

2022

## African American Women Leader Perspectives on Advancement Strategies in a Community College System

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# Walden University

College of Education

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Laquanda Thomas

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Walden University  
2022

Abstract

African American Women Leader Perspectives on Advancement Strategies in a  
Community College System

by

Laquanda Thomas

MA, Southern New Hampshire University, 2014

MA, University of Phoenix, 2007

BS, Georgia Southern University 2005

Project Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
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Walden University

November 2022

## Abstract

African American women are not retained or advanced in the community college system, resulting in an underrepresentation of African American women in administrative decision-making roles. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to examine the experiences of African American female leaders in the community college setting and to explore the strategies that these women used to obtain these positions. Semistructured interviews were conducted with seven African American women in decision-making roles within a southeastern state's community college system. Critical race theory and Black feminist theory helped to inform how race and gender impacted the selection of strategies used by African American women to advance as leaders in a community college. Data analysis began with open coding, moved to categories, and finally five themes emerged as findings from the data: (a) engaging with role models, mentors, and representation as an advancement strategy; (b) learning experiences and failures as an advancement strategy; (c) building relationships as essential to advancement; (d) combating stereotypes as a barrier and the importance of authenticity, and (e) the importance of support from the community and peers. The positive social change implications of the project based on these findings, a 3-day conference for African American women aspiring to a leadership role in the community college, could promote a healthier organizational culture. Diversity in administration potentially provides representation for students from different backgrounds and creation of an institutional culture of inclusion. A healthier organizational culture could have a positive impact on faculty, staff, and student experiences, which in turn would benefit individuals, the community college, and the surrounding community.

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## Dedication

I would like to thank Jehovah God, first. I have seen the beauty of his strength through this academic journey and my life. Without God, I would have no one to dedicate this journey to. I want to thank my late friend and colleague Dr. Oscar Samuel “Sammy” Holton for his encouragement and support in my doctoral journey and the massive impression he left behind on his students and colleagues.

To my family, I immensely appreciate the patience, support, encouragement, and sacrifice from each of you. Specifically, I would like to thank my son Ri’Yon Adams, who inadvertently helped me set this goal the day he was born. Children do not disable us, but they empower us. I would also like to dedicate this achievement to my daughter Nyla Thomas who provides me with the drive to make the world a little better because I know that I am making a way for her to exact change as well. I would like to thank my husband Craige Thomas who has shown me that life is as great as you make it. Through his unwavering love and support and will to live despite challenges, I have learned to forgive and love even harder with no expectations.

I would like to thank my brother Aubrey Adams who always told me that I was intelligent and had what I needed within me. To my friend Amy Prince, I want to thank you for cheering me on and telling me often that I am worth it. Knowing I am worth it was a key ingredient to conquering this task.

I would like to thank my parents Nathaniel and Carolyn Adams who have encouraged me to seek an education but not without conferring with God. Their love and support for each other has fueled their love and support for me. I would like to share this achievement and degree with my father who did not obtain a high school diploma but

instilled his ethics, hard work, and tenacity in me so that I might successfully finish any task that I start. I would also like to dedicate this degree to my mother who is my tribe. She is a mild-mannered amazing person who puts the needs of others before her own. She is a tribute to who the African American woman truly is and the strength, grace, and poise it takes to support the people she loves. Because of who she is and has been to me, her narrative and legacy will be a never-ending story.

I would like to thank the African American women who have come before me and paved the way so that I might show up as a light in my community. Because it is impossible to mention everyone, I want to thank anyone who has listened to me and encouraged me on this journey. Every word and prayer was received and greatly appreciated.

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## Section 1: Introduction

### **The Local Problem**

The impending leadership crisis presents an excellent opportunity to recruit African American women as leaders in community colleges (Eddy & Garza Mitchell, 2017). Executive leadership in decision-making roles at the community college level include state board member, president, vice president, provosts, dean, and directors (Nakitende, 2019). At the national level, the community college student enrollment demographic is diverse, yet these institutions have failed to promote and reflect diversity in leadership positions (Eddy & Garza Mitchell, 2017). The local community college system where I conducted the study is demographically diverse in its student population but lacks diversity in African American women in decision-making roles. In the state community college system where the study is focused, there are 1,800 women enrolled and approximately 40% of students are African American. With inclusion noted as an important aspect of the community college system mission and vision, reviewing the current composition of the administrative leadership in decision making in community college system could have strong positive social change implications.

A statewide network of approximately 25 separate community and technical colleges, Technical Community College System (TCCS), a pseudonym for the study site, graduated over 35,000 students last year. TCCS enrolled approximately 144,000 students in 2020. The institutions graduated over 37,000 students in 2020. Approximately 54,271 African American students were enrolled in a TCCS institution in 2020, and 13, 224 African American students graduated in 2020. As the focus for the study, TCCS

enrollment demographics support the need for leadership representation as African American students make up 38% of the student demographic enrolled in TCCS institutions as posted on their website fact sheet. Increasing opportunities for dialogue between the African American women who have advanced to a decision-making role in higher education and the African American female staff who may seek to obtain a decision-making position could facilitate inclusion of this group (Generett & Welch, 2018).

The gap in practice also is evident at the national level as few community colleges have African American women in decision-making roles (Gagliardi et al., 2017). Fewer than 5% of provosts are African American, and fewer than 8% of presidents are African American, which was an increase from 5.9% 5 years earlier (Espinoza et al., 2019). More research is needed in higher education of the underrepresentation of African American women in decision-making roles in community college systems (Kiral, 2019). The number of women who serve as higher education presidents is increasing, but the underrepresentation of racial and ethnic women as presidents persists at all degree levels (Hague & Okpala, 2017).

According to the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC, 2017), 58% of staff in the community college are women and 11% of all employed staff are African American. In addition, 53% of women working at community colleges hold executive or managerial positions, but only 10% of African Americans are employed in these positions (AACC, 2017). For this study, the community college system included technical colleges as well as 2-year colleges that offer degree level programs only. Forty

percent of the students enrolled in the technical colleges within the system that served as the study site are African American women (Lee, 2019).

Research reveals that White women exceed Black women in leadership advancement in community college settings (Hague & Okpala, 2017). Texas Community colleges enroll nearly 700,000 students, but the representation of African American women in administration does not reflect the growing number of people of color attending these institutions (Delgado & Ozuna Allen, 2019). To increase representation of African American women in community college in decision-making roles would contribute to positive social change through modeling academic and professional experiences and acknowledge the direct contribution of African American women in this specific community college setting.

African American women have proven their engagement in higher education from trend data revealing their increased enrollment into community colleges at the study site. Despite being underrepresented in campus leadership, African American women receive a majority of higher education degrees earned by all African American students, with 68% of associate's degree, 66% of bachelor's degrees, 71% of master's degrees, and 65% of doctoral degrees (Alcalde & Subramaniam, 2020; National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). African American women have also proven themselves valuable to educational progress historically, but their representation in leadership is not commonly found within the top leadership roles of colleges and universities (Alcalde & Subramaniam, 2020). As a matter of fact, African American women have successfully lead colleges in the past, but the numbers are few, as it still remains at the study site.

Diverse leadership styles can lead to diverse student programming, expanded opportunity, and increased representation in leadership, which ensures that all students obtain optimal support essential to academic success (Finkel, 2019). Representation of African women in decision-making roles of community colleges provide a voice for this demographic of students, and a model for staff and students (Finkel, 2019). When African American women are a part of leadership, students see future leadership possibilities for themselves in their faculty and staff role models.

Despite diversity and inclusion initiatives, the problem explored in this study was that African American women are not represented in TCCS decision-making roles, resulting in an underrepresentation of African American women in administrative positions in contrast to the number of African American women who are enrolled as students. According to The American Council on Education (ACE, 2017), 30% of college presidents are women yet only 5% are African American. College administrators and shareholder often claim to promote equal access to higher education, yet in leadership selection, they fail to diversify their administrative structure to reflect the changing demographic of the entire student body population (ACE, 2017). While trend data reveals that TCCS is increasing in diversity among students, decision-making roles across the community college system are occupied predominantly with White and male candidates across the statewide system.

Community college systems like TCCS are experiencing a leadership crisis that has been acknowledged at the national level (Forthun & Freeman, 2017). In the community college system where the study was conducted, African American



community college employees are more likely to hold positions with limited power and influence (Kiral, 2019). Across the United States, community colleges enroll nearly 10 million students a year (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2018). While student demographic data is changing, the number of African American women in community college administration remains limited (Bartman, 2015; Oikelome, 2017). In contrast to campus inclusion efforts, African American women are not retained and advanced at the local site that served as the study location in a southeastern state's community college setting resulting in an underrepresentation of African American women in decision-making roles (ACE, 2017).

At the state level, there is also a need of appropriate representation in administration to match the student demographic. There are many states that have minimal representation of students in administration. The common representation in administration is of the predominantly European American demographic (Delgado & Ozuna Allen, 2019). The focus of this study is a southeastern state where performance has remained below the national average on most of the key measures of higher education attainment (Perna et al., 2014). TCCS's mission is to educate and graduate work-ready students who can readily enter the workforce in nearby communities (Perna et al., 2014). Although this is so, there continues to be a shortage of work-ready graduates, and educational attainment has decreased (Perna et al., 2014). The state that houses the community college system has been challenged to improve performance to meet changing workforce demands (Perna et al., 2014).

Decision-making positions in the community college system that served as the study site included executive level positions with a sphere of influence in the decision-making process such as state board member, president, vice president, provost, dean, associate dean, and director. At all degree levels in higher education, as the level of academic rank increases, the representation of women in these positions decreases (Nakitende, 2019). African American women are more likely to achieve a position with little authority as opposed to an executive level position with decision-making power (Jenkins, 2018). Although this has been shown in research and community colleges include diversity of students in their mission, the same institutions have failed to align student diversity with a diverse administration (Whitehead, 2019).

Administrators can make changes; however, these administrators must be willing to hear the voices of students from various backgrounds and enact practices that are conducive to supporting academic success of all students, which may require assertive effort and supportive practices for campus culture (Walker & Okpala, 2017; Weatherton & Schussler, 2021). The student voice must be presented to the appropriate audience such as provosts, deans, department heads and other leadership staff to inform new policies (Weatherton & Schussler, 2021). It is necessary when implementing practices to support students of color to examine the issues, barriers, needs, and desires of that student population to ensure that these practices are successful.

There are more European American women in community college decision-making roles, and researchers have explored the experience of the European American female leaders, yet there are far fewer studies of how African American women advance

to community college decision-making positions (ACE, 2017). Gender-related inquiry that includes the African American woman's lived experience in community college leadership remains underexplored in the existing literature, and research has indicated that the typical academic worker is a man who is devoted to his work and chooses his occupation over family (Bierema, 2016; Eddy & Khwaja, 2019).

Diversity in administrative and decision-making roles provides representation for the demographic that the institution serves, improving the organization's ability to relate to a diverse population of students (Amirkhanyan et al., 2019). When administrators add diversity to its mission, there also should be aligned behaviors, actions, and planning conducive to creating an environment of authentic inclusion (United States Department of Education, 2016). Institutions with missions that promote diversity include leadership representation to ensure that the underrepresented groups are a focus to allocate funds for academic support and campus climate for these groups (United States Department of Education, 2016).

While research on female African American community college students is abundant, there is a gap in the research that examines the African American female leader's journey into a community college administrative position (Ashbury et al., 2015). Racial bias and stereotyping may impede African American women from obtaining decision-making positions in the community college setting. Although the profile of the higher education leadership is changing, ACE (2017) revealed that most higher education leaders are still European American males. An overrepresentation of European American men in administrative decision-making roles can have negative effects on campus climate

(Delgado & Ozuna Allen, 2019; United States Department of Education, 2016).

Leadership literature has been dominated by the representation of society's optimal organizational leader being masculine and European American (Bierema, 2016; Delgado & Ozuna Allen, 2019). African American women are in a unique position socially, occupying two socially marginalized groups of Black and female.

### **Rationale**

Because African American women are less likely than European American women to obtain decision-making positions including president, provost, vice president, dean, associate dean, and director, there is a gap in practice at the local study site. The lack of diversity in leadership and a lack of women of color in decision-making positions on the community college campus where the investigation took place promote exclusionary practices known to impact minority students' educational experiences (Mohamad Karkouti, 2016). With a work-ready mission, community colleges must educate students in an environment that reflects the diversity of society in which many graduates will be living and working (Chen, 2017). A diverse faculty and administration bring with them a new way of thinking, researching, and ideas (Chen, 2017). Leading administrators are in the best position to respond and commit to developing an inclusive campus climate and to institute organizational structures that respond to the dynamic environment that continues to change (Strayhorn, 2020).

Many community college systems have predominantly European American administrators and faculty, and all European American upper leadership at the state board level may exemplify a campus climate of microaggressions or biases that may convey

beliefs that African American students are intellectually inferior (Moragne-Patterson & Barnett, 2017). According to Chen (2017), professional practice of diversity is guided by standards that define the roles within higher education institutions and the desired relation between higher education and diverse communities. Professional practice can inform instructional leadership in three different ways as follows: develop trusting and engaging individual cultures, develop new admissions and hiring policies, and introduce diversity into the college setting through a systematic approach (Chen, 2017).

### **Definition of Terms**

*Belongingness:* Student belongingness is the ability to feel comfortable and included in an academic setting (Gilken & Johnson, 2019). Administrative belongingness is the feeling of comfort, value, and commitment to an institution as a leader in the community college setting (Crawford et al., 2020).

*Community college decision maker roles:* Upper leadership including state board voting members, deans, associate deans, provosts, academic program directors, and other influential individuals identified by the community college system on the website and contact us areas of TCCS's academic public presence. Nearly 25 junior college, technical schools, and community colleges make up this statewide network of affiliated public 2-year institutions with open enrollment. All decision makers at the 2-year educational programs of an associate degree, certificate, or career and occupational training that are affordable and a pathway to a 4-year degree institution (Cohen, et al., 2014) were considered for the participant pool for the study.

*Higher education leadership:* The six leadership competencies identified by the AACC are as follows: organization, resource management, communication, collaboration, community college advocacy, and professionalism (AACC, 2016). In the context of this investigation, the roles of (a) president, (b) vice president (c) provost, (d) chief academic officer, (e) dean, (f) associate dean, (g) director, and (h) state board member was included as they are involved in decision making that impacts campus climate.

*Mentorship:* Mentoring is "a relatively loose relationship," one in which a personal nurturing relationship is established (Hewlett, 2013, p. 7). A mentor helps the mentee develop career-oriented aspirations (Rolfe, 2014).

*Sponsorship:* Sponsoring is advocacy for someone's career advancement (Helms et al., 2016).

### **Significance of the Study**

Diversity is continuing to shape the student demographic of community colleges, and inclusion should guide strategic planning and be reflected in administration at all levels (Long & Bumphus, 2016). African American women in decision-making roles at community colleges provide representation to all women including African American female students. The outcome of this study provided insights to support female scholars in the pipeline to leadership for African American women to community college decision-making roles. Eliminating barriers to these positions for African American women can also provide support programs that contribute to increase in African American enrollment, campus diversity, student support, and program completion for

students of color. The values of most higher education institutions include diversity; however, the demographics of students have changed, and the diversity of administration has only now begun to slowly make a transition as efforts are made towards greater gender parity.

“Compositional diversity, recruitment and retention, perspectives, attitudes, behaviors, community engagement, and mentorship determine culture” (AACC, 2017, p. 3). Mentorship is important to the refining of skills (Mason, 2017). The more experienced colleague is the mentor and provides the mentee with guidance, advice, and support to those who are new or unfamiliar with the organizational culture (Rolfe, 2014). Mentors are familiar with organizational routines and culture and can convey this knowledge to the mentee to help the person become more acclimated within this culture (Rolfe, 2014). When students have a sense of belonging, they are likely to be more successful (Long & Bumphus, 2016). Administrators have a responsibility to guide strategic planning and student support initiatives in community colleges. Common culture, ethnic backgrounds, and cultural awareness between administrators and students can help community colleges create a sense of belonging for these students and develop support initiatives from administrators who are aware of the needs of students of color (Long & Bumphus, 2016).

African American women in community college administration can provide a sense of belonging and inclusiveness to students of color (United States Department of Education, 2016). Leaders in the community college serve several roles such as the following: communicators, negotiators, advocates, and confidants. In each of these roles, the community college leader must be consistent in following through on their word to

enhance credibility and trust from the student body (Kok & McDonald, 2017). African American women leaders offer representation in policy and decision making on an administrative level for minority groups. Inclusion of African American women leaders in administration is a milestone toward developing an inclusive organizational culture and climate for a diverse student population (United States Department of Education, 2016). Administrators have the responsibility ensuring that the educational setting is conducive to providing common good for all students, which empowers students; however, it is important that the administrators can relate to the challenges of students (Reis et al., 2016). African American women can be extremely useful in ensuring that the campus climate is inclusive, and she likely has effective ideas about how to empower African American students through promoting change for the success of African American students (Reis et al., 2016).

Community college campuses are focused on increasing diversity; African American female administrators are still rare (Whitford, 2020). Because African American women navigate the intersectionality of race and gender, which are factors that cannot be hidden when applying for an administrative position, they are uniquely equipped to provide insights into the current gap in practice (Buckley & Park, 2019). African American women and other women of color are more likely to have faced the microaggressions of race and gender. African Americans work hard to reach their academic goals and aspire to administration, but women in general remain underrepresented in administrative positions in community colleges (Buckley & Park, 2019; Nakitende, 2019).



## Research Questions

The problem addressed in this study was the lack of African American women retained and advanced in a southeastern state's community college setting resulting in an underrepresentation of African American women in decision-making roles. The following research questions explored the limited representation of the African American woman in decision-making roles at community colleges and highlighted the African American woman's experience in a decision-making role in a community college setting identifying any barriers that exist in higher education organizational culture that prevent African American women from developing and advancing into decision-making roles (see Jones et al., 2012).

RQ1: What advancement strategies did African American women use to become and remain a leader in a southeastern community college system?

RQ2: How do African American women in community college decision-making roles describe the supports and barriers they encountered as they attempted to advance in a southeastern community college system?

## Review of the Literature

To prepare for research, I selectively entered specific terms in the database. Initially, the research process began with *African American women in college administration*. This search revealed much about the topic, but there was a need for more details about the African American woman leader overall. I also searched *community college administration* and the *African American student experience in community college*. This search directed the focus to diversity and inclusion as well as organizational

culture. The searches were instrumental in guiding the research process and introducing different labels of the community college from a social context.

I searched the *community college as a bureaucracy* to explore the context of African American women leaders and a significant need for this representation in community colleges. The history of the community college was explored using phrases such as the *history of the community college* and *the origin of the community college*. The searches were executed in Google Scholar. I configured the Walden Library to Google Scholar to access articles that were not available in Google Scholar but available in the Walden Library. I also searched Galileo, specifically Ebscohost for the terms *community college decision making*, *community college student enrollment trends* ERIC contains multiple education publications. In ERIC, I searched for *sponsorship and African American women*, *community college decision making and gender*, and ProQuest, I searched for *community college enrollment trends and hiring practices*, *inclusion and hiring associates degrees*, and other searches using the Walden Library. There was also a need to identify public data. For data sets, I looked at Data Planet, and I explored educational statistics from educational organizations such as ACE and AACC.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework I chose is guided by the social barriers found in the literature that are relative to the problem. Critical race theory has six key tenets that are connected to social justice goals for combating racism in education. They are as follows: (a) the permanence of racism, (b) whiteness as property, (c) the importance of counternarratives and counterstories, (d) the critique of liberalism, (e) importance of

interest convergence, and (f) intersectionality (Capper, 2015; Martinez, 2020). This lens has been underutilized as an inventory lens that can be applied to education leadership (Amiot et al., 2020). Approaching the problem using a critical race theory allowed me to explore how these very elements impact the African American woman's experience into higher education leadership in the community college setting. The recent additions to the foundational framework of critical race theory are also helpful to understanding the lack of African American women in leadership at the community college. A concept called *deep Whiteness* was introduced by Bonilla-Silva (2015) and offered a new direction that posits that the superiority complex of Whites, reinforced by years of living a White supreme world that comes through even from White people who mean well.

The goal was to explore the narratives of the African American female leader in the community college setting to find ways to overcome these barriers in society that prevent women from obtaining these positions. Critical race theory has used narrative discourse as a practical method to explore the silencing of the voice of African Americans (Amiot, et al., 2020). Critical race theory encourages researchers to explore the social institutions and change by examining the meanings of social life, historical issues, isolation, social struggles, and possible solutions for improved possibilities (Amiot et al., 2020; Fay, 1987). Because the African American female leaders in the community college setting is limited, the experiences of those who are in these positions are worthy of recording and investigating to help provide change to the scarcity of African American leaders in the community college setting.

Based on the Black feminist theory, African American women have dual barriers that present challenges of promotion in professional settings (Coles & Pasek, 2020; Davis & Maldonado, 2015). Collins, P. (2009) emphasized the intersectionality of racism and feminism further asserting the dual barriers that socially hinder African American females from decision-making positions in higher education. Intersectionality forms a coconstruct between power and oppression, and work to create complex and unique forms of systemic harm and justice (Coles & Pasek, 2020). African American women can experience unique forms of oppression when gender and race are examined from a single axis such as looking at gender without race or race without gender (Coles & Pasek, 2020). While African American women aspire to be more successful, they are constantly hindered from moving forward because of the systemic challenges of both gender and racial disparities (Collins, P., 2009). African American women have been erased through masculinization and under distinction from Black men and excluded through over distinction from women in general (Coles & Pasek, 2020). The compilation of social constructs of the African American woman's identity presents a major challenge for the African American woman professionally.

Stewart (1994) supported the Black feminist theory so researchers could look for what has been left out of the literature relative to the lives of women regarding identity, sex, roles, and comparable worth as well as women's struggle with social devaluation and lack of social power. There is a intersectional invisibility that cause a lack of awareness for African American women in three ways: (a) there is the expectation of the prototypical woman being a White woman, (b) there is the expectation of the prototypical

Black person being more similar to the Black woman, and (c) the prototypical Black man and woman are expected to be similar more so than the White man and woman (Coles & Pasek, 2020). These prototypes are socially constructed in ways that leave the Black woman unrecognized as women, yet less distinguishable from Black men (Coles & Pasek, 2020).

There are social expectations that can overshadow the intersectionality of race and gender that silences the African American woman in many different social constructs (Coles & Pasek, 2020). There is a significant impact of the duality of invisibility and hypervisibility of African American women in leadership positions (Dickens et al., 2019). Black feminist theory provides African American female leadership narrative the opportunity to be told instead of silenced and assigns immediate value for analysis (Collins, P., 2009). Although a theory, the overarching goal of the development of theory lies in creating connections with real-life experiences of African American women that could cross over into scholarly material as well and read by African American women aiming to obtain these positions (Collins, P., 2009). Collins, P. (2009) asserted that an oppressed group often are heard only if the narrative mimics that of the privileged group; however, the Black feminist thought theory offers African American women the opportunity to tell their story in a familiar, comfortable setting and even in the language of the African American culture (Collins, P., 2009). The intent in making the language familiar to African American culture adds authenticity to the narrative, experience, and the African American female voice (Collins, P., 2009). Black feminist theory gives the

African American woman the opportunity to tell her professional story through the lens and voice of her culture without judgement.

According to Jean-Marie et al. (2009), African American women are impacted by the double jeopardy of race and gender in professional settings. Race and gender constructs infer power differences that are not deemed the same in society (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). These social constructs influence the way an educated African American woman is perceived in the professional setting and can be a contributing factor to systematic discrimination (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). Systematic discrimination is a violation of ethics, race, and gender as barriers of advancement for African American Women hinder organizational effectiveness (Jean-Marie et al., 2009). The epistemology and reality of the African American woman's experiences also are important in realizing her experiences in the professional setting.

While the Black feminist theory separates the dual impact of race and gender, CRT intersects race, gender, class, and the narratives or realities of social experiences (Jean-Marie et al., 2009). CRT has three significant goals that are pertinent to my study: (a) present stories about discrimination from the perspectives of people of color, (b) eradication of social subjugation and recognizing race as a social construct, (c) addressing other areas of difference such as gender, class and inequities experienced by individuals (see Parker & Lynn, 2002).

The oppressiveness that can be identified from race and gender discrimination is also supported by racial battle fatigue theory. African American women try to detach from the angry Black woman stereotype depicted in the media, which can cause her to

constantly monitor her words, thoughts, and actions continuously adding to the stress of functioning as a student or an employee (Corbin et al., 2018; Logan & Dudley, 2021). The *Angry Black Woman* is often depicted as strong, resilient, and persistent, which are the same characteristics needed to complete an educational program or continue education and enter a decision-making position (Logan & Dudley, 2021). The very same characteristics found in the African American woman that are deemed negative can very well be the same traits that contribute to her capabilities as a leader (Corbin et al., 2018; Logan & Dudley, 2021). African American women should be able to perform as strong leaders without judgement, which can allow them to bring authentic selves to the leadership role.

