“DO IT AFRAID”: LIVED EXPERIENCES OF BLACK WOMEN IN EXECUTIVE ADMINISTRATIVE LEADERSHIP POSITIONS AT PREDOMINATELY WHITE INSTITUTIONS IN THE SOUTHERN REGION OF THE UNITED STATES

by

LESLEY NETTER-SNOWDEN

(Under the Direction of KRYSTAL L. WILLIAMS)

ABSTRACT

The demographics of the student population enrolled in college is changing in the United States and estimates show that minoritized students will become the majority of the enrolled student population by the year 2030. However, less than 10% of leaders at predominately White institutions are Black, with an even smaller percentage representing Black women. This qualitative research study explores the successful journeys of Black women who currently hold or previously held an executive administrative leadership position at a predominately White institution using Patricia Hill Collins’ (2000) Black feminist thought as the underlying theory.

The results of this study indicate that Black women who have been successful in attaining executive administrative leadership roles at PWIs have experienced some differences in their journeys, but they also share similar experiences, which is the focus of this study. Three themes, which capture how participants describe their journeys to executive administrative leadership positions as well as how their background and personal lives contributed to their success, emerged as a result of evidence collected from

semi-structured interviews conducted with 12 study participants. The first theme, “you can’t do the job if you don’t believe in yourself” relates to how Black women self-support their professional journey and overcome challenges and barriers. The second theme, “I am one of your biggest fans, one of your biggest champions, and I want to help you” relates to the importance of external support received by the study participants as they pursued career success. The third and final theme, “if you have a seat at the table, you have to use your voice there” is related to career readiness and how participants view preparedness for the next step in their successful career journeys.

INDEX WORDS: Black feminist thought, Black women, predominately White institutions, executive administrative leadership

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by

LESLEY NETTER-SNOWDEN

Bachelor of Science, Auburn University, 2003

Master of Accountancy, Auburn University, 2004

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by

LESLEY NETTER-SNOWDEN

Major Professor:	Krystal L. Williams
Committee:	Libby V. Morris
	Eric C. Ness

Electronic Version Approved:

Ron Walcott
Vice Provost for Graduate Education and Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to Laura. I miss you every second of every day, mom.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Women have been dealing with sexism in the workplace for many decades and remain far less likely to be seen as or serve as leaders. Only 6% of companies listed in the Standard and Poor's 500 index (S&P 500) listed a woman as their chief executive officer in December 2020 (Chance, 2021), up 1% from 2015 (Hill et al., 2016). Double jeopardy, described as "the heightened disadvantage of Black women due to the adverse consequences of the Black and female subordinate identities" (Rosette & Livingston, 2021, p. 1162) makes the attainment of leadership roles by Black women even more difficult (Wagstaff & Moore, 1974). This is evidenced by the confirmation of Ketanji Brown Jackson as the first Black women to join the United States Supreme Court in 2022, almost 233 years after the Court was formed. Hill et al. (2016) assert "stereotypes and bias are among the leading obstacles to women's leadership" (p. v). Women, and especially Black women, struggle to attain senior level leadership roles within the workplace despite earning a higher percentage of advanced degrees than men (Holmes, 2003; Hannum et al., 2014). During the 2019-2020 academic year, Black women obtained 6.2% of all bachelor's degrees, 7.7% of all master's degrees, and 5.6% of all doctoral degrees conferred compared to 3.6%, 4.1% and 1.4%, respectively, during the 1976-1977 academic year. Among all Black students, Black women obtained 64.4% of bachelor's degrees, 70.3% of master's degrees, and 67.3% of doctoral degrees conferred during the 2019-2020 academic year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021).

However, Black women comprised less than 2% of leadership roles in the private sector of jobs (Logan & Dudley, 2021) and in 2015, Asian, Black, or Hispanic women made up less than 3% of board of directors at Fortune 500 companies in the United States (Hill et al., 2016). The strengths and flaws of the United States are mirrored and reinforced in the educational system which serves as a microcosm of the larger society and attribute to the identification of social norms (Jackson, 2001; Zamani, 2003; Hannum et al., 2014). As such, higher education is not immune to the shortage of Black women in executive leadership positions, as it is also a prevalent issue on college campuses in the United States.

