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Examining Sense of Belonging in Higher Education Leadership for Black Women with Intersecting Marginalized Identities

Dominique A. White
Walden University

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Walden University

College of Education and Human Sciences

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Dominique A. White

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

Review Committee

Dr. Latrissa Neiworth, Committee Chairperson, Education Faculty

Dr. Nancy Maldonado, Committee Member, Education Faculty

Chief Academic Officer and Provost

Sue Subocz, Ph.D.

Walden University

2024

Abstract

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Intersecting Marginalized Identities

by

Dominique A. White

MA-University of Arkansas at Little Rock, 2020

Ed.S.-Arkansas State University, 2014

MA-Arkansas State University, 2012

BA-Arkansas State University, 2010

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Education

Walden University

November 2024

Abstract

Black women juggling marginalized minority identities in executive leadership at public four-year universities contend with stigmas associated with race and gender, contributing to a decreased sense of belonging. Significant research has been done about the journeys of Black or African American women as they seek executive roles in higher education. However, minimal research explores Black women's sense of belonging once executive leadership status is reached. Understanding their sense of belonging could fill a gap in practice regarding Black women's scarcity occupying executive university leadership. This qualitative study examined the perceptions of a sense of belonging for Black women juggling intersecting marginalized identities while in executive leadership at public four-year institutions in the United States. It also explored suggestions to improve belonging. Crenshaw's intersectionality theory and Maslow's hierarchy of needs grounded this exploration. Twelve women who met the study criteria were interviewed via Zoom audio recordings. Findings showed that Black women in executive leadership had various perceptions of their sense of belonging from feeling "spoiled" to having no expectation of belonging. Overall, these women felt that sense of belonging for Black female executive leaders is a mutual responsibility of Black women and the institution. Key themes that emerged were: the value of villages, belonging beyond institutions, support, creating opportunity, and opting out. Results also indicated that Black women in executive leadership may never fully belong in predominately White spaces. Understanding these women's perceived sense of belonging can help institutions enact strategies to improve the job satisfaction, recruitment, and retention of Black female executive leaders, which could contribute significantly to positive social change.

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Table of Contents

List of Tables	v
List of Figures	vi
Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study.....	1
Background	7
Problem Statement	8
Purpose Statement.....	10
Conceptual Frameworks	11
Research Questions	14
Methodology and Design.....	14
Definitions.....	19
Assumptions.....	21
Delimitations	22
Limitations	23
Importance of Study.....	24
Summary	25
Chapter 2: Literature Review	27
Literature Exploration and Approach	27
Conceptual Framework	28
Key Themes Identified in Literature.....	30
Black Women and Leadership	32
Black Women Leading in Higher Education	33
Black Women Leading at Community Colleges and HBCUs.....	35

The Impact of Gender in Higher Education Leadership.....	37
The Intersection of Race and Gender in Higher Education Leadership	39
The Importance of Intersectionality	41
Intersectionality in Higher Education	42
The Importance of Belonging	47
Sense of Belonging and Students in Higher Ed	50
Belonging at Work	65
Sense of Belonging and Faculty in Higher Ed	71
Sense of Belonging and Black Female Executive Administrators in Higher Ed	72
Summary and Conclusion	73
Chapter 3: Research Methods.....	76
Introduction.....	76
Research Design and Rationale.....	77
Role of the Researcher	78
Methodology.....	80
Participants Selection	80
Instrumentation	81
Procedures for Participation and Data Collection.....	82
Data Analysis Plan	83
Trustworthiness	85
Transferability, Dependability, and Confirmability.....	86
Ethical Procedures.....	86

Summary	88
Chapter 4: Results	89
Introduction.....	89
Setting of Study.....	90
Demographic Data	91
Data Collection	92
Data Collection Description.....	94
Data Analysis Process	96
Data Collection Descriptors and Analysis	97
Results of Study	100
Emerging Themes	101
Trustworthiness of Results.....	111
Credibility, Transferability, Dependability, and Confirmability	112
Summary	113
Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations.....	114
Introduction.....	114
Interpretation of the Findings.....	121
Limitations of Study	130
Recommendations.....	132
Recommendations for Administrators	132
Recommendations for Black Women	133
Overview of Implications.....	135
Positive Social Change Implications	135

Practice Implications.....	136
Conclusion	137
References.....	140
Appendix A: Interview Questions	171

List of Tables

Table 1. List of Common Codes, Categories, and Themes	99
Table 2. Emerging Themes	101
Table 3. Perceptions of Belonging	115
Table 4. Solutions to Improve Belonging	119

List of Figures

Figure 1. Example of NVivo Codes for RQ 2 98

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The United States' higher education institutions are grappling with enhancing commitments to diversity, equity, inclusion, accessibility, and belonging (DEI-AB), especially in a political climate where these ideas are challenged by state and federal legislation (Knox, 2023). For example, teaching about race and LGBTQ+ issues in public schools is being challenged by politicians who believe that these diversity issues should not be taught in public secondary or postsecondary schools (Grossman & Young, 2023; Nguyen, 2023). Diversity programs are being removed from public institutions across the southern United States (Knox, 2023). Also, the Supreme Court arguably outlawed the consideration of race in the college admissions process (Jaschik, 2023). However, even before the recent challenges to diversity efforts, experts highlighted the need to go beyond diversity and focus on belonging.

The belonging piece of DEI work is a recent addition that has garnered significant importance in the field. Experts assert that belonging is an essential aspect that industries must enhance to see successful outcomes toward their identified goals. It is not enough for entities to be diverse, equitable, or inclusive; belonging must be a distinct aim for diversity initiatives to succeed effectively (Villarreal, 2022). Scholars define diversity as noticeable differences. Examples of diversity include differences in age, race, gender, ability, religion, and personality (Harvard Human Resources, n.d.). Equity can be defined as removing barriers to create fair treatment for all (Harvard Human Resources, n.d.). Inclusion denotes that everyone is seen, heard, and considered (Harvard Human Resources, n.d.). Belonging can be defined as a sense of acceptance, security, support,

and appreciation. It is when people feel a sense of community and as if they can thrive as valuable community members (Harvard Human Resources, n.d.). Others assert that belonging is not about fitting in but being celebrated for who one is and the unique perspective one brings (Barton, 2023).

A sense of belonging helps individuals feel united and compelled to pour into a place or cause. Regarding higher education, research underlines the value of a sense of belonging for various marginalized groups navigating the higher education environment. Studies showed that first-generation students with a sense of belonging persisted toward degree completion more than those without (Patfield et al., 2022). First-generation college students often have little financial resources or other family support throughout their journey. These factors make it typical for first-generation college students to fall through the cracks. After three years, first-generation college students often leave college, and approximately 90% never graduate (McCallen & Johnson, 2020). Many feel a lack of belonging compared to their peers, but those who feel a sense of belonging provided by peers, professors, staff, and administration have a better chance of staying the course (McCallen & Johnson, 2020; Patfield et al., 2022). Retention for international students is also enhanced when they feel like they belong at an institution (Rivas et al., 2019). Often, international students feel isolated, lonely, and overwhelmed by being in a new country. However, those who can develop a sense of belonging at their university thrive instead of simply surviving. Additionally, students with disabilities perform better academically, socially, and emotionally when they feel a sense of belonging at their institution. For

these students, belonging is often created through the intentional accessibility of classes, programs, and services offered to all students (McNicholl et al., 2021).

Scholarly work has also focused on the sense of belonging for minority faculty (Casad et al., 2021). Some researchers indicated that 94% of faculty and staff are more likely to remain at an institution and report more job satisfaction when they get support from supervisors and others in power, such as fair compensation and other rewards, opportunities for advancement, professional development, and flexible work environments, which are variables that contribute to a sense of belonging (Shaterjalali et al., 2021; Strayhorn, 2023). These feelings are also evidenced by respect and trust from peers, other students, deans, and administrators, and the capacity to teach and research with significant freedom (Dixon et al., 2019). Although much research has been done on the sense of belonging for various groups navigating higher education, belonging for those in senior leadership roles at institutions is rarely studied. Specifically, there are limited studies about Black women navigating executive leadership roles. Evidence suggesting that lack of belonging contributes to the rarity of Black women in higher education executive leadership can be found in works by Logan and Dudley (2019) that recount the experience of a community college dean who speaks about institutional opposition and alienation that contributes to her sense of belonging and ability to perform job duties from a social justice and servant-leader perspective. This work shares how Black women who ascend to higher education leadership frequently report feeling isolated, stressed, invisible, silenced, insecure, and devalued in these spaces; traits generally associated with a lack of belonging (Logan & Dudley, 2019). The authors also

asserted that Black women in leadership spaces must conform to ethnocentric leadership ideas to be accepted and effective in their roles (Logan & Dudley, 2019). These factors can explain why Black women are scarce in administrative leadership at the academy.

The absence of Black women in higher education leadership is evidenced by research conducted by the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (CUPA-HR). The 2020 publication by this organization reported that “Black employees make up less than 10% of higher education employees,” and fewer are women in executive administrative leadership (*CUPA-HR Signature Surveys*, 2020). Chapter 1 describes relevant background information for the study and the problem, purpose, and theories that ground the analysis. Research questions are also detailed, along with methodology, important definitions, assumptions, and limitations of the research. The importance of the study and an overall summary concludes this chapter.

The importance of administrative leadership at institutions has been studied significantly. Effective executive leadership influences policy development and implementation, the impact of globalization, and overall stakeholder support, as seen during the global pandemic and racial reckoning in 2020 (Kruse et al., 2020). Therefore, who these leaders are, where they come from, how they got to their roles, and how they enact leadership throughout their careers has greatly interested many researchers. According to Whitford (2020), senior leadership has primarily been studied from the lens of White men, as they are generally the individuals with access to cabinet-level administration ranks at institutions (Whitford, 2020). Women and racial minorities are underrepresented in higher education employment across all spectrums, but especially at

the executive level, except those who work within higher education finance, such as auditing and accounting (Whitford, 2020). When looking at the gender and racial makeup of executives in higher education, women make up fewer than 44% of individuals in executive administration (*CUPA-HR Signature Surveys, 2020.*). Reports further indicated that more than 80% of administrators are White, while people of color make up approximately 13% of executive offices in higher education (*CUPA-HR Signature Surveys, 2020.*).

While women and people of color in postsecondary administration have grown, those who occupy senior-level roles have remained stagnant (Whitford, 2020). Since 1636, the recorded start of higher education, leaders such as presidents, vice presidents, chancellors, vice chancellors, and provosts have largely been White men (Moody, 2023). Little is known about leaders from other racial and gendered backgrounds, particularly Black women. Their unique perspectives as intersectional minorities are essential because their visibility in these roles is rare. Some research also indicated that Black women generally lead differently than other groups (Schnall, 2020). Not all Black women lead in the same way; however, there are similarities in their leadership styles. This can be attributed to Black women occupying intersecting marginalized identities (i.e., gender and racial oppression). Research indicated that many Black women operate from a holistic perspective regarding how policies and practices impact individuals in the political, social, and educational realms (Schnall, 2020). Therefore, their rationale for decision-making has the potential to be multi-layered compared to leaders looking at challenges from a singular perspective. Black women also lead differently because they

see themselves as advocates for others due to their educational and leadership experiences of being treated “differently” than their White male and female peers (Johnson & Fournillier, 2023). Further, some Black women aspire to build the next generation of diverse leaders, which impacts their leadership perspective (Johnson & Fournillier, 2023). These differences can significantly influence funding, stakeholder support, institutional goals, objectives, and sustainability.

While sufficient studies focus on various aspects of higher education leadership, few focus on the sense of belonging for leaders in executive roles. Instead, research regarding the higher education workplace has focused on faculty and staff (Strayhorn, 2023). However, examining belonging for executive leaders is significant because it could influence a leader’s motivations, productivity, and retention, influencing innovative changes in the field. Suppose minimal research is done to assess the sense of belonging for women in executive leadership positions often dominated by White males. In that case, it is no surprise that less is known about Black women who occupy these positions. However, understanding the sense of belonging at the academy for these women could be significantly beneficial in emphasizing the value of belonging in diversity, equity, inclusion, accessibility, and belonging (DEI-AB) work, extending beyond student and faculty belonging to foster positive social change in the university setting. This chapter encompasses background information, the problem and purpose statements, research questions, conceptual framework, nature of the study, unique definitions, assumptions, delimitations, limitations, significance, and a chapter summary.

Background

African Americans in executive leadership at universities in the United States are a rare sight. Eighty-six percent of university senior leaders are White, and 7% are Black (*CUPA-HR Signature Surveys*, 2020). Fewer than half of those who serve as college presidents have been women, and most of these leaders have been White (*CUPA-HR Signature Surveys*, 2020). Therefore, the intersection of race and gender leaves very little room for Black women to achieve senior leadership prestige. While Black women have successfully attained executive leadership status at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and community colleges, they have had less success advancing to those roles at public four-year higher education institutions (Chance, 2022). Additionally, those who progress to senior leadership status do not stay in those positions long. Typically, the tenure of a university president is five to seven years (Greenfield, 2023). However, reports have indicated that Black women who obtain executive-level positions at institutions leave quickly due to microaggressions, subtle slights, acts of discrimination, and hostility (Grottis, 2022).

While research shows that Black women who obtain executive leadership leave these roles earlier than their peers, student diversity in higher education is continually growing. Specifically, the population of Black students attending public four-year higher education institutions is approximately 42% (The Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2020). With research showing that students of color benefit from faculty, staff, and an administration that looks like them, it is essential to examine why Black women are rarely present in higher education administration and why turnover for leaders of

color, including Black women, is so pervasive. Contributing factors may point to more lucrative positions opening for Black women in other industries and, as researchers suggest, a lack of a sense of belonging in higher education executive leadership. Therefore, it seems vital to examine the sense of belonging of these leaders (Anees et al., 2021). Research has indicated that Black women who do happen to inhabit executive leadership seats at public four-year institutions struggle to feel a sense of belonging, but few examine why and assess how that sense of belonging could be improved, which is the gap this study hopes to fill. The study is necessary because understanding the sense of belonging for Black women with marginalized intersecting identities in executive roles and exploring strategies to improve it could enhance job satisfaction, recruitment, retention, and overall university sustainability.

Problem Statement

Black women with intersecting marginalized identities struggle with a sense of belonging while serving in executive leadership roles at public four-year higher education institutions in the United States. This qualitative study explored the correlation between the shortage of Black women in executive roles and their perceived belonging within their institutions. Much research specifically involving Black women in leadership solely emphasizes either gender or race. This perspective disregards how the collective identities of race and gender affect Black women's lives in many spheres. Additionally, countless research studies detail Black women's route to executive administration at postsecondary schools. Still, few consider their sense of belonging and retention when they attain executive status. In a 2017 study focused on belonging factors for minority

women leaders, the organization completed semi structured interviews with four women who identified as Black or Latina that garnered notable results (Gray, 2018). Participants worked as chancellors or presidents at American universities (Gray, 2018). The results implied that women felt they had to prove they deserved the same level of support that their White male counterparts get without hesitation (Gray, 2018). The author also shared that the participants reported greater belonging when they were accepted as their authentic selves and when they were recognized for the exceptional work they do for others. Some participants reported feeling accepted in their roles. In contrast, others alleged having to counteract stereotypes like the “angry Black woman” throughout their journey to senior leadership and while navigating leadership.

Chance (2022) described similar findings, sharing that Black women in higher education encounter sexism, racism, and ageism while navigating leadership. The work also discussed these leaders dealing with tokenism or being the only one or one of few minorities in a position. The nine participants in this study examined the fatiguing experience of being viewed as heroes. They also discussed feeling like "unicorns" and not being accepted anywhere but persisting anyway. Participants recounted facing adversity as they navigated their positions, using it as a motivator and leaning on other supports, like family and mentors, who often reminded them of why they pursued higher education administrative leadership (Chance, 2022). Johnson (2022) asserted the necessity for further investigation on the experiences of marginalized groups in higher education executive leadership. The author argues that further research should be done that considers how the impact of multiple minority identities, such as race and gender, work

together to monopolize these spaces and significantly influence DEIB for senior leaders in postsecondary education, juggling intersecting marginalized identities. Therefore, this exploration examined the perceptions of a sense of belonging for Black women juggling the intersecting identities of race and gender while serving in executive leadership roles at public four-year institutions in the United States. Understanding the perceptions of a sense of belonging for Black women juggling intersecting marginalized identities while navigating executive leadership at public four-year higher education institutions in the United States may help fill a gap in practice as Black women are rarely seen at senior positions in the academy. The understanding and knowledge gained through this inquiry will help promote diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging initiatives tangibly, which could increase Black women's opportunities to rise in higher education executive administration and remain in those roles. Information gathered and analyzed could encourage universities to employ data-driven policies and practices to positively influence the recruitment and retention of diverse leaders (Johnson, 2022).

Purpose Statement

This qualitative study examined the perceptions of the sense of belonging for Black women juggling intersecting marginalized identities while navigating executive leadership at public four-year higher education institutions in the United States. Black women rarely occupy executive leadership spaces in higher education and often do not survive for long when they do (Coetzee & Moosa, 2020). These factors represent the significance of examining the sense of belonging for Black women who actively occupy those positions in a public higher education setting—exploring their suggestions on

whether they experienced a sense of belonging and, if so, how this was fostered in their organizations. This study also explored how the women suggested improving their sense of belonging in these spaces, as their suggestions could aid colleges and universities in increasing diversity efforts from a top-down approach. While much research has been done on the career trajectory of Black women rising to executive leadership in postsecondary education, less is known about their sense of belonging as they navigate these critical roles. Audio Zoom semi structured interviews with Black women from various regions of the United States provide a wide-ranging perspective regarding this phenomenon, as each woman's experience will be unique based on where they work, live, and the background that leads them to their roles.

Conceptual Frameworks

The theories supporting this study include the intersectionality theory, founded by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989, and Maslow's hierarchy of needs, proposed in 1943 (Harris & Patton, 2019; Trivedi & Mehta, 2019). Both theories are relevant to this study because Crenshaw's approach focuses on the impact of multiple marginalized social identities on one's opportunities and experiences, and Maslow's theory discusses the importance of belonging to success in personal and professional realms (Harris & Patton, 2019; Trivedi & Mehta, 2019). These are central to studying the perceptions of belonging for Black women in executive leadership roles at colleges and universities. Kimberle Crenshaw is a full-time faculty member at UCLA and Columbia School of Law. She is noted as a civil rights advocate and thought leader concerning race, racism, and the law (Haynes et al., 2020). She founded the intersectionality theory (Haynes et al., 2020).

The theory of intersectionality argues that focusing on one piece of an individual's identity does not tell the whole story. Consequently, it is necessary to examine the intersection of marginalized identities and how the systematic oppression experienced because of those identities influences an individual's unique experiences in various spaces (Nichols & Stahl, 2019). Crenshaw's work regarding the theory of intersectionality is well-respected in various fields. This theory has been cited in work regarding public policy and criminal justice (Hankivsky & Cormier, 2019). Intersectionality is also gaining ground in other disciplines (Wesp et al., 2019). Through the intersectionality theory, scholars suggest that intersecting minority identities influence how individuals are treated regarding access to resources such as housing, medical care, legal representation, fair and speedy trials, and access to and experiences navigating school, job opportunities, and career advancement. The theory also highlights the impact of intersecting marginalized identities on social perceptions and sense of belonging in these various sectors (Albuja et al., 2020). The intersectionality theory is essential for this research because it explores the perceptions of belonging for Black women in senior leadership roles at public four-year postsecondary institutions. Their identities as people of color and women intersect to create a unique experience relevant to a sense of belonging in leadership.

Abraham Maslow, a renowned psychologist, is credited with founding Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, distributed in 1943 (Hopper, 2022). Maslow's hierarchy consists of 5 levels or hierarchies. The first hierarchy consists of physiological needs. These are basic needs such as shelter and food (Hopper, 2020). The second hierarchy is

safety needs. Safety includes personal security, employment, and health (Hopper, 2020). The third level of this theory relates to the importance of a sense of belonging in whatever spaces people inhabit. This hierarchy is aptly called love and belonging (Hopper, 2020). Maslow argued that people must have friendship, intimacy, and a sense of connection to feel love and belonging. Esteem is the fourth hierarchy in this theory. It focuses on the need for respect, self-esteem, recognition, and freedom (Hopper, 2020). The final level in this theory is self-actualization. This is when people feel they have the tools necessary to become all they can be (Hopper, 2020).

Abraham Maslow argued that reaching the higher stages is difficult without fulfilling needs from the lower stages (Hopper, 2020). Love and belonging, the third stage of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, grounds this research in that sense of belonging is vital for Black women to succeed in executive roles at public four-year institutions and to become all they can be in those roles (Noltemeyer et al., 2021). This theory is appropriate for my study because earlier research has indicated that Black women struggle to "fit in" and feel a lack of support from peers and others as they navigate senior leadership (Johnson & Fournillier, 2023). These traits are generally related to feelings of belonging. Maslow speaks to the importance of feeling a sense of belonging as a predictor of an individual feeling fulfilled and operating within their fullest capacity.

The connection between these theoretical approaches and this study includes Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality. This term and theory have been used extensively to help describe the distinctive experiences of Black women navigating the systemic effects of intersecting identities in within American society and how navigating those

perceptions can influence access, opportunity, power, and concepts such as belonging. This theoretical approach asserts that evaluating Black women's experiences through a singular identity may not paint a holistic picture of their experiences because they must contend with racial and gender stereotypes and expectations. Furthermore, Maslow's theory stresses the significance of feeling love and belonging before advancing to higher-order feelings. Maslow's hierarchy of needs also grounded this research study, highlighting the necessity of belonging for people to flourish personally and professionally.

