, 2019.

This research could aid leadership and the human resource division within higher education institutions by developing strategies to mitigate the negative impact of the identified barriers.

This is an official invitation requesting your participation. Walden University's IRB has approved the study. **The IRB approval number is 03-05-19-0253185.** Additionally, (name of institution) IRB has reviewed and approved this study.

I have also attached a consent form for your signature. The consent form includes Walden’s IRB approval. If your institution required their IRB’s review and approval, your institution’s IRB approval is also attached. If you agree to participate in the research study, please send me the signed consent form, along with two available dates, times, and preferred meeting location for our interview by (date).

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at [lynette.nelson@waldenu.edu](mailto:lynette.nelson@waldenu.edu) or 901-491-2906. I appreciate your consideration of this request. I look forward to hearing from you.

Thank you,

Lynette Johnson Nelson