As it relates to institutions of higher education (IHEs), in fall 2015, Black men and Black women accounted for approximately 4% and 9%, respectively, of total employees in student and academic affairs and other education services in postsecondary degree-granting institutions in the United States (West, 2019). The number of Black employees in senior administrative roles declined from 3.7% in 2008 to 2.3% in 2013 (Lewis, 2016) and only 6% of Black women working in higher education were in upper-level leadership or administrative positions in 2014 (Townsend, 2021). Thirty percent of presidencies at colleges and universities were filled by women and underrepresented minority women represented just 5% of those presidencies in 2016 (Gagliardi et al., 2017). Although Black men and women have limited access to career advancement opportunities, access is even more limited for Black women (Lewis, 2016). Black women are challenged with being members of two marginalized groups who historically have been treated as irrelevant in higher education resulting in those women being unseen on college campuses (Zamani, 2003). Logan and Dudley (2021) argue, “in higher education

Black women can face institutional opposition, devaluation and alienation that is the result of both sexism and racism" (p. 1546). These obstacles create barriers to professional development and leadership opportunities for Black women resulting in a lack of Black women in executive leadership positions at IHEs (Gaetane & Lloyd-Jones, 2011; Glover, 2012, Jones, 2012; Logan & Dudley, 2021).

Problem Statement

The proportion of minority students is disproportionate to the percentage of non-White administrators, faculty, and staff at postsecondary institutions (Taylor et al., 2020) and leadership at these institutions should be reflective of the racial demographics of the students, faculty, and staff they serve (Guillory, 2001; Brown, 2005; Gaetane & Lloyd-Jones, 2011). The percentage of non-White students in postsecondary education grew from approximately 30% in 1996 to approximately 45% in 2016 (Taylor et. al., 2020) and estimates show that by the year 2030, more than 50% of students enrolled in post-secondary institutions will be minorities (Gallos & Bolman, 2021). Underrepresented minority students on college campuses will struggle to find faculty and administrators in positions of authority with similar cultural and ethnic backgrounds as their own (Lewis, 2016). In fall 2017, non-White faculty accounted for approximately 27% of all full-time faculty and 29% of part-time faculty, with approximately 6% and 9% of those identifying as Black or African American, respectively. During the same period, non-White full-time staff accounted for 44% of the total staff and approximately 13% of those identified as Black or African American (Taylor et al., 2020) which aligned with enrollment demographics in fall 2017 with approximately 47% of students identifying as non-White and 13% of those students identifying a Black (National Center for Education Statistics,

2018). However, the variance in racial representation is found within the levels of staff working at postsecondary institutions as discussed further below. In 2018-2019, most senior administrators in colleges and universities were White, ranging from approximately 74% of chief student affairs/student life officers to approximately 93% of chief development/advancement officers. Black senior administrators ranged from approximately 3% of chief facilities officers to approximately 19% of chief student affairs/student life officers. The share of Black women is even less with approximately 1% in chief facilities officer positions to approximately 10% of chief human resource officers (Taylor et al., 2020). In fall 2018, Black students still represented approximately 13% of the total enrolled student population with Black women representing approximately 8% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Less than 10% of leaders at predominately White institutions (PWIs) are Black with a smaller subset of that group being Black women (Njoku & Evans, 2022). Black women are currently outpacing other marginalized groups at the administrator level but the gap between Black women and their White colleagues in leadership positions persists (West, 2020).

Underrepresented minority students are more likely to encounter employees in clerical and service staff positions with similar cultural and ethnic backgrounds. In 2018-2019, underrepresented minorities represented approximately 17% of skilled craft staff, 26% of office and clerical staff and 41% of maintenance staff (Taylor et. al., 2020). Representation matters, so it is important for minority students to see and interact with people who look like them in positions of authority or positions they may aspire to hold one day. Increasing the number of Black women in executive administrative leadership positions may lead to greater success of minority students (Patitu & Hinton, 2003;

Hannum et al, 2014; Luedke, 2017; Lockett et al., 2018). Guiffrida & Douthit (2010) assert "research indicates that connections with Black role models who have been successful in higher education can increase self-efficacy of Black students and lead to academic success" (p. 311).