Research Questions

RQ 1: What are the perceptions of Black women juggling intersecting marginalized identities regarding their perceived sense of belonging while serving in executive leadership roles at public four-year higher education institutions in the United States?

RQ 2: What are suggestions from Black women juggling intersecting marginalized identities regarding how their perceived sense of belonging can be improved while serving in executive leadership roles at public four-year higher education institutions in the United States?

Methodology and Design

A basic qualitative design addressed the research questions identified to examine perceptions of the sense of belonging for Black women juggling intersecting marginalized identities while serving in executive leadership roles at higher education institutions in the United States. Data was collected and analyzed from semi structured

interviews with participants who met the study criteria. Qualitative research focuses on better understanding someone's social reality (Peterson, 2019). This data-gathering method is vital when accessing nonnumerical data focused on the lived experience of those impacted by a phenomenon (Muzari et al., 2022). A qualitative approach was best because the researcher was interested in individuals' unique perspectives rather than generalizing data.

The researcher collected data by conducting semi structured interviews with 12 participants. This interview structure was appropriate for this study because semi structured interviews allowed the researcher to gather in-depth information from participants (Ruslin et al., 2022). The semi structured interview approach is preferred for this study over other styles because it is flexible and adaptable but allows the researcher to have a guide that focuses on the interview process, unlike unstructured interviews (Ruslin et al., 2022). This interviewing style enabled participants to share their experiences but let the researcher guide the interview experiences to ensure the research questions were answered thoroughly. Interview questions were adapted from the Harvard-Panorama sense of belonging survey scale with the creator's consent. The Harvard-Panorama belonging survey is an established instrument that measures student perceptions of teaching, learning, culture, and climate. A specific scale section measures the sense of belonging (Panorama Education, n.d.). This scale has been used in many research studies, so adapting interview questions from this trusted tool will arguably help increase study credibility. The interviews will answer the research questions because they provide primary data regarding Black women's perceptions of belonging in higher

education executive leadership and gather suggestions from these women on improving their belonging.

Participants were recruited via email, Facebook, and LinkedIn. Participants were emailed a consent form before interviews were conducted. Informed consent is necessary when conducting research with human subjects to safeguard or protect individuals throughout the research process (Yusof et al., 2022). This form outlined the study's purpose to explore the perceptions of a sense of belonging for Black women juggling intersecting identities while navigating executive leadership at four-year higher education institutions in the United States. The document also informed subjects that recorded interviews will last approximately 30-60 minutes and be conducted via Zoom audio recording. The consent form also noted that participant numbers would be used to ensure confidentiality and all other identifying information would be redacted. Further, the consent form outlined that a computer with a secure password and a flash drive would be used to store data, and both would be kept in a secure location. Records will be removed and deleted from all stored areas at the appointed time designated by the university. Most importantly, all participants were assured that their participation is voluntary. Therefore, if they initially chose to participate but changed their minds later, that decision would be respected. Participants could remove themselves from the study at any time. They had the researcher's contact information to reach out if they had any questions or concerns throughout the research process. Once selected participants consented, data was gathered and transcribed verbatim. NVivo, a program that analyzes text, audio, video, and image data, was used to organize, categorize, and analyze data (Kent State University, 2018).

Inductive thematic coding was used to analyze data. Inductive coding is useful for this work because it is conducted by a novice qualitative researcher, and inductive coding is often used by novice scholars (Mezmir, 2020). Additionally, an inductive approach honors the participants' language, which is essential when assessing an individual's perceptions of a phenomenon. Also, this method inspires the truthfulness and credibility of data because it relies on participants' words. Credibility and truthfulness are critical when any researcher does work, especially for new scholars (Mezmir, 2020). During inductive coding, raw data is grouped into meaningful words or phrases for the study (Mezmir, 2020). These codes communicate something significant about the research problem being investigated. Inductive coding uses language spoken by participants, enhancing the integrity of the data and results. After initial coding, the researcher recoded the data to identify frequently used words or phrases from the previous coding cycle, which shaped categories and themes for further analysis. Categories and themes help emphasize data meaningfully, depict the phenomenon explored, and may contribute to positive social change (Ravindran, 2019). The criterion for participating included those who identified as Black or Black women occupying executive leadership roles at public four-year higher education institutions in the United States. Executive leaders serve on executive teams at universities or in senior leadership roles, such as chancellors, vice chancellors, assistant vice chancellors, senior associates, nonacademic deans, presidents, vice presidents, and provosts.

For the planned research design, participants were recruited using convenience and snowball sampling to participate in individual Zoom interviews. Sampling occurred

through email, LinkedIn, and Facebook posts detailing the purpose of the study, participant criteria, and researcher's contact information. Convenience sampling is the process of recruiting participants who are readily available to the researcher, while snowball sampling involves respondents identifying others who fit the study criteria (Bhardwaj, 2019). These techniques encourage the use of professional networks ethically and appropriately (Walden University, 2022). Email recruitment and social media have proven successful and cost-effective (Chambers et al., 2020). Snowball sampling was implemented by requesting that participants share the contact information of other women who fit the study criteria. As shared in previous detail, all participants were emailed a consent form explaining the study's purpose, where the interviews would be held, how data would be used, who would have access to the information gathered, and how data would be disposed of after completion of the research. Informed consent is a crucial component of research because it allows individuals to make informed decisions concerning their participation and details their rights and responsibilities while engaging in the research process. Informed consent also increases the credibility and fidelity of the researcher (Bazzano et al., 2021).

Participants' rights were clearly outlined as part of informed consent, including the benefits and risks of participation. Risks included the emotional impact of sharing sensitive details regarding belonging. Benefits included enhancing belonging for themselves and others by sharing their stories. Respondents would be assured that they are not required to participate, even if they previously gave consent, and they could withdraw at any time. Participants' rights also include the right to privacy. Therefore, all

identifying variables were concealed using participant numbers. Interviewees were aware that the researcher was in a private space during the interview to protect privacy and confidentiality. Participants were told that they could ask that audio recording be stopped at any time, and they could withdraw their participation from the study, requesting that no data collected from them be used in the study. All data is kept on the researcher's laptop, protected with a numerical code and password. An informed consent document outlining these factors was emailed to all interviewees. Each interviewee confirmed their consent via email before their interview was scheduled.

Definitions

The following terms are defined to help readers better understand study components:

Black/African American: These are individuals of African descent or those born in the United States with African ancestry. The words are often used interchangeably (Chavez, 2020).

Executive/senior leadership: This denotes individuals who are a part of the executive cabinet who oversee the higher-level operations at an institution and whose decisions at the institutional level are often the deciding and final factor. These individuals include but are not limited to presidents, vice presidents, chancellors, vice chancellors, and chief officers (Johnson Bowles, 2022).

Public four-year institution: This refers to an institution that offers various bachelor programs and is governed and supported by federal or state entities (BigFuture | College Board, n.d.).

Marginalized/Marginalization: The experience of discrimination and prohibition from various sectors because of unequal power relationships across economic, political, social, and cultural spaces because of an individual or group's social identities such as race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, religion, and identifiers (Kaye et al., 2021).

Minority: People who share common traits that differ from the majority in a particular country, area, etc., such as language, culture, race, gender, religion, sexuality, ability, or another identifier that often opens them up to bias and discrimination (Sotto-Santiago, 2019).

Multiple minorities: Multiple minorities are those who identify with multiple groups seen as subordinate to the dominant groups in a society, for example, someone who identifies as Black and a woman or Latino and gay (Ball et al., 2022).

Intersectionality/Intersecting or multiple identities: These terms refer to the cumulative way discrimination in various areas (i.e., racism, sexism, ageism, disability, etc.) combine or intersect to impact an individual or group's experiences in various areas of life (Harvard Human Resources, n.d.).

Microaggressions: This refers to brief but common or daily language or behavior, deliberate or unintended, that signifies hostile, belittling, or harmful snubs toward individuals belonging to an oppressed group. For example, a gay man being told that he is so masculine, or a Black man being told that he speaks so eloquently can be viewed as a microaggression (Tran et al., 2023).

Cisgender: A person whose gender identity is the same one they were born with. For example, this would be a person born male and identifies as male (Harvard Human Resources, n.d.).

LGBTQ+: This is the label given to those identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other identifiers within the spectrum (Harvard Human Resources, n.d.).

Phenomenon/Phenomena: Any problem, issue, or topic in society that can be observed reliably in research (University of Minnesota, 2016).

Qualitative research: This type of research refers to a group of nonnumerical, naturalistic approaches to gathering primary, firsthand data that is analyzed to help explain a societal phenomenon (Taherdoost, 2022).

Data: Data is any information gathered or collected to explain various components of research findings (Ayles, n.d.).

Token/Tokenism: This term indicates an unequal power exchange that causes someone to have a defined and restricted role in any dynamic. For example, being the only female senior leader in a company or the only Black person on a committee could be considered tokenism (Majid, 2020).

Code-switching: The ability to switch one's language or way of talking, dressing, expressing emotions, etc., to fit into a particular cultural context (Lozada et al., 2022)

Assumptions

Assumptions are accepted truths without concrete proof (Specht et al., 2022). This study focused on the sense of belonging for Black women navigating higher education

senior leadership. The researcher assumed their experiences differ from Black women leaders in lower to mid-higher education administrative leadership roles because few Black women exist in executive administrative spaces compared to lower and mid-level positions. Additionally, it was assumed that all the women who were interviewed understood the questions effectively and answered as truthfully as possible due to their level of education and understanding of the purpose of the study. Further, it was assumed their shared intersecting identities and leadership experiences would result in similar belonging stories in higher education based on what limited research has revealed. This data-gathering and analysis process aimed to assess and share respondents' subjective realities as objectively as possible.

Delimitations

In this study, the investigator explored the perceptions of the sense of belonging for Black women juggling intersecting marginalized identities while navigating higher education executive leadership. This specific focus was chosen because Black women in executive higher education leadership are such a rarity. For this study, executive leadership included those who serve on the president's cabinet at a university. This would consist of the president, provost, vice presidents of academic units, associates, nonacademic deans, such as the Dean of Students, and other similar roles. Those who may be considered executive leaders in more academic capacities, such as deans of colleges, were excluded because Black women in these roles are more likely compared to executive roles. The study highlighted how these women define a sense of belonging and their experiences of feeling or not feeling a sense of belonging as they navigate higher

education leadership. Only those who identified as Black or African American and held the abovementioned roles at public, four-year higher education institutions qualified to participate in this research.

Women at public HBCUs were excluded due to their unique experience in the higher education landscape. Since the study is limited to Black women and public four-year institutions, results are not generalizable to non-Black women or men who occupy senior leadership roles at universities that do not identify as public four-year institutions. Additionally, only 12 women were interviewed, so their stories do not paint a holistic view of the experiences of belonging for all Black women who serve in executive leadership capacities. With the delimitations presented in this qualitative study, results may not be generalizable to other settings or individuals. The goal was to understand the belonging experience of these women who serve as executive leaders at public four-year higher education institutions in the United States. This study could inspire other research regarding the perceptions of belonging for other individuals who juggle multiple minority identities while serving in executive leadership positions in higher education spaces.

Limitations

The study was done with one data source: semi structured interviews with 12 women. The researcher kept a journal detailing their thoughts and reflections throughout the research process to help track reactions due to their positionality as a Black, female, mid-level leader at a public higher education institution. Journaling helped the investigator be conscious of personal perceptions that could create research bias and address those biases when they arose by focusing on participants' actual language

provided and the shared perceptions of their lived experiences. The journal also includes notes taken during the interview process. Moreover, because of the scarcity of Black women who ascend to executive leadership roles at public four-year universities, the busyness of these leaders, and the vast distance between the researcher and participants, accessibility was a concern. Results will not represent the totality of experiences of all Black women who juggle intersecting minority identities and hold executive leadership roles at public educational institutions. This study focused on the unique experiences of the women selected; therefore, results will not be generalizable to the population.

Importance of Study

This study is significant because examining the perceptions of a sense of belonging for Black female executive leaders is rarely studied. Therefore, this research will add to the literature regarding this phenomenon. Studies regarding Black women's leadership often focused on these women leading in low to midlevel administrative positions because they often reach their peak in these roles and struggle to rise higher (Sims & Carter, 2019). Additionally, the experiences of Black women in higher education leadership are from a singular viewpoint rather than an intersectional perception. However, trusted scholars suggest that when someone inhabits intersecting minority identities, the significance of juggling all those identifiers should be considered in tandem to fully understand their lived experiences (Harris & Patton, 2019). Further, much of the research concerning Black women in higher education leadership concentrates on career advancement rather than their perceptions of belonging once they occupy executive roles (Gonzales & Terosky, 2020). Moreover, the concept of belonging

is generally explored from the student and faculty lens. However, research on understanding the perceptions of belonging for executive leaders is minimal, especially for Black women (Hussain & Jones, 2021). Consequently, this study will bridge that gap and significantly impact positive social change. As colleges and universities focus on the importance of belonging related to recruitment and retention, understanding perceptions of belonging for Black women in senior leadership roles could be instrumental in their efforts.

Summary

Chapter 1 included statistical information and research regarding the probability of Black women navigating senior leadership roles at public four-year institutions. This chapter included research on the importance of a sense of belonging for many higher education stakeholders. Those stakeholders include first-generation college students, Black students, international students, students with disabilities, and faculty. The work speaks to the importance of representation for students of color and how seeing faculty, staff, and administrators who look like them and can support them through their academic journeys helps them persist. Considering the benefits of diverse support for students, the shortage of Black women to rise to executive leadership in higher education, and their short tenure, exploring the sense of belonging of these women while they occupy senior administrative leadership is vital. The study examined the sense of belonging for Black women juggling intersecting identities while serving in executive leadership at public four-year institutions in the United States. Results could help university leaders and other stakeholders enact recruitment and retention efforts of these leaders that communicate

their commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging for the university community and improve university sustainability economically, socially, and culturally.

Chapter 2 is a literature review on Black women's leadership, intersectionality in higher education, belonging at work, and belonging in higher education. All the comprised literature correlates to the belonging experiences of Black women who occupy executive administrative roles at higher education institutions in the United States and the theories that ground this research study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This literature review emphasizes research highlighting Black women in leadership, intersectionality in higher education, and the importance of belonging. The work specifically underlines the gap in practice related to the focus on a sense of belonging for Black women working as executive leaders in higher education and the implications of this lack of focus on the sense of belonging for Black women occupying these roles. The goal was to assess how these women cultivate a sense of belonging in senior leadership spaces while juggling their intersecting social identities and higher administration. Literature includes scholarly peer-reviewed journal articles from 2018 to the present that underscore the experiences of Black women in leadership, the impact of intersectionality, the importance of belonging, and the belonging experience of Black women navigating higher education executive leadership. The frameworks guiding and grounding this study, the theory of intersectionality and Maslow's hierarchy of needs, were also described in detail. Themes within this research section include gender inequalities in executive leadership in higher education, racial disparities in executive leadership in higher education, intersectionality, and senior leadership in higher education, the impact of these disparities, proposed rationale for disproportions, and proposed solutions.

Literature Exploration and Approach

Approximately 30 terms were explored throughout the literature review process: *African American, Black, woman, female, gender, belonging, acceptance, executive leaders, senior leaders, administration, higher education, postsecondary, college,*

universities, leadership, identity, intersectionality, minority, multiple minority, race, racial, women, qualitative, case study, ethnography, phenomenology, narrative, grounded theory, inclusion, and association. Approximately 18 databases were used to search for articles. They include but are not limited to Google Scholar, ERIC, SAGE Journals, Taylor and Francis Online, Education Source, MEDLINE/PubMed, CINAHL, APA PsycInfo, SocIndex, ScienceDirect, Academic Search, Social Sciences Citation Index, IEEE Xplore, Emerald Insight, Directory of Open Access Journals, peer-reviewed articles and books were reviewed in 2023 to gather data for this study.

Conceptual Framework

Chapter 1 notes the theory of intersectionality and Maslow's hierarchy of needs, specifically the third hierarchy of love and belonging, ground this research study. The theory of intersectionality, founded by Kimberle Crenshaw, states that to understand the holistic experiences of those with intersecting marginalized identities, their interactions with the larger society must be viewed through an intersectional lens, considering all their accepted identities in tandem rather than as separate entities. Therefore, to fully grasp the perceptions of belonging for African American women in executive leadership at public four-year educational institutions, their experiences cannot be viewed from a strictly gendered or racialized lens. Instead, the intersection of race and gender must be considered collectively (Wyatt et al., 2022). Additionally, for any human to thrive and reach self-actualization or a feeling of operating at their full potential, they must feel a sense of love and belonging in their various spaces (Yardimci & Saricoban, 2022). Consequently, it is critical to grasp the perceptions of belonging for Black women

inhabiting executive roles at public, four-year higher education institutions and explore measures to create spaces where they can prosper and make lasting institutional change.

Considering the distinctive challenges faced by Black women in their career trajectory to upper management and experiences when they reach that level of success, the theory of intersectionality and Maslow's hierarchy of needs may help to explain why advancement to senior leadership in higher education is an obstacle for these women, and the belonging difficulties they face when they rise to that status, and long-term career outlook. According to experts, Black women find success rising to low or mid-level leadership roles in higher education, such as within Student Affairs, but many cannot seem to crack the glass ceiling beyond that (Bazner, 2022). The theory of intersectionality has been used extensively to help highlight why Black women struggle to rise above low and mid-level leadership roles. However, they may have the qualifications and experience to do so (West, 2019). Maslow's hierarchy of needs and the need for love and belonging may help explain why when Black women rise to executive leadership in higher education, they only stay for a limited time compared to others (Abdulahi, 2023).

The researcher in this current study examined perceptions of the sense of belonging for Black women juggling multiple marginalized identities who work in executive leadership at public four-year colleges and universities and explored their recommendations for improving their sense of belonging in these positions. This qualitative study provided a broad overview of the experiences of Black women in higher education executive leadership and their sense of belonging as they traverse through

various executive leadership roles. The sense of belonging for Black women juggling their multiple minority identities while serving in senior leadership and how to improve their sense of belonging was the primary focus of this research. Results could positively affect diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging work. In addition, results may positively affect employee and student recruitment and retention. Research data shows that students are more likely to succeed toward degree completion if they are connected with faculty, staff, and administration from similar backgrounds, including race and gender (Bitar et al., 2022). Research has also indicated that diversity positively impacts learning outcomes at every educational level and for everyone (Biesta et al., 2022). With these realities in mind, executive leadership diversity and understanding the experiences of diverse executive leaders is significant. Nevertheless, despite improvements in diversity, executive cabinets and executive leadership roles in higher education are still primarily White and male-dominated (Alcalde, 2021). Also, women of color who hold executive leadership roles do not stay in those positions for a significant amount of time. Hence, research on the sense of belonging for Black women in higher administration roles may be vital to improving diversity efforts and ensuring that these efforts are not performative or vain.

Key Themes Identified in Literature

Many themes or ideas emerged when researching literature concerning Black women in higher education executive leadership. What it means and looks like to lead as a Black woman was significant as research shows many Black women lead differently than others (Rosser-Mims, 2018). Black women leading in higher education highlighted

several essential factors that may be imperative to my study as I examine the sense of belonging for Black women in executive roles at higher education entities in the United States. As Caucasian men continue to prevail in postsecondary leadership roles, the intersection and impact of race and gender in higher education leadership is another theme in the literature that directly relates to my study as Black women occupy a space of double jeopardy, or the reality of having to juggle more than one minority status that impacts their life chances in various facets of society (Truehill, 2021). To that end, the importance of intersectionality in higher education has been consistent in recent studies (Nichols & Stahl, 2019).

Often, many people who navigate systematic factors such as juggling one or more minority identities struggle to belong compared to those in the dominant culture (American Immigration Council, n.d.). Therefore, the importance of belonging is a crucial theme in the literature review relevant to my inquiry. Many studies focused on the importance of belonging in higher education (Moore, 2022). Specifically, much of the belonging work centered on the sense of belonging for various student groups (Hussain & Jones, 2021). Other literature focused on the importance of belonging at work, with several studies emphasizing belonging for faculty in higher education (Arday, 2022). However, very little is found regarding the sense of belonging for higher education administrators. Even less is known about belonging for executive or senior-level administrators, which is where my research will contribute most. The sections below will detail the above analysis and highlight what existing literature reveals about various components relevant to the present study.

Black Women and Leadership

Evidence indicates that Black women generally lead differently than others; however, work regarding Black women in leadership is often discussed within the larger context of women leading (Lanier et al., 2022). Yet, Black women's leadership experiences are different given their societal positions at the intersections of race and gender. Therefore, studies centering on women in leadership do not often fully encapsulate the experiences of Black women. Research done in 2022 highlighted the dilemmas Black women face that other female leaders do not (Lanier et al., 2022). The authors examined traditional leadership theories and how they might apply to Black women's experience differently than their White counterparts. They then proposed how these theories could be expanded to meet the leadership needs of Black women about their intersectional identity in society (Lanier et al., 2022). The study concluded that Black women's leadership focuses on reducing hypervisibility and increasing acceptance from the dominant culture (Lanier et al., 2022). These women tend to be focused on fitting into organizational culture and surviving because they are not often given the support to thrive and make innovative changes (Lanier et al., 2022). The research also suggested that these women must contend with microaggressions daily, and although these interactions may be brief, they require a lot of energy to combat. Black female leaders experience humiliation and isolation that impact their self-esteem, ability to lead, and ability to be taken seriously by others (Lanier et al., 2022).