Exploring the African American female narratives through both Black feminist theory and critical race theory creates a focus on the experiences of the African American woman in the professional setting and perspectives that prevent many African American women from assuming decision-making roles in higher education. Addressing the aspect of racial battle fatigue provides theory to analyze the added pressures of navigating professionally for the African American female in predominantly European American higher education settings.

### **Review of the Broader Problem**

Higher education decision making is governed by many different components that contribute to its functionality. With a focus on state board members and academic decision-making leadership, it was important to look at the original intent of leadership in the higher education institution and how this has influenced the leadership demographic

within community colleges. More importantly, the research supported a need for more research regarding African American women leadership in community colleges. Terms used to continue to focus the research on the problem were *African American women administrators in community colleges* and terms such as *diversity* and *inclusion*. The literature review aimed to provide an overview that solidified the purpose and problem. Major themes that emerged from the literature include diversity and organizational culture, community college, systems, African American women's historical influence in education, and leadership in the community college settings.

### ***Diversity and Organizational Culture***

America's educators of higher education currently serves 20 million students of different backgrounds (NCES, 2016a, 2016b). Diversity is two dimensional involving more differences than just race (Hewlett et al., 2013; Hirsch, 2017). One dimension of diversity is inherent diversity, which includes ethnicity, nationality, gender, religious and spiritual beliefs, socioeconomic status, age, class, and (dis)ability (Hewlett et al., 2013; Hirsch, 2017). Acquired diversity includes academic need, educational interests, and personal experience (Hewlett et al., 2013). The aspects of acquired diversity are so broad and includes aspects such as cultural fluency, cross-functional knowledge, social capital, path to graduation, and so much more (Hewlett et al., 2013). Amirkhanyan et al. (2019) examined the organizational culture that contributes to diversity. Organizations are successful when they strategically apply practices of diversity and match the internal strategies to external demand (Amirkhanyan et al., 2019). According to Stewart and Valian (2018), "Diversity yields intellectual creative benefits not because people reason



differently as a function of their sex or race, but because their somewhat different interests and experiences give rise to different perspectives and ideas” (p.44).

Assessing the needs of a diverse clientele, whether patients or students, there should be representation on the administrative level. Achieving a diverse staff and administration is not easy for an organization. However, when a company connects the internal capacities to external demands, the company can strategically assess how the organizational demographic could use diversity to operate more successfully (Amirkhanyan et al., 2019). Diversity has become an important aspect of how well the relationships between an organization and those the organization serves develops favorably.

Representation in administration of the African American woman in community colleges can be justified in literature based on the statistical data that shows that African American women are a substantial part of the student population in need of representation. There has been great emphasis placed on the need to increase women in higher education administration positions in American colleges and universities based on equality of civil rights (ACE, 2017). Leadership ambitions of African American women are extremely high (Chance, 2022). According to a Nielsen survey, 64% of African American women have expressed the desire to work in leadership positions (Washington & Roberts, 2019). The underrepresentation of African American women in academic leadership in a community college system in a Southeastern state is not a result of a lack of ambition and systemic elements may impede advancement for women of color in community college settings.

Shahid et al. (2018) described the experience of African American students in predominantly White institutions (PWI) and the African American student's perception of racism and discrimination on the campus. The study shows that African American students are stressed from both subtle and even blatant forms of racism that can impact the student's academic ability (Shahid et al., 2018). Students of color, specifically Black students have negative views of the collegiate environment compared to their White peers (Parker & Trolan, 2020). The climate of PWIs is not evolving to support the African American student, and African American women, more specifically, feel like outsiders when attending these schools (Shahid et al., 2018). Black female students report feeling unsupported, lacking dedicated faculty mentors, and being held to a low academic expectation (Shahid et al., 2018). Representation for this demographic in administration could be a step forward to developing a campus culture for the success of all students.

Exploring African American women's experiences in leadership at the community college and identifying emergent and anticipated themes in the narratives using Black feminist theory and critical race theory created a focus on the experiences of the African American woman in the academic and professional setting. The community college system where the study was conducted reveals a gap in practice. In this system, while African American students are enrolling at increasing numbers, African American women are not advancing to senior leadership. By exploring the experiences that successful African American career administrators have had and the climate where they have advanced, certain perspectives that prevent many African American women from assuming decision-making roles in higher education were revealed. Addressing the aspect

of racial battle fatigue provided an additional theory to analyze the added pressures of African American women who navigate professionally in predominantly European American higher education settings.

### *Community College Systems*

Community colleges focus on preparing citizens for jobs and careers in the local setting (Delgado & Ozuna Allen, 2019). The overarching goal of the community college and its origin was to provide vocational training to students to impact the student's ability to improve life for the student both socially and economically (Grubbs, 2020). As an equalizer, community colleges have promoted and opportunities for students who would not have had the opportunity to attend a college or university (Grubbs, 2020). The community college has provided many opportunities for students to obtain vocational training and bridge into baccalaureate programs (Grubbs, 2020). A group who has benefited from this opportunity is those who are less fortunate and people of color. The attainable entry gate of community colleges has caused the mission of many institutions to shift over the years with many of these changes stemming from funding to political policy (Grubbs, 2020). Shifts and trends have not evolved within the community college system without challenges. One of the most significant challenges is achieving inclusion and diversity (Grubbs, 2020). Although difficult to achieve, diversity is an asset to the community college campus.

The community college is often referred to as a democratic institution that welcomes everyone, and the mission focuses on equity (American Association of Community Colleges, 2018). The complexity of the organization and the many different

processes, rules, and policies constitutes the community college as a bureaucracy. A college can learn much from a business that values diversity and places great emphasis on leadership training (Martin, 2021). The theory of representative bureaucracy asserts that a workforce that is representative of people in terms of race, ethnicity, and sex should ensure that the interests of all groups are considered in the decision-making process (Martin, 2021). According to American Association of Community Colleges (2018), more than half of community college students are women, and the community college serves nearly half of all undergraduate students who belong to racial and ethnic minority groups across institutions. A bureaucracy consists of administration distinguished by rules, regulations, policies, and procedures (Martin, 2021). These different departments are made up of human employees who fill the role of leader and follower or supervisor and employee, which is what adds a human element to a complex organization (Bradbury & Kellough, 2011). Just as the community college aims to offer equitable educational opportunities for students, they must also provide an equitable opportunity and expectations of who can lead within these institutions (Gause, 2021). A diverse administration ensures there is a voice for all students for academic success.

When adding a human element to the institution, there is now the emergence of social elements such as race, culture, background, and ethnicity. These social aspects are all factors that should not be used for discrimination against an individual. Community college has a bureaucratic nature that has cause them to miss their mark when providing ample representation for adult learners (Bradbury & Kellough, 2011). Making every attempt to create an inviting environment for female learners, the community college

administration has failed to invite them to the administration pool in the community college and many women feel hesitant to consider leadership positions in the community college, thus the continued inequity of gender representation of African American women in community college leadership (Gause, 2021; Martin & O'Meara, 2017).

A minority representative role has also been found to be a determining factor in African American opportunities (Bradbury & Kellough, 2011). Community college is a bureaucratic institution that serves a diverse number of students; many of these students are African American and women (Gause, 2021). Based on the bureaucratic theory, community colleges can benefit from having leadership roles that aligns with the demographic of students it serves (Martin, 2021). The common leadership demographic is currently White and male, and the research shows that this demographic performs quite well in the community college setting (The American Association of University Women, 2016; Martin, 2021). Further exploration of how the African American woman can shape the community college is needed but can only happen when African American women are in leadership positions to affect change.

Factors that have been found to act as barriers of success for African American students are miscommunications with instructors and counselors, lack of knowledge of resources, lack of access to high quality mentorships, feelings of isolation and stereotyping (Banks & Dohy, 2019). Examining graduation rates by race in America, it is apparent that disparities exist between students of color and their counterparts (Banks & Dohy, 2019). African American students are the least likely to graduate with a rate of 45.9%; however, European American students have a graduation rate of 67.2%. Looking

at the rate of graduation for students in community colleges, 1 in 13 African American students will graduate (Banks & Dohy, 2019). Community college policies are often designed to promote inclusion, but these policies can be impacted by implicit bias that provides opportunities for one group while decreasing the success of another group, especially when one group is expected to know how to navigate a system with little support or knowledge to do so (Long & Bumphus, 2016). Creating a space of diversity requires more than just documenting policies that promote inclusion; these policies must be executed ensuring that the administrative pool mimics that of the student demographic.

These are all issues that can be corrected beginning at the administrative level, but the administration must be knowledgeable about the culture and what support efforts are needed to assist feelings of inclusion (United States Department of Education, 2016). The American Dream can be invalidating to students who encounter obstacles despite their efforts to work hard and navigate the college culture (Buckley & Park, 2019). Administrators who are of the same background as students act as role models, but they also have insight into the microaggressions that they experience. Intersectionality includes race, gender, sexual orientation, and ethnicity, which are significant factors to a student's identity and significant factors of how society reacts to these students (Buckley & Park, 2019). African American administrators know how students can overcome these microaggressions and can have helpful strategies of preventing macroaggressions for the institution.

The community college learning environments are destined to evolve especially since administrators are facing enrollment decline, increasing equity gaps, a lost population of students of color, and mental health challenges (Donaldson, 2022). With the higher education institution student population constantly changing, it is important that leadership roles are continuously emerging and being reassessed and redefined to meet the needs of students in this environment (Black, 2015; Eddy & Garza Mitchell, 2017). Research has been done that shows that active representation has proven to be an asset to public administration literature. It was found that students in the public school system were disproportionately tracked and subjected to disciplinary at an increasing rate until the presence of African American faculty increased within the system; thus representation matters and has value to the institutions and students of color who lack representation (Bradbury & Kellough, 2011).

A one-size-fits-all model has hindered these institutions from being able to support students appropriately (Greenberg, 2014). According to Fosslien and Duffy (2019), “diversity is having a seat at the table, inclusion is having a voice, and belonging is having that voice heard” (p. 185). The community college campus is diverse and because of this, the institution needs leaders who are representative of the different demographics who attend the college (Goering et al., 2022). Active representation within a bureaucracy can help ensure that the interests of the groups are considered in policy and decision making; however, this is possible because the bureaucrats share attitudes, values, and beliefs and gender identities (Bradbury & Kellough, 2011). The bureaucratic nature of community colleges allows leaders to make decisions regarding the students who

attend the institution. Failure to include leaders in the decision-making process who represent the student demographic could cause, possibly unintentionally, decisions to be made with the lack of consideration of all students who attend the institution.

Implicit biases can occur simply by asking these women to not be too ethnic or refrain from engaging in research that spotlights their identities and struggles (Acuff, 2018). These women may feel isolated and unsupported (Cook & Glass, 2014). Implicit biases can occur simply by asking these women to not be too ethnic or refrain from engaging in research that spotlights their identities and struggles (Acuff, 2018). When an African American woman does step into a leadership role, she becomes the first, which comes with excitement of obtaining the position yet the challenges of being the only one (Cook & Glass, 2014). For these women to be accepted into leadership, there must be change at the community college on multiple levels, which goes beyond faculty. Administrators shape the policies and practices in which faculty and other support staff execute (Goering et al., 2022). The negative experiences of these women can make it difficult for other African American women to come behind them and assume a leadership position at a community college for fear that they too may find themselves in a position within an organizational culture that produce feelings of isolation.

### ***African American Women's Historical Influence in Education***

Despite the challenges of African Americans in education, the African American woman's commitment to education remains strong. The unwavering dedication to education can be linked to the correlation between education and freedom, which possibly originated in the days of slavery. Many slaves were aware of the power they



could have if they could read and write, and they also knew that knowledge would be needed to gain access to freedom (Arao, 2016). Shortly after the abolition of slavery, African American men and women worked equally to educate all within their community to empower them. Black women during slavery were likely to be in the house and close to information and could be resources for those slaves who worked the fields. Many of the women would memorize letters or symbols in newspaper articles, memos, or letters, and relay these symbols to the literate slaves who would address the meaning of these symbols and letters found in the master's home and report findings to other Black slaves within their community (Arao, 2016). As a constant in the master's home, these women would have access to White children who would assist the women in learning to read, which helped advance Black literacy (Arao, 2016).

After slavery, freed Black women played a major role in education as both teachers and students. Initially, it was important for both genders to get an education for the Black demographic, which was quite different from the White demographic who mostly encouraged White males to get an education (Arao, 2016). Mary Mcleod Bethune was born a decade after slavery and was able to attend school; however, she did not let the Jim Crowe laws prevent her from becoming a teacher. She promoted the education of African American children (Jones, 2020). She found the Educational and Industrial Training School for African American girls, which is known as Bethune-Cookman College today (Jones, 2020). At the institution, Bethune served as teacher, administrator, fund-raiser, and a civil rights advocate. According to Thomas and Jackson (2007), "the educational advancements of African American women have clearly afforded them

opportunities to play a critical role in the empowerment of African American communities and ‘uplift’ of the African American race” (p.368).

There have been several African American women who have contributed to education to empower themselves and improve the lives of others in the African American culture. African American women such as Mary Bethune Cookman and Lucy Diggs Slowe provide examples of the African American women with strong leadership capabilities (Jones et al., 2012). Lucy Diggs Slowe was one of the first women deans and a supporter of African American women authorship and scholarship (Arao, 2016). Even during the 1930s these women understood the need for them to be exceptional as educators. Slowe states: The world will expect from [college women] practically the same sort of contribution that it expects from men—the contribution of an individual so disciplined that she can direct herself, so informed that she can assist in directing others in this intricate modern world. (Slowe, 1933, p. 358) The shared stories of African American women being passed down to empower one another can stem from the belief that was shared by many slaves that education would be the tool of freedom. African American women educators often have a feeling of shared responsibility in the social and emotional development of African American students (Vickery, 2016). They often engage in othermothering, which has been noted as a form of community uplift (Vickery, 2016). However, research has shown that nurturing characteristics are deemed negative characteristics of leadership, which is in direct contrast to what many students of color need to be academically successful (Hughes et al., 2019; Weiner et al., 2021).

### *Leadership in the Community College Settings*

According to Davis (2003), leadership in higher education implies the movement of the operational element of higher education that takes the organization or a part of the organization in a new direction, which includes solving problems, initiating new programs, building organizational structures and improving quality (Eddy & VanDerLinden, 2006; Holmes & Oldham, 2019). The college's infrastructure and organizational structure mimic a dominant case system in that an unspoken, but visually seen, hierarchy of white superiority formally exists (Wilkerson, 2020). To understand leadership, it is important to know that it relies on a spectrum of different leadership theories over time and across academic disciplines (Eddy & VanDerLinden, 2006; Holmes & Oldham, 2019). With time, there is new and emergent definitions and enactments of leadership (Eddy & VanDerLinden, 2006). If there is a need for theory to evolve over time, there should also be a need for the leadership demographic to change, especially since the student population has grown and become more diverse. Diversifying the administration incorporates a social justice framework that promotes equal participation from all groups (Holmes & Oldham, 2019) and supports positive and equitable interactions and decisions (Kezar & Posselt, 2020).

The lack of African American women in decision-making positions limits the access to the diverse perspectives of the African American woman (Llopis, 2012). With a limited number of female leaders in administrative positions in community colleges, research regarding African American women in administrative positions has not been a priority (Delgado & Ozuna Allen, 2019). Instead, the research has focused on the socially

preferred demographic of community college leadership, which is the European American male (Delgado & Ozuna Allen, 2019). Diversity does not start with the student body only, but it must also be a requirement of the racial and ethnic composition of faculty and administrators (Mohamad Karkouti, 2016).

Mohamad Karkouti (2016) noted that an undiversified administration and faculty provides little guidance for students as to how to interact with racially different peers, which supports student isolation within their own racial and ethnic communities. The discrepancy of representation of the African American woman in administrative positions is apparent in higher education and other industries as well (Kaplan & Stevenson, 2019). Students of ethnic backgrounds lack role models in academia, and the higher education decision-making processes are often biased because of the lack of diversity in administration (Longman et al., 2014). Research has shown the importance of representation in school leadership as models impact school performance (Hallinger, 2016; Logan & Dudley, 2021). African American women, making up a large portion of the student body in community colleges, may benefit from a higher education institution administration that is cross culturally competent (Bartman, 2015).

According to Lomotey (2019), there are three dominant factors that present barriers to African American women's advancement into decision-making positions in higher education: (a) lack of socialization to faculty life, (b) lack of significant mentoring, and (c) the inefficiency to articulate a feasible research schedule. Therefore, a woman who desires a decision-making role may have to decide between personal obligations and professional obligations, which can bring constant scrutiny in both areas.

Experiencing discrimination along with fear of a real or perceived threat can lead to symptoms that cause posttraumatic stress disorder (Comas-Díaz et al., 2019). For African American women who obtain a role of leadership, they are expected to manage their identities as people of color and as women (Chance, 2022). Women of color are expected to manage roles professionally and personally, and the stress of managing it all can remarkably impact the ability to be effective in an administrative role (Delgado & Ozuna Allen, 2019).

African American women are fundamental to social institutions of Black culture such as education (Jones et al., 2012). They have contributed to education in many ways, and these contributions deserve recognition and an opportunity to explore the leadership styles of these women that appropriated them as successful leaders. According to ACE (2017), statistical data shows there is a preferred leadership demographic, and this data solidifies the idea that the preferred leader in community colleges is the European American male, despite an increase in African American female leaders in higher education since 2011 showing a huge disparity in the number of African American females who are in a decision-making role in higher education. African American students have opposing views when it comes to a preferred leadership demographic as they relay the rigid environment that they must persevere while attending predominantly European American institutions with predominantly European American leadership (Shahid et al., 2018).

The experiences of African American leaders portray women as desiring to rearticulate the Black woman's perspective through Black feminist thought, which can

help to suppress the White male-controlled knowledge process (Ffolkes-Bryant & Coppin, 2020). Reed and Neville (2014) noted that African American women must stand out in the crowd to be considered for a decision-making role, especially in a mostly White male dominating organizational culture. Traditional leadership styles such as the “Great Man” and “Trait” theories along with stereotyping can hinder opportunities for women of color (Lloyd-Jones, 2011). Lomotey (2019) asserted that a lack of significant mentoring and lack of socialization to faculty life are barriers to African American female leadership.

### **Implications**

Because the problem to be addressed in this study is that African American women are not retained and advanced in a southeastern state’s community college setting, a primary goal of this study was to bridge a current gap in research concerning African American women promotion to leadership in community colleges. African American female voice can play an intricate role in mediating cultural misunderstandings and offer essential but different perspectives understanding gender and race in higher education leadership (Ffolkes-Bryant, & Coppin, 2020). Research that examines the experiences of the African American woman in higher education leadership may enhance opportunities for this marginalized population and contribute to positive social change. The lack of research on this topic is just one more way in which African American women leaders are marginalized against within the community college professional community (Social Sciences Feminist Network Research Interest Group, 2017). More studies have been conducted on African American female students and faculty, with less

scholarly attention being paid to African American female leaders in higher education (Longman et al., 2014). The few studies that do focus on the African American female leaders have revealed that these women must navigate an organizational culture and climate of the institutions without examples of African American women in leadership previously (Longman et al., 2014).

To understand sponsorship, it is important to understand there is a difference between mentorship and sponsorship, which are closely related but not the same. A sponsor is often in a powerful position that allows the sponsor to introduce the protégé to people and environments that can open doors for career advancement (Helms et al., 2016). The sponsor has the responsibility of introducing assignments that can provide experience, opportunities of promotion, and a shield from negative influence or publicity (Helms et al., 2016). Sponsorship helps the protégé establish relationships and positions the person for career advancement.

According to Nica (2013), academic leaders are responsible for adjusting to the ongoing changes of modern universities. Diversity and inclusion research could be used to guide leadership reform and encourage organizations to create an organizational culture and environment that is conducive to student progress (Pearce et al., 2018). Diversity and inclusion research seek to inform interventions and encourage organizations to create an organizational culture and environment that is conducive to student progress (Pearce et al., 2018). Academic administrators contribute and construct through decision making the organizational climate, and higher education leaders are tasked with awareness of trends in enrollment and student demographic data to retain and

inspire students of all backgrounds. To guide strategy in a community college, the president has a responsibility to understand how students perceive their college experience and the diversity that exist within the community college population (Culler, 2014). Along with understanding the needs of the community college student population, the president must also create opportunities for inclusion and a community culture that is as diverse and representative as the student population (Culler, 2014).

To acknowledge the emergent barriers and supports, the research from the experiences of the African American woman in the community college provided insights into the development of a 3-day leadership workshop for African American women aspiring to obtain a decision-making position in a community college system. The content of the professional development content was anchored in the interview themes and categories that emerged. Alternately, as the themes were discovered, the project direction could help implement a new set of HR policies in diversity, recruiting, and retention for professional development opportunities to focus on how to identify, support, and develop emerging women of color leaders in the community college system.

Depending on the responses of the women being interviewed, a potential project direction could involve sponsorship training to sponsor decision-making roles is another possibility of an outcome from this study. According to “Sponsorship involves the mentor nominating the protégé for promotions, lateral moves, and other recognitions such as awards, assignment to research projects, and recommendations for fellowships” (Hewlett, 2013). Through the mentorship relationship, the aspiring leader obtains



exposure and visibility as the mentor provides opportunities for the protégé (Searby, et al., 2015).

The project study should be a product of the areas of focus that gives this study meaning beyond the women who participated in the study and provide a guide to attainment that can help other African American who desire a decision-making role. Therefore, the project study is a leadership professional development conference with mentoring and sponsoring components that allows community colleges to promote and retain qualified African American women in decision-making positions. The project study used the participant's perspectives and the organizational culture barriers identified in the study to assist higher education institutions in attracting and retaining a diverse group of students, meet their needs and boost the image of the higher education institution.

### **Summary**

The goal of this section is to introduce the research problem and purpose of the research to identify barriers and opportunities for community college administration to become more diverse giving African American women the opportunity to assume decision-making positions. The goal of inclusion efforts in higher education is to diversify administration and provide representation for African American and female students to improve student support and the organizational culture that promotes success of students of color. A more inclusive organizational diversity promotes representative and sustainable leadership that includes African American women as a viable choice for leadership in community colleges. The introduction of the study portrays the current

demographic makeup of the community college system under study, and the context of diversity of the student population to develop relevancy between the organizational environment, culture, and inclusion of the African American female leader.

The project resulting from the findings of this study (see Appendix A) was developed based on the components of Podsakoff et al.'s (1996) transformational leadership and the Holton model. Both models assist in introducing a conference that can close the gap for this demographic for African American women in leadership at the community college. Transformational leadership composes positive outcomes for leadership through the execution of a professional development conference. Those positive outcomes are as follows: vision articulation, role model provision, group goal acceptance, high performance expectations, individualized support provision, and intellectual stimulation (Podsakoff et al., 1996). Holton's model was established for the specific outcomes of the implementation of the leadership professional development conference with primary outcomes of learning, individual performance, and organizational results (Holton, 1996).

The goal of the conference is to improve the potential leader's confidence to obtain a leadership position, improve leadership skills and preparedness for the leadership position, and improve organizational climate for promotion of a diverse leadership demographic. The data gathered through participant interviews and reflections were used as the framework for the project. The interviewees consisted of women who have obtained leadership positions in the community college and the experiences of their journey to leadership and in leadership within the community college setting. The

insights from the participants played an intricate role in the development of a professional development conference that provides support and guidance for women who aspire to leadership while also inviting non-Black participants to join the conference to act as allies within these organizations for organizational change and support for African American women to progress to leadership in the community college setting.

The following section, Section 2, includes an overview of the study's method and design. Details of the qualitative basic study, including participants, data collection, data analysis process, and the results of the data analysis.

## Section 2: The Methodology

### **Research Design and Approach**

To better understand the underrepresentation of African American women in academic leadership in a community college system in a Southeastern state, I used a basic qualitative approach with in-depth interviews to explore the participant experiences and the strategies they used to obtain decision-making positions in a community college system. Qualitative studies can contribute to existing literature, and describes experiences, themes and stories for marginalized groups formulating a deeper understanding and analysis of social issues (Creswell & Poth, 2017, 2018). The qualitative research process focuses on learning the meaning that the participants hold about a problem or issue (Creswell & Poth, 2017, 2018). Insights into the experiences of women who have advanced in a community college system could provide information to academic administration to (a) support African American women aiming to achieve decision-making positions, (b) develop frameworks to successfully recruit and retain African American women, and (c) provide a deeper understanding of the impact and role organizational culture can have in enhancing diversity in administrative roles.