Additionally, "as more women and POC increase in representation in the labor market, higher education institutions ought to seek to recruit and retain these individuals at all levels" (Logan & Dudley, 2021, p.1546). While Black women have been afforded leadership opportunities at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) (Moore & Wagstaff, 1974; Mosely, 1980; Crawford & Smith, 2005; Tevis et al., 2020; Logan & Dudley, 2021), the number of Black women in leadership positions at PWIs remains low (Mosely, 1980; Crawford & Smith, 2005; Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Tevis et al., 2020; Johnson & Delmas 2022). As IHEs work to evolve with the demographics of their students and the general population, they must consider why there is a lack of Black women in executive administrative leadership positions in PWIs. There is knowledge to be gained from Black women who have successfully transitioned into these high-ranking positions at PWIs (Glover, 2012; Jones, 2012). Institutions seeking to diversify their leadership teams as well as recruit and retain Black women, and Black women seeking to attain these types of positions may learn from the experiences of these Black women and glean insight from their career journeys that may lead to greater representation of Black women in executive administrative leadership positions at PWIs.

Research Purpose

Research related to Black administrators in higher education has been conducted, but it has mostly been through the lens of student affairs professionals (Jackson, 2001;

Holmes, 2003; Harper & Kimbrough, 2005; Gardner et al., 2014; Breeden, 2021; West, 2019; West & Jones, 2019; West, 2020) or diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives at institutions (Moses, 1989; Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015). Additionally, "while there has been growth in the literature that exists on African Americans in higher education settings, it has primarily focused on qualitative studies of retention of students or faculty and has been negligent in the exploration of African American women administrators and their experiences" (Townsend, 2021, p. 585). This has resulted in gaps in the literature related to Black women administrators and their professional development and career experiences (Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015).

This qualitative research study explores the successful journey of Black women in executive administrative leadership positions at predominately White institutions. Specifically, the purpose of this research is to better understand the pathways of Black women who currently hold or have held an executive administrative leadership position at PWIs across the southern region of the United States. Findings may allow other Black women to consider these pathways as they begin or continue their journey in higher education (Glover, 2012). Additionally, institutions may use the results of the study to enhance efforts toward recruiting and retaining Black women in executive administrative leadership roles and diversifying their leadership teams. To meet this purpose, this study is guided by the following research questions:

- How do Black women describe their experiences successfully navigating their professional journeys toward an executive administrative leadership position at a PWI?

- How and to what extent do Black women perceive their background and personal lives as contributing to their persistence in their professional careers?

Definition of Terms

To provide clarity and articulate the scope of this study, key terms have been defined as it relates to this research. These terms will be used to guide all aspects of this study, including, literature review, research design, data collection, and data analysis.

- **Black** – This study will utilize the United States Census Bureau definition of Black, which is "a person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa."
- **Executive Administrative Leadership** – Professionals with the title of vice president or higher, including senior vice president, executive vice president, or president. These individuals are primarily responsible for areas outside of academic affairs at their institutions.
- **Predominately White Institutions** – Institutions with less than 50% of enrolled minority students will be defined as PWIs for this study.
- **Southern Region** – For purposes of this study, the southern region will include Alabama, Delaware, the District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia.

Methods

This study was conducted using the basic qualitative method and 12 in-depth semi-structured interviews with Black women who currently hold or have held an executive administrative leadership position at PWI located in the southern region of the

United States. The southern region was initially chosen as the geographic location to allow for in-person interviews and ease of travel; however, all interviews were conducted virtually. A basic qualitative study allowed the researcher to gain an understanding of how people perceive their lived experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Semi-structured interviews were chosen to allow the researcher to include several open-ended questions in the interview protocol but allow the researcher flexibility to discuss certain topics and issues on a deeper level based on responses from the participants as the interview progresses (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Each interview was video and/or audio recorded, transcribed, and coded to identify patterns and themes to draw conclusions using a computer assisted qualitative data analysis software. More detail about the research methodology can be found in Chapter three.

Theoretical Framework

Black feminist thought, by Patricia Hill Collins, was selected as theoretical framework for this study. This theory offers a lens to understand the experience of Black women, oppressed by racism and sexism, but acknowledging these experiences may differ among Black women (Collins, 2000). By selecting Black feminist thought, the researcher aims to provide Black women with a space to share their perception of their successful journey to an executive administrative leadership position at a PWI. Further, Black feminist thought has been used by other social scientists in their research of Black women's experiences in higher education (Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Davis & Maldonado, 2015; West, 2019; Breeden, 2021; Logan & Dudley, 2021). Additional information about Black feminist thought and this study can be found in Chapter two.