Lanier et al. (2022) stated that Black female leaders often take on more than what is required of them because they feel they must prove they belong in leadership spaces,

and this is the only way they will gain due respect. Yet, these leaders rarely receive that recognition. Instead, it is interpreted as Black female leaders enjoying heavier workloads (Lanier et al., 2022). Additionally, more responsibility can signal that these women are caregivers and servants instead of respected leaders who bring valuable insight and input (Lanier et al., 2022). This research also suggested that Black women lead by engaging in protective strategies such as code-switching or adjusting the way they speak to fit into the dominant culture, avoidance, or not sharing their thoughts to avoid microaggressions, stereotypes, and prejudiced treatment from their counterparts (Lainer et al., 2022). Black female leaders also must juggle walking a tightrope or making decisions from opposing sides. For example, these leaders are often called on when diversity issues arise. So, they must speak on behalf of the interest of the Black community without alienating the larger organization (Lanier et al., 2022). These realities put Black women leaders in vulnerable positions and leave little space for them to show up in leadership as their authentic selves, bringing their unique voice and perspective to the table and possibly enacting innovative social change.

Black Women Leading in Higher Education

Black women are vital to the sustainability of higher education. When issues of sexism and racism overtly permeated society, Black women were instrumental in finding a way to pursue education and finding a way to help others gain access to postsecondary education. Lucy Stanton Day Sessions is the first Black woman to earn a degree from a postsecondary institution (Grottis, 2022). She earned a degree in literacy from Oberlin College in 1850 (Grottis, 2022). Over a decade later, Mary Jane Patterson was awarded a

BA from Oberlin. Patterson was the first African American woman to earn a bachelor's degree in the US (Grottis, 2022). Today, more Black women are enrolled in postsecondary institutions than other minority groups (Grottis, 2022). Additionally, women like Mary McLeod Bethune opened doors for women and people of color at a time when they could not attend college with White students (Grottis, 2022). She opened and operated a school for Black girls in 1904 (Bethune-Cookman University, n.d.). That school transformed into a HBCU called Bethune-Cookman College (Bethune-Cookman University, n.d.). Bethune is recorded as the first Black female college president (Grottis, 2022). Bethune-Cookman College was one of the first schools to offer something beyond a high school diploma to Black students. This school helped shape the educational standards of HBCUs, which are still followed today (National Park Service, n.d.).

Although Black women have been integral to the sustainability of higher education in numerous ways, these women occupying senior leadership positions is still a novel idea. The American College President Study reports that college presidents are generally older White men (Johnson & Delmas, 2022). The survey reports that more than 80% of college presidents are White men and women (Johnson & Delmas, 2022). Black women comprise 5% of the presidency (Johnson & Delmas, 2022). Black men and women collectively comprised 8% (Johnson & Delmas, 2022). Participants in the study indicated that discrimination and bias were significant reasons Black women are not seen in senior leadership at universities. They discussed their experiences of tokenism and being given titles without the respect and influence that should come with them (Johnson & Delmas, 2022). While Black women leading from senior or executive positions is rare

in any facet of higher education, it is becoming more prevalent. These leaders find more opportunities to lead at HBCUs or community colleges than at public or private four-year institutions (Tevis et al., 2020).

Black Women Leading at Community Colleges and HBCUs

Although Black women have historically led in community colleges and at HBCUs, these opportunities for advancement do not come without resistance or challenges. Gause (2021) explored the experiences of Black women leading community colleges. The author discovered that while women had to combat White privilege at their schools, their resilient attitudes, motivations, and commitment to increasing representation in roles like the university presidency inspired them to continue their pursuits (Gause, 2021). In a 2019 study of African American professionals in higher education, authors researched African American professionals' experiences in both HBCUs and predominately White institutions (Decuir-Gunby et al., 2020). They assessed these leaders' experiences through a critical race theory framework. Critical race theory (CRT) is most known in the legal sphere. It asserts that the United States' history of racism is instrumental in understanding the social reality of how people of color are impacted by the justice system and other institutions, such as higher education (Busey et al., 2023). CRT is often used collectively with the theory of intersectionality, Black feminist theory, and others that distinctively consider race as an essential component to understanding people's lived experiences. The 2019 study, examined with a CRT lens, detailed how leaders coped with racial microaggressions. Fifteen individuals participated in the study. Only three were executive-level administrators, and only one was a woman,

which speaks to the scarcity of Black women in these positions (Decuir-Gunby et al., 2020). Those executive leaders came from either HBCUs or two-year colleges, which supports the notion that Black women have more success achieving senior leadership status at HBCUs or community colleges (Decuir-Gunby et al., 2020). When assessing the experiences of the Black female administrator, she recounted constantly feeling like she had to be twice as good and work twice as hard to prove her worth and competence (Decuir-Gunby et al., 2020). She also shared that if she felt like she was being disrespected or discounted because of her race, she was not afraid to say something; however, that often isolated her or brought about the microaggressions that she often experienced as one of a few Black women in leadership at her predominately White two-year institution (Decuir-Gunby et al., 2020).

Given the history and nature of those institutions, one would assume that those working in HBCUs had less experience with microaggressions. However, that was not necessarily the case. In a 2020 study, research focused on conversations about Black women presidents at HBCUs (Commodore et al., 2020). Authors used Black feminist theory (BFT) and critical discourse analysis (CDA) to evaluate discussions by Black female leaders in the comment sections of articles and news reports (Commodore et al., 2020). Black feminist theory recognizes that Black women in American society must navigate a racist, sexist society (Wade et al., 2022).

Due to the impact felt at the intersection of race and sex, their experiences differ from those of Black men and White women (Wade et al., 2022). As such, Black women's interactions within the larger society must be viewed from a multidimensional lens

(Wade et al., 2022). Critical discourse analysis (CDA) reviews written or spoken language and assesses established meanings, new meanings, and how these change over time based on culture and climate (Dahlborg et al., 2023). The 2020 study, outlined from a BFT framework and CDA, found that language and images surrounding Black women presidents at HBCUs were inundated with racial bias and stereotypes that impact how Black women in these environments are treated, respected, and responded to as leaders. Specifically, the authors pointed out that HBCUs are often seen as a haven for Black students and leaders. Still, these women had to navigate images and conversations about them being the Mammy, Matriarch, or controlling (Commodore et al., 2020).

Historically, a mammy is defined as “a Black woman responsible for maintaining the household and raising White children, especially during slavery and segregation (Wilson & Primus, 2021).” Mammy is often viewed as a derogatory term. A matriarch is a female seen as the head of the household. While this could be viewed as a positive, matriarchs are sometimes considered controlling women fixated on their children’s happiness more than their own (Haynes et al., 2020). These historical images of Black women lead to stereotypes and biases that undermine and misrepresent who they are and who they can be as leaders. They also contribute to opportunities for Black women to rise to higher education leadership and succeed in those roles.

The Impact of Gender in Higher Education Leadership

Gender inequality in leadership is a continued concern for the higher education industry. Much research has been done concerning women who struggle to advance in academic leadership. A 2020 study analyzed 35 interviews with professors in the United

States, United Kingdom, and Canada. The authors discussed the cultural and internal silencing of women, which impacts leadership opportunities. Cultural silencing concerns gender expectations or biases placed on women in a society that entities consciously or subconsciously operate within (Aiston & Fo, 2020). These expectations include that women be agreeable, docile, nonassertive, and wait until asked to give their opinions or views. Often, gendered expectations are limiting to women while they favor men's ability to perform, navigate, and ascend in the workplace. For example, while assertiveness is often viewed as a negative trait in women, the same quality is considered good leadership in men.

Internal silencing is the idea that women possess internal barriers that impede advancement to higher education leadership. Internal barriers include lack of confidence, fear of failure, and other variables (Aiston & Fo, 2020). The authors and participants assert that the silence or silencing of women in academic leadership at higher education institutions denotes an environment where they are expected to “fit in” to a system and structure built for male-dominated success. Their suggestions are for higher education entities to explore strategies that dismantle micro and macro-inequalities and promote equity, inclusion, and belonging so that women have greater access to leadership opportunities and can bring their unique selves and abilities to leadership spaces. While a plethora of research is done regarding women's access and experiences in academia, little is known about women's access and experiences in senior or executive leadership outside of the academic sphere in higher education. However, some work has been done on the subject.

When examining studies regarding women in senior academic leadership, research shows that women continue to struggle to rise to the highest ranks in administrative leadership at educational institutions in the United States and abroad (Khan et al., 2019). The authors conducted a mixed methods inquiry of differences related to race and gender. Leaders who participated in the study worked for 15 public health universities around the globe (Khan et al., 2019). When looking at gender and ethnicity, there was a decline in women occupying mid and senior leadership positions. However, women outnumber male leaders in lower-level leadership roles (Khan et al., 2019).

Scholars who study similar phenomena confirm the sparse rise of women in senior leadership nonacademic positions in the academy. A recent American Council on Education (ACE) study reported that, although progress has been made to promote women into cabinet leadership positions at institutions, men still dominate the scene. When the study accounted for the variables of gender and race, only 12.5% of colleges and universities are led by women of color. Of that number, even fewer are Black women (Greenfield, 2023). Other research shows that the number of Black women serving in cabinet-level university positions gets even lower when studies exclude HBCUs. These findings have changed minimally over the past 15 years (Lederman, 2022).

The Intersection of Race and Gender in Higher Education Leadership

Women who experience struggles to advance in leadership and create a sense of belonging in leadership spaces find it doubly difficult if they juggle multiple minority entities (i.e., race, disability, sexual orientation or identity, religion, age). In 2023, Inside

Higher Ed contributor Safia Abdulahi reported on a survey highlighting that women of color serving as community college chancellors and presidents faced more racial bias and leadership resistance than their White male counterparts (Abdulahi, 2023). The survey concluded that women of color experienced a lack of trust and respect from White contemporaries and peers and had to navigate being called slurs related to their gender and race as they juggled their responsibilities as leaders (Abdulahi, 2023). The article discussed that women of color do not have a long tenure in executive leadership positions once they rise through the ranks, and institutions must recognize this and explore strategies to improve these women's experiences and retention (Abdulahi, 2023).

Other research concerning Black women's experiences in higher education administration supports the results from work done by Abdulahi (2023). Grottis authored a chapter on how Black women experience and navigate higher education administration. She evaluated existing literature investigating the experiences of Black women regarding career advancement in higher education leadership (Grottis, 2022). The researcher told of experiences of discrimination, bias, and lack of opportunities to network formally and informally. For example, Grottis (2022) reported that Black women are often left out of formal and informal lunch meetings and other occasions where leaders discuss thoughts, ideas, and leadership strategies (Grottis, 2022). Respondents also reported feeling inadequate, not having proper resources and support for success, and frustration in dealing with entitlement from White co-workers (Grottis, 2022).

The Importance of Intersectionality

Intersectionality considers how one's multiple marginalized social identities influence social interactions, access, and opportunities. While people with intersecting identities have lived and understood the impact of their parallel identities for many years, Kimberlé Crenshaw popularized the idea of intersectionality over thirty years ago to help describe these experiences concretely (Mikulewicz et al., 2023). Crenshaw conceived this term as a response to the growing feminist movement that framed all women's experiences as the same. She argued that the feminist movement failed to account for the unique experience of Black women due to the intersection of race and gender (Mikulewicz et al., 2023). This theory is a reminder that to fully understand someone's life, all of who they are must be considered collectively instead of compartmentalizing their unique individualities (Wyatt et al., 2022). Intersectionality also emphasizes that examining how historically exclusive structures and systems still operate is vital to influencing the experiences of those in particular groups (Wyatt et al., 2022). Crenshaw and others highlight the inequality of structures and systems that work together to oppress individuals and groups based on their multiple social identities and how various types of oppression co-exist to intensify one's lived experiences (Karmakar, 2022). This theory initially focused on the cross sections of race and gender; however, it has been used to describe the effect of inequity relevant to other minorities who might juggle intersecting identities. Other minority groups include considerations of race, sexual orientation or identities, religion, age, ability, and socioeconomic status.

Intersectionality in Higher Education

As the idea of intersectionality has grown, higher education research experts have used it as a framework for higher education leadership. Many studies have used the theory of intersectionality to ground their research about the advancement, experiences, and leadership styles of administrators with multiple minority identities. Sánchez et al. (2021) interviewed eight higher education administrators who identified as Latina. Researchers analyzed data from a Chicana feminist perspective. This theory focuses on centering and honoring the voices of Chicanas/Latinas and recognizing their challenges as minorities within the larger society (Sánchez et al., 2021). The second element of this theory identifies the multiple minority status that Latina women carry as women and Latina. They note that these women could also have additional minority identities, including but not limited to class, sexual orientation, age, and religion. These identities intersect to impact the experiences of Latinas within the dominant culture. The recognition of intersectionality pays homage to the theory of intersectionality that grounds my study. Participants from Sánchez et al. (2021) reported that they could not assess their experiences without considering the joint impact of their race and gender. Being a racial and gender minority significantly impacted how they viewed their experiences in administration and their sense of belonging in higher education leadership. Participants said they felt pressure to be “the whitest versions of themselves” and prove they deserved to be there and belonged in their roles. The authors suggested that higher education must work on strategies to improve Latina administrators' career trajectories and experiences to help Latino students advance in higher education. Hollis (2018) found

that as the intersectionality of participants' identities increased, respondents were more likely to experience workplace harassment.

Research done by West (2019) concluded that Black women had similar experiences to their Latina peers. The author recounted the experiences of seven Black women serving as administrators in student affairs and attending a Black Women's Summit. Results concluded that these women felt like they did not belong at their institutions and saw this summit as an opportunity to experience this feeling with those from similar backgrounds. Summit goers reported feeling safe and understood among their "sister colleagues (West, 2019)." These findings showed the challenge low and mid-level administrators with multiple minority identities feel when trying to cultivate a sense of belonging in higher education and that they desire those opportunities. If Black female low to mid-level administrators feel this lack of belonging but the innate need to belong, it is logical to assume that Black women navigating senior or executive leadership in higher education have similar experiences and wishes.

When looking at the journey and experiences of Black women in executive leadership spaces, patterns emerge regarding how their multiple minority identities shape their perspectives and experiences. Breeden (2021) looked at the experiences of African American women in executive leadership positions in student affairs. They reported that these women pressured to overly perform, and their health declined from the burden of feeling like they had to prove they belonged in their positions. These women discussed trying to prove themselves so they were not seen as outsiders. His work highlights the struggles Black women encounter navigating executive roles, and it gives some insight

into their perceptions of belonging. Other scholars found comparable results. Chance (2021) examined how the challenging experiences of Black women in higher education leadership impacted their career development and ascent to senior leadership. He found that Black women in higher education executive leadership experience significant hardship in these positions. However, the societal adversity they endured in their personal lives due to their racial and gendered intersecting identities empowered them with the resiliency skills needed to forge ahead in their careers. This study describes how the variables of race and gender affect the experiences of Black women in higher education administrative leadership. Coker et al. (2018) published work that also discussed the tenacity of Black women with multiple minority identities who work in higher education executive leadership. The authors shared a narrative of the experience of four Black women and their motivations to pursue leadership roles within the academy. Results indicated that they were inspired by family mentors, confidence in their abilities, and resiliency factors developed over time.

A book chapter by Jones and Bryant (2022) underlines the microaggressions that some Black women face while navigating senior leadership spaces. They recount stories and incidents of Black female senior leaders being told they are not a “good fit” for institutions, being stereotyped because of their hair, and not being given support or professional development opportunities afforded to other peers (Jones & Bryant, 2022). In this chapter, Jones and Bryant (2022) describe the experiences of two Black women who serve in administrative roles at colleges. The women describe the significance of their racial and gender identities and how those intersections uniquely influence their

leadership trajectories and experiences. These women noted that their dual identities are linked and cannot be separated from one another as the oppression they sometimes face is not due to one identity but the collision of both (Jones & Bryant, 2022). Nevertheless, these women share coping strategies that help them persist and thrive in senior leadership.

While combating perceptions of worth and ability can motivate Black women, research shows that negative perceptions based on one's intersecting identities can stunt growth and opportunity. For example, a study by Chase and Martin (2021) shows that Black women struggle to lead confidently and effectively in higher education leadership roles due to constant stereotypes and discrimination they experience blatantly and inadvertently. This study underscores Black women's challenges in educational leadership while juggling multiple minority identities. Selzer and Robles (2019) heard similar stories in their exploration. They shared narratives of women in senior leadership, including two Black women, chronicling their careers. Results indicated these women sometimes felt invisible, voiceless, and discriminated against. These narratives are important because they describe stories of Black women executive leaders and echo feelings that often influence belonging. Smith et al. (2019) also explored stories of Black women juggling intersecting identities while holding administrative offices. These women reported being seen as intriguing but threatening and feeling pressure to balance perceptions due to their various identities. These realities speak to the unique experiences Black women leaders face that are likely not prevalent for their White counterparts who may only contend with the singular minority identity of gender.

Other researchers have dedicated scholarship to the experiences of Black women in executive leadership roles at postsecondary institutions and found patterns and narratives like those mentioned above. Tevis et al. (2020) shared the tales of three Black women operating in administrative roles in postsecondary education. They found that the Black women occupying these spaces were sparse. Those who do advance to these positions encounter racist language and perceptions concerning who they are and what they can do. Participants shared these experiences, their sense of support and their ability to rise to their full potential as transformative leaders. Considering the rarity of Black women in senior leadership at postsecondary institutions, Townsend (2021) emphasized that the combination and influence of race and gender are seldom measured when examining someone's opportunities and experiences in life. When those variables are jointly considered, studies often focus on individual discrepancies rather than structural, systematic, and environmental variables that may contribute to leadership experiences. The belief that Black women in executive roles are incompetent is not a novel concept. One researcher reported that, when surveying Black women senior administrators, women said they must work twice as hard to be viewed as capable and are often the "go-to" people to get all the work done. However, when something goes wrong, it is blamed on deficits within them or their work rather than someone else's wrongdoing or inadequate organizational structure, policy, processes, or procedures (Johnson & Delmas, 2022).

The Importance of Belonging

On some level, every human being has the hunger to be seen, heard, and understood. Every person desires to be accepted, included, and belong to whatever groups they identify with (Dobson-Smith, 2022). This yearning to belong exists on a spectrum, and some have a more profound need than others, but the need is there for everyone. Researchers define a sense of belonging as interactions over time demonstrating support for being one's full, authentic self (Brower, 2021). Although belonging is deemed crucial for all humans, many struggle to cultivate a sense of belonging.

Research shows that many people feel socially isolated, lonely, and disconnected from others (Allen et al., 2021). Some statistics show that men feel lonelier and more isolated than women (Allen et al., 2021). Contributing factors may include the growth of the digital age and the lack of family or community support (Allen et al., 2021). Lack of belonging often contributes to mental health issues (Allen et al., 2021). This is notably accurate for vulnerable populations, including youth, older adults, people with disabilities, those in the LGBTQ+ community, racial minorities, and others (Allen et al., 2021). A sense of belonging is central to human health socially, emotionally, physically, and in other ways that health is defined. People need and want to belong but often do not know how to manifest it or are not in environments that breed belonging.

Another study published in 2023 supports the notion of well-being being linked to a sense of belonging. This study examined the correlation between well-being, belonging, connectedness, and significant involvement in the everyday activities of healthy adults.

The study took place in Israel. One hundred twenty-one people completed the study (Haim-Litevsky et al., 2023). Participants were given The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) to measure well-being (Haim-Litevsky et al., 2023). This is a self-report scale with statements assessed on a Likert scale (Haim-Litevsky et al., 2021). Participants were also given the Sense of Belonging Instrument (SOBI). This questionnaire measures a sense of belonging (Haim-Litevsky et al., 2023). The items listed on the scale assess a psychological sense of belonging, which includes valuable involvement that helps an individual grow personally, and the fundamental principles of a sense of belonging, which include “energy, desire, and potential for valuable involvement (Haim-Litevsky et al., 2023).” The researchers used a psychological index instrument containing 18 questions scored on a four-point Likert scale (Haim-Litevsky et al., 2023). Results concluded that belonging and connectedness are basic human needs contributing to holistic well-being. The findings support the importance of fostering a sense of belonging for individuals at work and in their daily lives (Haim-Litevsky et al., 2023).

Looking further into the importance of belonging and well-being, research has been done to suggest that a sense of belonging can decrease suicidal ideation. When examining sexual minorities from religious backgrounds, the intersection of those identities can positively or negatively impact belonging. A study by Skidmore et al. (2023) explored how being a part of a sexual minority and a religious community related to suicidal ideation and the impact a sense of belonging had on decreasing thoughts of suicide. The authors gathered data from 602 participants who identified as being part of the LGBTQ+ community and members of the Mormon faith. Results indicated that those

who hid their sexual minority status or attended church services frequently experienced more suicidal ideation (Skidmore et al., 2023). However, if participants felt like they belonged in the Mormon church, it reduced suicidal ideation but increased concealment of sexual orientation (Skidmore et al., 2023).

The impact of belonging starts at an early age and impacts who individuals become as adults. Therefore, it is critical to examine belonging in pre and postsecondary schools. The presence of belonging in school has significant consequences for positive emotional and academic achievement (Allen et al., 2022). Allen et al. (2022) noted this in an article that examined the literature on the importance of belonging and data from an two professors and innovators in research regarding belonging (Allen et al., 2022). The authors argue that belonging is not just good; the need to belong motivates and influences everything humans do (Allen et al., 2022). Therefore, lack of belonging can result in dire consequences such as major depression, school violence, and other catastrophes (Allen et al., 2022). The researchers also point out that while belonging is generally positive, it can have negative connotations depending on how it is demonstrated. For example, people can form a sense of belonging by ostracizing other individuals or groups (Allen et al., 2022). In addition, people can join groups created to discriminate or harm others (Allen et al., 2022). When assessing the interviews conducted, respondents believed that the concept of belonging and the complexities of belonging, as detailed above, should be highlighted more. However, belonging is still essential to every individual's growth and development over the lifespan (Allen et al., 2022).