According to Merriam (2009), the qualitative approach allows an exploration into a phenomenon or tell a story with little interruption of the real life. Exploring the experiences of a population limits opportunity for statistical data, but the qualitative approach can deepen understanding through description and analysis of the description (Jacobs & Furgerson, 2012). I used a qualitative approach because of the exploratory element to understand the experience of African American women in the role of upper

administration in higher education. Perhaps even more importantly, by exploring the experiences of African American women through a basic qualitative exploratory study, the participant's voices were heard and the meanings that they assign to these experiences were explored as well. The goal of interviewing is to ask questions that extract the meaning of experiences from the participant (McNamara, 1999). Qualitative approaches aim to understand experiences or phenomenon, therefore, making it unrealistic to use a quantitative approach for exploratory research purposes (Merriam, 2009).

African American women historically learn from each other, which provides a model for the next generation (Generett & Welch, 2018). For this model to work, there must be a knowledgeable exchange between those who have aspired to lead and those aspiring to lead, and conversations of how to lead as an African American female must occur as well (Generett, & Welch, 2018). In the past, intergenerational dialogue has influenced and motivated African American women to fulfill certain roles (Generett & Welch, 2018). Intergenerational dialogue allows African American women to pass down knowledge from one generation to the next through narrative using both wisdom and experience to guide the younger generation.

Narrative inquiry can be both the method and the phenomenon of a study (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Therefore, a narrative inquiry is a possible approach to a qualitative study. The narrative focuses on stories told by the participant (Creswell, 2018). The researchers often arrange these stories in chronological order (Creswell, 2018). Narratives studies can be biographical focusing on the experiences of a single person or the lives of several individuals. Once these narratives were collected, I retold

the experiences by rearranging these stories into a certain framework. The drawbacks to using narrative research is that there is an immense amount of information that must be collected (Creswell, 2018). Although a story may be told by these women, I chose a basic qualitative study to focus on the themes identified within the data that are relevant to the literature and conceptual framework.

In a basic qualitative study, the researcher is not aiming to create meaning but urges the participants to ascribe the meaning (Creswell, 2018). Case studies usually draw on the researcher's ability to extract meaning instead of the participants ascribing meaning. Case studies usually exemplify or demonstrate something, or evaluate and critique, and it is almost always qualitative (Padgett, 2017). Case studies are generally bounded within the context of a single building and involve triangulation. In my investigation, a community college system that has multiple campus environments is the focus, and in-depth interviews with the women of color who have advanced to decision-making roles provided sufficient data. For this reason, the case study was not used for this study. The basic qualitative approach allowed these women to present their perspectives and triangulation with an employee handbook content analysis is not likely to increase understanding of the events and interactions they experienced as they sought advancement opportunities.

Phenomenology is an option of methodology to research the experiences of the African American leader's journey while in a higher education decision-making position. While narrative aims to focus on the story of the participant, a phenomenology focuses on describing the meaning of several participants learned experiences of a phenomenon

(Creswell, 2018). Phenomenology was not used to study African American women's narratives in community college leadership despite the fact that phenomenology usually focuses on intense human experiences (see Merriam, 2009). Phenomenology does focus on finding a deeper meaning of the phenomenon; however, the basic qualitative study does more than establish a deeper meaning (Worthington, 2013). The basic qualitative study aims to uncover the participant's experiences, meaning participants ascribe to experiences, and a process, which can all be explored in one study. (Worthington, 2013).

There is also a need to have a deeper understanding of broader philosophical assumptions that are identified by the researcher. It can be a challenge for the researcher to exclude his or her own personal experiences from influencing these assumptions and remaining separate from the text (Creswell, 2018). Phenomenology examines the essence or essences of a shared experience; however, the goal was not to explore the phenomenon of the decision-making position of African American women, but to gain insight into how these women interpret these experiences, how they construct and perceive this world, and what meaning they attribute to the experience (see Merriam, 2009).

As qualitative research has evolved, researchers have experienced a tension between the need for methodological flexibility and structure (Kahlke, 2014). Focusing on interpreting and finding meaning, basic qualitative research can also attempt to uncover the process (Creswell, 2018). A basic qualitative interpretive is a paradigm that assumes that social reality is not shaped objectively but is realized through human experiences and social contexts (Creswell, 2018). It is very possible that attitudes, beliefs, and opinions may emerge from the basic qualitative study, but the sole purpose of the

basic qualitative approach is to reveal meaning of the experiences that African American women encounter when in a position of leadership at a higher education institution (Merriam, 2009). According to Erikson (1959), identity is developed based on how a person perceives experiences that are encountered as related to self. Through the basic qualitative design, the researcher can ask open ended questions, listen to the responses, and explore the responses without judgement as the researcher (Creswell, 2007). Although the racial context may be extremely intense for participants, I used the basic qualitative approach as I was interested in the experiences of these women and how these experiences create meaning in the lives of these women and the organization in which these women lead. According to Merriam (2009), basic qualitative study is used for researchers interested in interpretation of experiences, construction of their world based on these experiences, and meanings assigned to these very experiences.

There can be an exploration of these experiences and how African American women are enabled and constrained by social barriers to interpret the impact it has on the women as well as organizational cultures (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The phenomenon of the topic is important and could possibly be used to continue researching the problem. However, finding meaning in the women's experiences allowed the African American women's voice to be heard and share their specific narrative in an insightful way that mimics the way in which African American women have interacted with their communities and articulated how they experienced reality (Collins, P., 2009). The reality that these women articulated was their perceived experience in leadership of a community college.



## **Participants**

The target population for a study was the set of individuals chosen from the overall population in which the research study's data are to be used to come to conclusions regarding the population (see Creswell, 2018). The target population must be clearly identified for the purpose of a research study (Creswell, 2018). To study a large group was not a realistic approach to this study because of time constraints. However, choosing a smaller sample from within the larger group allowed me to look closely at the data from a smaller population and make inferences about the target population (see Creswell, 2018). Because there is a gap in the research, it was likely that there are not many eligible participants to choose from; however, I did not definitively know this until the research was executed. The initial goal was to obtain between nine to 11 participants. Ultimately, seven participants were interviewed.

When executing research, it is best to use the whole population; however, this is usually not possible (Etikan et al., 2016). For a qualitative study, there are no specific rules for the sample size, but the sample size is best determined by the time and resources to execute a study (Daniel, 2019). The participants were employed in a community or technical college system that served as the study site. After receiving approval from the Walden University Institutional Review board (IRB), I began the phase of identifying possible participants by researching the websites of institutions. Purposive sampling was used to identify women with the system by exploring college websites for African American women who are currently in a decision-making role of state board member, director, dean, provost, vice president or president. Purposive sampling is usually used

when the participants of a study are not easily accessed (Sharma, 2017). Purposive sampling is also known as judgement sampling (Etikan et al., 2016). It is a nonrandom approach that does not require a certain number of participants (Etikan et al., 2016). It is valuable when gathering information to access a specific group of people (Sharma, 2017). Purposive sampling is often used in qualitative research studies to gain access information-rich cases for proper usage; it requires identifying and selecting participants who are proficient and well informed with the phenomenon of interest (Etikan et al., 2016). Purposive sampling aims to manifest the perception of these women in a purposeful but not extreme way (Patton, 2014).

I reviewed websites of community colleges in the southeastern state to identify institutions with African American women who are in decision-making positions. The next phase included reaching out to these participants to request participation. The goal was to contact at least 40 potential participants and use the first eight to 10 participants who responded to the request. The potential participants gave verbal consent before I considered scheduling an interview. Once the participant agreed to participate, I set up a time and place that was convenient for the interview to occur.

The study took place in a community college with the goal of obtaining practical information regarding the perspectives of African American women who serve or have served in decision-making roles in the community college setting. Examining the entire technical college system of the local study site and 2-year colleges that are Board of Regent affiliated, African American women in administrative roles were selected and interviewed. The population of participants was selected from the pool of African

American women in decision-making roles who were willing to participate from the Georgia system. The participants for this study were purposively, yet selectively chosen, for this study (Creswell, 2018).

The intent was to identify African American women leaders in Southeastern colleges who were willing to articulate their valuable experiences as leaders in the community college setting. Participants were limited to the community college system including TCCS. In a qualitative study, there is no method to calculate an exact number of interviews that can be executed within the study (Malterud et al., 2016).

Three criteria qualified the individual as a participant. The participants must have been an African American woman, held a decision-making position at a community or technical college in the Southeastern state where the study took place, and have held the administrative position for a minimum of two years. These women were chosen from the larger population as a representation of the group of women who have obtained a decision-making position and sustained the position.

From these women, I hoped to identify the key challenges and supports that they have used to obtain and sustain a decision-making position in the community college setting. During the interviews, these women provided their perception of their role and how potential institutional barriers impacted the journey to obtaining this position. The interview with each of the participants provided me with actionable insights into the research problem and questions.

In this case, the participants were in the best position to provide insight into their journey into a decision-making role in community colleges, and they also provided

insight into the organizational culture where they lead. Through purposive sampling, the participants were deliberately chosen as they met certain requirements as a participant in the study. Using purposive sampling, I looked to identify individuals who fit the study criteria by their role in the community college system.

Higher education institutions provide a directory with the names, positions, and emails of decision-making positions. Using the directory of the institutions, these women were contacted by email to obtain permission to include them in the study. The email stated the intent of the study and included an informed consent form. The email included the qualifications to participate in the study and asked that each participant respond to let me know that she meets the requirements and agree to participate. The women who were chosen for this study were in a decision-making position within a community college system. As a participant of the study, these women must have held a decision-making position including state board member, dean, director, vice president, provost, chief academic officer, or president position for two years or more in a technical college that offers associate level programs or a 2-year institution.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection was obtained from semistructured interviews. Creswell (2018) noted several benefits of interviews for collecting detail-rich data. Interviews can be used even when the participant cannot be observed in the setting (Creswell, 2018). However, interviews also allow participants to elaborate on meanings and even clear up any misunderstandings (Creswell, 2018). Therefore, for the collection of data method for this study I used interviews face to face or through a virtual channel to collect data. The

required approval from the IRB was granted prior to data collection. Once participants were identified, an e-mail was sent to African American female administrators identified in the samples.

Data included transcripts that were kept in a secure file to ensure that participant's confidentiality and privacy were maintained. Data collection began once approval was granted from Walden University's IRB. The informed consent documents were provided to each participant, and the reviewed and signed form was collected prior to any data collection. All participant rights and privacy were protected throughout the study. While elaborating, participants could offer historical information that could be important to understanding the problem (Creswell, 2018). I established an interview protocol that allowed the interview process to be conducted in a similar manner for all participants.

Bias is understood as any influence that provides a distortion in the results of a study (Polit & Beck, 2020). In a qualitative study, it is possible that the unique personality, characteristics, and research technique of a researcher can influence the data collection process (Galdas, 2017). Therefore, the researcher can influence the interviewee during an interview session causing bias causing some bias. As the researcher of the study, I possess characteristics of the participants targeted for this study.

As I conducted the interviews, I was aware of characteristics of myself that could create bias. I am an African American female employee who is a faculty member at a community college and who aspires to obtain a decision-making position at a community college upon completion of my terminal degree. With these characteristics, I felt confident that I developed a rapport with these women during the interview process. As a

community college English instructor for the past 8 years at a community college in the Southeastern state that served as the study location, I have had limited exposure to leadership and decision-making administrators who were African American women in the community college system. As such, I may have some biases based on the setting in which I currently work and the lack of administrators who are African American women. To minimize this bias, I focused on the responses of the participants during the interviews and allowed their voices and their experiences to influence the research and not my own ideas and opinions.

To ensure that the best interview protocol was applied, I used one-on-one interviews. The telephone interview does not provide face-to-face access to the interviewee (Creswell, 2007). However, I chose the one-on-one approach as it allowed for comfort for me, the researcher, and the participant and helped participants who are shy or who felt uncomfortable speaking in a group setting to be open with their responses. (Creswell, 2007). Because of COVID-19, it was best to use a virtual platform that allowed me and the interviewee to meet in a comfortable and safe environment for both parties. COVID-19 protocols included the ability to meet virtually. The participants were informed of the types of questions that were asked. Interview questions were designed to align with the primary research questions to the conceptual framework critical race and Black feminist theories. Participants were provided with final study findings prior to project construction.

To ensure that the study was carried out successfully and ethically, I employed an interview protocol (Appendix B). Interviews lasted between 40-60 minutes. I recruited

participants using purposive sampling, and I had a protocol in place to ensure that I executed the proper procedure of identification, outreach, and recruitment of participants. The first stage was approval by the Walden University IRB. Once my study was vetted for ethical compliance and approved, I then began to research community college websites to identify African American women in decision-making positions. Based on the email provided on the website, I contacted the women through email and provided them with an informed consent form as well. The email explained the intent of the study and obtained permission from them to participate in the study.

In-depth interviews were conducted face-to-face or via virtual channels such as web conference at the designated location of each participant. The interviews were recorded via a digital recording device, transcribed, and coded for themes. The themes were analyzed by its significance and meaning. A mock interview with a peer was held with colleagues to test the interview questions and the length of the interview before executing the study with the actual participants. Interview dates were scheduled according to the availability of the participants. The following process was used to collect the data. After required forms were approved and reviewed by IRB, an email notice was sent to potential participants via email and followed up with a phone call. The potential participant's response to the phone call or email provided knowledge of the potential participant's willingness to participate and confirmation. Consent forms and confidentiality forms were sent to participate through email. Confirmation of receipt of these forms came from the email time stamp and a verbal verification by me that the

forms were received. Finally, the interview was scheduled considering the date and location that best accommodated the participant.

### **Data Analysis**

According to Creswell (2018) qualitative research requires organizing and planning, reading and reviewing, and coding the data. A qualitative study should be based on qualitative analysis (Syed & Nelson, 2015). For this study, I began with open coding, moved to categories, and finally identified five themes. The coding process is detailed in the following section.

### **Coding Procedures**

The process of analyzation of data to discover themes and coding began immediately after all interviews were completed. After preparing the data for analysis, I first explored the data by reading through the transcripts at least twice and writing reflective notes on emerging ideas. Each interview was transcribed using online transcribing software, Otter.ai. The live nature of the transcription software presented the option to review the interviews as much as needed for reflection and coding. The transcripts were stored in the Otter.ai application on a personal password-protected device to ensure that I did not lose the original transcripts. The transcripts were shared with the interviewees by email and the participants reviewed for accuracy. I encouraged feedback from interviewees to ensure that the interviews were transcribed accurately. Once the data were transcribed and reviewed by the participants for accuracy, I read and reviewed the data again to reflect on it to determine a comprehensive meaning of the data.



The initial phase of coding, known as open coding, was the stage where I reviewed each participants' interview transcript to search for reoccurring words and phrases. The codes were also reviewed for frequency as well. Codes are often single words or phrases that represent the data (Saldaña, 2014). For this study, I initially identified 64 open codes. From there, the codes collapsed to nine categories, which led to the identification of five themes.

### **Evidence of Quality**

I followed an interview protocol (Appendix B) to explore the experiences of African American women who lead in a community colleges system currently to keep interviews consistent and reduce bias. I engaged the participants in a transcript review to ensure accuracy, managed researcher bias, and, finally, used thick, rich descriptions to help assure transferability.

### ***Dependability***

Dependability is an aspect of reliability in qualitative research, which is related to actions to ensure consistency within a study (Creswell, 2009). Based on the research questions, a total of 16 questions were generated for the interview. Using an interview protocol, I was certain to ask these questions in sequential order with each participant. I also asked participants to engage in transcript review, reviewing the transcripts for accuracy.

### ***Clarifying Researcher Bias***

Reflecting on bias is an essential element of trustworthiness in qualitative research (Glesne, 2011). Race is a topic that many scholars avoid; therefore, it is not

unlikely for a person to become uncomfortable when describing the effect of racism and discrimination relative to employment in the community college system and responses to the interview questions may be influenced by this. Research bias from me, as the researcher, could have tainted the outcome of the study. I am an African American woman who has an emotional investment regarding the research topic. Preventative measures were taken to ensure that research bias did not influence the outcome of the study. Ensuring that the interview questions were appropriate and using note taking during the interviews to manage emergent emotions and personal feelings during the process allowed me to acknowledge and use my self-monitoring to ensure research bias did not occur.

### ***Transferability***

Transferability in qualitative research is the “degree to which the results....can be transferred to other contexts or settings with other respondents” (Korstjens & Moser, 2018, p. 121). One strategy toward transferability is to include a wide variety of participants (Merriam, 2009). For this study, seven African American women from a wide array of colleges who are or have been in a decision-making role at a community college for two years or more were interviewed. Finally, in the findings I will provide thick, rich descriptions of the participants and of the setting to help to ensure transferability.

### **Discrepant Cases**

Discrepant cases are data that do not fit an overall pattern (Booth et al., 2013). There was one case identified as a possible discrepant case but then later included in one

of the five main themes. The participant highlighted an altercation between her and a staff member. This information was extreme and highlighted an extreme case of interaction between African American women leaders and those they lead. It offered insight into the lack of respect that many of these women entail when in a leadership position. Although other participants did not retell situations of disrespect at this level, the women agreed that they were often disrespected or questioned in their ability to lead. Ultimately, this experience fits in to Theme 4, so it was determined that this experience, although the details were unique, fit with other stories related by other participants. Therefore, no discrepant cases were found.

### **Data Analysis Results**

This study took place in the technical college system and the participants were from a wide array of colleges in this system. Seven African American women who are or have been in a decision-making role at a community college for two years or more were interviewed. The study focused on the women's early life, college years, and their time as a community college administrator. The goal was to find African American women in mid-level to executive level positions such as director, program chair, dean, vice president, president, and board member. A director, two deans, two vice presidents, a program chair, and a board member were recruited for the study. By employing a basic qualitative design, the perspectives of the participants were revealed. Narratives focused on individual experiences and tied these narratives to an organization to establish a plan for change through the meanings established from a basic qualitative approach (Creswell & Poth, 2017). A basic qualitative approach is one that uses narrative to explore and

describe context and use the participant's frame of reference to assign meaning to the experiences retold (Reeves et al., 2008).

For this study, I recruited seven African American women who are in a leadership role at a community college for the study. The women consented to the study by stating "I agree" regarding the informed consent form provided before each interview began. All seven participants chose the virtual method of meeting, and the Teams application was used to conduct and record each interview. Following the completion of interviews, transcriptions were completed, and the transcripts were reviewed for accuracy by the participants. I also reviewed and listened to each transcript several times for accuracy and made edits and revisions to the transcripts to clarify any of the responses that were misstated by the transcription software, Otter.ai. Once transcripts had been confirmed and reviewed, participants were assigned pseudonyms and data analysis began.

### **Participant Pseudonyms**

Personal identification characteristics of participants were omitted from the study to keep the identities of these women confidential; however, each participant was provided with a pseudonym. The pseudonyms were derived from historical African American women who paved the way for education for their communities. The pseudonyms are provided as follows:

- Participant 1: Virginia Randolph
- Participant 2: Shirley Chisholm
- Participant 3: Hallie Queen Brown
- Participant 4: Mary Mcleod Bethune

- Participant 5: Inez Beverly Prosser
- Participant 6: Ramona Edelin
- Participant 7: Gloria Blackwell

Participant 1 was assigned the pseudonym Virginia Randolph because of her expertise in workforce development. Virginia Randolph played a major role in vocational training and did all she could to get parents and students involved (Pincham, 2005).

Participant 2 was assigned the pseudonym Shirley Chisholm because of the participant's current election as county commissioner in the district where she lives. Historically, Shirley Chisholm was the first African American congresswoman in 1968, and she attempted to run for president in 1972 (Winslow, 2020).

Participant 3 was assigned the pseudonym Hallie Queen Brown. Participant 3's intensity for woman's equality was apparent in her responses. Hallie Quinn Brown was an educator who advocated for women's rights.

Participant 4 was assigned the pseudonym Mary McLeod Bethune. Historically, Mary McLeod Bethune advocated for education for African American students, and she wanted African American mothers to have a sense of independence through education (Hanson, 2003). She also modified the curriculum of Dayton Institute, which was changed to Bethune-Cookman College, and advocated for the training of young people for emerging employment opportunities all while using her position as a government appointee to advocate and coordinate activities for Black equality (Hanson, 2003). During the interview, this participant recalls her efforts in beginning an adult education program at her church. She volunteered and developed this program without being paid a

salary. Eventually, her expertise was sought by the local community college as an adult education dean. This resonated with me as being methodical yet powerful as an asset for the African American community.

Participant 5 was assigned the pseudonym Inez Prosser. Inez Prosser was the first Black woman to receive a Ph.D. and used her research in the field of educational technology and for the development of African American students (Miller, 2020).

Participant 5 was assigned this pseudonym because she had completed a doctoral degree and was strategic in using her expertise and research in her role as the vice president of a community college.

Participant 6 was provided the pseudonym Gloria Blackwell. Historically, Gloria Blackwell was an educator at a historically black university Clark University; she was an advocate who was instrumental in the fight to desegregate schools (The History Makers, 2022). Participant 6 was assigned this pseudonym because of her willingness to stand up for what was right and her ties to civil rights as her father also was an advocate.

Participant 7 was assigned the pseudonym Ramona Edelin. Ramona Edelin started a program named “Say Yes to A Youngster’s Future” program. This program was to help assist black teachers and youth in America and eventually did so with the assistance of the Department of Education (DeFreitas, 2019). Participant 7 was assigned this pseudonym because of her strong belief in the community college pipeline and ensuring that the instructors she leads have the proper resources and knowledge to teach their students.

These pseudonyms have been used throughout the findings to indicate the responses of each participant. Virginia Randolph served as a Community Service Director, Continuing Education Director, and a Director of Corporate Training and Continuing Education. Shirley Chisholm is a Dean of Adult Education. Hallie Queen Brown is an Associate Vice President of Administrative Services. Mary Mcleod Bethune is a Dean of Adult Education. Inez Beverly Prosser is a Vice President of Academic Affairs. Ramona Edelin served as a member of the Board of Trustees. Gloria Blackwell is a Program Director for Health Information Management Technology.

## Findings

The following is a summary of the findings from each of the seven participants in this study. For this study, I initially identified 64 open codes. From there, the codes collapsed to nine categories, which led to the identification of five themes. The following themes were identified in the study (Table 1):

**Table 1**

### *Five Main Themes*

Research Question	Theme
RQ 1: What advancement strategies did African American women use to become and remain a leader in a southeastern community college system?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Engaging with role models, mentors, and representation as an advancement strategy.</li> <li>2. Reflecting on learning experiences and failures as an advancement strategy.</li> <li>3. Building relationships is essential to advancement.</li> </ol>
RQ 2: How do African American women in community college decision-making roles describe the supports and barriers they encountered as they attempted to advance in a southeastern community college system?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. African American women identified combating stereotypes as a barrier and the importance of authenticity.</li> <li>5. African American women described the importance of support from community and peers.</li> </ol>

For these women to overcome the barriers of obtaining a leadership position, it was important to highlight the oppressive nature of climates of the organizations in which

these women attained leadership, which is a constant through all five themes. These women articulated that many institutions are not equipped to promote African American women to leadership, but the participants asserted that these women need to feel welcomed to leadership. This can only happen through sponsorship and mentorship that can help African American women get to the next level in their careers in the community college. The five themes are largely focused on relationships and self-reflection as essential elements to advancement.

### ***Background***

Before detailing the five themes, there was one consistent element related to the participant demographic and background related to readiness when attending college. Although it does not relate to the five themes, this background provides some insight into the challenges these women had not just as leaders in the college but even when attending college. Also of note, the women's preparedness as undergraduate students was to look at the former experiences of these women in their college education to understand how their experiences influenced their aspiration into administrative roles in the community college. These women are well educated and interested in making a difference both professionally and in their communities. Through comparison of responses, these women agreed that education was an important factor to them, but the level of preparation of their undergraduate degree varied immensely. The responses ranged from feeling prepared to feeling completely unprepared. Virginia Randolph assumed the importance of education but lacked direction and an idea of what program she would enroll in. She did



not feel prepared for college. She stated, "I just knew that I had to go to change my trajectory in life so to speak. But I really didn't know what I was going to major in."

Ramona Edelin alluded to her background and where she was from as being an impeding factor in her educational progress. She stated: "So basically, growing up in a small town, you only going to get so much and when you start to go to school and a large account, of course, what they expect of you is going to be totally different." Knowing that her background had limited her, she used her family support and emphasis on education to push herself even though she was not prepared. She continued:

I hit the ground. And I put a lot in and so my expectations were is to get something out of this one day. I can say that I was prepared at the best that could be prepared at that time, but I still had to have some extra extra help to get through some of those tough things.

Shirley Chisholm felt prepared for her undergraduate program in college because of trial and error. She said:

I can confidently say this is because of my experience through trial and error as a college student ... as a freshman in college having probably anywhere from five to six academic advisors and I was misadvised in so many different ways.