Sense of Belonging and Students in Higher Ed

While belonging is a universal need, it has not always been the focus of industries like higher education. Historically, problems such as retention in higher education were blamed on student deficits (Lu, 2023). Leaders, faculty, and staff would suggest that students did not study, did not work hard enough, did not want to come to class, focused too much on socializing, and other factors. However, some have argued that this does not explain the rapidly declining enrollment numbers or that many students do not graduate (Lu, 2023). With pressure to identify and solve these problems, the focus on belonging grew (Lu, 2023). Experts began to wonder if students struggled to survive and thrive because they did not feel that sense of belonging arguably required for long-term success (Lu, 2023). As a result of this shift focusing on belonging, cultivating a sense of belonging has become instrumental in higher education and various fields.

Sense of Belonging and International Students

Higher education research indicates that a sense of belonging is an instrumental factor for various groups of students. For example, research focused on international students talks about the importance of a sense of belonging for the success of this student group. International student enrollment has grown significantly at four-year institutions and community colleges (Garcia et al., 2019). Because of this, ensuring that international students feel a sense of belonging has become paramount for university administrators. Scholars have indicated that a sense of belonging helps these students feel like they belong to their campus and the country they are studying in (Garcia et al., 2019). The authors highlight that a sense of belonging is a student's sense of connection, social

support, acceptance, and sense of value by the campus community. They defined this term based on previous work by Strayhorn in 2012 (Garcia et al., 2019). Findings in this work suggest that international students feel a closer sense of belonging to faculty and staff than their domestic peers and about how they connect with peers (Garcia et al., 2019).

Similar studies centering on the experiences of international students indicate that belonging can contribute to social and cultural harmony (Rivas et al., 2019). In his 2019 work, Rivas and their co-authors assessed 17 interviews with international students. Themes included perceptions of the US, elements that impacted their social lives, and their educational and campus experience (Rivas et al., 2019). Cultural worldviews seemed to significantly impact the sense of belonging for international students to the degree that the interviewees felt more connected to other international students than their domestic peers (Rivas et al., 2019). Additionally, those with more extroverted personalities reported more belonging than introverted international students (Rivas et al., 2019). The authors spoke on the importance of staff, faculty, and administrators making specific efforts to ensure international students feel connected through organizations, clubs, and other entities that help cultivate a sense of belonging.

Sense of Belonging and Low-Income Students

Low-income students have a distinctive experience regarding belonging at college. Nguyen and Herron's (2021) research highlighted the financial burden of belonging for low-income students. They conducted 30 interviews with students who met the study criteria. Three themes emerged that influenced these students' sense of

belonging, including technology, spending money to cultivate relationships, and the right academic materials cost money (Nguyen & Herron, 2021). Today, education is becoming more technology driven. It is rare for classes not to require an iPad or for students to be able to survive without having a laptop and other devices that might be relevant to their major. However, low-income students do not often have the financial resources to obtain the latest, fastest technology or the family support to get these items. So, they are often ostracized or made to feel different from their peers, which decreases their sense of belonging (Nguyen & Herron, 2021).

Beyond the cost of technology needed for student success, sometimes, cultivating social connections and relationships costs money. Students often gather and get to know each other by going to restaurants—clubs or taking advantage of community events within the town where the school resides. Even with student discounts, those events can be expensive for low-income students who do not have discretionary or extra funds (Nguyen & Herron, 2021). Therefore, they miss opportunities to build genuine connections, relationships, and friendships. In addition to struggling with the cost of technology and social gatherings, low-income students also struggle to belong due to not being able to afford the necessary materials to succeed in their classes and majors. For example, textbooks and special supplies needed for certain science classes or majors are expensive (Nguyen & Herron, 2021). Additionally, some schools require students to buy specific software for quizzes or proctoring online exams (Nguyen & Herron, 2021). Some students, such as low-income students, cannot easily afford these expenses. Those in this study commented that they sometimes felt judged and ostracized by peers because they

could not easily afford these items or had to rent instead of buying them (Nguyen & Herron, 2021). Other participants shared that not being able to purchase materials early made them less desirable group mates or study partners, which are often ways that students foster relationships and a sense of belonging (Nguyen & Herron, 2021).

Other research confirms the findings by Nguyen and Herron (2021) about how finances can underscore students' sense of belonging, especially regarding social activities. A mixed-method study in 2018 found that what students could afford to participate extensively influenced a sense of belonging, or lack thereof (McClure & Ryder, 2018). The authors conducted a survey as well as four focus groups to gather data (McClure & Ryder, 2018). The emerging themes include the necessity of spending money to build and sustain relationships, the pressure to fit in, and the fear of social exclusion, which had them spending money they could not afford to pay (McClure & Ryder, 2018). Low-income students in this study commented that spending expectations are often more challenging to achieve and maintain, impacting their sense of belonging and connectedness to their peers.

Looking at focus group results from this study, students shared some critical insights. One student talked about wanting to join a sorority to make connections and develop friendships. However, affiliation with a sorority costs money. Members must participate in dues and various social activities, and because of the cost, she decided not to do it (McClure & Ryder, 2018). Students also commented that even when they planned to budget, most of their social activities involved going to clubs, bars, restaurants, and coffee shops because that is what everyone else was doing (McClure & Ryder, 2018).

Another mentioned that sometimes, just getting to these social locations was hard. They did not have a car and had to weigh whether to spend the money on cab fare or save it for something more meaningful (McClure & Ryder, 2018). It was often difficult for many participants to determine what was most important, saving money for unforeseen costs or spending it to socialize, fit in, and make friends, which are equally important. Forty-five percent of respondents said they spent money they could not afford to because they were trying to keep up with their peers and did not want to be excluded or left out because they could not afford to do something (McClure & Ryder, 2018). Fifty-one percent of the participants classified themselves as low-income and felt they often missed social activities and opportunities they wanted to participate in because they could not afford them (McClure & Ryder, 2018). Many focus group participants said they felt like all these activities, which could add up financially, impacted their sense of belonging and ability to connect throughout their college experience and beyond. Therefore, the financial cost was worth it, even if they could not afford it and knew that their decisions were not the best economic decisions. Participants felt that they were willing to face the consequences of their financial choices if it meant that they did not miss making those social connections necessary to feel the sense of belonging that so many of them craved (McClure & Ryder, 2018). Researchers concluded the article by discussing the impact of financial capital on social capital and how much lack of money can be significantly connected to a lack of belonging during a time when belonging is essential, socially, academically, and mentally (McClure & Ryder, 2018).

Continuing with a look at belonging for college students from low-income families, research suggests that these students' struggle for belonging goes beyond finances. Students from lower socioeconomic statuses see college as an opportunity to gain economic freedom, which can positively impact other areas of life, such as healthcare, home ownership, and other life circumstances. It is also true that access to college for financially disadvantaged students is becoming more difficult. This is especially the case in recent years as tuition costs continue to rise, and student loan debt disproportionately impacts middle- and low-income students (Kitchen, 2023). However, the cultural and social implications of navigating college for students from low-income backgrounds influence belonging as much, if not more, than finances (Kitchen, 2023). College can be a culture and social shock for low-income students because it is an environment not generally made for them. University experience usually involves understanding or assimilating to a particular way of speaking and dressing and the expectation that a certain level of knowledge and skill has been taught (Kitchen, 2023). However, if a student comes from an area with poorly funded schools and limited social capabilities and mobility, they may struggle to fit in when navigating campus life.

Kitchen (2023) helped construct a mixed-method study that explored the sense of belonging for low-income students navigating college. The study was done with three universities in Nebraska, each diverse and offering various sources of support and socialization opportunities for students (Kitchen, 2023). A base survey was given to these students in 2016, and a follow-up survey was executed in 2017 (Kitchen, 2023). Participants had applied for a scholarship for low-income students (Kitchen, 2023).

Sample survey questions about validation included faculty empowering me to learn, faculty believing in my potential, staff recognizing my achievements, and at least one staff member taking an interest in my development (Kitchen, 2023). Questions concerning belonging included items such as “I feel like I belong, I make friends easily, I see myself as important to the campus community, and I feel like a member of the campus (Kitchen, 2023).” Results emphasized that the more validating faculty and staff were, the more students felt like they belonged at the university (Kitchen, 2023). While programs like Student Support Services/TRIO, student organizations, and students’ connections to those in their major helped, faculty and staff validation and mentorship significantly impacted the sense of belonging in this research.

Sense of Belonging and First-Generation College Students

First-generation college students are often low-income, so they have similar experiences to those in the studies mentioned above. However, first-generation college students have some unique struggles regarding belonging. They must juggle many responsibilities such as jobs, families, health issues, and other considerations that peers do not. Additionally, first-generation college students are generally of racial minority status (Takimoto et al., 2021). Existing within multiple minority groups compounds the struggle to belong and achieve success academically. Research conducted in 2021 highlights challenges faced by Latinx first-generation college students (Takimoto et al., 2021). Researchers assert that Latinx youth are often considered dangerous and uninterested in education. However, their families deeply value education and see it as a way to achieve financial and social mobility (Takimoto et al., 2021). The authors outlined

results from a mixed-methods cross-sectional study examining the influence of belonging, ethnic identity, discrimination, and family emotional support on the academic success and well-being of Latinx first-generation collegegoers (Takimoto et al., 2021). Results revealed that a sense of belonging significantly impacted academic achievement and emotional well-being (Takimoto et al., 2021). This study emphasizes the importance of a sense of belonging for college students navigating multiple minority identities.

In similar studies on first-generation college students, experts report that more than 50% of undergraduate students in the United States are considered first-generation college students, being the first in their families to go to college (Edelman, 2023). These students are more likely to struggle than their peers who have other family members who have sought higher education and can provide them with substantial guidance. Additionally, most first-generation college students come from minority backgrounds related to race and socioeconomic status (Edelman, 2023). Those intersecting marginalized identities make the college experience more challenging. These students often must work and have families to support in addition to school. These are some of the factors that make it harder for first-generation college students to function in the university environment. One of the solutions to helping first-generation college students succeed academically is to create a greater sense of belonging for this population. In an article written for *Diverse Issues in Higher Education*, the author suggests that one of the strategies to communicate belonging is to create a space just for these students (Edelman, 2023). This safe space can help communicate that first-generation college students are valued, seen, and heard and that the institution understands their needs (Edelman, 2023).

Sense of Belonging and LGBTQ+ Students

The importance of safe spaces and a sense of belonging has been prevalent regarding other student groups, such as LGBTQ+ students. LGBTQ+ students' experiences are unique compared to their straight, cisgender counterparts (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021). Results from a 2021 study showed that students who identify as LGBTQ+ differ in their sense of belonging depending on their subgroup (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021). For example, bisexual students reported a greater sense of belonging than other groups (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021). Conversely, White college students in the LGBTQ+ community feel less belonging than other groups in the study. Interestingly, authors indicate that Black LGBTQ+ students may not have reported less belonging than their other counterparts because they must contend with the marginalization connected to race and the intersection of sexuality and race throughout their lives; they do not have the same expectations for belonging compared to their peers (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021).

Similar studies indicate that LGBTQ+ college students struggle to feel a sense of belonging in higher education. While universities are working to implement programming and services to support those in the queer community, institutions are often still unwelcoming places for those in any LGBTQ+ subgroup (Tavarez, 2022). Research published in 2022 specifically focused on college students who identify as bisexual and the struggles they have navigating the college environment and feeling a sense of belonging (Tavarez, 2022). The research communicated that all participants experienced a lack of a sense of belonging because much of the programming does not focus on their unique experience, which is different from others within the queer community.

Additionally, participants indicated that bias and harmful stereotyping occur within the LGBTQ+ community, and those who identify as bisexual often feel othered, even within their social groups (Tavarez, 2022). Moreover, when investigating belonging for students of color who exist in subgroups of the LGBTQ+ community, Duran et al. (2022) reported that students of color who identify with an identity other than gay or bisexual feel less belonging than their LGBTQ+ peers. Specifically, those who identify as trans, nonbinary, or another identity within the LGBTQ+ spectrum struggled to fit in, establish, and maintain connections. These participants reported feeling othered and like they did not belong in the broader campus community or LGBTQ+-friendly spaces (Duran et al., 2022).

Sense of Belonging and Students with Disabilities

Students with disabilities are considered a minority group historically disadvantaged in the educational sector. The Americans with Disabilities Act, passed in 1990 and the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, provide legal protections and access to persons with disabilities in the educational setting. However, access does not always equate to equity or belonging. Research regarding students with disabilities in the college setting has alluded to these studies struggling to obtain equitable access, which impacts their sense of belonging. Fernández-Batanero et al. (2022) reviewed literature from four databases that focused on the challenges of students with disabilities in the university setting (Fernández-Batanero et al., 2022). The literature analysis involved 20 studies published between 2011 and 2021 (Fernández-Batanero et al., 2022). Results suggest that students with disabilities face obstacles to inclusion that are physical, social, and

attitudinal (Fernández-Batanero et al., 2022). Experts highlight that these barriers impact the learning environment and a sense of belonging compared to nondisabled peers.

Research published by Fox et al. (2022) also focused on the experiences of college students with disabilities. The researchers surveyed students from a sizable public university in the Northeast region of the United States. The survey garnered interesting results, detailing students' reluctance to identify as disabled and negative experiences for those who did choose to identify (Fox et al., 2022). Some respondents indicated that they felt unwelcome on or during campus activities because of barriers to the physical space or attitudes from peers (Fox et al., 2022). Students with disabilities also reported the importance of lack of time to participate in activities that promote belonging. While all students reported time being an issue, authors noted that, for students with disabilities, often lack of time went beyond a busy class or work schedule but also consideration of how long it would take to get to a location or access a disabling environment (Fox et al., 2022). The issue of time was also relevant regarding healthcare appointments that nondisabled students may not have to consider (Fox et al., 2022)—not being able to participate in programming and services as frequently and equitably as other students contributed to a lack of belonging for many study participants.

Students with autism enter college at rates like never before (Pesonen et al., 2023). However, due to the symptoms consistent with autism, they struggle with the social components of college life that often impact belonging. Therefore, when looking at the belonging experience of students with disabilities, students with autism have a unique experience. Autism is a developmental disability where individuals struggle with

communication, understanding, and reacting in social situations (Pesonen et al., 2023). Those diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) may also have difficulty with sensory and behavior stimulation (Pesonen et al., 2023). Because those diagnosed with ASD have barriers to social interactions, developing social relationships that help establish a sense of belonging is a challenge for those navigating the college environment.

Pesonen et al. (2023) conducted a study to investigate the perceptions of students with autism about their sense of belonging in college (Pesonen et al., 2023). The scholars used semi structured interviews to collect information from 12 students and graduates diagnosed with autism (Pesonen et al., 2023). Results showed that the sense of belonging for students with autism was multi layered, ever-changing, and dependent on several variables. While some participants reported feeling a sense of belonging because of close relationships with faculty, mentors, and peers who had the same specific interests as them, many shared that they had very few or no relationships with peers because they “didn’t fit (Pesonen et al., 2023).” They commented that interacting with strangers takes too much energy (Pesonen et al., 2023). Additionally, some participants said that anytime they tried to interact with peers in social situations, they always said or did something wrong, so those situations did not go well (Pesonen et al., 2023). Because many indications of belonging for students focus on connections with peers, many students felt they lacked a sense of belonging compared to students who did not have an autism diagnosis (Pesonen et al., 2023).

Another study on college students with autism focuses on the experiences of students with autism compared to those with other disabilities and no disabilities (McLeod et al., 2019). The authors conducted an online survey about academics, social, and health considerations (McLeod et al., 2019). Students from 14 institutions participated in the survey (McLeod et al., 2019). Results revealed that students with any kind of disability struggled in every area compared to students without disabilities (McLeod et al., 2019). When examining academics, students with disabilities reported lower GPAs and more remedial and repeated courses than their nondisabled classmates (McLeod et al., 2019). While students with disabilities reported lower levels of social interactions and more bullying than those without disabilities, they surprisingly reported a higher sense of belonging than nondisabled peers (McLeod et al., 2019). When looking deeper into these surprising results, students with autism only reported a more heightened sense of belonging if they attended a two-year college. Authors suggest this could be because two years focus more on vocational degrees more fitting with the concrete thinking often attributed to those with autism (McLeod et al., 2019). Authors also assert that because community colleges do not have on-campus residences or significant social activities compared to four-year universities, students with autism who attend two-year schools do not feel the pressure to belong in the same way that those at four-year institutions might feel (McLeod et al., 2019).

When looking at disability from an intersectional perspective, students with disabilities with other minority statuses have a distinctive experience. Black students with disabilities find themselves at the intersection of disability, race, and cultural jeopardy

(Métraux, 2023). Cultural jeopardy is the idea of multiple minority statuses working together to exacerbate oppression (Métraux, 2023). A recent study analyzed interviews with twelve Black male students with disabilities (Métraux, 2023). Students attended a historically Black university (HBCU). All students were registered with the disability services office and had disabilities such as ADHD, hearing loss, cerebral palsy, and others (Métraux, 2023). Participants were 19-28 years old (Métraux, 2023). The students shared that stereotypes about race, disability, and gender expectations impacted their sense of isolation, belonging, and thoughts about their intelligence (Métraux, 2023). Students with visible disabilities, such as cerebral palsy, felt a more significant lack of belonging (Métraux, 2023). Some interviewees disclosed that racial stereotypes and biases significantly impacted their experiences, while others thought disability had a more significant impact. Others commented that it was hard to separate the two (Métraux, 2023).

Students' Sense of Belonging and Race

When focused on students from racial minority groups, research shows that those who experience frequent microaggressions while attending college feel less belonging. This is evidenced by a 2021 study explored the racial microaggression experiences of students of color (Lewis et al., 2021). These students included African Americans, Asian-Americans, Latinxs, and Multiracial students. All participants attended historically White universities (Lewis et al., 2021). Results revealed that African American students encountered racial microaggressions more frequently than their peers of color. These interactions resulted in a lower sense of belonging for Black students (Lewis et al., 2021).

Results are consistent with similar research on the experiences of African American students and their sense of belonging in college.

Students' Sense of Belonging and Intersectionality

Black female students have a unique perspective and experience. In a 2019 study of the sense of belonging for Black women attending predominately White institutions, authors shared that their Black female participants felt doubly outcasted due to gender and race. The women reported that they expected to come to college and be free to talk about their heritage and be celebrated and accepted for who they are, but that was not the case (Vaccaro et al., 2019). The women noted that people did not want to talk about diversity in any form or get to know anyone different from them (Vaccaro et al., 2019). Participants felt a profound lack of belonging that they were not used to because they grew up in areas where people looked like them or where there was an array of diversity, and everyone was welcomed.

Haynes (2019) conducted research to support the isolation, frustration, and lack of belonging for Black women at predominately White institutions (PWI). In this study, 20 interviews were conducted with Black women attending PWIs. Participants shared that the academic rigor of these schools positively challenged them. However, they reported that their academic achievement often masks the microaggressions they encountered in and out of the classroom (Haynes, 2019). For example, peers would be surprised they got a high grade on a paper or conversations about them getting admitted due to Affirmative Action and taking slots away from other White students (Haynes, 2019). These women felt alone because they often did not see anyone who looked like them, and few people

tried to create an atmosphere that welcomed them (Haynes, 2019). The interviewees revealed feeling alienated and oppressed while invested in their academic pursuits.

Research published in 2020 resulted in similar findings. Porter (2020) assessed the sense of belonging for Black women studying at PWIs. Porter revealed that these students feel they “have not mattered or don’t belong,” evidenced by previous contacts with faculty and peers. One of the solutions presented to improve belonging for Black female students was more representation or for them to see employees who look like them. Therefore, analyzing the sense of belonging for Black women in executive administration at postsecondary institutions, which is the purpose of my study, is significant.

Belonging at Work

Not only is a sense of belonging essential to academic success, but it is also an important concept at work. But what does it mean to belong at work? A 2019 study attempted to answer this question using an innovative method. The authors used snaplogs to assess participants’ perceptions of workplace belonging (Filstad et al., 2019). Using snaplogs is a qualitative method where participants take their photos (snaps) and write short texts (logs) about what the images represent (Filstad et al., 2019). They must take pictures in a naturalistic setting relevant to the study, such as at work (Filstad et al., 2019). Fifty-one participants were asked to take one picture with their smartphones demonstrating their perceived belonging at work. They were then asked to write a short description explaining why they thought their picture represented belonging (Filstad et al., 2019). No other direction was given to ensure participants gave their authentic,

unfiltered viewpoints. Results indicated that there is not one idea of what it means to belong. Some participants took pictures of flowers given to them by a colleague. Giving a gift the colleague knew they liked communicated a sense of belonging (Filstad et al., 2019). Someone else took a picture of a clock they brought from home, and they commented that they create their sense of belonging at work by bringing a piece of home with them (Filstad et al., 2019). Others took pictures of people eating together and wrote that they feel a sense of belonging when included in simple social interactions that they are not required to be a part of but are invited to be a part of (Filstad et al., 2019). The authors reasoned that this data collection and analysis method presents a holistic view of what belonging could mean in conscious and unconscious ways.

One aspect of advancing diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging at work is providing opportunities for professional development. However, these initiatives come with their barriers. Weiner et al. (2021) studied microaggressions in an administrator preparation program. Ten Black female school leaders participated in this qualitative study (Weiner et al., 2021). Women reported that they were not allowed to discuss their intersecting identities or experiences of stereotyping or discrimination (Weiner et al., 2021). Throughout the program, no strategies were discussed for addressing issues of this kind. Participants reported that leadership was discussed from an identity-neutral standpoint, and facilitators suggested that one's identity had no bearing on how one should lead or interact with others from a leadership status (Weiner et al., 2021). The Black women in this study recounted that "racial or gender differences were ignored or

silenced,” which are types of microaggressions that communicated that they would not belong in administration or leadership spaces.

If individuals do not feel like they belong or are recognized for who they are and the unique qualities and perspectives they bring, this could negatively impact performance and retention in the workplace (Bond, 2022). Bond (2022) shared that belonging also enables innovation, a trait essential to organizational growth. Great Place to Work, the organization the author is affiliated with, has researched belonging for years. Bond reports that the organization has defined belonging in the workplace as a sense of uniqueness and acceptance by colleagues and leadership. They say belonging is not simply about feeling appreciated by raises, lunches, or other incentives. Instead, it is about day-to-day experiences and encounters that make people feel safe and like they can bring all they are to work (Bond, 2022). The article argues that employees want to feel like an “insider” and are encouraged to maintain the fullness of who they are instead of fitting a company or organizational mold (Bond, 2022). For example, employees are also parents, and spouses have different races, gender expressions, and other identities that they want to evoke at work without shame, fear, or dismissal.

Further analyzing Bond’s article and the research done by Great Place to Work, some vital statistics are revealed. Results highlight that when employees feel they belong at work, they are three times more likely to believe that people enjoy coming to work. The report also indicates that people are three times more likely to say their workplace is fun. Results also indicate that those who feel like they belong at work are “nine times more likely” to believe people are treated equitably regardless of race and respondents

are “five times more likely” to want to stay at their companies long-term (Bond, 2022).

All this information alludes to the critical effect of workplace belonging.

The Influence of Leadership and Belonging at Work

Belonging at work can often depend on the atmosphere from the top down.

Feeling a sense of belonging at work can be significantly influenced by leadership.

Therefore, it is essential to examine what kind of leadership styles influence the greatest

sense of belonging. Shore and Chung (2021) did research describing four leadership characteristics and how they affect worker belonging and value (Shore & Chung, 2021).

The four leader traits studied were leader inclusion, exclusion, assimilation, and

differentiation (Shore & Chung, 2021). Leaders who foster inclusion work to make sure

employees feel like an essential part of the team by inviting them to share ideas and

different perspectives. Employees who are led inclusively report more creativity,

productivity, and psychological safety (Kolbe et al., 2020). Psychological safety denotes

a level of security that allows individuals to converse in a way that promotes learning and

growth (Kolbe et al., 2020). Psychological safety helps individuals feel confident to share

ideas and opinions that help grow an organization. A feeling of psychological safety helps

to boost a sense of belonging (Shore & Chung, 2021).

Some leaders encourage assimilation and convince workers that this may be the

best way employees can succeed within an organizational structure (Shore & Chung,

2021). However, assimilation can be in direct conflict with belonging. Assimilation is

fitting into the dominant culture (Shore & Chung, 2021). The authors argue that

assimilation is partial inclusion because it works if a person’s personality and disposition

fit into the larger culture. Still, it does not value, celebrate, or honor uniqueness or difference. Therefore, if any part of a person's identity, experiences, opinions, or beliefs are outside of the organizational norm, they may be made to feel like outsiders.

The third leadership trait that Shore and Chung (2021) described is differentiation. Differentiation focuses on creating diversity within a team (Shore & Chung, 2021). While this is a positive leadership trait at face value, differentiation often does not go beyond the surface. Leaders who lead by differentiation understand the importance of diversity for organizational growth financially (Shore & Chung, 2021). They know that an institution's stakeholders are diverse. Therefore, their companies must be, too. However, many employers with this focus often feel like tokens rather than a sense of belonging (Shore & Chung, 2021). They think that they are a number and simply meet a quota expectation rather than being valued for their unique perspectives, ideas, and contributions.

Lastly, Shore and Chung (2021) highlight leaders who operate from an exclusion framework. This involves categorizing employees into groups based on performance, likeness, or other attributes (Shore & Chung, 2021). This leadership trait results in a low sense of belonging and a low value of uniqueness (Shore & Chung, 2021). Dividing workers into groups often creates tension, microaggressions, and ostracizing among employees (Shore & Chung, 2021). Individuals operating in this atmosphere do not feel worthy or deserving of respect within the organization. Employees can feel pressured to conform and as if they cannot bring their authentic selves to work (Shore & Chung, 2021).

Other research has been done to support the importance of leadership style on the sense of belonging at work. Korkmaz et al. (2022) focused on inclusive leadership and how it influences employee belonging. The authors reviewed 107 articles focused on inclusive leadership (Korkmaz et al., 2022). They label inclusive leadership as “communications and actions by a leader that encourage and appreciate others’ contributions to the team and larger organizational goals” (Korkmaz et al., 2022). Researchers suggest four components to inclusive leadership that foster a sense of belonging (Korkmaz et al., 2022).

Leaders must ensure equity or fairness to foster a sense of belonging at work. To ensure fairness, leaders should act morally, be unbiased, enact decisions with justice, reward fairly, and ensure all team members are represented fairly (Korkmaz et al., 2022). Belonging is also cultivated by building relationships. To create positive team relationships, leaders must make each member feel like they belong individually and are a central part of the team, show support regarding work and personal matters, encourage diverse work groups that depend on individuals’ unique skills and perspectives, and encourage respectful communication (Korkmaz et al., 2022). This research argues that inclusive leaders inspire a sense of belonging by sharing decision-making responsibilities (Korkmaz et al., 2022). Sharing decision-making consists of consulting with workers because a leader values employee input, being transparent in decision-making, providing a sound rationale for decisions, collaborating with the team when assessing possible decisions, and celebrating team agreement or compromise (Korkmaz et al., 2022). When

a leader commits to leading from an inclusive lens, employees feel like valuable members of the team and are more productive, loyal, and innovative (Korkmaz et al., 2022).

Sense of Belonging and Faculty in Higher Ed

As demonstrated above, a sense of belonging is often researched from a student's perspective. However, a sense of belonging has also been examined extensively from a university faculty perspective. These studies aim to understand faculty experiences and explore strategies to implement faculty recruitment and retention efforts, especially for minority faculty, because the sense of belonging correlates with greater recruitment and retention of minority faculty (Flaherty, 2021). One study shared that 69% of White professors said they belonged at their institutions and within their departments, and 67% of Asian and Pacific Islander faculty members felt that way (Flaherty, 2021). On the contrary, 23% of Latinx and other groups, including Black faculty, said they were dissatisfied with their sense of belonging or lack thereof (Flaherty, 2021).

A study done with faculty in Minnesota found complementary results. Warren and Frison (2022) conducted a case study centered on three Black faculty members on the tenured track at a PWI (Warren & Frison, 2022). They facilitated a one-hour focus group and implemented a questionnaire to gain primary data regarding their experiences and what support was available to them. Participants shared that they did not often feel valued, accepted, or seen (Warren & Frison, 2022). They agreed that they must work harder than their non-Black colleagues and must prove that they deserve tenure by going above and beyond what the requirements entail (Warren & Frison, 2022). The professors also detailed combatting microaggressions when people are surprised they have made it

to professorship and tenure-track status. Subjects also indicated that they feel isolated at their university and in their community because they are not only a minority at their institution but within their home communities too (Warren & Frison, 2022).

Further research that focuses on faculty belonging finds similar results.

Chancellor (2019) wrote about the experiences of Black female professors and their challenges juggling the impact of their multiple minority identities in higher education.

Authors found that women of color face more challenges in postsecondary education than their White counterparts. In addition, the exhaustion they endure while juggling the effects of their overlapping, marginalized identities negatively influence their experience in higher education.

Sense of Belonging and Black Female Executive Administrators in Higher Ed

Cornelius and Mitchell (2023) highlighted the experiences of Black student affairs vice presidents. One of the themes that emerged was belonging. The women reported being one of few in senior leadership and how isolating that is. This finding is significant because the sense of belonging was a theme highlighted in this work. However, it was not the primary focus of the research, which is where my current study will fill the gap.

Another study exploring Black women's experiences in higher education executive leadership found themes of belonging or lack thereof, although that was not the focus of their research.

Selzer and Robles (2019) detailed related stories of women feeling invisible and voiceless as they navigated senior leadership in higher education. Results reflect feelings that often impact the sense of belonging. While there is scholarly work focused on

women in executive leadership, this phenomenon is rarely studied compared to the experiences of other groups in these positions. Work published by Lewis-Strickland (2021) emphasizes this. This study discussed the leadership development and advancement of Black female university deans. The author concluded that Black female deans encountered many challenges to career advancement and that those struggles persisted as they attained and navigated their roles as leaders. The author points out the limited scholarly research focused on Black women in senior leadership and how their intersecting identities are integral to fully understanding their experiences. In his study and others, while themes of belonging and feelings that may impact belonging are often revealed in research regarding Black women in any leadership role, including senior higher education leadership, belonging is rarely the primary focus of these studies. However, exploring and understanding the perceptions of a sense of belonging for Black female executive administrators is imperative to university sustainability regarding job satisfaction, school choice for students, recruitment and retention, and degree completion.

Summary and Conclusion

The importance of a sense of belonging has been studied extensively. Experts have concluded that diversity is inevitable, but inclusivity and cultivating a sense of belonging are daily choices. Spaces and places will be diverse because people naturally are. People come from different races, genders, ethnicities, religions, socioeconomic backgrounds, ages, sexual orientations and identities, abilities, and other variables that make humans different. However, fostering inclusivity and a sense of belonging goes much deeper. It is an intentional, active choice that workplaces and schools must work to

cultivate by how they lead, whom they hire, and how they enact, implement, and amend policies, practices, and programming to communicate that they honor, value, celebrate, and welcome an individual's unique perspective and experience.

A focus on belonging has become imperative in higher education. Work surrounding diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility in higher education has now centered on the importance of belonging. Many researchers have focused on the importance of belonging to diverse student groups. Some of these groups are international students, Black students, Latino/a students, international students, students with disabilities, LGBTQ+ students, and students with intersecting marginalized identities. Scholars present findings that show a sense of belonging dramatically impacts recruitment, enrollment, retention, academic success, and degree completion. Other researchers point to the importance of belonging for faculty. They highlight how a sense of belonging influences faculty recruitment, retention, career advancement, motivation, and satisfaction.

Less belonging research has been done on those who occupy leadership spaces, especially senior ones. Even less is known about the perception of belonging for Black women who navigate executive leadership roles in higher education and if lack of belonging explains the scarcity of these women in those positions. This current study hopes to fill that gap in the literature and perhaps explain the gap in practice. This study also hopes to guide stakeholders from Black women in executive leadership spaces about how to improve their sense of belonging, which could expand DEIB initiatives and enhance the recruitment and retention of Black women executives and Black students

whose collegiate success often benefits from having leaders that look like them and come from similar backgrounds.

To address this gap in literature and practice, it is logical to perform a qualitative study that explores the sense of belonging for Black women navigating senior leadership roles at public four-year higher education institutions in the United States. Semi structured interviews are a valid approach because this method allows a researcher to gather primary data on participants' perceptions and interpretations. This qualitative approach collects in-depth, personal knowledge of a particular phenomenon. Virtual interviews are beneficial because they allow a researcher to gather perspectives from various participants across different regions of the United States. This data and analysis will hopefully help expand the understanding of belonging for Black women navigating executive leadership spaces at four-year public higher education institutions and inspire other research and social change.

Chapter 3: Research Methods

Introduction

Research on the belonging of Black women navigating executive leadership in higher education is limited. Data on the sense of belonging in higher education mainly focuses on various student groups, faculty, or lower-to-mid-level administrators. Even after gaining access, research recounts that students with one or more minority status struggle with a sense of belonging (Anistranski & Brown, 2023). Similarly, compared with their colleagues, studies show that minority faculty, staff, and low and mid-level administrators struggle with belonging in higher education (Garcia, 2020). However, little is known about the belonging experience of executive administrators and how to improve belonging, particularly for Black women leaders, which is the gap this study hopes to fill.

Chapter 3 is a synopsis of the methodology for this study. A descriptive qualitative approach was used to collect in-depth, primary data. This approach was appropriate because the researcher was interested in Black women's perceptions of their experience of belonging in higher education executive leadership, how those perceptions impacted their work, their suggestions on improving belonging, and the way forward as higher education institutions continue highlighting the importance of belonging. This chapter also describes the research design, data sources, collection process, and how information was compiled, secured, and reported. Additionally, ethical considerations, data analysis, the investigator's role as a researcher, and the trustworthiness and credibility of results are discussed.

Research Design and Rationale

This basic qualitative study explored the perceptions of a sense of belonging for Black women who juggle intersecting marginalized identities while serving in executive leadership roles at public four-year higher education institutions in the United States. The first research question that guided this study was RQ 1: What are the perceptions of Black women juggling intersecting marginalized identities regarding their perceived sense of belonging while serving in executive leadership roles at public four-year higher education institutions in the United States? The second research question was RQ 2: What are suggestions from Black women juggling intersecting marginalized identities regarding how their perceived sense of belonging can be improved while serving in executive leadership roles at public four-year higher education institutions in the United States? The interview questions were adapted from the Harvard Panorama scale on sense of belonging, which measures students' sense of belonging, school climate, and other educational experiences, and helped answer research questions (Panorama Education, n.d.). Qualitative descriptive analysis was the best approach to answer these research questions because qualitative analysis focuses on understanding the unique, firsthand experiences of participants impacted by a phenomenon, which was the goal of this current research (Kandel, 2020). The qualitative approach also honors how individuals make meaning of their experiences and gives respondents space to express those truths and to be believed (Kandel, 2020). This was the objective for the current study. The qualitative approach is unlike quantitative research, which focuses on statistics and making predictions. Instead, qualitative research is interpretive and helps stakeholders

understand how people interact with their socially constructed realities (Kandel, 2020). This method seeks to understand a distinctive perspective rather than producing statistics or generalizations (Kandel, 2020). Furthermore, qualitative descriptive research is interested in understanding how participants interpret or perceive their lived experiences or realities, which is what this study aimed to do (Crick, 2021).

Role of the Researcher

Scholars must acknowledge possible biases and positionality when conducting research because their subjective experiences shape their worldview and influence the research process and results (Crick, 2021). The researcher's experience as an African woman in low-to-mid-level leadership in higher education was noted as they conducted this study as an observer. Because she aspires to be in higher education executive leadership, this might have influenced her opinion regarding the sense of belonging for Black women in executive roles at public four-year higher education institutions. As the director of a disability services office in the southern United States, the investigator has experienced belonging challenges that impacted her understanding and closeness to this phenomenon. Furthermore, she works with students with disabilities who also juggle other minority identities, including but not limited to race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and socioeconomic status. In her work, she has noticed how juggling multiple minority identities impacts belonging for students. Beyond anecdotal evidence, previous research also indicated that as the complexities of identities increased, a sense of belonging became more challenging to cultivate (Townsend, 2021). These realities might have influenced the researcher's thoughts on how Black women juggling marginalized

intersecting identities perceived their sense of belonging as they navigated executive higher education leadership.

As a Black woman in higher education leadership at a public four-year university, the investigator acknowledged that her position might have influenced this study. Further, she anticipated that unidentified variables may have unknowingly affected how she collected, analyzed, and reported data. Therefore, the researcher was careful to remain reflective throughout the research process. She did this by journaling, which helped her stay aware of her biases to help decrease their impact. The researcher assessed the journaling throughout the data analysis process to ensure that she grasped the participants' thoughts and feelings rather than interpreting information from her own lens. Additionally, using verbatim transcription and participant quotes helped ensure data integrity and trustworthiness (Saldaña, 2021). In addition, allowing participants to review data after the interviews helped ensure that the researcher accurately heard and understood what they intended to share. While the investigator's personal and professional positions motivated her to engage in this research, the goal was to highlight the unique experiences of study participants rather than her own. These women's stories have the potential to inspire strategic approaches to enhance belonging for Black female executive leaders, which could impact the recruitment and retention of these leaders as well as students, staff, and faculty who have similar backgrounds. The potential impact for positive social change motivated the researcher to listen to participants without assumptions or biases to obtain clarity and truthfulness that honored the participants' narratives.

Methodology

Participants Selection

This research used two sampling methods, convenience and snowball sampling, to find participants for one-on-one Zoom audio interviews (Bhardwaj, 2019). Convenience sampling denotes participants being easily accessible to the researcher (Bhardwaj, 2019). Snowball sampling involved asking those who met the study criteria suggesting other participants who might meet the requirements and might be open to participating (Bhardwaj, 2019). Both of these methods were used due to the researcher emailing Black female executive leaders, posting social media messages via LinkedIn and Facebook, and asking confirmed participants to suggest other women that might have been interested in contributing to this research. The study criteria included Black or African American women who serve in executive or senior leadership roles at public four-year higher education institutions. Senior or executive leaders was defined as presidents or those who typically serve in the president's cabinet such as vice presidents, nonacademic deans, and provosts. Participants were recruited by summarizing the study purpose and participant criteria shared in Facebook and LinkedIn posts. The same summary and participant criteria were also emailed to Black women in higher education. These online recruitment methods reached at least 150 individuals, which made it probable that at least 10-12 interviewees would be recruited for the study. Due to its low cost and broad reach, internet-based recruitment has become increasingly common for research and is valid, reliable, and effective (Agustina & Suharya, 2021). The researcher recruited 12 participants for this study. Instead of representing large numbers for generalization, in

qualitative research, the objective of sampling was to gather enough data from participants that allowed the research questions to be answered thoroughly, resulting in significant codes, categories, and themes that helped explain a phenomenon (Alam, 2021).

When participants who met the study criteria were identified, an informed consent form was emailed to all individuals who wished to participate. The consent form detailed the study's purpose, how the research would be conducted, the benefits and risks to participation, participant rights, and the privacy and confidentiality measures that would be taken to protect them during the research process. When consent was confirmed via email, each participant was sent Zoom information based on the interview day and time they agreed to. A follow-up email was sent closer to each person's individual interview time.

Instrumentation

Semi structured interviews were used to collect data from Black women serving in executive roles at public four-year higher education institutions in some regions of the United States. Little demographic information beyond race and gender was intentionally collected to protect the privacy and confidentiality of this small sample. Open-ended interview questions were adapted from the Harvard-Panorama sense of belonging scale, with permission from creators. The Harvard-Panorama belonging instrument is an established scale that assesses the sense of belonging in the classroom, school climate, and other components of the educational experience for 3-12 grade students (Panorama

Education, n.d.). It has been adapted by researchers in various fields to assess the sense of belonging for a variety of individuals.

Interview questions were tailored to fit the purpose of the study. Adapting questions from an established, trusted instrument increases validity. Semi structured interviews let researchers ask specific questions that guide the interview process but allow for follow-up questions based on participant information gathered during the interview process (Naz et al., 2022). Interviews were conducted virtually using Zoom. Interviews were one-on-one, lasting for approximately 30-70 minutes. During the interview process, the researcher provided background information regarding the study, participant responsibilities, rights, what would happen during the interview process, and how their privacy and confidentiality would be protected throughout the research process. Sharing these details arguably helped build a rapport and allowed participants to be open and honest about their experiences. The recorded interviews were transcribed using NVivo, a software to organize interview data (Dhakal, 2022).

Procedures for Participation and Data Collection

Confirmation of participation was garnered via an emailed consent form each participant received. The consent form detailed the purpose of the study, what the participants' involvement would entail, the right of participants to withdraw from the study at any time during the research process, and how confidentiality would be protected by using participants' numbers instead of names or other identifying information. The consent form also emphasized that interviews would be audio recorded and that recordings, journal notes, and other writings used for data analysis would be stored on a

password-protected computer and in a locked drawer in the researcher's home. Notably, the informed consent form detailed the risks and benefits of the study. Risks included the emotional toil discussing a difficult subject like belonging and juggling minority identities at work. However, the benefits of participation were also highlighted. Benefits included the opportunity that their stories could help improve the sense of belonging for Black women in executive higher education administration. Interviewees were notified that files would be kept for a mandatory five years per the university requirement.

After consent was confirmed via email by the participants responding with "I consent," an email with Zoom information was sent based on an agreed date and time. A reminder email was sent closer to the time of each interview. Before each interview, the researcher ensured that their computer functions worked appropriately so that the sound and camera quality were adequate. A digital recorder was used as a backup in the event of technical difficulties. Handwritten notes were taken during the interview as another backup measure. Once transcribed, each participant was emailed their interview transcript to confirm the information was accurate and truthful. Zoom audio recordings were stored on a personal password-protected computer. Consent forms and handwritten notes were stored in a locked drawer in the investigator's home.

Data Analysis Plan

The data analysis plan for this research included several rounds of coding. Data analysis transformed raw research results into meaningful information that helped answer the research questions (Mezmir, 2020). Coding involved making meaning of research data by identifying words and phrases that helped make sense of a phenomenon or

occurrence happening a particular setting (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). Coding was central to this qualitative research analysis and allowed the researcher to organize data into themes and categories based on personal, unique information shared by each study participant (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). The researcher transcribed each interview immediately to increase the accuracy of the data. Transcription involved converting audio into a written form. (McMullin, 2023). Data was transcribed using NVivo. NVivo is a coding software that helped the researcher organize data significantly and made it easier to identify patterns, categories, and themes (Dhakal, 2022). Each transcript and set of meeting notes were reviewed to ensure that participants' stories were accurately relayed. The researcher emailed each participant a copy of the transcript so they could guarantee the truthfulness and provide clarity where needed. After the accuracy of each transcript was verified, Microsoft Word and Excel were used to organize and arrange data into codes, categories, and themes.