Chisholm recalled being in college and not getting the appropriate advising from her advisor, which caused her to question whether she had sufficient credits to graduate with her associate degree. She said,

It was actually at the associate level when I made a mistake. I will tell you this, though, what the beauty of that mistake was the fact that I was taking these upper-

level courses too at the end, and I was actually able to apply those in the elective area.

Prosser, too, had to make adjustments while in college to ensure that she aligned her education with her future goals. To resign to a career was made as she matured as a student. Prosser stated:

When I started school, I initially went in to be a doctor ... halfway through, I changed and went into English ... I was always an English major, but I was an English pre-med major and then I changed and went into English ... I started liking it, so I started teaching.

Bethune asserted that she did not begin as an educator and did not feel prepared and ready for management or administration based on her undergraduate experiences as a student. She stated: "I started my undergrad as a journalism major and then completed my Bachelor of requirements in public relations. I really had no desire, thought or plan to go into education I just kind of literally fell into it." The remaining participants all felt prepared because of their support communities. Randolph made it clear that she understood the power of education but had no idea how she would make a difference. The women felt prepared, but the reasons varied from being a capable student to having a sufficient support community around them and engaging in trial and error.

***Theme 1: Engaging with Role Models, Mentors, and Representation as an Advancement Strategy***

Representation does matter and became apparent as a theme within the study. It was important to understand the representation and role models these women had as students, and how this influenced their role as leaders in the community college today. Thus, this provided insight into the impact of representation on African American students in the college setting. Representation and role models for many of these women were not just personal, but professional as well. Representation matters in education because it provides a model for what students can become, which is important in the African American communities (Corbin et al., 2018). For the women interviewed, they were clear about the impact that a role model and representation or the lack of it had on their journey to leadership in the community college. There were varying answers to representation. However, these women made it clear that representation did matter for them.

Randolph asserted that a lack of representation was important to her desire to become a community college leader. Not having representation was an inspiration to her to be a mentor to others. She wanted a mentor even with the advancements she has made in the past; she still feels that a mentor is important to her further advancement and success. The lack of representation of African Americans and women in institutions where she worked urged her to be a role model for others. She stated, “For me, it was working in the environment and not seeing African American women in those leadership roles ... I didn't know how achievable it would be in the current setting that I was in.”

She could identify these roles, but these roles were not filled by people who looked like her, which became a driving force.

Representation was not just important to inspire these women or model the positive aspects of leadership; it also played a major role in guiding who they did not want to become as a leader in the community college setting. Inez Prosser stated:

I had this one very bad Supervisor. I was dean, and she was the Vice President of Academic Affairs. She was such a bad supervisor to everybody. She really helped me change or not even change she just she just really caused me to look at my leadership and decide who I did not want to be.

Representation was important personally as well. When there was not a role model in the home or someone they could see positively in themselves, it was possible to create the role model for themselves; thus becoming a role model to others. This likely required these women to see themselves in others. Not having representation influenced who they were in these roles because they wanted to be positive representation for the students they served. Bethune agreed with the lack of representation being an important factor in her career choice. Mainly, not seeing someone that looked like her aspired her to be that person. Bethune said: "I finally had my first African American teacher when I was in eighth grade." This delay of a role model or someone in education that looked like her played a part in who she became as the dean of adult education. She stated:

I want to represent them in a way that they are proud to have me represent them ...when I first came on, they thought the secretary was the leader of the program because they never saw the dean ...when they have class parties and stuff. I go

down and I get my paper plate and I fix their food on that plate and I sit down and I eat with them.

Shirley Chisholm asserted that she wanted to use her ability to become a role model because there was not any role models in the home as a child. She wanted better for her family.

Role models are just as important to representation; role models can be representative of positive characteristics to emulate. Edelin asserted: “when I looked out into the work environment, there was one of my mentors, and I wanted to emulate her because she seems to be what I wanted to be as I matured, a mature woman of integrity.”

Gloria Blackwell found a role model in her father who was an advocate for civil rights; she notes that he had a great impact on her and her professional development and being willing to stand up for others. She also agreed that role models and representation were essential to who she became in her profession. She recalled that her teachers would not let her be mediocre. “They expected excellence from me.”

All participants noted that mentorship can play an intricate role in being in a leadership position at a community college. These women have had to overcome barriers as they advanced to leadership positions and much of this advancement came from the mentorship of other African American women who came before them and supported them as they showed an aspiration and traits of leadership. Most of these women admired their mentors and wanted to emulate them because they were impressed with their character. Randolph asserted that “I wanted to emulate her because she seems to be what

I wanted to be as I matured, a mature woman of integrity. A woman who loved people ... took people and train them up in the way that they should go.”

Bethune depicted the influence of her mentor as well and some important aspects he taught her. She said, “My spiritual mentor slash, my covering. He's very heavy in the community, and in addition to his ministerial duty, but he would pray for me constantly, just because of the environment that I was in connected to the college.” The supportive nature of Bethune’s mentor was not just professional but spiritual also. He even taught her “The whole notion of cya (cover your ass) making sure I'm documenting things, but also being able to stand my ground and learning how to defend myself.” His interest in her life went beyond professional because he even supported her in learning to take care of herself and her wellbeing.

Prosser asserted that she emulated her mentors “open mindedness, his ability to see things from all perspective ... Almost like a worldliness in the sense of key value, diversity and culture.” She stated, “he taught me how to deal with people who are different and how to kind of navigate through those differences because he valued all kinds of people from all different walks of life from all different cultures.”

Mentors can provide mentees with opportunities that can fuel their future advancements.

Mentorship was very beneficial to Edelin. She said:

I had someone who sought me out at a conference and just happened to see me communicating with some other women. And she said to me, I have a position for you ... she would not leave me alone. And she took me by my hand, she put me in the position, and I have held this position for seven years.

Mentors can be valuable to giving a person the very first opportunity to prove who they are. Overtime, they can grow these skills into leadership skills. Blackwell stated that she was spotted at a conference by someone who became her mentor and welcomed her into collegiate education as a part-time instructor in her program. Her part-time commitment in less than 30 days went from “part time to full time to 10 years later. And I went from an instructor to a program director halfway through the career.”

Mentorship should be proper and appropriate within the community college for faculty and staff, especially those aspiring to leadership. Bethune stated: “I was promised a mentor and at the time. I was the only Black dean. Black female dean. Who gone mentor me?”

In retrospect, Bethune said,

I never got a mentor and in my last five years they just threw me under a very maniacal, socially inept leader, the quote unquote leader who made life hell ...You making it you make it where I you know, Sunday night, my stomach is in knots because I don't want to come to work Monday morning.

Mentorship must go beyond simply assigning someone to help another person. The mentor should share characteristics and experiences of the person they mentor because they have a better understanding of what it would take for this person to get from their current position to a leadership position and lead successfully.

## ***Theme 2: Reflecting on Learning Experiences and Failures as an Advancement***

### ***Strategy***

Reflecting on learning experiences and failures as an advancement strategy was another theme that emerged from the interviews. These women eagerly shared their experiences. Not all of their past professional experiences were positive ones. The failures were attributed to the overall operation of the institutions that made it possible for them to not be as effective as they desired. Many of these women made mistakes and even served in a different capacity to their communities before they were successful as a community college leader.

Randolph found her way as a professional through serving as she stated:

I pretty much stayed on that committee for about five or six years. And then of course, when I got married and had my child, I kind of backed away but then I got back on that committee, again, like 2015, 2016 and then they started asking me to chair it ... But all the experience that I got from serving on that committee has helped me in this position.

These women used every opportunity to serve on committees to obtain their positions.

Bethune made it clear that she received very little professional guidance. She stated, "I ended up transitioning over to adult education as an instructor, but none of those experiences prepared me for education administration or management." Some experience came at a cost, and these women have internalized their experiences to drive them to have better experiences professionally. African American women must be willing to seek professional experiences that can refine skills and help them become a valid



leadership option in the field. Prosser stated: “If we look outside of that, and we look for professional development opportunities that are really made for us, tailor made by us for us. We still get the same result. We still become better leaders.” These women know how important it is to continue to develop themselves professionally. Prosser emphasized the importance of professional development and not just any professional development but workshops and conferences that speak to the African American woman and her aspirations. She stated:

I took a group of women of color through because they weren't just Black women. And they actually were some White women in there who just wanted to learn how to become better leaders of women of color, but I took them through.

Some important questions these women needed to answer were the following:

What is your story? What are your experiences? How did these experiences shape your leadership? Where do you want to see your leadership journey? How can you use your experience to shape your leadership?

Blackwell confirmed the necessity of training and refining skills to assume a decision making role. She stated,

My professional experience that led to my assuming decision-making position was my training and well first of all my education and my training with my first career, which is at Georgia Department of Labor, and I decided that I would do some in kind service and volunteer work for some people in the community that was it was a program called TANF at that time in the welfare program.

There can be an intentional nature to becoming a community college leader for the African American woman. This intent does not have to just be about the African American woman, but it can also help other cultures know how to lead and interact with these women as well.

Many authors frame the success of Black women in education as being effortless or without challenges or need for support (Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019). Education for African American women is not without challenges, but it is a gateway to achieving professional success and a step toward obtaining a leadership position. Edelin asserted: “So obtaining higher education, in whatever it is that you seek is always a big advantage for women of color. We have to have to have more in our luggage than most.”

Chisholm confirmed the importance of education by saying,

I would definitely say education. Because I've learned and I've seen that can truly be a factor as to whether a person is promoted or elevated professionally ... one of the first things they look at on the educational background.

These women were adamant that there was no single strategy that lead them into a leadership role. They made different mistakes because of the opportunities they were afforded. However, each woman recalled using failures to catapult them to their next level, not deter them from moving forward. Most of these women lacked role models to help them omit certain failures; however, they took the experiences that they had and turned them into experiences that would take them to the next level in their careers. With a formal education and learning experience, these women were able to achieve a leadership position in the community college.

***Theme 3: Building Relationships is Essential to Advancement***

A valuable theme that surfaced in the data collection phase of the study is building relationships that can be essential to the African American woman's journey to leadership in the community college. Building relationships both external and internal to the institution is important to being an effective leader and coming into the role of leadership. These relationships can contribute to other opportunities and even acceptance within the institutions. Bethune stated: "I might have 10 staff members and I can't say we all buddies, but it is important to build the proper relationships in order to get the job done." Blackwell said, "When you serve with people as long as I did, I think they began to accept you. You know, that's how they operate." Building relationships create moments of getting to know one another that can combat stereotypes and provide a true reflection of who the individual person is regardless of their race or gender.

Having a strong support system within the organization can be useful to the African American woman leader in the community college. Prosser stated: "it's really good if it's a culture where everybody, all the leaders have common goals and they work together." Building relationships professionally may add responsibilities that can be essential to the journey to leadership. Blackwell stated:

Even though I worked for the department of labor, TANF was in the Department of DEFACS. I would go in and provide some workforce development training for the women and I would do it at the technical college setting ... next thing you know, there was a state level program. Those women were given an opportunity to learn how to be successful in a job search. So that was a connecting force with

me, networking with people that were in the technical college. The president of the college at that time, thought it was just a beautiful thing, and he decided to ask me if I wanted to serve on his board of directors ... And from there that that was how I got on the board of directors at the technical college.

In addition to building relationships, effective communication and visibility in the college and the community can also be beneficial to the African American woman's leadership journey. Communication and visibility are two important aspects of building relationships because the visibility allows the African American woman to portray her passion for the community college and communicate this through her visibility in the community and the institution. Chisholm stated: "Speak up. Don't cower in or humble down, I think that too many African American men and women do that when they're in such places where they can progressively move up the ladder ... Because I think that if they do or they think they do, then that will hinder their chances of maybe being promoted. Edelin remained visible by keeping the needs of the people she served in front of her, and this kept her visible in her community. She stated: "My strategy was to meet the needs of people. I was working in workforce development. I was seeing people who had lost their job who was who were downtrodden, who didn't know how to go about getting the job." She helped people get jobs and this created visibility for her that made her valuable to her community as she created opportunities of employment for people who were a part of her culture. She even used her personal time to help those in her community fill out applications and find jobs. Edelin recalled:

And then there were just so many people that, you know, I couldn't help them necessarily through the office, because of the workload or whatever else. But in my private life, I can help them and no people not going to keep that a secret, which she said very helpful.

The visibility of these women in the community college may contribute to cross training and being valuable to the college setting in more than one way. Randolph stated:

Be somebody who's well versed in a number of different things ... I look at resumes and bios of African American women who are in President roles at colleges, they've worked in the whole college. Now when I look at their White counterparts, they typically have worked in one institution, one or two institutions in one particular capacity, and that's it.

Being visible came with more responsibility and personal sacrifices for the sake of advancement. For the African American woman, it calls being resourceful and working to prove that they are prepared for any challenges. Brown asserted her meaning of being visible as she stated: "You have to first make yourself available. It may not pay but gives you more experience ... that makes the higher ups know that you are prepared and ready for leadership ... You can't just stay in your job description."

These women have had to give more than others in some regard because they must overcome the stereotypes that work against them in the work place. Randolph speaks of the sacrifices she has made to get to where she is today. She said:

I was always one willing to learn or willing to go the extra mile. So I would take on sometimes extra projects... I always wanted to know what other people did in

their particular job ... because I knew as the African American female, I had to have more than my counterparts.

Chisholm continued:

For me, it's just those opportunities as a leader that I have to see more and be a part of more ... I have that opportunity to really engage with other leaders from other college community colleges, businessmen and women ... other employers, CEOs, and other community officials and government officials. It just, it just stirs up a curiosity.

To be visible and lead in a community, the leader should know the community and realize that the students are the community and a stakeholder that adds value to the success of the institution. Randolph stated: "I think to be in a leadership role in the community college system, you got to know the community... if we don't have the connections with the community, we don't have students, we got no job." Bethune said that serving in her community has become important not just to her, but she teaches her children to have a role in serving the community. She stated: "Like we don't even do Christmas we serve. I mean, we recognize Christmas for what it is. They have always been there while I have served; they have always helped me serve."

Building relationships can mean developing a mentorship, but it can also mean communicating well with others to show them that you are prepared as a leader. Communication and visibility are valuable to developing relationships. However, these women admit that they must create visibility in so many ways that it can become overwhelming. They realize that this is not usually the expectation for their counterparts.

***Theme 4: African American Women Identified Combating Stereotypes as a Barrier and identified the Importance of Authenticity***

Within the professional environment, African American women are often combating stereotypes that have been assigned to this demographic from the media. These women often have to combat these stereotypes and undo the image that has been placed upon them that misinforms others of who the African American woman is and can be. Combating these stereotypes surfaced in the data from the participants. Chisholm stated:

Because in southeast rural Georgia, there's this misconception about African American women, even those that are educated that she may have an education, but there's got to be that ghetto mentality, hidden behind all of that somewhere ... people look for that in any kind of way, from the way that you dress, how you speak, how you deliver yourself, how you walk. These are things that, you do have to be mindful of because there are these misconceptions, because people are so curious about African American women, even to this day and about the Black culture. That they try to understand it through television, through social media through the internet. Those are not realistic depictions of African American women.

Despite those who still try to insult and demean the African American woman, there is still hope for a more positive depiction of the African American woman in the media professionally. Brown stated, "With a Black lady in the office that really helped project us, we just got to come out to be professional ... You got to show your professionalism."

Edelin stated that many of the younger African American women today have the chance to grow professionally. She noted that for many of these women, they will learn to combat the microaggressions and stereotypes in time as they mature:

They're smart, but they're not mature. When you're not mature, you get drawn into the negativity. With maturity, you don't get in at tit for tat conversation with people when they're challenging you. I see the future is getting brighter, as long as our generation of women understand I'm smart, but I got to know how to handle my maturity as well, especially with this kind of environment.

Combating stereotypes can often mean not changing appearance to fit in to what the American society has deemed professional. Many of these women have struggled with their appearance in what they wear or how they style their hair thinking that they must choose styles that are approved by their White counterparts to be accepted professionally. There can be social pressures on the African American woman to extract certain parts of herself when in the professional setting, and this could come from criticism of the way she dresses or wear her hair. Prosser stated: "when I interviewed for this job, I really struggled with my hair. If I was gonna have my hair straight, or I was going to have my hair in its natural curls, and I think I ended up straightening my hair, but I said I would never do it again." Randolph affirmed the microaggressions that African American women may struggle to deal with in the professional setting while trying to aspire to leadership. She stated: "I remember being hesitant about braids because there was no Black people there. I took my braids out, and my supervisor who was a White female made the comment, Oh, I like your hair; it looks real professional."



The angry Black woman is a stereotype that seems to follow the African American woman wherever she goes, especially in the professional environment. However, this stereotype can be combatted by simply staying professional and owning who she is and her knowledge as an African American woman.

Blackwell stated: “A lot of Black women have the reputation of being angry Black women and we're not. We're just trying to get our point across. There's no nonsense that we don't like to tolerate.” Brown was shown by a Black woman how not to lead, and she used those experiences to strive to prove that she could be an effective leader in the community college. Over time, she was able to assert herself and show that she was capable and prepared to carry out her role as vice president. She stated:

A Black lady got me from Defacs and brought me over to the community college. Once I started working up under her, she was a bitch. That taught me that was not how I want to manage ... I don't have to raise my voice, I don't have to curse to relate the point to you ... some White parents have walked away and try to find out who was higher than me because they didn't want to do deal with a Black woman.

Knowing that the angry Black woman stereotypes exist, these women have tried to combat this stereotype. In doing so, they are intentional in their interactions with others professionally to combat these stereotypes. Brown said: “I don't go in there and I don't want them to respond to fear. A lot of Black women that have dealt with those in higher positions, they like to lead through fear.” Prosser stated: “people may think, she's hard to get along with or she's gonna turn into the angry Black woman and it makes people not

want to work with us. I've really been intentional about collaborating inside of the college.” Bethune stated that she combatted these stereotypes by defending herself, not fighting back, which was likely what was expected of her based on the stereotype of the African American woman. She said,

I learned that there's a difference between defending myself and fighting back ... fighting back takes it to level 10; it's I'm going to get my point across or I'm coming into this meeting defensive ... I had one of my one of the White VPS even said, I don't know why she messes with Mary like that ... it's like she gets some kind of thrill off of it and that's when it clicked like this heifer know what she's doing to me and I'm letting her do it.

Defending herself was different. Defending herself made her a better leader and allowed her to combat stereotypes and not portray the very traits that her White counterparts expected. Defending herself or “standing up for myself was, one, always going in prepared. Whether kicking back against a budgetary item, or you got something slick to, I come back with the facts. I'll make you accountable for what you say.” In learning to defend herself, she did not get upset or validate the stereotype.

Prosser validated the sentiments of Bethune by recalling experiences of her authority being questioned and trying to understand how to combat this when in a seat of authority. She recalls times when she was trying to handle herself without portraying the stereotype of the angry Black woman. Prosser recalled being overlooked because she was short in stature and a Black woman. She said:

Let's say we're walking these community meetings or something like that. They'll start talking to him. Normally, it hits the people when we do introductions, or the person I'm with will say, Oh, no, no, I'm not. I'm not the VP; she is ... race and gender has made people overlook me almost to a point of disrespect ... then I get this air about me, where it's like, alright, let me let me talk the talk. Let me just go ahead and show out so that I can leave all the cards on the table. I love it. I love looking at me because I'm the decision maker. I'm the decision maker.

Institutional inequities are likely to emerge from the stereotypes and microaggressions that are often manifested within the organization. During data collection, institutional inequities were apparent in the data. These women often felt looked over for positions and were often mistreated without consequence. White counterparts in decision making roles can offer very guidance and even insight some of the institutional inequities without notice or consequence. Bethune stated:

My Vice President over me. I don't know why the hell she's over me. What are you teaching me? ... I wanted to make sure that I define my role in leadership, not management. Don't manage the program, but I want to lead people; I want to lead that's what I'm here for.

Edelin stated, "It's part of the reason why morale is so low right now, because of ineffective organization decisions. And we're at a level where we don't feel like we've been heard." African American women endure administrators and supervisors who are uncompromising and expect African American women to work positions that are not clearly objectified. Randolph stated:

The different roles that I had when I first got into the technical college/ community college setting, I started off as the career placement and Development Coordinator, which was in the Student Affairs Division. I did that for four years. Then I was also an adjunct instructor for like a year. Then I went to economic development. In that first year in economic development, I had three titles. This was, what was the chaos. Now, if I got three different titles, and my job duties aren't changing, why are the titles changing? I started off as a community services director. Then they switched continuing education director. And then my final was director of corporate training and continuing education. So, three job titles in one year, one division.

The participants stated that they would like a fair chance at leadership positions, especially when many of the administrators are unsupportive and not effectively carrying out their roles. To have a fair chance at a leadership position in the community college, these women deserve the chance to be mentored and a chance to move into a leadership position and have equal pay and opportunities for other advancement. Chisholm stated: "African American women need to be given fair opportunities as their counterparts on all levels, from leadership roles to equal pay and equal opportunities for everybody."

Bethune recalls an incident regarding unequal pay. She stated:

One day I was conducting my budget meeting and my vice president came in and said that we're gone always be in the black because we don't pay you near as much as we was paying Paul. She saw nothing wrong with what she said. She

joked about it in front of people. She didn't say it with just me in there; it was five other people and everybody's eyes got so big.

The blatant nature in which these women are overlooked as viable options for leadership is demeaning and leaves no chance for them to have a voice and use their voice in this professional arena. Overlooking these women is an action that has happened for quite some time. Blackwell, a community college board of trustee, stated: "I've been around a long time, and I've seen at least three vice president of academic affairs that have been appointed. We got people within the system; it kills the morale." When there is a leadership opportunity, African American women or a viable solution for these roles; however, they are usually overlooked and the position is awarded to an external candidate who knows little about the institution they will serve. When one of these women enter into a leadership position, it is likely that she is the first one and/or the only African American woman to assume the position. This can be quite overwhelming. Blackwell stated, "I was just one of three African American women in leadership at the college." Bethune also stated, "when this position came up, and I apply for it, met the minimum qualifications, but I also brought something to the table that my White male predecessors I'm the first Black woman in this position." Becoming the only one is a way to break generational curses and combat stereotypes for African American women. However, it becomes a huge responsibility to be the only person to carry this weight.

When there are institutional inequities, there is the risk of professional bullying to occur. During the interviews, several of the participants recalled instances of being bullied. Many of these women gained great insights from these experiences. Brown

stated: "I was over like three White women, and they were older than I was so they really tried to treat me as if I didn't know anything." This can create hostility between the person is leading. Institutions must ensure policies are in place that does not uphold bullying or failure to comply with the demands of a leader simply because of race or gender. Bethune endured a situation that became an outlier in the data as it was one of the most extreme cases of workplace aggression. She recalled an emotional experience with an employee as the dean of adult education. As a dean, she approves leave and working from home for the employees she leads. She had an employee who wanted to work from home but was not given her all. Bethune recalls what happens when she addressed the issue with the employee. She stated:

She got in my face. She literally attacked me in front of other staff members and students. She was so close to me like our knees are touching that's like she was in my physical space ... one of my staff members pulled me away, and then she's walking behind me mumbling and she said something derogatory to me, and I stopped and I turned around ... I got my things and I left the campus. Two very negative things happened after that. The next day when I came to work, she was in her office, and I intentionally just didn't say anything to her. I was still trying to diffuse the situation. She went to HR told HR I was a monster and resigned. That same day, my boss my leadership, called me into their office and wrote me up because she said I had conduct unbecoming of a dean. And I said, so you mean tell me I am not allowed to defend my personal space. This woman was in my in my face in my space, and you're writing me up? I still have that right up to this

day. I'm going to get you leadership training. I'm going to get you all these books because you need training, that's not how a dean acts. I haven't gotten it until this day. I was written up for that.

The situation Bethune endured highlights the instructional culture that can be conducive to discord when African American women are in leadership positions. Not having support from the leaders above her, it was apparent that she had to overcome this situation on her own. This also created an opportunity for the employee to overlook what was expected of her as stated by the dean. Institution's policymakers must develop policies that protects leadership and create for African American women who are in these roles to ensure that the institutional structure promotes her leadership and not minimized the respect that should be had for her. This was a situation where the African American woman had to persist through resistance, which called for her action to stand her ground and stand up for herself, yet she was reprimanded for her actions.

The institutional inequities that exist within the community college can cause the African American woman to ask important questions about their career and the climate of the environments in which they aspire to serve. Randolph stated: "I didn't even get an interview for certain positions that I know I was qualified for. There's nobody like you in leadership. So who can you go to make a complaint a formal complaint about what has happened?" When hired, these women can feel as if they are filling a quota especially since when opportunities occur for leadership training, the African American woman is not the first to be chose for these events to ensure that she is prepared for leadership. Randolph continues: "they had a leadership program through the technical college

system. Why wasn't I going to the leadership conference? Why wasn't I a part of the leadership program to help develop me and network other individuals in my field?"