Coding helped the researcher attribute meaning to data (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). A code was often a word or phrase that stood out and helped describe the phenomenon (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). The researcher identified several codes to describe data. Coding is arguably the most essential part of data analysis in qualitative research. It helps make meaning of raw data that would otherwise have little significance (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). The researcher enacted inductive coding, or codes derived directly from transcripts (Vears & Gillam, 2022). These codes consisted of participants' words and phrases that helped answer the research questions regarding perceptions of the sense of belonging and solutions to improve the understanding of

belonging. Inductive coding was most effective for this study because, unlike deductive coding, which relies on predetermined codes and could potentially increase researcher bias, inductive coding was derived from participants' own words, increasing the trustworthiness and accuracy of data (Vears & Gillam, 2022). After initial coding, categories were developed based on generated codes (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). Categories were created from codes, and grouped data into smaller classifications that helped explain data (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). The categories then helped to assign more prominent themes or insights that explained the phenomenon relevant to data and research questions (Lochmiller, 2021). Codes, categories, and themes were reexamined until the researcher was confident that the analysis honored the participants' voices and helped answer the research questions.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness and credibility were essential in the research. Both factors must be ensured for stakeholders to trust the researcher and results. Trustworthiness is concerned with data accuracy, while credibility is concerned with the accuracy of data, analysis, and fidelity of the researcher conducting a study (Shenton, 2004). The investigator for this study showed a commitment to trustworthiness and credibility by clarifying their understanding of information with participants throughout the research process. They also provided participants with a transcript of their interview and asked them to review it to ensure the reliability of the data collected. By having respondents review transcripts, the readers would be able to trust the data presented and would trust that the researcher is credible and ethical.

Transferability, Dependability, and Confirmability

Transferability occurs when the reader can apply research results to other similar contexts (Ravitch & Carl, 2021, p.168). To increase transferability, the researcher collected only participants' demographic information essential to this study. They also ensured that their recruitment methods garnered participants who could speak knowledgeably about the problem identified in the study (Daniel, 2019). Dependability concerns the reliability of data collection techniques and analyses (Ravitch & Carl, 2012, p.171). To enhance reliability, the researcher described their data collection methods and the rationale for data analyses and interpretations (Stenfors et al., 2020). Confirmability stresses are measured to reduce bias and ethical concerns (Shenton, 2004). This was highlighted with direct quotes that acknowledge the participants' thoughts, feelings, and perceptions in their language (Stenfors et al., 2020). All these elements increase the research's trustworthiness, validity, and reliability.

Ethical Procedures

The greatest ethical principle any researcher could follow is to not harm when working with human subjects during the research process. This is related to physical, psychological, and emotional harm that participating in research could evoke. The researcher honored these principles by ensuring that they protected participants' confidentiality by using participant numbers as identifiers, safeguarded transcripts, recorded data, and other written data by keeping information on a personal, password-protected computer and in a locked drawer in their home. This information would be deleted and shredded after the university's required five years have passed. Because

research subjects must be protected during the research process, they must go through their university's Internal Review Board (IRB) process (Balon et al., 2019). Therefore, the researcher applied for and received IRB approval before beginning research. They followed all IRB protocols while working with participants. This included obtaining informed consent, protecting participants' privacy and confidentiality, and informing participants of their rights and responsibilities. The IRB requires that the researcher notifies participants about the recording of interviews, where data will be stored, who will have access to data, and when and how data will be disposed of. This will emphasize the researcher's commitment to participants' privacy and confidentiality (Gray et al., 2020). The investigator did all of this, as required.

The researcher for this study stressed that participants could revoke participation during the research process. By taking the necessary steps to obtain IRB approval and communicating extensively with participants about the purpose of the research study, the importance of their honest participation, and the autonomy they have throughout the process, the trustworthiness of data, the researcher, and the research process could hopefully be inferred. By taking these steps, the researcher hoped to insight into the perceived belonging experience for Black women navigating executive leadership at public four-year US institutions. Further insight could potentially influence policies and practices that enhance DEI-AB work in higher education.

Summary

Chapter 3 provided a detailed description of the methodology used to guide and ground this study. This chapter also outlined participant recruitment and selection, the instrument used to extract data, data collection methods, data analysis, and methods used to establish the trustworthiness and credibility of the study and scholar. This research explored the perceptions of a sense of belonging for Black women juggling intersecting marginalized identities while navigating higher education executive leadership at four-year public universities in the United States. While belonging scholarship has underlined student and faculty experiences, few have focused on the experiences of minority administrators. Further, even less have focused on minority executive-level administrators juggling multiple minority identities. Employing descriptive qualitative research methods to better understand belonging for this group would fill a gap in research and practice. Chapter 4 outlines this study's results, findings, and limitations.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

This study aimed to explore the perceptions of the sense of belonging of Black women juggling marginalized intersecting identities while serving in executive leadership roles at public four-year institutions in various parts of the United States. By hearing and evaluating the experiences of women who fit the study criteria, the researcher gathered significant data regarding how Black women in executive leadership perceive their sense of belonging at their institutions. Based on quotes and feedback from each interviewee, codes, themes, and categories were developed and analyzed to detail the relevance of the research questions outlined for this study. The knowledge gained was used to understand each participant's perceptions of belonging as they navigated their perspective roles. The research questions grounding this study were:

RQ 1: What are the perceptions of Black women juggling intersecting marginalized identities regarding their perceived sense of belonging while serving in executive leadership roles at public four-year higher education institutions in the United States?

RQ 2: What are suggestions from Black women juggling intersecting marginalized identities regarding how their perceived sense of belonging can be improved while serving in executive leadership roles at public four-year higher education institutions in the United States?

In this chapter, the researcher discussed the approach used to conduct participant interviews and described the interview setting, relevant participant demographics, data

collection, and results. Chapter 4 also includes a thorough description of the data analysis process, evidence of trustworthiness, and results.

Setting of Study

Black women navigating executive leadership positions at public four-year institutions in the United States struggle to feel a sense of belonging in these roles and spaces. Research indicates that these struggles could be attributed to the intersection of their marginalized identities as women and people of color (Marion & Wilson-Jones, 2023). This lack of a sense of belonging may help explain why so few Black women occupy senior administration roles at public four-year institutions (Bower & Wolverton, 2023). Yet, much of the research regarding Black women in executive leadership does not primarily focus on their sense of belonging. Most research has focused on one aspect of their marginalized identities rather than the impact of their intersecting identities working in tandem (Williams & Lewis, 2021).

Without knowledge and understanding of the perceived sense of belonging for Black women juggling marginalized intersecting identities in executive leadership roles at public four-year institutions and getting input from Black women about how to decrease this problem, this gap in practice cannot be filled. Twelve women who identified as Black or African American in executive leadership at public four-year higher education institutions shared their unique experiences through semi structured audio interviews recorded via Zoom. Participants also outlined specific suggestions for improving the sense of belonging for Black women in executive leadership. The interviews were conducted in a private location with cameras off to lessen researcher bias. Data gathered

shared personal, insightful experiences that have the potential to foster significant social change.

Demographic Data

This qualitative study included semi structured interviews with participants who identified as Black or African American women serving in executive leadership roles at public four-year institutions in various regions in the United States. Executive leadership roles included those in positions such as university presidents, chancellors, vice presidents, vice chancellors, assistant vice presidents, assistant vice chancellors, senior associates, nonacademic deans, provosts, and any role that would typically be in the chancellor's or president's cabinet. While the women did not come from every region of the United States due to the small pool of interviewees, given the unlikely nature of Black women reaching such prominent positions in higher education, participants still represented a diverse sample. Twenty-five percent of the women were from the Midwest, 66.7% were from the southern or southeastern parts of the United States, and 8.3% of the participants came from the northern part of the United States. Diversity also emerged in terms of: years of experience in executive leadership, intersecting identity statuses beyond race and gender, and thoughts regarding perceptions of belonging and potential strategies to enhance belonging.

The study specifically focused on those working at predominately White, public, four-year institutions because research suggested that Black women's ascension to executive leadership was rare at public four-year institutions compared to two-year schools or HBCUs (Chance, 2022). Additionally, studies have shown that seeing this

representation at public four-year institutions may be more vital as many Black students attend public four-year schools more than any other type of institution (PNPI, n.d.). With this focus in mind, 12 participants were recruited for this study. All participants identified as Black or African American women in previously defined executive leadership roles at public four-year institutions. Participants shared unique, varied experiences and recommendations for improving a sense of belonging for Black women navigating senior leadership roles in higher education. The perceptions of belonging they described, and suggestions on how to enhance belonging, could significantly influence the sense of belonging for any Black woman navigating executive leadership at public four-year institutions and improve job satisfaction, recruitment, and retention of these leaders and students of color.

Data Collection

Twelve Black women were recruited by email, social media posts, and snowball sampling to participate in qualitative one-on-one interviews focusing on their perceptions of belonging while navigating executive leadership at predominately White, public, four-year higher education institutions. Each interview was audio recorded using Zoom. Zoom video was not enabled to maintain privacy and confidentiality and to reduce the potential for researcher bias. Transcripts were emailed to each participant the day after their interview was conducted to check for accuracy. Transcripts from the twelve interviews were compared and analyzed using NVivo, a software program used by qualitative researchers (Elliott-Mainwaring, 2021). There were no errors or discrepancies reported. The goal of this study and data collection method was to provide rich, detailed accounts

of each participant's story that reflected the distinctiveness and depth of their experiences.

Previous literature reported that while Black women have found success rising to senior leadership roles at HBCUs and two-year schools, and feeling a sense of belonging in these spaces, Black women struggle to rise to senior leadership at four-year institutions that are predominately White and report a feeling of tokenism rather than the belonging that may be arguably felt by peers at two-year schools or HBCUs (Chance, 2022).

According to a study done in 2023, twice as many men serve as presidents at two- or four-year colleges compared to women. Black women make up 5.45% of those presidencies and much of that 5.45% serve at two-year schools or HBCUs (The American College President: 2023 Edition., 2023). This current study supports these findings as none of the women recruited serve as the president or chancellor of an institution. While Black leaders, men or women, struggle to attain senior-level positions in the academy, 53% of Black students attend public, four-year PWIs, arguably making the representation of Black leaders at these universities significant (National Association of Colleges and Employers, n.d.). This suggests that the representation of Black leaders at these universities is significant to the sense of belonging and success for the many Black students who attend these institutions.

Research has shown that students of color are more successful when mentored by faculty, staff, and administrators from similar backgrounds, including race. These students also feel less isolated and more belonging when they have mentors who look like them or share a similar background (Brady et al., 2020). This is arguably one of the

reasons Black faculty and staff representation is growing at public, four-year PWIs, but the same cannot be said for Black executive administrators, especially Black women in executive leadership. However, a minimal number of Black women have risen to executive leadership in higher education. The goal of this study was to explore the perceptions of a sense of belonging for Black women juggling intersecting marginalized identities who have ascended to executive leadership roles at predominately White, public, four-year institutions in the United States and to gather their suggestions regarding how to improve the sense of belonging for Black women in executive leadership at public, four-year PWIs in the US.

Data Collection Description

Semi structured interviews were conducted to gather data. With permission from the organization, interview questions were adapted from the Harvard-Panorama questionnaire regarding belonging. Before each interview, participants were emailed a consent form to review that detailed the purpose of the study, sample interview questions, data collection methods, how confidentiality would be maintained, researcher responsibilities, and participant rights. Once participants' consent was confirmed via email, each interview was scheduled. At the start of each interview, the researcher greeted the participants and explained the interview's purpose and structure, reminded interviewees that their participation was voluntary, and let them know they could stop at any time. They could also ask that information gathered from them not be used in the study. Participants were reminded that their confidentiality would be protected and that all identifying information would be redacted. Each participant was given the opportunity

to ask any questions they had before beginning the interview. Procedures for recording were also reviewed and participants were assured that recorded data would be secured and kept confidential. They were aware that university officials, such as committee members, may have access to the data if requested, but no one else outside of that capacity would have access.

One-on-one interviews were conducted with these women so they could openly share their experiences, feelings, and opinions without judgment or fear of how others would react. Literature shows that, compared to other interview styles, qualitative, one-on-one interviews allow participants to share their honest, unique perspectives without the pressure of groupthink or other considerations that could impede vulnerability. This also allows participants to share in a space that is comfortable for them and removes the barriers of cost and transportation that could be associated with research (Oliffe et al., 2021). Interview questions were adapted from the Harvard-Panorama belonging scale because this is a trusted instrument in education (Panorama Education, n.d.). This survey also details questions about belonging that were easily adapted into open-ended interview questions about the same topic.

Specific questions were asked about how the participants defined a sense of belonging and how well they felt like their institutions understood them personally. They were asked if they felt accepted and respected by other employees in general and in their roles as leaders. Questions about if they felt that their intersecting identities as women or Black people impacted their experiences in general and as leaders in executive positions were also asked. Participants were asked for suggestions on how to improve a sense of

belonging for Black women in executive roles at public four-year schools in the United States. Each interview lasted between 20-70 minutes. Data was transcribed using NVivo, a coding software commonly used in qualitative research, and the researcher went back through each transcript to make appropriate corrections (Deterding & Waters, 2021).

Data Analysis Process

Each transcript was analyzed for initial codes of data consisting of significant words or phrases spoken by participants that were relevant to the research questions. These codes became categories, which turned into more prominent themes relevant to the study and research questions. Codes were identified based on how many times a word or phrase was repeated by multiple women and unique words and phrases that stood out to the researcher. Journal notes derived from each participant's interview aided in the creation of codes and categories to create themes. Studies indicate that maintaining a research journal is an effective strategy to recount essential observations in the research process and minimize bias by allowing the researcher to go back and reflect on participant's exact words, descriptions, and reflections so that the researcher can adequately distinguish between their thoughts and what participants have shared (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). All interview files were transferred to the researcher's laptop, which is password-protected. Journal entries and hand-written data are stored in a locked drawer in the researcher's home. Files will be destroyed five years after approval of the study per university procedures.

Data Collection Descriptors and Analysis

Data collection consisted of conducting 12 Zoom audio interviews with women who met the study criteria. All women identified as Black or African American and confirmed that they work as executive leaders at public, four-year PWIs. Data analysis began with transcribing interviews and evolved into coding data into more significant categories and themes, and detailing those results. NVivo software was used to transcribe data. The transcripts were then studied at length to populate codes into an Excel chart. Codes derived from repeated words and phrases that stood out to the researcher, and words or phrases that interviewees put emphasis on during the interview process based on tone and other communication mechanisms. An example of what was calculated during analysis in NVivo is shown below:

Figure 1

Example of NVivo Codes for RQ 2

(RQ2) Belonging Solutions					
build relationships	informal connection	community support	education	deliberate act...	affinity groups
	advocate	don't stereotype	training	metrics for r...	collabroativ...
candid conversations	welcomed instead of bel...	creating opprotunity	belonging ...	unique...	say s... openly...
	belonging to larger commu...	build a life	memberships	allow crea...	
	mentors	best practices in rese...	assume you're inv...	hiring	Don't ...
				formal spa...	

During the first round of coding, in vivo coding was used. In vivo coding involves the use of participant language to serve as codes, which increases trustworthiness (Xu & Zammit, 2020). Approximately 769 codes were identified for RQ 1 and 151 for RQ 2. Those codes were then minimized to the most significant codes. 280 codes were removed from the combined list of codes for each research question. During my second round of coding, a total of 287 codes remained from the first round. 230 codes aligned with RQ 1 and 53 aligned with RQ 2. Four codes were removed from the combined list of codes for each research question. Codes were eliminated if they did not assist in answering the

research questions, if it was a repetitive code already best described by another word or phrase, and other similar discrepancies. NVivo software was used to analyze data significantly. The researcher reviewed each transcript multiple times to understand the participants' responses to each interview question, and which responses related to the research questions were identified. Organizing the codes in an Excel table helped to easily visualize initial codes, remove codes that were not relevant, and determine the frequency of codes, which then transformed into larger, more abstract categories that addressed the research questions and helped explain the phenomenon being studied. Categories were transformed into more prominent themes that gave an overall picture of participants' experiences. These themes illustrated the collective descriptions of the responses from each interviewee that were relevant to the research questions. Results are represented in Table 1 below.

Table 1

List of Common Codes, Categories, and Themes

Codes	Categories	Themes
Open dialogue, formal opportunities to engage, financial support, diversity metrics, "I hire me," community, infinity bias, invite yourself, brunch, dinner, invitations	Formal and Informal Support	Creating Villages
Outside of institution, family, faith, regional and national conferences, sorority, wasn't made for you	Unaddressed Needs	Belonging Beyond Institutions
Dismissed, challenged, isolated, lonely, invited, in the loop, equally valued work, advocates, allies, anti-Black, code shift, putting on a uniform, not having to curate myself, authentically, unapologetically	Being Seen	Support

Codes	Categories	Themes
Delicate, fragile, first, balance, heavy, impact, “here for a reason,” Zero, only one, mentor	Responsibility	Creating Opportunity
Stress, worry, suicide, motivation, opting out, physical health, burnout, damaged confidence, mental health breakdowns, exit, wouldn’t be here long	Mental Health	Opting Out

Results of Study

This qualitative study explored the perceived sense of belonging for Black women navigating intersecting minority identities while serving in senior leadership roles at predominately White, public, four-year institutions in various parts of the United States. The research also highlighted participants’ solutions on how to enhance belonging for Black women in these roles. The first research question that guided this study is: What are the perceptions of Black women juggling intersecting marginalized identities regarding their perceived sense of belonging while serving in executive leadership roles at public four-year higher education institutions in the United States? The second research question is: What are suggestions from Black women juggling intersecting marginalized identities regarding how their perceived sense of belonging can be improved while serving in executive leadership roles at public four-year higher education institutions in the United States? These questions and research findings grounded this study. Twelve women who met the study criteria of identifying as a Black or African American woman and working in executive administration at public, four-year PWIs were interviewed. The interviews were conducted via Zoom where only the audio was

recorded to help reduce researcher bias. The goal of this study was to better understand the perceived sense of belonging for Black women working in senior-level leadership positions at predominately White, public, four-year institutions and to gather solutions from these women on how to improve belonging for this population.

Emerging Themes

By listening to and analyzing the experiences of the Black women interviewed for this study, information was collected about their sense of belonging while navigating executive leadership at public, four-year institutions. With evidence consisting of direct quotes and extensive feedback from each participant, significant themes emerged. The following section distributes the analysis into five themes that developed from the data. Quotes were accumulated to understand how these women perceive their sense of belonging as executive leaders at public, four-year institutions and their suggestions on how to improve belonging for themselves and other Black women in executive administration. The results centered on the experiences of 12 Black women who met the study criteria. The themes that emerged from the data are below:

Table 2

Emerging Themes

Emerging Themes From Data
The Value of Villages
Belonging Beyond Institutions
Support
Creating Opportunity
Opting Out

The Value of Villages

One hundred percent of the interviewees discussed the importance of creating a community and how these communities help establish, maintain, and improve their sense of belonging. The word community or variations of it was mentioned roughly 72 times across participant interviews. They all discussed creating communities within and outside of their university to improve a sense of belonging. 16.7% of the women interviewed discussed groups they specifically created for Black female executive leaders to connect because they wanted to feel a greater sense of belonging and to make sure others felt that too. Participant 2 had this to say about a group she formed, “We have a group...So we get together a couple of times a month, you know. So that gives me a sense of belonging” (2024, p. 4). She went on to share that the cost of not building a community and lacking belonging can be detrimental. She recounted that a friend in executive leadership committed suicide, and the participant felt that it was because she lacked belonging. She shared:

“You know, my girlfriend committed suicide because I think she felt bullied in a large part of that is she didn't feel like she belonged in her own community, which was her alma mater” (Participant 2, 2024, p. 4).

Another participant talked about creating a community in the form of villages. She mentioned the word village five times throughout her interview, saying: “I'm a connector by nature. I know the value of a village within my own... you know, culturally. I think that's important...we all really come together very strongly...they become like this chosen family” (Participant 1, 2024, p. 3). Participant 8 discussed understanding the

importance of villages but not having success creating one where she is due to the politics, culture, and her minority faith, which is another intersecting identity that she feels impacts her sense of belonging (2024, p. 4).

Belonging Beyond Institutions

All participants mentioned the importance of cultivating belonging beyond institutions and outside of work. When asked questions about belonging specifically, which helped assess RQ1, participants had a spectrum of responses that highlighted the importance of belonging beyond institutions. One participant continued to reiterate that while belonging was important and belonging at work could allow people to succeed in executive leadership roles, her sense of belonging went beyond her institution. Therefore, although she felt like she belonged and fit in at work, she had never truly thought about it in a significant way or cared because so much of her sense of belonging came from other spaces in her life. She went on to say:

I don't have to have a sense of belonging there to know that I need to be there. I think my sense of belonging is much higher than my employment. My sense of belonging is just really outside of the bounds of where I work...So, it's an internal and intrinsic sense of belonging. So, I honestly don't probably pay much attention to belonging to a place or that environment. (Participant 2, 2024, p. 2)

Other participants, such as 6 and 7, shared that they belonged because they said they did and because they earned the right to belong. Specifically, Participant 7 discussed the importance of joy outside of work with her husband, and bonus child, and even shared that people could find a sense of joy with pets (2024, p.18-19).