When aspiring for leadership positions, these women must research information on their own and use their own expertise to develop themselves into a leader. The lack of preparation for leadership masked with the constant aim to be visible becomes quite overwhelming for these women and for some of them it affects their health and personal relationships. These women are constantly trying to maintain in these positions with very little support. They realize that any little mistake they make could sabotage their career. Institutional efforts to create an institutional environment that is equitable and offers opportunity for leadership based on merit combats the mentality that these women are the token. Instead, they are valued more and respected, which allows them to serve in the capacity that they originally intended. Chisholm stated: "They're still to some degree that being in rural Southeast Georgia that people still kind of operate under this Good ole boy system, Jim Crow mentality." Having to combat a system that is not conducive to advancement can be overwhelming for the African American woman trying to navigate these professional environments for leadership attainment. Edelin stated: I would say the bulk of the people on the board were White males. And they were very strong opinionated. They weren't necessarily looking out for each and everybody."

Bethune stated: "My White male predecessors, they sat in their offices and got their doctoral degrees or they sat in the offices counting how much leave they had."

She continued:



I believe I was hired because I was a Black woman in the sense that they realized that they had not had one before I was hired. There was only one Black woman in leadership. She was a VP. There were no Black deans at all. And so after having two White boys who literally jumped ship. One of them brought the Secretary in his office and said I'm gonna show you how to run the budget. Within a week, she knew how to run the budget. He took all his three months' worth of leave and left, just clocked out and just left. The next one was so disconnected from everybody because he sat in his office doing an online doctoral program. The minute he got his doctorate degree. He was gone.

Even in a system that does not seem to value the African American woman and her voice, it is important that she stands on her values. Edelin recalls a challenge for her where she was stood on her values and did not waiver.

Because of the system that is at play within the community college institutions, African American woman are not sought after as the first option for leadership roles. They are often passed over for roles that they are equipped to obtain. Prosser recalled a time when she was passed up for a leadership position. She stated:

I was interviewed for a VPA position before I got this one and I didn't get it. The entire panel told me that I was the number one candidate as far as the interview process, I interviewed better than the man who they offered the position to and the President called me himself. He said you did an awesome job. You will be a vice president one day and probably soon, but I gave him this position because he went

up for this position before, and I overlooked him to hire somebody else. And I just didn't want to do that again.

A system where a person obtains a position not because they are best for the job but because they were overlooked creates an institution of leaders who are in positions based on who they are and not the values and merits of their potential to lead.

There are so many stereotypes and misconceptions of who the African American woman is. These misconceptions come from sources that do not consider her womanhood, but instead focus on her blackness (Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019). This places stereotypes on the African American woman not just from White counterparts, but these stereotypes can come from their own community. However, the participants of this study affirmed their need to stay true to who they were and lead authentically from this very place. Shirley

Prosser asserted: "I believe in authentic leadership... because I think there's often this temptation to like morph into who we should be for the organization or for the people that we work for." In being true to who she is, she is able to show up in other areas of her life effectively and positively, but also be an authentic leader who cares about those she leads. She continued:

One of the challenges that I've seen is that people want me to cut off pieces of me to be the person in the seat, and you can't do that. People expect me to say, well, let me find somebody else for my child. You know, so to be a VP, and listen, I say all the time. There are times plenty of times when my family has to sacrifice for

this job. But on the same token, the job should understand the sacrifice for the family ... it is best for people to show up as their whole selves.

Through this authentic approach, she can establish a positive rapport with those who she leads within her department. This positive rapport can maintain a positive morale of the department also. She stated:

It will empower them to show up with what they need to get the product to me that I need. So that I can keep doing what I need to do in this organization ... you can handle whatever you need handle from home. Sometimes it's just that simple ... people forget that.

Leading from an authentic place is not an easy task and does not come without challenges especially for the African American women. Aspects of the culture that may be favorable to her could confirm a stereotype that is detrimental to her journey to leadership. Blackwell asserted that her authenticity was not always received positively especially when she stuck to her values, which went against the ideas of everyone else on the board in which she served. This scenario also shows how the system overlooks valuable employees to place someone in a position who is well known or come from a prominent background despite showing his or her ability to lead effectively. She stated:

I'll go back to one that I share with you about picking that President they weren't very happy with me because after I brought the fact that he was a bad student. He didn't bring any quality leadership to education at all. When I spoke on it, people began to side with me. I think it did impact the inside person who was applying

for the job but not with the people who wanted to bring a businessman How dare you? Just cause George Bush got up and said he made C's and D's in school.

She continued to stick to her values in this situation stating the following:

I didn't encourage my kids to make C's and D's in school. They had to do better.

And they did. But somewhere along the way, I just noticed this guy was given everything he was given. I read everything I saw in his in his paperwork and when I got all the way to the back and saw his grades .... He had like a one point GPA.

He was from a prominent family.

Prosser added to Blackwell's account stating:

Being an authentic leader is difficult ... you have to accept the fact that everybody won't appreciate your authenticity ... but it's also rewarding because you know that wherever you go in leadership, if you are authentic, it was you.

Authentic leadership from African American women can take on different forms; however, Prosser and Randolph agreed that there can be a sense of servitude engrained in authenticity. Prosser asserted: "I am an authentic leader. And I am to a degree a servant leader I believe in rolling up my sleeves and helping my folks do the work." Randolph highlighted servitude as an aspect that she saw from the community of women who raised her and emphasized how this shaped her leadership style and the authenticity of it. She stated: "Most of these women, they were servants ... The servant type style was more prevalent to me. I saw a lot of people volunteer and I saw a lot of people giving back to the community." Bethune also saw servitude as being an aspect of authentic leadership. She recalls an amazing way in which she has served her community. She said:

I went to my church and I said, Look, I think it'd be really good thing if we did and we did free GED and other education classes here. I'll go out here to the college and I'll negotiate and see what we can do. And so they came to our community center, they bought computers and laptops and furnished it and all that and for two years, I managed that program for free.

To serve others is not easy professionally, especially when many of these women have families in which they must serve as well. For many Black women, servitude is an aspect that becomes engrained in who they are and filters over into their professional world. Authenticity is a way to establish equal footing as these women obtain leadership in their own way by using who they are authentically and their credentials to gain a leadership position. Prosser stated, "It's not easy being an African American female leader but if that leader stays true to herself, it's a lot easier to deal with everything that's gonna come at her." Through Prosser's authenticity, she has learned to demand her respect when in the room full of professionals. "If I'm in a room and a White male is being called Dr. so and so and I'm being called just Inez, I'm going to say I prefer Dr. Prosser." Knowing who she is and leading from an authentic space assist in demanding respect that creates equity showing that the credentials are equal and, in some cases, higher.

With this distinction, respect is demanded. Through these demands, the African American woman becomes visible, and her achievements and credentials set the ground for equality. Prosser stated: "when I see that there is a distinct difference between what one person is being called and what I'm being called, I speak up." She emphasized the fact "that I am on equal standing or education as the person sitting next to me." Being

authentic to who they are, African American women have an opportunity to work together and assist one another.

For many of these women, their authenticity is enriched by their innate characteristics and values that they have developed over time. Chisholm stated. "I'm a proud Black woman. I'm proud of where I come from, and I don't shy away from it ...it's only made me better. I do appreciate being influenced by others, but I take great pride in being myself." Bethune asserted that her authentic leadership comes from her respect for her students. Bethune stated:

I need to be that community partner that brings value to the situation. That will still you know, go above and beyond to serve and to work and to find Win Win situations. I need to be the one that can clearly communicate what I need and vision for my program. I do need to have that edge that allows me to advocate for my students and staff.

Through Bethune's authenticity, she has validated herself as a leader. She feels that the work to be done is the focus and she can only do her job from a place of authenticity. She stated: "I have so many old White people tell me you'll never get higher leadership. Then there must be something else for me to do because I refuse to not be authentic and then sacrifice who I am." Through authenticity, Prosser has managed to set boundaries and become more flexible to ensure that she and her staff take care of themselves to be most productive when in the professional environment. She stated:

I do set boundaries. So there are boundaries to where I will and won't do for this job. There are boundaries to how I show up. I value my mental state. I take mental

health days, because the job is stressful and it is demanding. I take a sick day, and then I'm able to communicate that to people who are supervised, and I'm able to say, you know, if you need a minute, or if you need a day. I had a direct report who found out that his wife had cancer and he found out at work during interviews. He continues to go through those interviews while his wife is texting him and all that but then when he talked to me, he was kind of processing on the phone with me and came up and I said, Hey, listen. Why are you still at work? Go be with your wife. Don't worry about anything. I'll take care of what you were taking care of. I give it because I know I have to do it for myself sometimes, and I think we value that all the way around with those that we love. It makes us better leaders.

For these women, it takes a lot to admit that their culture is not the status quo of professionalism. However, they can use who they are to break the mold of what professionalism should be. These women aim to walk in who they are combatting stereotypes and basking in who they authentically are unapologetically. This helps to change the image of professionalism and welcome aspects of the African American culture into professionalism as these women allow their leadership and actions to speak for who they are. The authenticity of these women presents them as proud of who they are, and this pride leads to the women's demands for respect despite the institutional culture they must function in.

***Theme 5: African American Women Described the Importance of Support from Community and Peers***

The African American woman has always identified with one another in a way that establishes a sisterhood. This sisterhood does not exist in one age group, but women of older generations find a way to pass down their wisdom to the next generation through narrative and experience (Collier, 2019). For many of these women, their community emerged from the very beginning with the mother and grandmothers being a strong force in the lives of these women. However, those who did not have a strong sisterhood at home were able to find a community outside of the home that played a significant role in the education and leadership success. For other women, there was an African American woman in the community who was supportive of them and was integral to their current role in leadership in the community college. These women mentioned African American mothers, mothers-in-law, and teachers as being significant to their academic and professional progression in life. Virginia Randolph confirmed the impact of the African American woman's community as she stated:

I got bits and pieces of things from different individuals. My mom, was hard working and so I think the hustle in me like, if I need to get two jobs, I get two jobs. I gotta do what I got to do. I think I got it from my mom. Also, I was raised with my great aunt, who, at the time was a hairstylist. She left Brunswick and went to hair school in New York and then came back. I saw entrepreneurship at a young age and how she was able to like, buy rental properties and stuff, you



know, way back then. I had another aunt who was entrepreneur always involved the community involvement.

Edelin found value in family support and recalls the time with her mom and other African American women who influenced her life. Edelin stated: “I come from a family of two strong women's my grandmother and my mother, who was always very encouraging to me, even when I had those setbacks.” The support of other African American women is extremely significant and inspires other African American women to succeed through the sharing of similar experiences even if in different professions. Sharing experiences and navigating organizational cultures and stakeholders who do not see the value in African American woman, can create a discussion within the African American female community in how they can create environments that are more inviting. Prosser stated:

I have a tribe of Black women who are just like, awesome and if I'm in a bind, I call one of them ... the more we speak out, the more we create support for one another that we're not in competition. I'm trying to help you get there. You try to help me get there. It works.

Brown was supported by several African American women who beginning with her mother-in-law. These women were older than her and could provide her with mature advice as she advanced in her career. Edelin continued saying, “Well, basically, in the home you know was my mother and my grandmother.” The mother and grandmothers were strong supporters of the African American women and instilled in these women a sense of resilience that has been valuable to their careers. African American women are known mother to others; thus, the term othermothering (Collins, J., 2022). Blackwell

even took on the motherly role within her profession. She stated, “I was accused of being the mother hen of the agency... when I retired, my name was mama J.”

Earlier in the interview, Chisholm stated that her mother was not a high school graduate, and her family experienced many different traumas; however, there was an African American woman teacher who played an intricate role in her life. Her experiences show that having an African American woman who is a positive role model in a student’s life can do wonders for their self-esteem and create a vision for their own future. This teacher was aware of her student’s culture and could help them in ways that other teachers could not. Chisholm stated: “it was my seventh-grade teacher ... I’ve shown her gratitude ... it was an educator, a teacher who had truly helped me to discover who I was ... believed in me and accepted me for just who I was.” She even recalled the characteristics that made this woman significant to her progression as she recalls: “She was she was a forward thinker. She was understanding. She was non- judgmental. She was respectful. This great sense of humor. She was honest and with integrity”

Community for African American women is extremely valuable. Prosser stated: “it’s important to have that support group of African American women who you can go to and be real with and say this happened or how do I handle this, or I just need to gripe about this.”

Within community, spirituality is a very strong factor that African American women attribute the attainment of a leadership position in a community college. Edelin stated: “I’ve always had the faith and I always prayed and always ask God to give me and lead and guide me so my spirituality has always been with me when I had my ups and

when I had my downs.” In addition to community support and mentors, Prosser asserted that there is a spiritual and faith-based element to being an African American female leader that allows for a diverse group of supports professionally and spiritually. She stated:

A large lead or something that I rely on heavily, heavily is my faith in God. So my spiritual I guess my spirituality and my spiritual bliss have helped me to overcome challenges and barriers and obstacles to keep moving forward.

Chisholm confirmed her spirituality and its part in her success as a leader by saying: “I believe in God. And I always say that, no matter what happens in my life, especially all the great wonderful things if it doesn't come from Him, then I don't want it.” Bethune’s biggest supporter and reliance came from God. Not having all of the tools for leadership and learning as she goes has become a very important factor in her success. She stated: “I'm just figuring it out and trusting God.”

Many of the women interviewed highlighted that their road to leadership could not have happened without support. However, it is likely that this support came from another African American woman who held spirituality and education as important. Although these women lack professional mentors in many cases, the support they received from the African American community was important to their drive to continue to aspire for leadership not just for themselves but for their community as well.

### **Summary and the Project Deliverable**

Five main themes emerged from data collected from seven African American female leaders in semistructured, one-on-one interviews. Three themes emerged related

to Research Question 1 (see Table 2): engaging with role models, mentors, and representation as an advancement strategy; reflecting on learning experiences and failures as advancement strategy, and building relationships is essential to advancement.

**Table 2**

*Themes Related to RQ1 and Related Quotes*

Theme	Participant Quote
Engaging with role models, mentors, and representation as an advancement strategy.	<p>Lack of Representation: “For me, it was working in the environment and not seeing African American women in those leadership roles ... I didn’t know how achievable it would be in the current setting that I was in.”</p> <p>Representation: “when I looked out into the work environment, there was one of my mentors, and I wanted to emulate her because she seems to be what I wanted to be as I matured, a mature woman of integrity.”</p>
Reflecting on learning experiences and failures as an advancement strategy.	<p>“My professional experience that led to my assuming decision-making position was my training and well first of all my education and my training with my first career, which is at Georgia Department of Labor, and I decided that I would do some in kind service and volunteer work for some people in the community that was it was a program called TANF at that time in the welfare program.”</p> <p>“So obtaining higher education, in whatever it is that you seek is always a big advantage for women of color. We have to have to have more in our luggage than most.”</p>
Building relationships is essential to advancement.	<p>“It’s really good if it’s a culture where everybody, all the leaders have common goals and they work together.”</p> <p>Building relationships professionally may add responsibilities that can be essential to the journey to leadership.”</p>

These themes emerged as advancement strategies that women who have obtained a leadership position in the community college urged had a profound impact on their journey to leadership.

The first emergent theme of representation presented representation and the lack of it as being a motivating factor for these women to achieve a leadership position. One participant urged that the lack of representation inspired her to leadership. As she reviewed the professional environment that she was in, she did not see an African American woman in her organization, which inspired her despite not knowing how attainable a role to leadership would be for her.

On the other hand, one participant who was fortunate to see leadership from an African American woman was inspired to leadership because she had a first-hand view of its impact on the institution. The second emergent theme of research question 1 focused on using past learning experiences and failures to promote leadership advancement. One participant recalls working for another state organization and using what she learned in this institution to advance her career into leadership.

The third theme of research question 1 was building relationships that can catapult the career of the African American women. These relationships allow the African American woman to remain visible in these organizations. She urged that education was important to the African American woman and was also a big part of staying visible in relation to other colleagues. Although unfair, the African American woman needs education and positive professional relationships to ensure that she has much in her professional luggage than any other demographic. Through these three advancement

strategies that emerged as themes, the participants were able to obtain and retain a leadership position at a community college.

Two themes emerged related to Research Question 2 (see Table 3): African American women identified combating stereotypes as a barrier and the importance of authenticity, and support from the African American community and peers. Combating stereotypes comes with a massive job of overcoming those characteristics that have been assigned to all African American women despite any efforts they may make to better themselves or live very differently from the stereotype. One participant asserted that the reputation of an angry Black woman is not likely to be the true representation of the professional African American women; instead, this is the African American woman's defense mechanism for "no nonsense that we don't like to tolerate." Another participant urged that they want African American women to cut off pieces of themselves to have a seat at the professional table. They think that an African American woman can assume a leadership role and be a good mother or wife, but these women can have it all including a leadership role, especially if they are allowed to lead from an authentic place where they do not have to be ashamed to be a mother, wife and a professional leader.

The participants of this study also urged that African American community and support is significant to overcoming barriers within an educational institution to attain a leadership position. One participant denoted that there are a tribe of Black women in her community have and still support her in her personal and professional movement. The African American community can become a quilt as there can be support from various people in the community. The participant stated,

My mom, was hard working and so I think the hustle in me like, if I need to get two jobs, I get two jobs. I gotta do what I got to do. I think I got it from my mom.

Also, I was raised with my great aunt, who, at the time was a hairstylist.

Overall, an African American woman can use her community to learn ethics, entrepreneurship, and leadership skills that are an asset to her when she assumes a role as a leader in the community college.

### Table 3

#### *Themes Related to RQ2 and Related Quotes*

Theme	Participant Quote
African American women identified combating stereotypes as a barrier and the importance of authenticity.	<p>“A lot of Black women have the reputation of being angry Black women and we're not. We're just trying to get our point across. There's no nonsense that we don't like to tolerate.”</p> <p>“One of the challenges that I've seen is that people want me to cut off pieces of me to be the person in the seat, and you can't do that. People expect me to say, well, let me find somebody else for my child. You know, so to be a VP, and listen, I say all the time. There are times plenty of times when my family has to sacrifice for this job. But on the same token, the job should understand the sacrifice for the family ... it is best for people to show up as their whole selves.</p>
African American women described the importance of support from community and peers.	<p>I have a tribe of Black women who are just like, awesome and if I'm in a bind, I call one of them ... the more we speak out, the more we create support for one another that we're not in competition. I'm trying to help you get there. You try to help me get there. It works.</p> <p>I got bits and pieces of things from different individuals. My mom, was hard working and so I think the hustle in me like, if I need to get two jobs, I get two jobs. I gotta do what I got to do. I think I got it from my mom. Also, I was raised with my great aunt, who, at the time was a hairstylist. She left Brunswick and went to hair school in New York and then came back. I saw entrepreneurship at a young age and how she was able to like, buy rental properties and stuff, you know, way back then. I had another aunt who was entrepreneur always involved the community involvement.</p>

For the African American woman, promotion to any role will be met with challenges. However, the study highlighted the assets these women can bring to the

college campuses, and the support and representation needed, not just for African American students but for all students. The African American women that I interviewed indicated that while there is a need for change, the change does not seem to be happening soon enough. Many of these women noted that they are the only African American women in the organization who has achieved a role in leadership. The research highlights diversity as an asset to an institution. However, this does not mean that the institution should have a diverse student population, but these students must be taught and lead by a diverse staff and administration. African American women in leadership offer a voice for African American students and any other group that can be considered a person of color. They can offer new perspectives and approaches to educating these students that currently is not strongly represented in the community college leadership pool.

They also highlighted the difficulties within the institution that make it difficult for an African American woman to assume a leadership role. Mentorship and sponsorship is a solid method to assisting African American women to leadership. Institutions must be willing to own their part in the lack of African American women in leadership positions in the community college and be willing to find value in this demographic by promoting African American women to leadership not as a token, but as a strong voice of representation for students.

### Section 3: The Project

#### **Introduction**

Based on the findings of this basic qualitative research study, I developed a project that aimed to use the findings of the research to develop a leadership preparation



and mentor conference that can prepare and promote African American women into leadership positions in the community college setting. The project is titled, “A SistaHood: Supporting and Promoting African American Women to Leadership in the Community College.” The project encourages African American female leadership in the community college to activate support strategies for each other. These women can be instrumental providing a voice for an unheard demographic in the community college. The conference targets African American women who have been in a leadership position, currently serve in a leadership position, and aspire to a leadership position of a community college. It also targets non-Black leaders who can have an influential role in mitigating barriers and challenges of the leadership journey of African American women.

African American women have always used their voice, narratives, and experiences to influence education. This conference is an opportunity for African American women who have been in a leadership position or currently serve in a leadership position to come together with other African American women aspiring to a leadership role in the community college setting. The conference focuses on three very important themes from the research study: combating stereotypes, learning from experiences, and fostering meaningful relationships. Focusing on these themes can help these women establish a sense of belonging in the community college setting and ascend to leadership as they interact with women who are leaders or have been leaders in the community college setting. The long-term goal of the conference is to promote the idea of diversifying the current administration by adding African American women as a viable option for leadership. To do this, there is a need to focus on leadership preparation, create

a community for cultivation of support to manage institutional challenges and barriers, and create connections that can create visibility for these women (see Surna, 2018).

The project is anchored in the revelations from participants, and the curriculum for each day is anchored in different aspects of leadership that could help the African American woman obtain a leadership job in the community college setting. The objective of the curriculum is based on the identified themes and patterns obtained from the data collection process. The overall goals of the conference are as follows:

1. Highlight barriers and challenges of African American women who advanced to leadership in the community college setting.
2. Foster relationships for mentorship and/or sponsorship for women aspiring to leadership in the community college setting.
3. Support and encourage African American women to continue to seek a leadership position in the community college setting.
4. Promote value of having the African American woman in the administrative pool in the community college setting.
5. Promote support within the organization from other leaders to support African American women as leaders.

The project can be used to address identified gaps in recruitment and retention, and in that instance, the project might be geared toward educational human resource development. The interviews guided the core elements of the project, which are grounded in research and contribute to a movement to educate and equip other African American women with the essential skills and knowledge to obtain a leadership role in a community

college setting. In addition, African American women could be provided tools to navigate an organizational culture that originally was not created with the African American woman in mind as a student nor as an administrator (Ffolkes-Bryant & Coppin, 2020). Most importantly, the African American woman's voice regarding higher education leadership can inspire current educators and administrators to provide an atmosphere where all stakeholders can have a voice (Surna, 2018).

The project that resulted from this investigation is a 3-day leadership conference of professional development for African American women for an opportunity to come together to inspire, mentor, and sponsor this demographic of women into a leadership role in the community college. This conference is an opportunity to connect aspiring African American women across higher education to leadership positions using the tradition of narrative and support from one Black woman to another. The women who attend the conference can attend the conference with the mindset of being mentored or to mentor. This is an opportunity for women in leadership to reach back and uplift another African American woman to leadership in the community college. The women who are aspiring to a community college leadership role are not limited to full-time instructors, but any African American woman who aspires to leadership in the community college, despite her current role.

The outcome of the study alluded to relationship building as one overarching theme; therefore, individuals who are in a leadership role at a community college who are not African American can attend this conference as well to gain insight into how to interact with African American women and create opportunities for her to be a valuable

and viable option for a leadership role in the community colleges where these individuals serve. The purpose of the conference is to create a space for women aspiring to leadership roles to interact with African American women who have obtained a role in leadership and to help them navigate institutions that may not always welcome the African American woman as a leader, but it also attempts to create a dialogue between non-African American administrators and create organizational concepts that can create opportunities for the African American female to advance to leadership.

### **Rationale**

Through one-on-one interviews with the participants, I identified a need for mentorship between African American women who are leaders in the community college and African American women who desire to obtain a leadership position in the community college setting. Examining my current position as an English instructor in the community college, I found that there is minimal opportunity for African American women to achieve decision-making roles in the community college. There is minimal conversation of the experiences of those who do achieve leadership positions. However, it is clear that for “Black women leadership development results from resilience and the cost of resilience is lived adversity” (Chance, 2022, p. 68). With more women becoming leaders in the community college, there is a chance for these women to support and promote other women to leadership. The responses of participants and review of the data collaboratively revealed that African American women need a space where they can reflect on their journey to leadership and reach back to help other women do so and navigate the process.

### **Review of the Literature**

The project related to this study took shape as professional development in the form of a professional development conference for women who aspire to a leadership position in the community college. The findings of the study guided the development of this conference and reinforced the need for support and guidance for African American women who aspire to a leadership position in the community college. I developed a 3-day professional development conference that can support African American women to leadership by allowing for the opportunity to be sponsored and mentored. The conference also gives African American women who are in a leadership position the opportunity to use their experiences and narrative to encourage, support, and inform African American women about leadership in the community college. The conference is also an opportunity for non-Black faculty to hear the narrative of the African American women in leadership and use their voice to change the current culture of the community college and support the African American woman as a viable option for community college leadership.

Based on the findings in the study, some very important themes emerged that entailed the conceptual framework and theories used to explore this study. The findings unveiled that African American women saw an immense need for representation within education to ensure that there is a voice for African American students. These women were motivated to become that representation for their community if they had no representation or if they did have ample representation showing that the motivation to become a role model may be just as important for those who did not have a role model when trying to reach their goals. These women also expressed the importance of building

professional relationships and combating stereotypes within the discussed setting. Combating these stereotypes were important to these women both professionally and personally because they wanted to show up in their leadership roles as their authentic selves. CRT perspectives focus on empowering human beings to break the social constraints that can be placed on them by race, class, and gender (Fay, 1987). The professional development conference developed from the study is an attempt to empower African American women to leadership in the community college to break the barriers that have prevented this from within the institution. It is a chance to highlight the role that African American women play in education as well as promote African American women to leadership as an effective approach to diversify the administrative pool.

Both Black feminist thought and critical race theories create an opportunity for storytelling from the African American woman's perspective that was engrained in the development of the conference, which provides an opportunity for African American women to tell their stories as leaders and provide insight into these experiences for developing a better organizational climate and promotion of African American women to leadership. The current professional environment alludes to the African American woman as angry, but through her narrative this has been deemed appropriate as the same characteristics that describe the angry Black woman are the same characteristics that are considered assets for the White leaders in the community college (Corbin, et al., 2018). Therefore, I aimed to include narrative, positive professional relationships, and positive professional interactions in the project as a comfortable place for African American women to support one another and invite others to engage in the conference to promote

the prevention of challenges for the African American women aspiring to leadership. The conference is a change agent for African American women in leadership as they can have a place to encourage other African American women to leadership. Women aspiring to leadership are supported to leadership attainment, and non-Black allies, as well as the African American women in leadership positions, can work together to break down the barriers that present a challenge to leadership attainment for African American women within the community college institution.

The primary resource used to find peer-reviewed articles and books for the project literature review was the Walden University library. Google Scholar acted as a secondary resource. I altered between these two databases for information relative to professional development and networking. The terms used to search this information were as follows: *professional development, network conferencing, mentorship, and sponsorship*. In ERIC, I searched for *sponsorship and African American women, mentorship and African American women, and African American women leadership preparation in community college*.

The lack of research related to African American women's experience in higher education leadership creates a clear gap in practice (Generett & Welch, 2018) to investigate at the local study site. The original contributions of this research could include a deeper understanding of the experiences of African American female leaders in community college leadership. I aimed to add to the limited literature that is currently available on this topic and introduced possible recommendations for future research to close the current literature gap on the topic. Exploring the professional experiences of

African American woman who are in a leadership role offered insights into the leadership skills and contributions that can be used to benefit others who are employed in higher education institutions (Jones et al., 2012). Accessing the African American woman's perception of a leadership position in a community college once she has attained it, I used the findings to contribute to the construction of interventions that improve African American women's success in obtaining leadership positions in community college settings and equip these women with tools to positively impact students of color. The approach comes in the form of a 3-day conference that can create moments of mentorship, sponsorship, and encouragement to continue to strive for a leadership position in the community college setting despite the obstacles that exist in attainment for African American women.

### **Narrative Sharing**

Finding meaning in the firsthand experiences of women who have obtained leadership positions was an advantage of the qualitative approach and beneficial to the project based on an analysis of the study outcome. African American women have changed society by sharing their narratives, and African American female leaders can benefit from hearing the firsthand experiences of other women who have been able to navigate into a role of leadership in the community college setting. According to Walker (1983), the fortunate ones have a responsibility "as artists, scholars, and witnesses for the future to collect them again for the sake of our children ... if necessary, bone by bone" (p. 92). Narrative sharing can be just as beneficial to the woman seeking a role in leadership as it is to the woman sharing the narrative who currently is in leadership



(Joubert, 2021). For both women, this becomes a moment in which they can support one another.

The sharing of the African American female narrative offers insight into the thoughts and actions of the African American woman in a society that does not always support her and provides a map for the generation of African American females to follow. A conference for African American leadership in the community college is a way to ensure that women aspiring to leadership in the community college can make valuable connections, exchange innovative ideas, share practices, and stories untold of their journey to leadership (Joubert, 2021). In the past, intergenerational dialogue has influenced and motivated African American women to fulfill certain roles (Generett & Welch, 2018). The lack of dialogue among African American women who have obtained a leadership position in higher education and the African American woman who desires to obtain a leadership position does not promote the inclusion of this group in higher education administration (Generett & Welch, 2018). The conference is a chance for African American women in leadership to assume their responsibility and reach back to help those aspiring to a leadership position by sharing their experiences and strategies for leadership position attainment and retention.

According to Alcalde and Subramaniam (2020), it is rare that professionally established women have an opportunity to sit down and share their professional stories because of time famine, which means that professional women have too much to do with very little time to do it. According to Brazeau (2018), being successful in any career requires having the courage to share experiences with others, which is essential to the

role of educators, clinicians, and researchers. Coming together to share stories and experiences told has always been a cultural way in which African American women have managed to advance in many fields and the field of education should not be any different (Brazeau, 2018). Through research, it is more than evident that there is a need to explore the African American female perceptions of the leadership role and the vision of higher education institutions to support, motivate, and encourage a more diverse leadership team that includes the African American woman as a valued component to administration of higher education.

Demographic, political, and ideological shifts within the internal environments of higher education indicate that there are shifts that may cause changes in both the structural and cultural design of higher education, which includes leadership (Phillips & Snodgrass, 2022). The current state of leadership is experiencing a great change, and a conference that allows these stories to be told can wedge the gap in leadership regarding the continued limited number of women in leadership in the community college. One shift in leadership is globalization and diversity (Kezar, 2020). There is a revolution of leadership that requires reexamination, and the need for diversity is one of the aspects that are important and must be integrated into leadership conferences (Kezar, 2020). Prior assumptions in the past of leadership conferences are that representation is value free (Kezar, 2020). The shift in leadership diversity that must be explored in professional development should emphasize, interdependence, awareness of cultural and social differences, and adaptability (Kezar, 2020). However, this is quite different today, and more leadership conferences that focus on representation and diversity is now needed.

## **Professional Development**

Professional development is used quite often to train and develop staff to ensure that there is a standard for quality of performance (Powell & Bodur, 2019). During professional development, specific needs must be considered during this development (Powell & Bodur, 2019). Professional development is an ongoing effort that can allow an individual to refine skills and improve performance when used effectively (Powell & Bodur, 2019). Conferences by design support and enhance professional development and can foster personal growth and development as well (Tan & Nabb, 2021). The conference is a chance for like minds to engage. Those who are aspiring to leadership can use this opportunity to identify tools of ascension into leadership that are valuable to the African American woman's journey into leadership. With this newfound knowledge, these women can renew their excitement for leadership (Tan & Nabb, 2021). This could work two-fold. The women who are aspiring to leadership may have not been able to obtain positions of leadership in the past; however, the conference can provide a renewed excitement to continue to navigate the journey. For those who are in leadership, they too can become excited about their roles in helping others achieve leadership positions to create a comradery among African American women in these roles and use the experience of the conference to promote change to alleviate these barriers to leadership in the community colleges where they serve (Han & Leonard, 2017).

There are valuable insights from the conference that can be used by all who attend. It is important that the women who are in leadership roles set the goal of using the information discussed at conferences and the experiences that they have endured to

educate other administrators and make them aware of the barriers that the African American women experience as this could be the first step toward finding solutions to these barriers and challenges (Han & Leonard, 2017; Pace, 2018). The women in attendance who have obtained a leadership position can be vital to creating environments of trust within the community college setting and advocating for more inclusiveness and diversity in administration (Pace, 2018).

### **A Positive Professional Climate**

Research that focuses on the woman in the workplace usually concentrates on the gender, not her race (Delgado & Ozuna Allen, 2019), which does not contribute to an understanding of the intersectionality of race and gender that African American women experience in their leadership development (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). The limited research available on the African American women who lead in the community college reveals negative experiences of discrimination based on race, gender, tokenism, and microaggression behaviors as these women try to move forward in their professional career paths (Eddy & Garza Mitchell, 2017). Failure to research women of color in administration has widened the gap in literature (Delgado & Ozuna Allen, 2019). With little research to understand the African American female leader in administration at a community college, there is also a gap in the research when exploring programs implemented to prepare African American women for leadership positions (Washington & Roberts, 2019). A conference that provides a voice for the African American woman can help provide insight into the needs of the African American female leader in

community college and encourage sponsorship, which is considered a great tactic for career advancement.

Many African American women are likely the only African American woman in a leadership position at the institution and lack a connection with other women who are in similar leadership roles (Allen & Flood, 2018). A conference that invites African American women in leadership positions together to support women aspiring to leadership is also a chance to support each other as well. African American women leaders in the community college lack a support or sisterhood that is usually a significant aspect of the African American female community. For these women, it is difficult to develop meaningful relationships with their female counterparts, and a sisterhood for support from women who look like them is impossible with the limited number of women who obtain leadership roles in higher education (Allen & Flood, 2018). Leadership conferences for African American women who have obtained these positions as well as those aiming to attain a leadership position can create a sisterhood for these women that can make leadership positions for African American women in the community college more achievable and less stressful once obtained.

The current trend of administration being mostly White males and the gap in research of the African American woman's experiences in administration at community colleges confirms the need to explore a conference that allows African American women to act as a support for one another while in these positions, but also use this opportunity to support leadership attainment of other African American women who aspire. Leadership roles can be extremely time consuming and demanding, and women may not

have the option to devote all their time to their jobs causing them to choose between obtaining a leadership role and family life (Hughes et al., 2019). These women work hard to obtain their role but report being depressed, burnout, and anxious when balancing their professional life and personal life (Hughes et al., 2019). A conference that creates a sisterhood for these women can create a space that allows them to interact with women who look just like them to support, encourage, and insight one another to leadership. Few African American women are obtaining leadership positions in community college, but the few who are obtaining these positions see each other as competition and do not celebrate one another or assist others to leadership in the higher education setting (Allen & Flood, 2018). The conference is a chance for these women to see each other as comrades with a common cause, not competitors

For African American women, maintaining a connection with women who have obtained a leadership position can be quite beneficial. Currently, there does not seem to be a connection between even the women who are in leadership positions in higher education. African American women in leadership positions long to find a place of solace and unspoken understanding among other women who have served as executive leaders or recognize their talent for college leadership in their careers (Gause, 2021). Instead, these women are in leadership roles that become quite overwhelming for them leaving very little opportunities for them to interact with other African American women in these roles (Allen & Flood, 2018).

The conference is an opportunity to come together to identify these barriers and translate them to individuals in leadership positions who can assist in mitigating these

barriers and challenges for African American women who want to assume a leadership role in the community college. Understanding African American female leadership advancement in higher education has the potential to contribute to the experiential nature of leadership and learning more about the experiences of members of this demographic could become the foundation used to train members of this group for executive level leadership (United States Department of Education, 2016). This study also asserts that shareholders within the organization must be aware of the aspects within the organization that creates challenges for this demographic (Pace, 2018).

The study revealed emergent professional development needs that can make leadership positions more attainable. An in-depth reflection on African American women in leadership can contribute to improved recruitment strategies to increase the number of African American women in administration at community colleges (Stead & Elliott, 2013). African American women in leadership positions have a responsibility to ensure that other women do not have to go through the same challenges as they did. Therefore, they can use information revealed at the conference to highlight the challenges that exist and that should be alleviated so that more African American women can be viewed as viable options for these leadership roles in the community college setting.

### **Mentorship and Sponsorship**

The conference must do the following to change the trajectory of attainment of leadership for African American women in the community college: focus on leadership, development, mentorship and intentional guidance to leadership positions; create a community for cultivation of support of women by women to combat the challenges that

deter them to reaching the goal of a leadership position; and create connections for those who aspire to the positions and catapult them to these positions (Surna, 2018). A three-day conference is a natural way to give African American women in a leadership position at a community college the opportunity to uplift, sponsor, and mentor other African American women who aspire to these roles. Those women who aspire to leadership can also foster relationships that can be essential to obtaining a leadership position.

According to Briscoe and Freeman (2019), mentorship and sponsorship have been significant in preparing aspiring leaders to presidency, advocating for the professional development, and encouraging an individual to apply to a president position. Leadership development can allow for interest in leadership candidates from across the institution to foster leadership environments that are collaborative and willing to cultivate the commitment and skills needed to navigate an ever-changing history, culture, and social interaction (Kezar, 2020).

Professional development through a conference can be initiated by the individual or by the institution (MacPhail et al., 2019). When administrators of an institution offer leadership opportunities through conferences and other professional development measures, they are offering those interested in leadership an opportunity to refine skills that are needed for leadership positions. This can create a pipeline for leadership for individuals currently employed within the institution in many different capacities to have the opportunity to advance into leadership positions and be prepared for these positions as they transfer from their current role into a leadership position (MacPhail et al., 2019). Organizational pipelines can be created through sponsorship. Women who have achieved



a leadership position assert that building strong relationships is important because they obtained these positions because someone in a higher position or role noticed them (Pace, 2018). Through these relationships, these women received career advice, psychosocial support, and growth opportunities (Pace, 2018).

Despite being underrepresented in leadership roles, African American women make up a higher percentage of the student population and receive the most higher education degrees as a demographic (United States Department of Education, 2019). However, there is still a huge disparity in the leadership roles of these two groups in community colleges (Mader et al., 2016). As student demographics in community colleges continue to evolve and change, the number of African American women in community college administration remains limited thus there is limited representation for the African American woman as a student and limited commonality among colleagues (Bartman, 2015).

Because African American women must navigate an organizational culture and professional climate of an institution often without mentorship or support to obtain a leadership position, looking at the role that sponsorship plays in career advancement can be useful (Madsen, & Longman, 2014). The conference aims to offer a sisterhood for women of color who have achieved a leadership position in community college, but these women also can mentor and sponsor women who aspire to leadership roles, and the conference can act as a networking experience. As women who are in leadership roles, they can use their experiences to help other women achieve leadership through this method of coming together with a common goal of diversifying leadership and providing

more representation of African American women as leaders in the community college setting (Han & Leonard, 2017). Mentorship and sponsorship can come from various backgrounds; however, African American women need another African American female to provide both professional guidance and emotional support on this leadership journey (Gause, 2021). A conference can offer revelations regarding their professional success in a professional environment that does not provide sufficient sponsorship for African American women.

Many organizations are aware of the need for diversity, but there is no clear pipeline to diversify the administration pool. A conference that includes African American women who aspire to leadership roles and women who have already obtained a leadership role could be the first step toward developing sponsorship for this demographic. Sponsorship has vast potential for increasing African American women to leadership positions in the community college (Hernandez & Longman, 2020). However, how to use sponsorship has not been clearly defined. More analysis of mentoring for career advancement has been explored, but mentorship is an aspect of sponsorship (Hernandez & Longman, 2020). Sponsorship is an aspect of mentorship that can speed up the protégés exposure to influential networks and advance career opportunities through using mentor influence (Hernandez & Longman, 2020).

It can be difficult to assign a mentor to self. This can be even more difficult for African American women who are in community colleges with administrators who are not aware of the barriers that exist for these women (Chang et al., 2014). The conference also gives an African American woman aspiring to leadership an opportunity to get to

know a woman in leadership and interact with her before the mentorship or sponsorship begins. To increase diversity in administration, there must be more known about the women who obtain these positions. A conference that promotes a sisterhood where women who aspire to leadership can interact with women who have obtained these positions can begin the positive direction toward learning about the experiences of African American women who become leaders and creating opportunities for this demographic without these barriers (Allen & Flood, 2018). However, it is also a step toward developing a pipeline for this demographic. The conference can highlight the journey of women who successfully developed and progressed beyond entry level faculty and staff positions to a role of leadership (Pace, 2018). These women can answer questions for women aspiring to leadership, but these women also can have insight into institutional challenges that hindered advancement or made it difficult from a first-person perspective.

Sponsorship programs can be enriched by providing a space to develop trustworthy connections between sponsors and their protégés and can only happen through open conversations regarding stereotypes, microaggressions, and the challenges of African American women in these positions and the challenges of achieving these positions (Pace, 2018). Research of the experiences of women in higher education administration focused on structural factors such as positions obtained prior to a leadership position, and leadership programs have been developed to help women develop leadership skills to obtain a leadership position (Cejda, 2008). These programs are often based on text of educational administration who did not include diversity and

encouraged leadership styles that preferred certain identities over others (Weiner et al., 2021). The academic pathway for women is not linear and can be difficult for women who already meet challenges in the workplace to seek to continue their education. Conferences can provide these women with an opportunity for professional development in a more convenient way that does not cost them a lot of time and energy to engage (Moodly & Toni, 2017).

However, adding implicit bias and issues of ethnicity, gender, and race creates an intersectionality of factors that must be examined before establishing a pipeline for African American women not focused upon in previous research. Increasing representation of African American women administrators goes beyond mere representation as change can only happen when the assets of these administrators are used effectively within the institution for the success of the students and those they lead (Lowery-Hart, 2021). A conference where African American women leaders in the community college can engage to also use their knowledge to help their organization create a pipeline could be advantageous to highlighting the African American woman as a viable leadership option.

A conference can be a positive option that can engage those in attendance while allowing those who have achieved leadership roles to enlighten fellow administrators to this viable option and challenges for this demographic to exact change in these institutions for a less challenging way to achieve leadership for African American women in leadership at the community college. The conference is a chance for African American women to emerge themselves in a communal support network beyond the institutional

space in which they work (Hernandez & Longman, 2020). A conference that introduces other African American women aspiring to leadership to women who are already in these roles is a helpful starting point for professional development efforts that focuses on leadership for this demographic of women (Hernandez & Longman, 2020).

Although there is a need to increase African American women in leadership, merely increasing the number is not effective. Instead, these women must be prepared for these positions as well. According to Selingo et al. (2017), approximately two-thirds of presidents reported being mentored and supported by mentors or coaches to prepare for a leadership position in the college setting. These necessary adaptations to leadership development programs are necessary to ensure that they align to the needs of those who are served within higher education institutions. A new revolutionary approach to developing leaders allows for a new approach to developing leaders instead of a top-down, value neutral approach (Kezar, 2020).

Sponsorship and mentoring can help advance women to these positions, but there must be a space where these relationships can originate, form, and thrive (Hernandez & Longman, 2020). This space should allow these women to be present in their authentic identities and to support and sponsor another woman to these roles as well. The conference encourages a space for African American women, but it also encourages other races to enter these conferences for an understanding of the African American woman's experience as a leader in the community college, which could encourage cross-cultural sponsorship and support from non-Black colleagues to support institutional efforts to support African American women to leadership (Louis et al., 2014).

Leadership development has been limited in higher education institutions because there is a preconceived notion that there is only a few who are qualified as experts to lead (Dopson et al., 2019). The research shows that these leaders are likely to be White males, and White females are the next best option (Arao, 2016; Hague & Okpala, 2017). Non-Black leaders have a responsibility to help change the trajectory of leadership in the community college, and they have the leadership positions to influence institutional stakeholders for change in operation, culture, and collaborative engagement (Gigliotti & Ruben, 2017). Non-Black leaders have the influence to become an ally to this demographic of women and welcome them to leadership in the community college system. Leaders currently in decision-making roles can be informal sponsors for change. They have the ability as leaders to use their communication to link actions and activities of individuals and organizations to desired goals (Manafzadeh et al., 2018). Therefore, a conference that invites African American women together should not exclude those who can be valuable to the change process and who can form an alliance for change in the community college administration to present the African American women as a viable option for leadership.

### **Project Description**

To carefully develop this project, it was not just important to examine the experience of the African American woman in the leadership role, it was also important to explore the educational experiences as far back as their attendance to college for an undergraduate degree. Community colleges serve many students from lower income and marginalized groups, and African American students in similar settings could benefit

from increased focus on ensuring the organizational culture is inclusive and reflective of the student body. According to AAMC (2020), “the people make the place, and the people consist of administrators, faculty, professional staff/non-faculty, and students” (p. 3). Many African American women experience microaggressions, strive for promotions, and become overwhelmed with trying to be the best in their personal and professional lives. The project is a three-day professional development conference aimed to connect women who have obtained a decision-making role and women who aspire to obtain a decision-making role to ensure that there is a support system that can ensure the progression of African American women into leadership at the community college level.

### **Potential Resources and Existing Supports**

The development of this professional development conference is based on the concepts of network leadership that has outcomes that focuses on structure, health, and connectivity (Leithwood, 2019). Using each of these elements, the conference can encourage collaborative relationships of like-minded individual working together across organizations, diverse people come together for a common cause, and information is fostered for an easier flow for planning and engagement in change (Leithwood, 2019). Network leadership can be used to explore leadership practices, identify clear goal and purpose of leadership, organize activities around collective action, buffer members from challenges posed by institutions, and locate resources for networking task (Leithwood, 2019). The curriculum for this three-day conference was based on the themes that emerged from the study. The conference will be available to African American women who want to mentor and sponsor other African American women into leadership at the

community college level and will also be available to African American women who want to be mentored or sponsored into a leadership position on the community college level. The conference developer strives to identify potential African American female leaders for the community college as early in the career as adjunct instructors or even newly completed graduate school African American females. This is an opportunity to help these women navigate themselves successfully to a leadership position with the support of other African American women who have progressed into a leadership role in the community college or who currently leads at a community college.

Transformational leadership integrates key characteristics that were integral to the development of this project such as the following: effective management for future oriented planning, balanced achievements, and inclusive understanding of self and others (Gupta & Mehta, 2019). The conference integrated the six components of Podsakoff et al. (1996) transformational leadership model for positive outcomes of the leadership professional development conference, which included articulating a vision, providing an appropriate role model, fostering the acceptance of group goals, high performance expectations, providing individualized support, and intellectual stimulation. These concepts were integrated into the project. The goal of the professional development conference is to provide each of these aspects of fostering leadership to the African American women aspiring to a leadership role in the community college. This conference will provide these women with models of leadership attainment and a vision for change. It will also be important to stimulating the intellect of those in attendance to aspire to



leadership and those who can have an active role in promoting these women to leadership positions.

The professional development conference is a networking session that encourages mentorship and sponsorship that can allow women in these positions to sponsor other African American women to these positions to create an administration that is representative of the African American students who attend. All community colleges in the system will be made aware of the conference for attendance. Speakers will be invited to speak at the conference at least 3-6 months prior to the conference scheduled to give them enough time to prepare their content. Speakers are responsible for creating content based on the topics provided by the conference developer. The PowerPoints used by the speakers to deliver their presentation will be emailed to all attendants after the conference. The three-day conference will be an asynchronous event. All participants will need reliable and fast internet access to attend the conference. The Canvas platform will be used to house content and ensure the delivery of the content per activity and event scheduled each day. The attendants are expected to provide their own note-taking materials during the sessions. Attendees will be responsible for their lunch on Days 1 and 2. On Day 3, attendees will be sent lunch using a delivery service, which will be provided by the developer of the conference.

### **Potential Barriers and Solutions to Barriers**

Potential barriers could be a lack of accessibility to high-speed internet. An individual who does not have internet service will have to find a resource for internet or make arrangements for internet service that could make it difficult to be available for all

the parts of the conference. To overcome this, agendas can be sent out at least two weeks to a month in advance to ensure that the person can plan to have high-speed internet service for the parts of the conference that the individual wants to attend. Many of the women interested in attending this conference may have busy lives. They may not be able to commit to attending three days to a conference. Because it is a virtual conference, attendees can receive a recorded version of the conference. This gives attendees the option of watching the conference as a recording. This could be helpful for any moments that the individual had to attend to other task during the conference.

### **Proposal for Implementation and Timetable**

Day 1 of the conference begins with welcoming the attendees and participants followed by a survey to assess the intent of attending the conference, and any challenges experienced in aspiring to leadership. The survey will be followed by keynote speakers who are in leadership roles and how they overcame challenges to obtain a leadership position. The keynote speaker on day 1 will be in a vice president role, and there will also be a panel discussion that discusses overcoming stereotypes when aspiring and attaining a leadership role for African American women. The panel must include women who have obtained the positions of focus within the study and have been in these positions for 2 or more years. Virtual reflection questions will be used to allow the attendees to reflect on their experiences in the community college and how the speakers of Day 1 have impacted them.

On Day 2, the speakers will include two presidents and a director. The goal is to include speakers who have navigated to the community college setting. Breakout sessions

are scheduled on Day 2 as well to give the women the opportunity to interact with women in leadership positions in a smaller session. The participants will switch sessions upon the completion of one session to attend the other. This is to ensure that all participants can attend both sessions. There will be an open floor session on Day 2 to give participants ample opportunity to interact with the participants and ask questions that they did not get to ask during Day 2 sessions. This open floor session will give the attendants one-on-one question segments with the speakers of the day. Virtual reflection is to be completed by the attendees. They should complete these questions on Day 2 of the session. These questions will be in Canvas for the attendants to answer.