When addressing how administrators can foster a sense of belonging for Black women in executive leadership and how these women can create a better sense of belonging for themselves, Participant 5 had an interesting perspective about building community within and beyond the university. She shared the following statement:

It is difficult to create, to foster a sense of belonging...a full sense of belonging, when that sense of belonging is not reciprocated at Walmart or Target or Kroger or anywhere else in your community or very few places. The university is insulated and isolated. But at some point, you do go buy gas or groceries. And there's nothing that we can do about that. (2024, p.18).

Participant 10 offered a unique perspective of belonging compared to all other participants. She discussed that she never thought Black women could belong in majority White spaces because they were not made for marginalized populations. In fact, she mentioned that Black women can strive to feel welcomed, but if they are striving for belonging, they may not ever get there (2024, p. 14). She went on to say the following: “I just think, again, these organizations, it's not Fubu, right? It's not for us, by us, so it's you know, I don't want to be pessimistic. I just think it's not going to happen as much” (2024, p. 16). Participant 11 shared similar sentiments and discussed that she felt like she belonged even if others did not feel she belonged, but even if she did not feel a sense of belonging at her institution, her belonging came primarily from outside of the institution, so it would not bother her either way (2024, p. 2).

Support

During the 12 interviews, the word support was mentioned approximately 104 times. Every woman mentioned the importance of support from their supervisors, other leaders on the executive team, and the campus community contributing to their sense of belonging as they traversed in their roles. Participants mentioned experiences where they felt support from their supervisors, and that had a profoundly positive impact on their sense of belonging. Many women also mentioned having bad supervisors in the past, and those experiences enlightened them on the importance of feeling a sense of belonging as an executive leader—making sure they were intentional about creating a sense of belonging for others they supervise every day. Participant 1 mentioned how she was “spoiled” at her institution and how she felt the table was set for her to succeed due to the level of support she received from those above and around her. She talked about the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion, but that it only went so far if people were not set up for success once those diversity, equity, and inclusion measures were met. The participant shared:

I always say it's one thing when you invite someone to the table, but then if you don't tell them that the room that the table is in is cold and you should probably bring a sweater. And if you don't tell them that, you know, the Wi-Fi is bad so you probably should bring a notepad. I know you typically use your iPad. If you don't tell them the things they need to do, to be prepared and yet everyone else is. If the environment is not set, if the table is not set for them to thrive based off what they need, then it doesn't matter who you bring to the table if I can't do well

in that. And I feel like, here, I have been brought to a table that has been set for me. (2024, p. 11)

Participant 3 reported very different experiences, expressing that while she is working to ensure students feel a sense of belonging at her institution, she recognizes a sense of loneliness and sometimes a lack of belonging within herself. Participant 3 commented, “I think I became even more aware that, you know, there's a loneliness there sometimes” (2024, page 4). She did make a point to mention that she did have people on campus who were supportive and new leadership members who were hypersensitive about making sure they were being inclusive to help create a sense of belonging for everyone on the team, but sometimes, she still felt isolated as a Black woman in her position.

Participant 9 shared a similar experience to Participant 3 in that she sometimes felt isolated, and even sometimes “villainized” because of the role she had and the “White supremacist thinking” within her leadership (2024, p. 2). She mentioned a few times that her dean did not support her or know her as a person so that lack of support impacted the work she was able to accomplish. She went on to share that her position was being eliminated, and she had just found this out days before our interview, which made the topic of a sense of belonging even more poignant for her. Participant 9 went on to say that her intersecting identities of race, gender, faith, and age have impacted her sense of belonging, her purpose for doing the work she does, and her resolve to keep going despite the elimination of her role (2024, p 7). Unlike Participant 9, Participant 12 talked about how supportive her president was and said that she would not work this hard for another

institution or another leadership team if she did not feel the kind of support she felt from her current president (2024, p. 9).

When asked about ways university leadership could improve a sense of belonging for Black women in executive leadership, many of the participants stressed the importance of informal and formal support coming from upper administration. Informal support was collectively described as actions like openly praising people in front of higher leadership, ensuring that someone's title and position are on agendas during meetings, considering these women for new opportunities and initiatives, and faculty, staff, and supervisors showing up to events that these Black executive leaders sponsor or host. Participant 4 particularly discussed having allies and advocates, saying:

They're very strong advocates, are very strong allies. There's two who are in my corner all the time. One of them is the president. And I'm happy to say that I report to the president, and he has been 100% supportive. And let me change that...I must say 98%, he's been very, very supportive. (2024, p. 6).

Participant 8 also mentioned having significant support from her president, and this made her feel like she belonged. She also discussed the importance of focusing on your allies for support rather than trying to convince people that you or your work were worthy, because this took a lot of mental energy. She went on to say, "Don't prove yourself to people who don't even care to be an ally with the work that you're doing" (2024, p.12).

Formal support was described as financial support from leaders that sponsor opportunities for Black women in leadership to connect with one another and metrics

regarding diversity, recruitment, and retention of Black women in top leadership positions. In reference to formal support, Participant 3 had this to say:

It's one thing to bring them in, it's another thing to, you know, have measures in place to ensure that they're being supported and know, aware of what's happening...not that you want to have quotas because I don't necessarily know that you need quotas, but I think...if there's a performance metric...like, if you get judged in your performance appraisals based on those metrics, then I think people will start paying attention because it's a priority. (2024, p. 14)

Participant 3 and others went on to share that when informal and formal support measures were in place, they would feel a stronger sense of belonging because those supports were tangible elements they could see and feel.

Creating Opportunity

The concept of creating opportunity and the responsibility these women felt to do so was mentioned approximately 33 times across all interviews. Many of the women talked about how creating opportunity could impact belonging for themselves and the Black female executive leaders who come after them. Participant 3 specifically discussed the importance of her supervisor creating opportunities for her to work on projects that would put her name out there and would allow others to get to know her and her work. She shared that those experiences added to her sense of belonging with other members of the executive team and the larger campus community. She also shared how it inspired her to create that atmosphere for others (2024, pg. 9-10).

Participants also noted that being the first or only Black woman to reach their level of success could be delicate. They sometimes felt unable to bring their full selves to work for fear of losing the respect or sense of belonging they had gained. However, being a "first" allowed them to create space for other people of color and women to follow. To that point, Participant 2 shared, "I hire me," and that gives opportunities to others (2024, p. 5). Participant 12 also discussed how important it was that her president created opportunities for her. She commented, "She says my name in rooms I'm not in." The participant added that such actions fostered her sense of belonging and created opportunities for other women to advance to similar roles and be their authentic selves. (2024, p. 6).

Many of the women emphasized that creating opportunities for belonging is something Black women in executive leadership must actively pursue for themselves. Participant 3 said, "I think when we're the odd one out or we're not like everyone else, it's almost like the burden is on us to a certain extent to help people get to know us a little bit more" (2024, p. 15). Participant 7 reiterated this belief, saying, "But I also feel like a closed mouth can't get fed. Like you have to speak up and reach out and make connections too. I just think that's important" (2024, p. 19). Participant 12 ended her interview by saying that creating a sense of belonging is something that university leadership must allow women the space for, but Black women have to do a lot of the work of belonging on their own and be given a supportive space to do that in (2024, p. 11). All the participants talked about finding and creating spaces for connection, such as a Black Faculty and Staff Association, chat groups with other Black women in executive

leadership, connecting with leaders in national organizations, getting together at conferences, and various other avenues to foster opportunities for connection and belonging. Participant 8 talked about how virtual associations have been beneficial to her belonging since she lived in a small community and struggled with cultivating a sense of belonging (2024, p.12). When speaking about creating opportunities for belonging, Participant 7 discussed the importance of Black women and university administration being intentional and strategic about making sense of belonging for Black female executive administrators just as important as the focus universities have on belonging for students. She mentioned that her university had experienced a lot of student suicides over the past academic year, and it had really highlighted the need for more focus on wellness and belonging. That focus on student wellness and belonging bled into centering belonging for faculty, staff, and administrators as well, and she could see those efforts being made at her university (2024, pg. 19).

Opting Out

When asked about the cost of not belonging, 100% of the participants talked about Black women leaders leaving their universities after short stints in leadership or leaving the profession altogether. They discussed retention, loss of talent, loss of networks, loss of a particular vision for the university, and loss of funding and time due to having to recruit, hire, and train someone new to take over that role. 100% of the participants talked about the physical or psychological toll not belonging can have on someone, and how people would eventually decide to opt out for their health before it was too late. Specifically, Participant 4 discussed struggling with some health challenges

due to stress she felt she was under, in part because of a lack of belonging, at a previous institution. She revealed,

The doctor said to me... started asking me questions about my work and my job and my role. At the end of my answering those questions, said to me, I think you need to consider another job... And I was mad. And I said, first of all, I don't have the privilege of quitting my job... But after I settled down and realized that they were saying this out of concern...My work was literally killing me. (2024, p.10-11).

She went on to talk about how, while her current institution was better, she always thought about what people really meant when they said “better.” She shared that just because something was better did not mean it was good. She went on to say that sometimes, people left environments that were so toxic that any other place looked better, but “better” did not always mean it was a good or healthy place to be (2024, pg. 11).

Trustworthiness of Results

As part of the data-gathering process, each participant had a chance to review their interview transcript for accuracy. The researcher kept a journal/notebook that contained notes that were taken during each interview, as well as the investigator's thoughts during the data collection process. Sharing the transcript with participants, maintaining a journal regarding the researcher's thoughts, feelings, and observations throughout the data collection process, and the use of direct quotes and words from participants helped ensure the integrity of the research. Trustworthiness was also about

outlining how the researcher established concepts such as dependability, confirmability, transferability, and credibility, all detailed below.

Credibility, Transferability, Dependability, and Confirmability

Credibility in research is about the accuracy of findings and the legitimacy of the researcher conducting a study (Shenton, 2004). Transferability is concerned with how generalizable results could be in similar settings or participants (Shenton, 2004). Readers generally evaluate the transferability of research (Ravitch & Carl, 2021, p.168). Dependability speaks to the consistency of a researcher's data collection methods, analysis, and interpretations (Ravitch & Carl, 2012, p.171). Confirmability stresses that measures are taken to reduce bias and ethical concerns (Shenton, 2004). To meet the criteria in all the areas mentioned above and garner the trustworthiness of the data and the researcher, several steps were taken. In vivo coding, where participants' actual words are used to produce codes, categories, and themes, speaks to the credibility of data and results (Xu & Zammit, 2020). Additionally, the researcher listened to recorded content and viewed the written transcripts multiple times. Doing this and relying on language used directly from the primary sources helped to ensure the accurate interpretation of data. Further, the investigator kept a reflective journal to help reduce bias and all participants were allowed to review transcripts for accuracy. These strategies increase the trustworthiness of the data collected, results communicated, and the analysis provided. All the steps taken to ensure trustworthiness will also increase the reliability of results and encourage further research on the topic or similar inquiries.

Summary

Black female executive leaders serving at public four-year institutions were interviewed to share their perceptions of a sense of belonging as they juggle intersecting identities and navigate these roles. Results indicated a diversity of viewpoints regarding the importance of belonging as executive leaders and who was responsible for fostering a sense of belonging for Black female executive leaders. The cost of a lack of belonging was also explored in-depth, and consequences as dire as sickness and death arose in a few of these women's stories. The Zoom audio interviews that were conducted aligned with past research concerning the importance of a sense of belonging and how juggling multiple intersecting identities can impact one's experience of belonging. A common theme across all 12 interviews was that these women believe that creating a sense of belonging is largely up to them and that they must be intentional about doing this instead of depending on administrators and others to cultivate that space for them. Chapter 5 will present an analysis of the results, implications of the research, suggestions for university officials and Black women in executive leadership on how to cultivate belonging for these leaders, a conclusion, and opportunities for further research on this or related topics.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

This qualitative study focused on understanding the perceived perceptions of belonging for Black women navigating intersecting marginalized identities while working in executive leadership positions at public, four-year institutions in parts of the United States. Twelve women who identified as Black or African American working at public, four-year institutions in executive leadership roles participated in one-on-one, audio Zoom interviews discussing their sense of belonging while navigating these roles, and juggling intersecting identities in higher education leadership. The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim using NVivo software, and the researcher went back to make corrections that were needed. Transcripts were provided to each participant to ensure accuracy and clarity. Understanding how these women perceive their sense of belonging and what contributed to belonging will help universities and other Black women in similar roles implement strategies that could improve a sense of belonging for these leaders, thereby increasing job satisfaction, retention, and recruitment of talent, as well as increase racial student diversity within these institutions. The chart below displays some findings related to RQ 1 and how the theories that ground this study, Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality and Maslow's hierarchy of needs, support these findings.

Table 3*Perceptions of Belonging*

RQ 1: Perceptions of Belonging	Findings	Theoretical Support
Belonging is intrinsic	“I belong because I say I do.”	Research indicates belonging is a growth need and that can be influenced more internally through intellect and creative behaviors rather than extrinsic motivators.
	“Belonging is a feeling.”	
	“I earned the right to be here. I know I belong.”	
No expectation of belonging	“It’s not Fubu. It wasn’t built for us.”	Maslow stated that external circumstances or individual differences can influence how important each stage is to a person.
Belonging fluctuates	“It fluctuates.”	Research on Maslow’s theory asserts that human beings can shift between levels, arguably asserting that feelings of belonging, self-esteem, and actualization can fluctuate. He also asserted that one can have peak experiences in certain levels, arguing for the idea of fluctuation.
	“I wouldn’t do this work for every president or institution.”	
	“Some days it’s Zero.”	
Table was set for belonging and success	“I’m spoiled.”	Maslow’s idea that when people feel a sense of belonging and acceptance, they can reach self-esteem where they feel like an important admired part of a group, and eventually reach self-actualization, where they can be their most authentic selves and succeed in various areas of life.
	“The Table was set for me.”	
	“Is this a dream?”	

RQ 1: Perceptions of Belonging	Findings	Theoretical Support
Belonging inspires better work	<p>“I’m given a sixth sense about things, and I have insight others don’t have.”</p> <p>“I’m more likely to contribute my best work.”</p> <p>“A lot more second guessing.”</p>	Maslow’s idea that belonging increases self-esteem and self-actualization, allowing people to feel confident in who and where they are and to do and be their best.
Intersecting identities influence belonging	<p>“I understood it better after George Floyd.”</p> <p>“I’m careful about what I share.”</p> <p>“They haven’t lived it”</p>	<p>Maslow stated that life experiences can influence belonging. Therefore, it can be argued that the way people are viewed by society because of their minoritized identities can influence belonging.</p> <p>Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality discusses how intersecting minoritized identities impact daily lives and interactions with others and society.</p>

The findings that answer RQ 1, *what are the perceptions of Black women juggling intersecting marginalized identities regarding their perceived sense of belonging while serving in executive leadership roles at public, four-year higher education institutions in the United States*, were similar among participants, but there was some variety in responses and perceptions. Not only were findings similar among participants regarding their perceived sense of belonging, but these findings are supported by previous research and theory as well. Agbanobi and Asmelash (2023) discussed how feelings of inclusion,

connection, and trust, which are concepts participants in this current study mentioned as part of belonging, are more difficult to experience as Black women due to the historical and cultural context of what it means to be a Black woman juggling intersecting identities in the United States. This often makes it difficult for women to show up at work in their highest capacity and thrive. Maslow's hierarchy of needs speaks to how the traits of inclusion and connection contribute to love and belonging, and are essential for people to show up as their best selves in life and work (Mustofa, 2022). The second theory that grounds this study, Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, may speak to why Agbanobi and Asmelash reported these ideas being more difficult for Black women to achieve due to the intersection of their race, gender, and how society interacts with Black women because of these factors (Losleben & Musubika, 2023).

The authors went on to discuss how businesses, and arguably other sectors of the workforce, were created for White men (Agbanobi & Asmelash, 2023). This is akin to what a participant mentioned in the current study about higher education not being made for Black women, so it would be difficult, if not impossible, for them to feel a full sense of belonging in academia. Some participants in the current belonging study also discussed the importance of psychological safety contributing to their belonging. Psychological safety can be defined as feeling that one can take risks, express ideas and concerns, speak up, and make mistakes without constant fear of negative consequences (Gallo, 2023). Some of the women reported feeling psychologically safe while others talked about the importance of knowing what you can say and what you cannot. These feelings align with research done in 2022 that stated that 66% of Black women report not

feeling psychologically or emotionally safe at work (Hines & Ward, 2022). Looking from the lens of intersectionality, Crenshaw and others would argue that Black women may struggle to feel psychological safety because of the historical nature of what it means to be Black and a woman in the larger society, which are marginalized identities Black women uniquely wear (Losleben & Musubika, 2023).

In the present study, women also discussed the importance of allies and advocates contributing to their belonging. Many of the women talked about having allies in their presidents, other co-workers, and even alumni. The women mentioned that having people who champion them and stand up for them makes them feel like they are valued in their roles as executive leaders. While many of the participants in this study discussed people who act as allies, they also shared incidents where they do not feel heard, understood, or supported by supervisors or peers. The importance of allies and advocates in cultivating belonging proved so instrumental that it helped the theme of support emerge from the results. The value of allyship is supported by other research that reported that less than half of Black women feel they have allies at work, leading to less psychological safety and conceivably less belonging (Lean In, 2020). Interestingly, in that same report by the Lean In Organization on how black women are navigating work in corporate spaces, 80% of White women and men see themselves as allies to Black women. So, there is sometimes a disconnect between the level of allyship and support Black women feel in the workplace and what peers or an institution may think is being provided. Theories such as Maslow's hierarchy of needs note that if humans do not have a sense of connection, trust, support, or allyship, they struggle to move to higher-order needs.

Maslow theorized that if people do not feel like they belong to a tribe, it is difficult for them to reach self-esteem and self-actualization, levels that allow them to do their best work and show up in spaces as their most authentic selves (Mustofa, 2022).

The findings that answer RQ 2, *what are suggestions from Black women juggling intersecting marginalized identities regarding how their perceived sense of belonging can be improved while serving in executive leadership roles at public, four-year higher education institutions in the United States*, produced many similarities but unique differences as well. These perspectives provide insight that could contribute to increased recruitment and retention of such leaders, as well as improve the diversity of the student population at universities. See findings for RQ 2 in the chart below:

Table 4

Solutions to Improve Belonging

RQ 2: Solutions To Improve Belonging	Evidence	Theoretical Support
Formal and informal support from administration	100 % of participants mentioned this.	<p>Crenshaw’s theory asserts that the combined identities of race and gender could impact the types and levels of support Black women receive in any sector.</p> <p>Maslow’s hierarchy of needs argue that if support and belonging is provided, Black women could have more self-esteem in their roles, and this may aid in reaching self-actualization.</p>

RQ 2: Solutions To Improve Belonging	Evidence	Theoretical Support
Mentoring	Roughly 67% of participants mentioned this.	The theory of intersectionality has helped shape inclusive efforts in higher education, including an understanding of the importance of mentors for students, faculty, and staff.
Belonging requires a lot of intrinsic work	Approximately 75% of participants mentioned this.	Having an intrinsic sense of belonging arguably aligns with Maslow's idea of self-esteem but will be difficult if individuals do not experience love and belonging.
Metrics/Tangible results	Nearly 25 % of participants mentioned this.	Crenshaw argues that solutions or metrics enacted to speak to Black men or to women, don't adequately address the unique experiences of Black women because of their intersectional identities. So, metrics need to be more nuanced.
Building community within or outside of institution	100% of participants mentioned this	Maslow's third hierarchy, love and belonging, speaks to the importance of building a tribe and community to reach other hierarchical levels.
Honest dialogue	About 83% of participants mentioned this.	Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality asserts that if society cannot be honest about the unique experience of oppression faced by Black women because of the combined impact of race and gender, no solutions to improve the political, economic, or social status of these women will be successful.

The findings above regarding solutions to improve belonging for Black women navigating executive leadership in higher education were supported by statements from many of the study participants. These suggestions are also supported by previous

research. Adeshola (2024) urged Black women to believe that they deserve to be in their roles, build allies outside of work, and speak up and advocate for themselves when needed. These are suggestions many women in the present study shared.

Other solutions such as coaching or mentorship, cited by women in the current study, have been suggested by others, such as The Society for Diversity. Wynn (2024) from this organization discussed how mentorship for Black women is essential in industries like higher education because Black women must combat the unique political, social, and historical constraints of racism and sexism, unlike others in their roles. This is a central point of the theory of intersectionality that grounds this current study on belonging. The theory notes that Black women's experiences in various sectors of society are uniquely more challenging because of the intersection of race and gender, so any solutions to improving their sociopolitical standing in society must take their Blackness and womanhood into consideration simultaneously (Losleben & Musubika, 2023). Many of the 12 participants in this study of belonging speak to not knowing if people are responding to their womanhood or race, and not being able to separate the two aspects of who they are, along with other identities they carry that could result in marginalization and impact their sense of belonging.

In this chapter, the findings of this study are interpreted, and the researcher highlights the limitations, implications, and recommendations for further study.

Interpretation of the Findings

The findings of this study provided unique, in-depth insight into the perceived sense of belonging for Black women navigating executive leadership at public, four-year

institutions in various parts of the United States. This analysis of this study's findings is grounded in two theories that are empirically sound. One of those theories is Kimberle Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality and the other is Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality emphasizes the importance of considering the impact of intersectionality when highlighting the experiences of Black women. Crenshaw argue that traditional feminist theory and other theories often focus on one aspect of a person's identity and how that shapes their lives and experiences (Losleben & Musubika, 2023). However, this perspective often negates the impact of intersecting marginalized identities and the systemic, intentional oppression that keeps people from accessing power and opportunities in various aspects of society, including experiences in school leadership (Burton et al., 2020). This lack of power and opportunity can impact a sense of belonging when people with interesting identities, such as Black women, ascend to spaces they were previously not permitted to enter. Thirty-three percent of the women interviewed for this study specifically mentioned Kimberle Crenshaw's name when describing their experiences or the idea that their experiences differed from White women or Black men because they had to navigate the variables of a minority race and gender simultaneously.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs also grounds this study and analysis. Maslow's theory underlines the importance of people's basic needs being met before they can become what they perceive to be their best selves (Mustofa, 2022). The hierarchy of needs includes physiological needs (air, water, food, and shelter), safety needs (employment, health, personal security), love and belonging (friendship, intimacy, sense

of connection), esteem (respect, status, recognition), and self-actualization, or the desire to become the most that one can be (Mustofa, 2022). That third tier is love and belonging (Mustofa, 2022). Specifically, that sense of connection that can be garnered through work is something Black women struggle to achieve fully at public, four-year, PWIs. When that sense of connection, friendship, and intimacy is missing, as the women in this current study pointed out, it is difficult to feel that their work is respected, valued, and recognized as equally as their peers, and it is difficult to ascertain that they are respected, valued, and recognized for who they are personally and as human beings. Therefore, if Black women do not feel a sense of love and belonging at public, four-year institutions while navigating executive leadership, it is difficult for them to advance to esteem and self-actualization on the hierarchy of needs scale (Mustofa, 2022). As one participant said, people spend a significant amount of time at work, and if a person does not feel respected, valued, and connected there, it is difficult to bring their best effort to what they are tasked to accomplish.

The first theme identified in this study addressed the importance of creating villages or communities to help foster a greater sense of belonging. Creating a community or tribe is central to love and belonging, the third tier of Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Mustofa, 2022). The findings suggested that Black women must make an intentional effort to find communities of other Black women who can serve as a support system for them, and if those communities do not already exist, the women must create them. Eighty-three percent of the participants discussed the reality that they had to build a community because no one was actively doing it for them or making sure they had the

level of connection and support they needed to feel a sense of belonging. The women shared that these communities consisted of formal interactions such as within university, regional, or national associations, as well as informal associations such as a chat group, frequent lunch dates, brunch dates, dinner invitations, invitations to baby showers, weddings, and more. These villages help women feel a sense of belonging and like they are not “crazy,” or the only ones having the unique experiences they are having as Black women in executive leadership in the academy.

Theme 2 emphasized belonging beyond institutions. Many of the women shared that there are likely people at their institutions who do not like them, that they know they are replaceable, and while they can be themselves at their institutions, they understand it is only to a certain degree. So, while some reported feeling “spoiled” at their institutions, and like they belong there in a meaningful way, most of the women highlighted the importance of understanding that they must have a sense of belonging beyond the institution to be effective at work. That belonging outside of the university, as with creating villages, can be found within regional or national organizations. However, many women also pointed to faith and family as places where they belong and they never have to question it, unlike how many of them sometimes question their sense of belonging in the workplace. The findings suggest that there is an unmet need for institutions to focus on a sense of belonging for Black female executive leaders in higher education, because, as research indicates, when institutions focus on belonging, most of the focus is centered on students and faculty (Allen et al., 2022). However, belonging for administrators is just

as important because it retains them and their vision so that lasting change can take shape.

Research has noted that Black women have found greater success in reaching executive leadership status at community colleges and HBCUs. At least 25% of the participants discussed thinking about whether they should be at an HBCU because perhaps they would feel more supported and a greater sense of belonging at a Historically Black College or University. Many of the participants earned degrees from HBCUs and commented on it feeling like home and family, so considering they should work at one of those institutions is not a surprise. However, there were some participants that revealed they feel a greater sense of belonging now compared to the HBCUs they came from as students or employees. That difference was attributed to the culture of the university, the city, and the personalities of those on the executive team.

The third theme to emerge from this research was the idea of support. 100% of the women interviewed talked about the importance of support regarding how they defined belonging in general and discussed what it means for them to belong at work. They discussed the importance of support from their supervisors, from others on the executive team, and from faculty and staff across the campus community. The women shared that the support helps to motivate them, helps them maintain good mental and physical health, and helps them remain at the university long term. When defining support, many of the women had various ideas on what that looked like.

For some women, support means being kept in the loop regarding things going on in the office and being considered for projects that would help bolster their name to

stakeholders in a significant way. Others defined support as meaningful mentorship that would help them grow and develop as professionals. Many participants talked about support meaning being able to go to work and be authentically themselves, without having to curate who they are to make others feel comfortable or less intimidated by them. They gave examples like being able to wear natural hair, braids, colorful clothing, and simply being able to speak up, and say how they feel without being questioned or dismissed. These ideas and concerns align with other research where Black women talked about being stereotyped as angry, defensive, and unprofessional due to what they say, wear, or their hair (Chance, 2022). The 12 women interviewed for this study shared that they would feel a greater sense of support and belonging if they could come to work and know that they could be unapologetically themselves without retribution. This current study and previous research highlighting the importance of support aligns with Maslow's hierarchy of love and belonging, which underscores feeling secure within a space, having friends, and supportive relationships that allow a person to move to self-esteem, or feeling respected and admired, ultimately contributing to self-actualization, the highest hierarchy of Maslow's theory (Mustofa, 2022).

While almost 100% of the women discussed the idea of support meaning they can be exactly who they are, at least 50% of participants discussed that they would likely never show all of who they are, even if the opportunity were available. Some women shared that this is simply because of how they were socialized or raised. Others talked about the fear of losing whatever respect they have been able to garner by showing the full versions of themselves because, even though people might say that a particular

university is somewhere you can be all of you, the reality of that could be very different and costly for a Black woman. Other women talked about how, although being able to bring your full self to work would communicate tremendous support, it could also be dangerous and divisive because some Black women have learned traits and ways of thinking that they had to build to survive in a society that systematically works against them, so they bring that into the workplace, even if it were a place that would accept you. To sum up that perspective, one participant said that Black women must make sure they are not doing things to contribute to their own lack of belonging.

The fourth theme identified in this study was creating opportunity. Many of the women shared how their sense of belonging, or lack thereof, made them feel a responsibility to create spaces and belonging opportunities for other Black women in higher education. They discussed knowing the feeling of not belonging and not wanting others to feel that. While they recognized the responsibility they hold to create opportunities and foster belonging for other Black women at their institutions, the participants discussed what a burden that is to carry. They talked about how heavy of a responsibility this can be, especially if they are one of a few or the only Black woman in an executive leadership role.

The perspective above concerning the responsibility of Black women to cultivate belonging for themselves and others is akin to other research done on the experiences of Black women in higher education leadership. Johnson (2021) shared how Black women in leadership often feel the burden of having to get it right so that the good job they do helps to open doors and opportunities for other Black women to come behind them. The

theory of intersectionality speaks to the pressure Black women feel at work and in life to “get it right” due to the stereotypes that are often thrust upon them by the larger society due to their positionality as both racial and gender minorities (Losleben & Musubika, 2023). Approximately 16.7% of the women in this current belonging study highlighted the belief of “having to get it right” as women shared that they understood that if they “messed up” their opportunities in executive leadership, it would be harder for any Black woman coming behind them to get the opportunity to rise to executive leadership status. They also shared that being their most authentic self in these spaces could cause others to lose respect for them, which could impact the work they are able to do and opportunities for others in the future. However, they also pointed out that it is hard to do their best work and leave the door open for other Black women aspiring to executive leadership at public, four-year institutions if they do not feel a sense of belonging while they are there because they won’t last long in those positions.

These participants also talked about how senior leaders at the university needed to create more opportunities for belonging or better support the avenues that are already there. Many women talked about higher administration financially supporting the efforts of Black women executives who want to create organizations for connection, go on retreats, and other similar opportunities. These women talked about feeling a sense of belonging when people invest in them and invest in the things they care about, like creating community, and opportunities to advance in their careers. One participant discussed the idea of having metrics to evaluate how long Black women or people of color stayed in executive roles, why they left, and what is being done to address their

reasons for departure. She talked about how higher administration being that intentional about retaining diverse executive talent would make her feel like she is really wanted at her institution, like the institution truly valued diversity, and like they are deliberate concerning creating and sustaining opportunities for Black women and other historically marginalized groups. These perceptions and perspectives are consistent with other research when women of color are included and asked how to improve their sense of belonging or opportunities for advancement in higher education (Okolo, 2024).

Opting out is the fifth and final theme identified for this study. The 12 participants discussed how not having a sense of belonging as executive leaders in higher education caused Black women to leave institutions after only a brief period or left the profession to seek entrepreneurship instead. All the women highlighted how lack of belonging can cause physical, mental, and emotional health problems. At least 25% of the women discussed how lack of belonging has made them feel lonely, isolated, and stressed. Two of the women interviewed shared stories of friends in executive leadership at universities who committed suicide due to bullying and lack of belonging. This aligns with Maslow's hierarchy of needs and the idea that if humans experience rejection and alienation instead of love and belonging, they will have a difficult time moving forward toward self-esteem and self-actualization, never reaching their highest capacity and full desires (Mustofa, 2022).

These women talked about the importance of taking mental health days, vacations, connecting with others, and having a sense of joy and identity outside of work so that, even if there were no belonging in the workplace, it would not bring you to such a

breaking point. Other research has also focused on the mental and emotional toll felt by people with marginalized identities in workspaces. Research by Njoku and Marshall (2024) discussed how Black women administrators struggle with mental wellness because of the stress of their work in higher education and arguably not feeling a sense of belonging in those spaces. They talked about the deaths of 3 Black female administrators in higher education due to suicide and what that says about inclusion, belonging, and ensuring that Black women take care of themselves (Njoku & Marshall, 2024). Some women in this study resonated with these sentiments, experiencing the toll that not belonging has taken on their physical and mental health, as well as observing its impact on colleagues and friends.

Limitations of Study

One limitation of this study is that participants were not recruited from every part of the United States. However, considering that Black women rarely rise to senior leadership at public, PWIs in the United States, the researcher attempted to recruit voices from as many parts of the United States as possible. In addition to a limited sample size, another common limitation in qualitative research is the concept of transferability or being able to duplicate the study in other settings. Still, the researcher noted this and attempted to address this limitation by ensuring that all research methods were provided in detail, and data gathered constituted rich, personal accounts of participants' lived experiences. Another limitation was the recruitment process. Because the investigator only used two social media sites, direct emailing, and snowball sampling, recruitment sources were limited. However, both social media sites host numerous individuals so the

opportunity to find participants who meet the study criteria was plentiful. The instability of internet connections during Zoom interviews could be seen as another limitation but every effort was made to mitigate this possibility by ensuring interview success, such as making sure the researcher's internet connection was stable and having an audio recorder ready to use for backup if needed.

Further, potential biases introduced by the researcher's identities as a Black woman juggling multiple intersecting identities while working in higher education are noted as a limitation of this study. Although the investigator tried to remain keenly aware and conscious of her positionality and how that could affect data collection and analysis, the probability of unconscious bias is still present. To try to account for researcher bias, she kept a reflective journal throughout the research process. Additionally, results and analysis were frequently and meticulously compared to participant transcripts to ensure that the researcher's understanding and interpretation of what these participants shared aligned with descriptions and analysis.

Moreover, with the current political climate concerning diversity, in an effort not to highlight their institutions in a negative light, the investigator acknowledges that there are potential limitations regarding self-reported information and experiences. Research indicated that inconsistent self-reports are a common occurrence in qualitative research (Campbell et al., 2021). Also, generalizability is naturally limited in qualitative studies as qualitative research focuses on the lived experience of a certain group of people, therefore, results cannot be generalized to the larger population, which is generally not the goal of qualitative research (Hays & McKibben, 2021). The sensitive nature of the

research topic, the political climate of the moment surrounding diversity in higher education, and the limited number of Black women who generally ascend to executive leadership spaces, led to limitations regarding a relatively small number of participants. This also impacts generalizability (Hays & McKibben, 2021). To combat this limitation, the investigator relied on the participants' genuine responses and actual language to produce data-driven coding, a technique encouraged by many experienced qualitative researchers (Younas et al., 2022).

Recommendations

Many recommendations emerged from this research study addressing the perceived sense of belonging for Black women juggling intersecting identities while serving in executive leadership at public, four-year institutions in many parts of the United States. The suggestions are as follows:

Recommendations for Administrators

- Formally or informally survey executive staff on their sense of belonging
- Employ some level of metrics to ensure the retention of Black women and diverse leaders at the executive leadership level
- Formal and informal support from higher administration (funding to participate in activities that foster belonging, fairly paying Black women, paying for coaching, showing up at events that Black executives are involved in)
- Allow these leaders to express experiences of belonging openly and without fear of retaliation with the understanding that actionable steps will be taken or supported to address concerns

Recommendations for Black Women

- Focus on belonging outside of the institutions (conferences, professional organizations, etc.)
- Focus on building a personal life where a sense of belonging is felt
- Create spaces and opportunities where other minorities feel a sense of belonging
- Temper expectations of belonging and perhaps focus on being welcomed or included, but not necessarily belonging
- Focus on mental health

Given that Black women are less likely to occupy these roles for a significant amount of time compared to their White, male counterparts, efforts should be made to initiate, promote, and support strides to improve a sense of belonging for these women at four-year institutions. As one participant stated, if there is constant turnover in these roles, universities lose the vision these leaders brought to the institution and the work falls by the wayside (Participant 4, 2024, pg. 14). As another woman stated, if women do not stay long enough to build a foundation for progress, progress is always stalled (Participant 10, 2024, pg. 11). Encouraging Black women's sense of belonging at public, four-year institutions can help reduce turnover and improve retention and recruitment efforts of other diverse leaders and students. It is also recommended that university officials employ some level of metrics to ensure the retention of Black women and diverse leaders at the executive leadership level. This includes assessing how long these leaders stay in roles, why they leave, concrete measures to improve why they leave, as

well as facing potential consequences regarding maintaining diverse leaders in executive administration.

This study highlighted the mental, emotional, and psychological toll not belonging at work can have on Black women's lives. Therefore, it is also recommended that these leaders, and other leaders with intersecting marginalized identities, focus on belonging outside of the institutions where they are employed and ensure that their worth, value, sense of purpose, and belonging are not tied solely to the workplace. This can mean ensuring they have meaningful relationships and support from family, friends, and other networks outside of the university setting. This also suggests that Black women should be intentional about counseling, rest, vacation, and pursuing hobbies and interests that fill them with joy and peace that has nothing to do with work. 100% of the participants interviewed for this study talked about the importance of building community and a life beyond their institutions, because, as one woman stated, perhaps predominately White institutions can make Black women feel included and welcomed, but if Black women are looking for belonging, they may never find it because these spaces were not built for them (Participant 10, 2024, p. 14).

Based on data from participants, previous literature, and the limitations of this current study, recommendations for further research also emerged. Because participants were not recruited from all areas of the United States, a more comprehensive study with more participants from various regions could foster a greater understanding of the sense of belonging for Black women juggling intersecting identities as they navigate executive leadership in higher education. Further research could also be done with groups who have

different intersecting identities aside from or in addition to race and gender. Many women in this study mentioned mental health and belonging, so research regarding how mental health influences perceptions of belonging for Black women or others could yield beneficial data. Other research that centers belonging for minorities with intersecting identities working in various levels of higher education could be valuable.

Overview of Implications

Positive Social Change Implications

This study can help enact positive social change in many ways. If universities understand their perceived sense of belonging for Black women in executive leadership and heed their suggestions on how to improve belonging for this group, they may be able to retain these leaders for a substantial amount of time. Research has shown that these women's tenure in executive leadership at public four-year institutions is short and that they are opting out of higher education altogether (Fisher, 2024). However, Black women offer a unique intersecting perspective on many issues impacting all educational settings. Therefore, their presence and voices are vital to the continued growth and expansion of institutions.

In addition, their presence can have a positive impact on academic success for diverse student populations, which improves retention and graduation rates for these students, which is a form of social change (Nittle, 2022). The research emphasized the importance of Black women creating community and a sense of belonging. Also, it underlines the importance of Black women not being afraid to own their right to be in higher education spaces because of the credentials they have earned. Many of the women

interviewed acknowledged that this perspective comes with age, which is another intersecting identity, and experience. They shared that they were not always in such a confident space, and some even mentioned that being full themselves, such as wearing their hair like they want, is still a struggle, but one that they are slowly resisting. The results indicate that the perceived sense of belonging for at least 33% of participants was solidified because they know who they are, and the value they bring, and they belong because they say so and believe they do regardless of what others say or think.

Practice Implications

Black female executive leaders at public, four-year institutions, such as provosts, presidents, chancellors, vice presidents, vice provosts, nonacademic college deans, associate vice presidents or vice chancellors, and anyone who sits in the chancellor's or president's cabinet, should be offered formal and informal supports that enhance their sense of belonging at universities. This includes funding to support professional development, and attendance in organizations as well as regional and national conferences, which are spaces where Black women often find sisterhood and support. Informal support could consist of the ability to initiate groups such as Black Faculty and Staff Associations, Sister Circles, and other assemblies at institutions that help foster connection for these leaders. Additionally, Black women in executive leadership should have access to talk about their experiences of belonging openly and honestly with those in power and suggest actionable steps that can be taken to improve this perception. University leadership should invest in these suggestions in a tangible measurable way that can be felt and seen by Black women in executive leadership. These intentional

efforts could collectively improve a sense of belonging for this group and others who may have different intersecting minority identities. If these efforts are successfully implemented, it could have a significant social impact on institutional culture and improve recruitment and retention efforts for these leaders and diverse study populations, ultimately positively impacting university sustainability.

Conclusion

This qualitative research study explored the perceptions of a sense of belonging for Black women juggling intersecting identities while navigating executive leadership at public, four-year institutions in parts of the United States. The study underscored the importance of a sense of belonging for Black female executive leaders, who are responsible for cultivating that sense of belonging, and how much emphasis should be placed on belonging at work. Institutional administrators must support various efforts to foster and maintain belonging for these leaders to retain them. This support must be shown in formal and informal ways such as paying for organizational memberships, conferences, retreats, and professional development and training. This also includes providing opportunities for Black female executive leaders to get recognition for their work and allowing them to show up to work without having to curate who they are. University leaders must be intentional about supporting belonging initiatives for Black female executive leaders and go beyond “lip service” (Participant 6, 2024, p. 6). Likewise, Black women executive leaders must find ways to create community and cultivate belonging for themselves. This can be done through Black faculty and Staff Associations, women’s groups, lunches, brunch, and more.

Further, it is imperative that Black female executive leaders foster a sense of belonging and meaning in their lives outside of work. Additionally, these women must acknowledge, be aware of, and come to terms with the realization that they may be welcomed or included in university spaces but not fully belong there (Participant 10, 2024, p. 14). One participant was adamant in discussing how important it is to have that intrinsic sense of belonging and just knowing that you earned the right to be there. She said this about knowing you belong even if no one else roots for you, “So I have a rug in my bathroom...it says, “root for your damn self.” Excuse that language, but I think you have to do that in a number of ways. Bolster yourself. Make sure you value yourself” (Participant 12, 2024, p. 15).

The interpretation and analysis of the study results must be consumed with an understanding of the limitations presented including issues of transferability, potential researcher bias, hesitancy, and the small sample size due to the sensitive and complex nature of the research topic. However, despite its limitations, this research study provides valuable insights into the unique experiences of belonging for Black women in executive administration at public four-year predominately White institutions and provides potential solutions to improve belonging for this group. The research and results are grounded in credited theoretical orientations and have implications that could contribute to positive social change. These findings can help guide future efforts to create a greater sense of belonging for Black female executive leaders at public, predominately White four-year institutions as well as others with differing multiple minority identities. By addressing the problem and purpose identified in this study, future research can delve deeper into

strategic strategies to enhance a sense of belonging for many marginalized groups in university settings, which could increase retention, recruitment, and overall job satisfaction for various groups. Furthermore, given the current political climate regarding diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) in higher education, future research could focus on evaluating the effect of approaches designed to improve belonging at educational institutions and how that improves the growth and development of higher education institutions and the stakeholders that invest in these settings.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. How would you define sense of belonging?
2. What does it mean to you to belong at work?
3. How important is it for you to feel a sense of belonging as an executive leader in higher education?
4. How well do those within your university understand you as a person?
5. How well do you feel your values line up with the values of your institution?
6. How connected do you feel to other employees and leaders at your university?
7. How much respect do you feel your peers show you as a leader?
8. How have your intersecting identities of race and gender impacted how others respond to you?
9. How have your intersecting identities of race and gender impacted your sense of belonging as an executive leader?
10. How much do you feel you matter to your institution?
11. Overall, how much do you feel like you belong at your institution?
12. Do you feel you can bring your full self to work and tell me more about that.
13. What do you think contributes most to your sense of belonging at your university?
14. How has your sense of belonging changed from when you first got into your role as an executive leader compared to today?
15. How do you think your sense of belonging impacts the work you are able to accomplish as a leader?

16. How has your sense of belonging impacted your motivation as a leader?
17. How has sense of belonging impacted your career goals in leadership at your institution and in general?
18. Tell me about your sense of belonging at previous universities and how that compares to where you work now.
19. In your opinion, what is the most challenging aspect of creating a sense of belonging for Black female executive leaders?
20. How do you think belonging for executive leaders is being addressed at your institution?
21. What approaches do you think could improve your sense of belonging at your university?
22. In your opinion, what is the cost of not belonging as executive leaders in higher education?
23. What advice would you give to institutions on how to improve the sense of belonging for Black women in executive leadership?
24. What advice would you give to Black women in executive leadership on how to cultivate a sense of belonging at work?