Day 3 aims to pull all of the days together to ensure that sponsorship and organizational culture are explored. The goal is to get all in attendance to think about ways to build relationships that can be collaborative in promoting diversity in leadership in the community college setting. The day will be dedicated to relationship building for leadership change and promotion of the African American woman to leadership. Day 3 includes a keynote address focusing on forming relationships that can catapult the African American woman's career to a leadership position. This day also examine how women can form allies within the institution that can be important to sponsoring them into a leadership role as well. The panel discussion for Day 3 is titled "Who Speaks for You When You Are Not in the Room?" The attendees will be provided lunch on Day 3 by the conference developer. After lunch, the attendees can interact with speakers and ask questions with an open floor format for questions. The summary of the conference will be provided, and attendees will then be asked to complete the survey questions. The surveys

will be administered to attendees who aspire to a leadership role and those who already have a leadership role. The goal is to assess the practicality and value of the conference to the women who aspires to leadership, but the survey will also assess the motivation of those in leadership to begin to promote sponsorship within the institutions where they currently serve as leaders.

### **Role and Responsibilities of Facilitators**

As the professional development facilitator, my job is to plan and coordinate the 3-day professional development conference so that the attendees get the most out of it. The planning phase begins long before day 1 of the conference. The planning should begin six months to a year before the conference begins. The facilitator will research and contact speakers for the engagement and provide them with the topic that they will present at the conference. I will present the study's findings at the conference and introduce the conference on day 1. The introduction will include the overall objectives for each day of the conference. As the developer, I will also ensure that the conference remains on the agenda timeline, providing speakers with a timeline for presenting.

### **Project Evaluation Plan**

During the study, the information provided by these women during the interview process was valuable to the origination of the leadership conference for African American women. Once analysis, coding, and theming was complete, the overall review led to the proposal of a three-day conference for African American women aspiring to a leadership role in the community college. There must be evaluation of the execution of the conference to ensure that there can be improvements in the conference and goals are

being met each time the conference is held. For evaluation, the Holton model was used. This model is similar to the Kirkpatrick model but aims to fully identify all constructs underlying the phenomena of interest (Holton, 1996). Because taxonomy does the very opposite of this in Kirkpatrick's model, validation becomes impossible (Holton, 1996). This model aims to look at not just whether the conference can increase African American women in leadership, but it aims to be a cause of this increase by using the conference to close this gap in leadership. The three primary outcomes of the Holton model is learning, individual performance, and organizational results (Holton, 1996). The organizational impact can be quite difficult to assess; however, this conference integrates organizational aspects by inviting the administrators of the community college to be a part of the conference to help with the transferability of what is experienced at the conference and to help impact the climate culture of the organization for positive change in this area.

The overarching goal of this professional development conference is to improve the demographic of leadership in the community college, but this must begin with women aspiring to this position understanding how to navigate this journey. There must be transfer of motivation, learning, and experience to the setting where they aspire to leadership. The Holton model asserts that the transfer climate must be evaluated if transfer from professional development is to occur (Holton, 2005). Also, the practicality of the information learned will motivate the transfer of what is learned (Holton, 2005). The intervening variables of this model that promotes transfer of learning are as follows: ability, motivation to learn, reaction to learning, transfer design, and motivation to

transfer, transfer conditions, expected utility, linkage to organizational objectives, external events, intervention readiness, job attitudes, personality characteristics, and intervention fulfillment (Holton, 2005). Using this model, the developer can ensure that the material and content of the conference meet the needs of those in attendance and improve the conference each time the conference is executed. These women are attending this conference to be motivated and learn what it takes to attain a leadership position. More than anything, this training is to make a difference, and this validates the Holton model as the best model for evaluation.

To evaluate the professional conference, selective questions in form of a survey are asked to attendees at the beginning of the first day of the conference, and the attendees are provided the survey at the end of the last day of the conference to assess the benefit of attending the conference and the motivation of the aspiring women to continue to seek leadership positions. The first four questions of the survey are for those attending the conference who aspire to leadership. The last three questions are for the presenters and leaders in attendance who can help to exact change within the organization to eliminate barriers and challenges discussed at the conference. The following questions make up the survey:

### **Questions for Participants Aspiring to Leadership**

1. How did coming together with African American women in leadership positions at the community college impact your goals to leadership?
2. Are there any positive aspects for change in leadership at your institution highlighted in this conference?

3. Are you motivated to continue your journey to leadership despite the challenges and barriers that currently exist?
4. Providing a leadership position and without providing a name, who is one potential ally in your institution who can help you navigate to a leadership position? (Example, Vice President of Academic Affairs). Explain why you chose this person as a potential supporter.
5. Rate the conference from 1-10. What can we do to make the conference better? Please be constructive.

### **Questions for Women Who Have Achieved a Leadership Role and Non-Black**

#### **Leaders**

1. What power do you have, if any, to exact change in the leadership dilemma at the community college where you now serve?
2. How do you plan to use your current role to influence the organization in diversifying the administrative pool?
3. Rate the conference from 1-10. What can we do to make the conference better? Please be constructive.

These women must know that they can get from their current positions to a leadership position, and the conference aims to provide these women with support and methods of attaining a position. The primary outcomes of the Holton model are the basis on which the conference will be evaluated for feedback and value of the professional development conference. The final evaluation is the survey of questions that are presented to the women at the end of the conference. The evaluation is to assess the

women's self-efficacy of attainment of a position after attending the conference. With the barriers and challenges that currently exist for this demographic, many of these women may be frustrated or giving up on their goal to attain a leadership position. However, this conference is to renew their interest in these positions and provide them with support, stories, and tools to get to a potential leadership position. Also, the conference plans to communicate the need and the value in having African American women in these leadership positions because of the representation and voice they can bring to all students. The final administering of these questions aims to assess the woman's confidence after attending the conference to continue to aspire to a leadership position. The key stakeholders of this project are African American women aspiring to a leadership role in the community college. However, administrators in community colleges who do not have African American women in their administrative pool can also benefit by creating organizational cultures that allow these women to advance and use their experiences to represent and inform positive change within the higher education institution.

### **Project Implications**

The positive social change implications of the project may result in a healthier organizational culture, which could have a broad impact on faculty, staff, and student experience, which in turn would benefit individuals and the community college constituents. Wyatt-Nichol and Antwi-Boasiako (2008) posited that, "evidence of a changing society and workforce creates an imperative to educate and prepare students to work in diverse organizations and communities" (p. 80). This project is a chance to create change and promote diversity within administration in the community college. In doing



so, the administration can see that African American women are a viable option for leadership in the community college and open a path to leadership for this demographic.

African American women who obtain a leadership position struggle to maintain these positions because they are working with administrators who fail to promote them to leadership. These women often feel isolated and become the only African American woman creating a tense environment for her to navigate. This project is a chance to invite women aspiring to leadership and women who have achieved leadership in this setting to encourage and support one another. It is also a chance to invite allies who are not African American, but in a position of leadership to collaborate within the higher education institutions to break down the barriers that make it difficult for the African American woman to attain a leadership position.

Students can have a voice once African American women are in the role of leadership, but organizations must become more open to the changes of education that exists and create opportunities for these women to have a leadership role in the community college. For so long, the administrator of the community college has been White and male despite the fact that the student demographic is constantly changing and tremendously diverse.

## Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

### **Project Strengths and Limitations**

The project was proposed to center the African American female voices of community college leaders and use these voices to propel the progression of more African American women into this role, if they aspire. A strength of the project is its use can be aimed at different demographics. In this case, the research targeted the demographic of the study, which was African American women. However, the project can be adapted to any demographic to create a space of interaction. It can also be adapted to a face-to-face mode. The outcome of this study asserted that African American women struggle to gain promotion in the community college; however, there are some aspects of the organizational culture that can hinder this from happening. The project is a leadership professional development conference for women to become supported by those in leadership and African American women who have attained these positions. The conference was based mainly on Podsakoff's et al. (1996) transformational leadership model that promotes leadership that articulates a vision, provides an appropriate role model, fosters the acceptance of group goals, promotes high performance expectations, provides individualized support, and stimulates intellect. Each of these aspects of leadership are valuable to all leaders.

The use of the Holton model for assessment is a strength of the project because it aims to assess the benefit to the individual and the organization. A leadership conference that can assist African American women into leadership will benefit the individual but it will also have a vast impact on the organization by providing representation and voice for

African American students. The insight that these women can bring to the setting as leaders can ensure that there is diversity of experiences and knowledge that can be used for the overall good of the organization. Additional strengths of the project are the virtual platform of delivery making the conference more accessible to all who wants to attend.

The project can be used to establish challenges for the African American female leader in the community college and provide institutions with practices that can eliminate these challenges creating an opportunity for these women without obstacles and barriers. Analyzing the transcripts, the participants made it clear that there is a need for all employees to understand biases and microaggressions, and the way these aspects of an organization impact an individual of color. Another strength of the project is the open invitation to African American women who are in a leadership position and want to be a part of increasing potential candidates for leadership in the administrative pool of the community college. The conference aims to provide networking opportunities for women aspiring to leadership, but the opportunities for networking should continue beyond the three-day conference to be effective.

In this study, I engaged in the experiences of the participants but was limited in the number of participants who volunteered to engage in the study. Only seven participants were interviewed in the study and this small number of participants caused the study to lack generalizability. A president was not available to interview. Not being able to contact an African American woman in this role limited the study to the leadership roles that could be identified and consented to participate in the study. The only demographic information collected for the study was race and gender. The study did

not probe into the age and marital status of the participants. It is likely that this could impact the success of an African American woman to have the time for professional development and education to obtain a community college leadership position.

Limitations must also be explored for the project. Just as it was difficult to find participants who were not too busy to participate in the study, it may be just as difficult to find leaders to volunteer their time for the project. Possible limitations of the project are non-Black leaders who can be allies but may not want to participate in the conference because they see very little need for change. Also, the African American women who are leaders in the community college have a high demand workload that can make it difficult for them to attend or participate. These women may have the desire to help others but have very little time to participate in this capacity.

The research was not too broad because the African American woman's voice is not considered mainstream, and the voices and the experiences of this demographic are often ignored. The voices of the African American woman cannot be generalized to a larger population, but it can be identified by the African American women who are frequent in professional environments and who regularly enroll in college to better their life's potential. There must be the consideration of transference because of the small number of subjects who participated in the study. If non-Black leaders who hold most of the leadership positions in the community college setting are not willing to attend the conference, there can be difficulty transferring the change to the organizational culture. There must be allies within leadership who are not African American but see the African American women as a viable option for leadership.

### **Recommendations for Alternative Approaches**

The project was proposed as a virtual conference. However, there may be opportunities to develop this conference in a face-to-face format as well. A face-to-face format would allow these women to share in the conference with one another without any barriers of communication from technology. Similar conferences can be developed using this proposed project to create mentorship for other underrepresented populations and can even apply to settings other than higher education. The conference can be offered on a monthly or annual basis. The more opportunities to interact with one another as professionals can positively impact the professional relationship and the sponsorship and mentorship between sponsors, mentors, and protégés. Although the project outcome was a conference, there are other ways in which this problem could be addressed. The problem could be addressed through sponsorship and mentorship programs that focus on just preparing the individual for leadership. However, this may result in leaving out the components of sisterhood that is needed for the African American woman's journey to leadership.

### **Scholarship, Project Development and Evaluation, and Leadership and Change**

The journey of the development of this project began with research. The outcome of the study influenced the development of a project that would provide a safe space for African American women aspiring to leadership to interact with African American women who have obtained a leadership position. Through the development of this project, I have found an appreciation for research and how it can guide the development of solution-based content. During the study, I learned how to collect data and analyze the

data for overarching themes that were significant to the study. I learned how to use these themes for analyzing the data and using this data for exploring options for presentation to others and promoting change. This has helped me to develop my skill sets as a practitioner that will be beneficial to my role as a leader one day in a higher education institution.

The development of the project began with the responses of the participants and the challenges experienced by these women as they navigate the journey to leadership. I discovered through this study that African American women can have a valuable impact on higher education institutions, but this impact may come with sacrifices to her personal life. Although this is so, this space for African American women is a starting point to sharing the experiences of this journey and can have a profound impact on the professional outcomes of women aspiring to these roles. Each participant's responses were valuable to the project development. These women wanted to provide their experiences, which lead to my belief that scholarship and advocacy for change is a team effort that requires communication and advocacy.

The interaction within this conference must be transparent and transferred into the community colleges to begin to assist these women to achieve leadership. The organizational stakeholders must be willing to consider the barriers and challenges that currently exist for the African American woman to achieve leadership and aim to overcome them for an increase in African American women in leadership positions in the community college setting.

As an instructor in the community college, I aspire to a leadership role in the community college. However, I realize that aspiring to any leadership role does not come with hard work alone but is impacted by the relationships and the sponsorship of those who are already in leadership positions. The project is one step toward helping African American women attain a leadership position in the community college by establishing a relationship with those who have obtained a leadership position. Developing this project, I had to maintain an unbiased view to assess the possible strengths and weaknesses of the project. Through this lens, I was able to offer a solution to addressing the problem. With this realization, I have come to know that I have the scholarly skills to research and use this research for much more than compiling evidence, but this evidence can become valuable to solution-based outcomes that can change the learning environment in the most positive way.

### **Reflection on Importance of the Work**

The importance of this work stems from the African American woman's constant involvement in the community college setting whether as a student or a member of faculty or staff, yet the representation of the African American woman in administration remains limited. Many college administrators have included diversity as an important factor of the community college. This is apparent in the student demographic, but the representation for these students is lacking in administration.

For an institutional diversity plan to work, there must be collaboration of administrators and integration of diversity into the administrators assigned to the strategic plan (Stanley et al., 2019). By collaboration of institutional leaders and other

departments, there can be an establishment of diversity college wide (Stanley et al., 2019). Increasing the number of women of color in community college leadership has strong positive social change implications because it would provide positive role models for African American students and enhance persistence for women of color who serve as faculty and academic staff in these settings.

Increasing African American women in the administrative pool at community colleges can increase the voice for African American students and assist in creating a learning environment that considers the cultural aspects of an African American community college student. This topic is vital to any discussion of expansion of community college access as institutional leaders are at the forefront of diversity efforts. Leaders who have firsthand experience of a student's culture are better equipped to ensure that institutional efforts can meet the needs of students of color as well as continue to support the efforts that are already in place for other ethnic groups who attend the institution (United States Department of Education, 2016).

To ensure that policies and procedures are in place to support positive relationships with students require partnership, understanding of diverse perspectives, and understanding of diverse experiences (Kok & McDonald, 2017). Diversity has been linked to academic success because there are support systems established for all students including students of color (Banks & Dohy, 2019). In an institution where support systems are carefully established, students are likely to enroll and complete programs (Banks & Dohy, 2019). Socialization of African American people in places where they see themselves can foster positive messages into the lives of students and African



American faculty who aspire to leadership roles (Campbell et al., 2019; Walkington, 2017).

### **Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research**

The findings of the study, have direct implications for African American women aspiring to a decision-making role in the community college. African American women have more than the essential tools to lead and make decisions in the community college, but the pathway to achieve a leadership position remains limited. The barriers and immense challenges that African American women face to attain a leadership position can be a huge deterrence from achieving this goal. Therefore, policymakers must play a role in developing policies that eliminate the barriers that these women must overcome within their institutions and act aggressively to create an equitable opportunity to leadership attainment. With these challenges and barriers remaining in existence, there is a need to revisit the mission, purpose, and strategic plans to evaluate the non-compliance with diversifying the institution and valuing representation for all students (Delgado & Ozuna Allen, 2019). Those currently in higher education administrative positions have a responsibility to help mitigate these barriers for African American women and create an environment where they can freely obtain a leadership position without hardship. This may require identifying individual, group, and institutional levels of resistance and then alleviating them (Brower et al., 2019). There may also be a need for other leaders to seek understanding of the experiences that these women experience, which can begin to fortify efforts to change these aspects of the institutional environment (Brower et al., 2019).

This research can be applied to all community colleges. College administrators can look at the demographic of administration and look for ways to include African American women in this pool for diversity and representation for the African American student. Knowing that barriers and challenges are there for African American women aspiring to leadership can spark an assessment of these barriers to ensure that they are identified and alleviated from the community college environment to encourage leadership representation of African American women in the community college setting.

However, future research should focus on the president role and the African American woman's journey to presidency in the community college. Not being able to access African American women in this role limited the knowledge that could have come from a participant in this role. In the future, it is also important to continue to look at the achievement of not just the African American woman but the African American man too. The African American man may have some insights needed in the community college, and representation of this demographic is also needed.

### **Conclusion**

The overall purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the experiences of African American female leaders in the community college setting and to explore the strategies that these women used to obtain these positions. These women eagerly described their experiences and expressed how they were able to become one of few African American women who lead in the community college setting. The findings from the data showed a variation of experiences and journeys to leadership. These variations could be contributed to different factors; however, these women agreed that mentorship,

networking, education, experience, and professional development are all important to the African American woman's professional growth and attainment of a leadership position in the community college. They also revealed that remaining authentic to who they are and representation for student of color is vital to the leadership role of a community college, but there is a lack of support in organizational structures of community colleges that support this.

Several of the candidates indicated that they perceive mentorship as an integral aspect to attaining a leadership position in the community college. Therefore, the study reinforced the concept of developing a conference that encompasses mentorship, networking, and professional development by embracing and learning from the journeys of women who have attained a leadership position in the community college. The women in this study did not hold back in relating the experiences and narratives that they have endured to be in a position of leadership in the community college. For many of these women, this journey came with making personal sacrifices, combating stereotypes, and breaking down barriers to an institution that they felt they deserved to be a part of as a student and later as a professional and an administrator.

African American women who aspire to be in a leadership role at a community college must take ownership of their education, training, and professional development. It is through these measures that the woman grows and becomes a viable option for community college administration. These women also seek to be a representative for other African American students even though many of them could not find this representation for themselves as a student, which shows the powerful nature of

representation and the lack of it. Representation allows for a student to see himself or herself in the positive aspects of another person. Lack of representation in academia can fuel the African American woman to aim to be who she felt she needed as a student developing representation through self, for self, for other students, and for the community. As an administrator, the African American woman can now make decisions for this demographic and act as the voice to promote equitable supportive resources to the African American student and a fair chance at student success.

To ensure that policies and procedures are in place to support positive relationships with students require partnership, understanding of diverse perspectives, and understanding of diverse experiences (Kok & McDonald, 2017). Diversity has been linked to academic success because there are support systems established for all students including students of color (Banks & Dohy, 2019). In an institution where support systems are carefully established, students are likely to enroll and complete programs (Banks & Dohy, 2019). Socialization of African American people in places where they see themselves can foster positive messages into the lives of students and African American faculty who aspire to leadership roles (Campbell et al., 2019; Walkington, 2017).

Obtaining a leadership position was not the end of the challenges for African American women in leadership positions. These women often felt that they lacked support from the institution and struggled to remain in a leadership position at the community college. However, the study offers insight into the journey of these women to leadership roles providing a better understanding of the path taken to assume a leadership

role in the community college setting. The perceptions of the organizational structure and the lack of support for these women showed that the intersectionality of race and gender is a primary factor contributing to the lack of presentation of African Americans and women in decision making roles. The impact that race and gender have on the Black woman continues the invisibility of the African American woman in leadership for this setting.

There is room for intentionality from African American women. Through intentionality, these women can embrace their authentic selves and confront these challenges within this leadership journey at the institutional level. As there is an understanding of the challenges these women experience without change, there may be a need to be intentional for our own communities, which may ignite opportunities to create our own paths of leadership within communities where we are invited such as Historical Black Colleges and Universities or even right in the communities where we live. African American women should not have to continuously force their way to leadership in the community college. According to Harts (2019, “We are ready to build our own tables, sit at yours, and create our own place settings if need be” (p.7).

African American women in these positions often combat a system that considers her isolated, angry, and even uncompromising in the role of leadership of a community college. However, these characteristics are viewed in other White counterparts as resilience, passion, and commitment (Harts, 2019). African American women deserve the opportunity to lead in the community college institution and be supported in their efforts as community college leaders. The journey to achieve these positions is not an easy one,

but those who do achieve these roles were identified as having valuable insight that can help other women achieve decision making roles in the community college. Essential to this happening is creating a space where these women can tell their stories and prepare other aspiring women for these roles. There can be more African American women in these roles, but this can only happen when systems promote policies to promote equity among everyone. This may also require making the decision-making roles more accessible to African American women. As more and more women obtain these positions, they can have an impact on other women and influence them to navigate the journey to leadership as well. By supporting one another, African American women can use the experiences of women who have obtained and retained a decision-making role in a community college to help other women aspiring to these roles navigate the intersectionality of race and gender, microaggressions, and stereotypes. Ultimately, this sisterhood could be the start to increasing the representation of African American women in the community college setting.

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## Appendix A: The Project

**Conference Description:** African American women have always used their voice, narratives, and experiences to influence education. This conference is an opportunity for African American women who have been in a leadership position or currently serve in a leadership position to come together with other African American women aspiring to a leadership role in the community college setting. The conference focuses on three very important themes from the research study: combating stereotypes, learning from experiences, and fostering meaningful relationships. Focusing on these themes can help these women establish a sense of belonging in the community college setting and ascend to leadership as they interact with women who are leaders or have been leaders in the community college setting. The long-term goal of the conference is to promote the idea of diversifying the current administration by adding African American women as a viable option for leadership. To do this, there is a need to focus on leadership preparation, create a community for cultivation of support to manage institutional challenges and barriers, and create connections that can create visibility for these women (Surna, 2018).

**Target audience:** The conference targets African American women who have been in a leadership position, currently serve in a leadership position, and aspire to a leadership position of a community college. It also targets non-Black leaders who can have an influential role in mitigating barriers and challenges of the leadership journey of African American women.

### **Overall Goals and Objectives:**

6. Highlight barriers and challenges of African American women who advanced to leadership in the community college setting.
7. Foster relationships for mentorship and/or sponsorship for women aspiring to leadership in the community college setting.
8. Support and encourage African American women to continue to seek a leadership position in the community college setting.
9. Promote value of having the African American woman in the administrative pool in the community college setting.
10. Promote support within the organization from other leaders to support African American women as leaders.

### **Day 1: Learning Outcomes**

1. Identifying barriers that exist in the community college
2. Discuss how African American women can overcome barriers to leadership.

### **Day 2: Learning Outcomes**

1. Affirm that all African American women can obtain a leadership position.
2. Determine what it takes to successfully navigate the leadership journey as an African American woman.

### **Day 3: Learning Outcomes**

1. Identifying allies
2. Explore collaborative efforts for change
3. Exacting change

### **Day 1 Agenda- Breaking Barriers**

**7:00 a.m. -9:00 a.m.**-Breakfast/ Registration/Welcome/ Sign in/ Administer the survey

**9:00 a.m. - 11:00 a.m.** - Keynote speaker: African American Women: Breaking Barriers-  
Vice President of Diversity and Inclusion at XXX College

**11:15 a.m.-12:00 p.m.** Panel: Why I Chose Community College Leadership?

**12:15 - 1:15 p.m.** – Lunch

**1:30- 3:00 p.m.** - Presentation: Who does she think she is? Combating Stereotypes?-

**3:00 p.m.—3:15 p.m.** – Break

**3:15 -4:00 p.m.** - Panel Discussion: How to Overcome Barriers and Challenges to  
Leadership?

### **Day 2 Agenda- You can be President or Whatever: Affirm It**

**8:00- 9:00 a.m.**-Breakfast

**9:00- 10:00 a.m.** - Keynote Speaker- How I became president of XYZ College? –

**Breakout Sessions-** Do You Have What It Takes?

**10:00- 10:15 a.m.** - break/ organize session

**10:15- 11:00 a.m.** The Impact of Professional Development/Sponsorship/ Mentorship-  
Presented by the Vice President of XXX College

**11:00-11:15 a.m.** -break/ organize session

**11:15 a.m. - 12:00 p.m.** The Impact of Education- Presented by the Director of Career Development at FFF Community College

**12:05- 1:05 p.m.** – Lunch: Attendees will provide their own lunch.

**Breakout Session:** The ladies will attend a session from 1:15-2:00 p.m. and another session from 2:15-3:00 p.m.

**1:15-2:00 p.m.** - Level Up: The Strategies That Will Get You There

**2:15-3:00 p.m.** – Know the Power of Your Presence- Presented by

**3:15- 4:00 p.m.**-Open floor to attendees for questions.

### **Day 3 Agenda - Who Are Your Allies?**

**8:00- 9:00 a.m.** – Breakfast

**9:00- 10:00 a.m.:** Keynote Address: My Sponsor Can Be Your Sponsor Too

**10:00- 10:15 a.m.:** Panel Discussion: Who Speaks for You When You Are Not in the Room?

**11:00 a.m. -12:00 p.m.** Lunch Provided by Uber Eats

**12:15- 1:15 p.m.** Discussion- open floor to attendees to ask questions to speakers at the conference.

**1:15- 1:30 p.m.** Summary

**1:30- 2:00 p.m.** Complete the final survey.

**Day 1- (Duration- 9 hours)** Objective: Through a better understanding of microaggressions and combating stereotypes in the community college setting, this conference has been developed to allow a safe space for African American women to discuss their experiences in the community college setting and the road to leadership. African American women and even women of a different race can come together to

discuss how African American women can navigate the journey to leadership in the community college setting.

### **Breaking Barriers- Day 1 Learning Outcomes**

1. Identifying barriers that exist in the community college
2. Discussion how African American women can overcome them.

**7:00 a.m. -9:00 a.m.**-Breakfast/ Registration/Welcome/ Sign in/ Administer the survey and provide time to complete and submit the survey before the start of the session. All surveys should be submitted by the start of the first keynote address. The survey is provided to attendees to complete. This survey allows these women to reflect on their role in the community college and the experiences within the institution. They also reflect on whether their organization currently has organization support for African American women to advance to leadership roles in the community college.

### **Survey Questions- Survey responses will be administered and submitted to Canvas (LMS)**

1. Describe two barriers that have proven to be a challenge for you for attainment of a leadership position in the community college. One barrier should be internal to your institution and the other one should be external to your
2. Have you been able to overcome this challenge? How so? If not explain what keeps you from overcoming this challenge
3. How can you use this experience to shape who you are as a leader?
4. From a scale of 1-10, how close are you currently to assuming a leadership position in the community college? After choosing a number, explain why you think you are near or far to obtaining a leadership position.

**9:00 a.m. - 11:00 a.m.** - Keynote speaker: African American Women: Breaking Barriers- Vice President of Diversity and Inclusion at XXX College

**11:15 a.m.-12:00 p.m.** Panel: Why I Chose Community College Leadership?

Panel Members: Moderator-/ Panelists

**12:15 - 1:15 p.m.** – Lunch

**1:30- 3:00 p.m.** - Presentation: Who does she think she is? Combating Stereotypes?- Two African American women in a leadership position at a community college will lead a discussion about how African American women can combat stereotypes in the community college setting.

**3:00 p.m.—3:15 p.m.** – Break

**3:15 -4:00 p.m.** - Panel Discussion: How to Overcome Barriers and Challenges to Leadership?

Panel members: Moderator-/ Panelists

**Virtual Reflection and Discussion Questions:** What barriers are you experiencing currently in your journey to leadership? Is it external or internal to your institution?

Attendees will complete the discussion and interact with presenters of the conference in Day 1 in Canvas (LMS).

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**Day 2 (Duration- 8 hours)** Objective: The overall objective is to affirming the values of African American women and what they have to offer to their communities and the community college setting as leaders. A keynote speaker in a presidency role and presentations will be presented by other community college leaders to affirm that it is possible.

**You can be President or Whatever: Affirm It- Day 2 Learning Outcomes**

1. Affirm that all African American women can obtain a leadership positions.
2. Determine what it takes to successfully navigate the leadership journey as an African American woman.

**8:00- 9:00 a.m.**-Breakfast

**9:00- 10:00 a.m.** - Keynote Speaker- How I became president of XYZ College? – African American female speaker reflecting on her experience and advancement journey to presidency at a community college.

**Breakout Sessions-** Do you have what it takes? The ladies will attend a session from 10:15-11:00 a.m. and another session from 11:15-12:00 p.m.

**10:00- 10:15 a.m.** - break/ organize session

**10:15- 11:00 a.m.** The Impact of Professional Development/Sponsorship/ Mentorship- Presented by the Vice President of XXX College

**11:00-11:15 a.m.** -break/ organize session

**11:15 a.m. - 12:00 p.m.** The Impact of Education- Presented by the Director of Career Development at FFF Community College

**12:05- 1:05 p.m.** – Lunch: Attendees will provide their own lunch.

Breakout Session: The ladies will attend a session from 1:15-2:00 p.m. and another session from 2:15-3:00 p.m.

1:15-2:00 p.m. - Level Up: The Strategies That Will Get You There- Presented by

2:15-3:00 p.m. – Know the Power of Your Presence- Presented by

**3:15- 4:00 p.m.**-Open floor to attendees for questions.

**Virtual Reflection and Discussion Questions:** How has today's session influenced your goal or path to leadership in the community college setting? Why do you aspire to lead in the community college setting? Do you feel that you have what it takes? Explain.

Attendees will complete the discussion and interact with presenters of the conference in Day 1 in Canvas (LMS).

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**Day 3 (Duration- 6 hours)** Objective: The overall objective on this day is to promote sponsorship and institutional collaboration. The goal is to get all in attendance to think about ways to build relationships that can be collaborative in promoting diversity in leadership in the community college setting. The day will be dedicated to relationship building for leadership change and promotion of the African American woman to leadership.

### **Who are Your Allies? - Day 3 Learning Outcomes**

1. Identifying allies
2. Explore collaborative efforts for change
3. Exacting change

**8:00- 9:00 a.m.** – Breakfast

**9:00- 10:00 a.m.:** Keynote Address: My Sponsor Can Be Your Sponsor Too- Presented by

**10:00- 10:15 a.m.:** Panel Discussion: Who Speaks for You When You Are Not in the Room?

Panel members: Moderator-/ Panelists

**11:00 a.m. -12:00 p.m.** Lunch Provided by Uber Eats – Lunch will be provided to all speakers and attendees by Uber EATS- Lunch will be sponsored by the developer and invested sponsors. Attendees can feel free to use this time to enjoy their lunch and enter group chats to continue to socialize before the completion of the conference.

**12:15- 1:15 p.m.** Discussion- open floor to attendees to ask questions to speakers at the conference.

**1:15- 1:30 p.m.** Summary- Conference Developer will thank the attendees and speakers at the event and express the need for change in leadership in the community college that introduces the African American woman as a viable solution for community college leadership. The developer will also reaffirm the impact African American women can have in exacting this change. Thank everyone for attending.

**1:30- 2:00 p.m.** Complete the final survey.

**Survey Questions- Survey responses will be administered and submitted to Canvas (LMS)**

### **Questions for Participants Aspiring to Leadership**

6. How did coming together with African American women in leadership positions at the community college impact your goals to leadership?
7. Are there any positive aspects for change in leadership at your institution highlighted in this conference?
8. Are you motivated to continue your journey to leadership despite the challenges and barriers that currently exist?
9. Providing a leadership position and without providing a name, who is one potential ally in your institution who can help you navigate to a leadership position? (Example, Vice President of Academic Affairs). Explain why you chose this person as a potential supporter.

10. Rate the conference from 1-10. What can we do to make the conference better?  
Please be constructive.

**Questions for Women Who Have Achieved a Leadership Role and Non-Black Leaders**

4. What power do you have, if any, to exact change in the leadership dilemma at the community college where you now serve?
5. How do you plan to use your current role to influence the organization in diversifying the administrative pool?
6. Rate the conference from 1-10. What can we do to make the conference better?  
Please be constructive.

Once the summaries have been completed and collected, the attendees will be dismissed.

# A SISTAHOOD: SUPPORTING AND PROMOTING AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN TO LEADERSHIP IN THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Laquanda Thomas

Walden University

## DESCRIPTION

- **Conference Description:** African American women have always used their voice, narratives, and experiences to influence education. This conference is an opportunity for African American women who have been in a leadership position or currently serve in a leadership position to come together with other African American women aspiring to a leadership role in the community college setting. The conference focuses on three very important themes from the research study: combating stereotypes, learning from experiences, and fostering meaningful relationships. Focusing on these themes can help these women establish a sense of belonging in the community college setting and ascend to leadership as they interact with women who are leaders or have been leaders in the community college setting. The long-term goal of the conference is to promote the idea of diversifying the current administration by adding African American women as a viable option for leadership. To do this, there is a need to focus on leadership preparation, create a community for cultivation of support to manage institutional challenges and barriers, and create connections that can create visibility for these women (Surna, 2018).



## GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

- Highlight barriers and challenges of African American women who advanced to leadership in the community college setting.
- Foster relationships for mentorship and/or sponsorship for women aspiring to leadership in the community college setting.
- Support and encourage African American women to continue to seek a leadership position in the community college setting.
- Promote value of having the African American woman in the administrative pool in the community college setting.

## DAY 1 OBJECTIVE

- **Day 1- (Duration- 9 hours)** Objective: Through a better understanding of microaggressions and combating stereotypes in the community college setting, this conference has been developed to allow a safe space for African American women to discuss their experiences in the community college setting and the road to leadership. African American women and even women of a different race can come together to discuss how African American women can navigate the journey to leadership in the community college setting.

## LEARNING OUTCOMES

### Breaking Barriers- Day 1 Learning Outcomes

- Identifying barriers to leadership that exist in the community college
- Discuss how African American women can overcome barriers to leadership.

## BREAKING BARRIERS- DAY 1 AGENDA

- 7:00 a.m. -9:00 a.m. -Breakfast/ Registration/Welcome/ Sign in/ Administer the survey and provide time to complete and submit the survey before the start of the session. All surveys should be submitted by the start of the first keynote address. The survey is provided to attendees to complete. This survey allows the women to reflect on their role in the community college and the experiences within the institution. They also reflect on whether their organization currently has organizational support for African American women to advance to leadership roles in the community college.

**Survey Questions-** Survey responses will be administered and submitted to Canvas (LMS)

- 9:00 a.m. - 11:00 a.m. - Keynote speaker: "African American Women: Breaking Barriers"- Vice President of Diversity and Inclusion at XXX College
- 11:15 a.m. -12:00 p.m. Panel: "Why I Chose Community College Leadership?"
- Panel Members will be African American women who currently hold a leadership position
- 12:15 - 1:15 p.m. – Lunch
- 1:30- 3:00 p.m. - Presentation: Who does she think she is? -Combating Stereotypes- Two African American women in a leadership position at a community college will lead a discussion about how African American women can combat stereotypes in the community college setting.
- 3:00 p.m.—3:15 p.m. – Break
- 3:15 -4:00 p.m. - Panel Discussion: How to Overcome Barriers and Challenges to Leadership?
- Panel members will be African American women who currently hold a leadership position
- **Virtual Reflection and Discussion:** What barriers are you experiencing currently in your journey to leadership? Is it external or internal to your institution?

Attendees will complete the discussion and interact with presenters of the conference in Day 1 in Canvas (LMS).

## SURVEY

**Survey Questions- Survey responses will be administered and submitted to Canvas (LMS)**

- Describe two barriers that have proven to be a challenge for you for attainment of a leadership position in the community college. One barrier should be internal to your institution and the other one should be external to your institution.
- Have you been able to overcome these challenges? How so? If not explain what keeps you from overcoming the challenges.
- How can you use this experience to shape who you are as a leader?
- From a scale of 1-10, how close are you currently to assuming a leadership position in the community college? After choosing a number, explain why you think you are near or far to obtaining a leadership position.

## KEYNOTE SPEAKER: “BREAKING BARRIERS”

- Delivered by the Vice President of Diversity and Inclusion at XXX College.
- The keynote address is developed by the speaker, but the developer of the conference provides the speaker with the topic for the speech.
- The speech must do the following:
  - highlight barriers and challenges within the journey to a decision-making position in the community college.
  - highlight how the speaker personally navigated through her journey.
  - Offer words of encouragement and strategies of leadership attainment to the women who aspire to a leadership position in this demographic.
- This address must be delivered by an African American woman in a decision-making position at the community college.

## **PANEL DISCUSSION: WHY I CHOSE COMMUNITY COLLEGE LEADERSHIP?**

- Panel members/Moderator: African American women who currently hold a leadership position.

## **LUNCH- DAY 1**

- Participants are responsible for their lunch.



## **PRESENTATION: “WHO DOES SHE THINK SHE IS?- COMBATING STEREOTYPES”**

- This discussion will be lead by two African American women in a leadership position at a community college. The focus of the discussion is on combating stereotypes for African American women potential leaders and current leaders in the community college.

Questions for the discussion are provided by the conference developer. These women will open the floor to attendees to ask questions at the end of the discussion.

## **BREAK**



## **PANEL DISCUSSION: “HOW TO OVERCOME BARRIERS AND CHALLENGES TO LEADERSHIP?”**

- Panel members/Moderator: African American women who currently hold a leadership position.

## **VIRTUAL REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

- **Virtual Reflection and Discussion:** What barriers are you experiencing currently in your journey to leadership? Is it external or internal to your institution?

Attendees will complete the discussion and interact with presenters of the conference in Day 1 in Canvas (LMS).

## DAY 2 OBJECTIVE:

- The overall objective is to affirm the values of African American women and what they have to offer to their communities and the community college setting as leaders. A keynote speaker in a presidency role and breakout sessions will be presented by other community college leaders to affirm that it is possible.

## LEARNING OUTCOMES

### **You can be President or Whatever: Affirm It- Day 2 Learning Outcomes**

- Affirm that all African American women can obtain a leadership positions.
- Determine what it takes to successfully navigate the leadership journey as an African American woman.

## YOU CAN BE PRESIDENT OR WHATEVER: AFFIRM IT!- DAY 2 AGENDA

- 8:00- 9:00 a.m. -Breakfast
- 9:00- 10:00 a.m. - Keynote Speaker- "How I Became President of a Community College?" – African American female speaker reflecting on her experience and advancement journey to presidency at a community college.
- Breakout Sessions-** "Do You Have What It Takes?" The ladies will attend a session from 10:18-11:00 a.m. and another session from 11:18-12:00 p.m.
- 10:00- 10:15 a.m. - break/ organize session
- 10:18- 11:00 a.m. "The Impact of Professional Development/Sponsorship/ Mentorship" - Presented by the Vice President of XXX College
- 11:00-11:15 a.m. -break/ organize session
- 11:18 a.m. - 12:00 p.m. "The Impact of Education" – Presented by the Director of Career Development at PFF Community College
- 12:08- 1:05 p.m. – Lunch: Attendees will provide their own lunch.
- Breakout Session: The ladies will attend a session from 1:18-2:00 p.m. and another session from 2:18-3:00 p.m.
- 1:15-2:00 p.m. – "Level Up: The Strategies That Will Get You There"
- 2:15-3:00 p.m. – "Know the Power of Your Presence" - Presented by a Vice President of LMN Community College
- 3:15- 4:00 p.m. -Open floor to attendees for questions.
- **Virtual Reflection and Discussion:** How has today's session influenced your goal or path to leadership in the community college setting? Why do you aspire to lead in the community college setting? Do you feel that you have what it takes? Explain.
- Attendees will complete the discussion and interact with presenters of the conference in Day 2 in Canvas (LMS).

## KEYNOTE SPEAKER- "HOW I BECAME PRESIDENT OF A COMMUNITY COLLEGE?" –

- Delivered by the President of XYZ College.
- African American female speaker reflecting on her experience and advancement journey to presidency at a community college.
- The keynote address is developed by the speaker, but the developer of the conference provides the speaker with the topic for the speech.
- The speech must do the following:
  - Highlight the speaker's personal journey to leadership.
  - Provide the audience with key takeaways to navigating the journey to leadership in a community college.
  - Confirm the work it takes to obtain a leadership position.
  - Encourage aspiring African American women to continue their journey to leadership as high up as presidency.
- This address must be delivered by an African American woman in a presidency role for two or more years at a community college.



## **BREAKOUT SESSIONS: “DO YOU HAVE WHAT IT TAKES?”**

- Half of the attendees will attend one session and the other half another. The groups will switch sessions.
- Breakout Session 1: “The Impact of Professional Development, Sponsorship, and Mentorship”-This session is presented and led by the Vice President of AAA College.
- Breakout Session 2: “The Impact of Education”- This session is presented and led by the Director of Career Development at FFF Community College.

## **LUNCH**

- Participants are responsible for their lunch. Session will resume at 12:05 p.m.

## BREAKOUT SESSION

- Half of the attendees will attend one session and the other half another. The groups will switch sessions. The breakout sessions for the day will be moderated by African American women in presidency roles at the community college.
- Breakout Session 1: "Level Up: The Strategies That Will Get You There"- Presented by
- Breakout Session 2: "Know the Power of Your Presence"- Presented by a President of LMN Community College
- The last 45 minutes of the day will be an open floor to attendees for questions for anyone presenting or leading a breakout session during the conference.

## VIRTUAL REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- **Virtual Reflection and Discussion:** How has today's session influenced your goal or path to leadership in the community college setting? Why do you aspire to lead in the community college setting? Do you feel that you have what it takes? Explain.

Attendees will complete the discussion and interact with presenters of the conference in Day 1 in Canvas (LMS).

## **DAY 3 OBJECTIVE:**

- The overall objective of this day is to promote sponsorship and institutional collaboration. The goal is to get all in attendance to think about ways to build relationships that can be collaborative in promoting diversity in leadership in the community college setting. The day will be dedicated to relationship building for leadership change and promotion of the African American woman to leadership.

## **LEARNING OUTCOMES**

### **“Who Are Your Allies?” - Day 3 Learning Outcomes**

- Identifying allies
- Explore collaborative efforts for change
- Exacting change

## WHO ARE YOUR ALLIES?- DAY 3 AGENDA

- **8:00-9:00 a.m.** – Breakfast
- **9:00-10:00 a.m.** : Keynote Address: "My Sponsor Can Be Your Sponsor Too"- Presented by a Vice President for Academic Affairs of STP Community College
- **10:00-10:15 a.m.** : Panel Discussion: "Who Speaks for You When You Are Not in the Room?"
- Panel Members will be African American women who currently hold a leadership position
- **11:00 a.m. -12:00 p.m.** Lunch Provided through UberEats – **11:00 a.m. -12:00 p.m.** Lunch Provided by Uber Eats – Lunch will be provided to all speakers and attendees by Uber EATS- Lunch will be sponsored by the developer and invested sponsors. Attendees can feel free to use this time to enjoy their lunch and enter group chats to continue to socialize before the completion of the conference.
- **12:15-1:15 p.m.** Discussion- open floor to attendees to ask questions to speakers at the conference.
- **1:15- 1:30 p.m.** Summary- Conference Developer will thank the attendees and speakers at the event and express the need for change in leadership in the community college that introduces the African American woman as a viable solution for community college leadership. The developer will also reaffirm the impact African American women can have in exacting this change.Thanks everyone for attending.
- **1:30- 2:00 p.m.** Complete the final survey
- **Survey Questions- Survey responses will be administered and submitted to Canvas (LMS)**
- **2:00 p.m. Dismissal**

## KEYNOTE ADDRESS: "MY SPONSOR CAN BE YOUR SPONSOR TOO"

- Delivered by the Vice President of Academic Affairs at XLM Community College.
- African American female speaker reflecting on her experience and advancement journey through a formal or informal sponsorship.
- The keynote address is developed by the speaker, but the developer of the conference provides the speaker with the topic for the speech.
- The speech must do the following:
  - Highlight the speaker's personal journey to leadership.
  - Provide audience with key takeaways to mentorship and sponsorship and its role in the leadership journey.
  - Identify her allies to leadership
  - Encourage aspiring African American women and all leaders to mentor and sponsor African American women to leadership.
- This address must be delivered by an African American woman in a decision-making role at a community college who was sponsored into her leadership position.

## **PANEL DISCUSSION: “WHO SPEAKS FOR YOU WHEN YOU ARE NOT IN THE ROOM?”**

- Panel members/Moderator: African American women who currently hold a leadership position.

## **LUNCH**

- Lunch will be provided to all speakers and attendees by Uber EATs- Lunch will be sponsored by the developer and invested sponsors.
- Attendees can feel free to use this time to enjoy their lunch and enter group chats to continue to socialize before the completion of the conference.

## OPEN FLOOR DISCUSSION

- Discussion- open floor to attendees to ask questions to speakers at the conference.
- Keynote Speaker will moderate discussion.

## SUMMARY

- Conference Developer will thank the attendees and speakers at the event and express the need for change in leadership in the community college so that African American woman can become a viable option for community college leadership. The developer will also reaffirm the impact African American women can have in exacting this change. Finally, she will thank everyone for attending and participating.

## FINAL SURVEY

- The final survey will be administered to the attendees and speakers.

**Survey Questions- Survey responses will be administered and submitted to Canvas (LMS)**

- How did coming together with African American women in leadership positions at the community college impact your goals to leadership?
- Are there any positive aspects for change in leadership at your institution highlighted in this conference?
- Are you motivated to continue your journey to leadership despite the challenges and barriers that currently exist?
- Providing a leadership position and without providing a name, who is one potential ally in your institution who can help you navigate to a leadership position? (Example, Vice President of Academic Affairs). Explain why you chose this person as a potential supporter.
- What power do you have, if any, to exact change in the leadership dilemma at the community college where you now serve?
- Rate the conference from 1-10. What can we do to make the conference better? Please be constructive.

Once the summaries have been completed and collected, the attendees are dismissed.



## Appendix B: Interview Protocol and Scripts

My name is Laquanda Thomas. I want to thank you for agreeing to meet and share your time with me. The interview should last between 40-60 minutes. This interview is an intricate part of my research to understand the African American woman's journey into decision-making positions in the community college. The problem to be explored in this study is the underrepresentation of African American women in academic leadership in a community college system. The purpose of this study is to explore the professional experiences of African American women obtaining a position of leadership in Southeastern Community College System with a primary focus on executive level positions as well as senior staff positions. By exploring the professional experiences of African American women who have obtained decision-making roles in higher education, the study may help to devise strategies to increase diversity in community college administration, which could have a positive impact on student experience, institutional climate, policy implementation, and decision making. Your responses are very valuable to the outcome of this study; therefore, feel free to speak freely regarding your experiences that lead you to assume a position as a leader as well as the experiences that have influenced you as a leader in the community college.

### **Tape Recorder Instructions**

I would like to ask permission to record our conversation. This will allow me to be able to get all details of our interview and focus on executing the interview in an attentive manner. Your comments will remain confidential. The interviews of each participant will be compiled in a report for analysis. However, each participant's responses will be kept confidential by providing responses but keeping the interviewee anonymous.

### ***Academic preparation***

Please think back to your early days in higher education, did you feel academically prepared when you initially begin college as an undergraduate? Why or why not? Please describe some of the influences on your leadership development early in your career and now? (Follow up with influences of social, political, theoretical, familial, and spiritual influences/impacts)

Were there any individuals in the home, community or workplace, who you aimed to emulate? What leadership traits and characteristics did these individuals have that appealed to you and why did these characteristics and qualities appeal to you?



**RQ1:** What successful advancement strategies did African American women use to become and remain a leader in a community college system?

Interview Question 1a. What professional experiences do you feel lead to your assuming a decision-making position?

Interview Question 1b. Describe an advancement strategy that you used to gain a decision-making role.

Interview Question 1c. Who was the most influential person in your professional advancement so far? How did that individual support you in your journey to becoming a community college decision maker?

Interview Question 1d. What actions or approaches do you recommend to other African American women who aspire to a decision-making role within the technical college system?

Interview Question 1e. What would you describe as key challenges or obstacles to your career advancement in the community college system? If there were any, how did you deal with the challenges? Would you share one or two examples?

Interview Question 1f. What do you think is the future for African American women who aspire to leadership within the technical college system, specifically, and higher education in general?

Interview Question 1g. What, if any, efforts or approaches should be made to encourage leadership development and potential for African American women within the community college system?

**RQ 2:** How do African American women in community college decision-making roles describe the supports and barriers they encountered as they attempted to advance to a decision-making position?

Interview Question 2a. How would you describe your leadership style and how were you influenced to develop this style?

Interview Questions 2b. Can you share a story where your leadership style caused you difficulty or a story where your leadership style helped you advance?

Interview Questions 2b. Once you obtained a decision-making position, what strategies did you need to use to retain your position?

Interview Question 2c. Has your leadership style evolved over time? Can you share a story of your leadership from early in your career? Would you handle the situation the same today? Why or why not?

Interview Question 2d. Describe an experience that made you feel confident as a community college leader?

Interview Question 2e. What impact, if any, do you believe race and gender has had on your leadership and your ability to advance in your profession?

Interview Question 2f. What impact, if any, do you believe race and gender has had on how others view and respond to you as a decision maker? Can you share a story of an interaction where your leadership style positively or negatively impacted the situation?

Interview Question 2g. Please describe the strategies you use when leading and managing community college employees and staff?

Interview Question 2h. What organizational aspects have been most helpful and least helpful to you in your time as a community college leader?

Final Interview Question: Are there any other ideas, strategies, or interventions that you feel would support African American women attempting to navigate the community college system to a decision-making role that you haven't mentioned?