Significance of the Study

This study is relevant and significant for various reasons, which are outlined in detail below. The goal of this study is to move the existing body of literature about Black women in higher education forward by focusing on executive level administrator positions. While the body of knowledge related to Black women in student affairs or diversity roles is increasing (Moses, 1989; Jackson, 2001; Holmes, 2003; Harper & Kimbrough, 2005; Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015; Breeden, 2021; West, 2019; West & Jones, 2018; West, 2020), there is minimal research related to what may have attributed to the success of Black women achieving executive administrative leadership positions in higher education at PWIs outside of those areas (Howard, 2017).

Increased enrollment of underrepresented minority students

As previously mentioned, the enrollment of underrepresented minority students in postsecondary education is on the rise and the minority is projected to be the majority by 2030 (Gallos & Bolman, 2021), and it is important that the faculty, staff, and leadership reflect the diversity of the student body they serve (Guillory, 2001; Gaetane & Lloyd-Jones; 2011, Johnson & Delmas, 2022). Research has shown that Black student's persistence towards completing their degree can be linked to representation of Black faculty and administrators on predominately White campuses (Patitu & Hinton, 2003; Lockett et al., 2018). Bracey (2017) asserts "White administrators often lack sensitivity to the educational needs of their Black students" (p. 689) and White administrators often do not provide adequate attention to Black students beyond the classroom setting (Luedke, 2017). Minoritized staff and administrators provide a space where minority students can be their authentic self, and share information about their background and experiences

prior to college, allowing these staff and administrators to build social capital with minority students (Luedke, 2017). With this established social capital, minority staff and administrators can provide support, guidance, positive and negative feedback to students allowing them to be more successful (Luedke, 2017). In situations where senior administrators are more behind the scenes and interact less with students, they are still may have a significant impact on the success of minority students. Lockett et al. (2018) highlight this notion by asserting,

> Even if students do not come into direct contact with their institution's leadership team, the leadership team of the university lends a strong hand in maintaining and shaping the student support structures that are intentionally put in place to empower historically disenfranchised students (p. 5).

Seeing Black employees in leadership positions on campus allows Black students to identify role models and believe they can also be successful and attain similar professional positions (Patitu & Hinton, 2003; Hannum et al., 2014; Lockett et al., 2018; Johnson & Delmas, 2022). As such, ongoing underrepresentation of Black women in positions of authority may negatively impact the success of Black students.

Diversified Leadership and Talent

Recruiting and retaining more Black women at the highest levels and diversifying leadership within an institution may provide several meaningful benefits. For example, research has indicated that organizations with women in leadership positions improve their financial performance, and increase productivity, innovation, and creativity (Madsen, 2015; Teague, 2015; Madsen & Longman, 2020; Johnson & Delmas, 2022). Women tend to be more democratic and collaborative in their leadership style which

yields greater productivity and trust among their employees (Madsen, 2015; Hsu, 2021). Research has also shown that organizations that are ethically and gender diverse are more likely to outperform industry peer medians (Hsu, 2021). IHEs should consider the benefits of gender-inclusive leadership as institutions are challenged to be more innovative and productive in the face of many significant issues within higher education (Teague, 2015; Madsen & Longman, 2020). It is also beneficial for organizations with diverse leadership teams to reflect the diversity of its customer base, or students, in higher education, to help develop products and services and be responsive to customer needs and concerns (Gaetane & Lloyd-Jones, 2011; Teague, 2015).

As higher education faces ongoing scrutiny (Teague, 2015; Madsen & Longman, 2020), institutions can no longer overlook the benefits of cultivating an environment that fosters gender and racial diversity. As turnover occurs at the leadership level, institutions should strive to achieve diversity of thought and experience in its next generation of leaders. At the highest levels of authority and leadership within an institution, differing and balanced perspectives in decision making generally comes from having a diverse group of leaders around the table discussing issues (Gaetane & Lloyd-Jones, 2011; Teague, 2015; Madsen & Longman, 2020).

The demographics of the population in the United States continues to evolve with estimates expecting minorities to account for more than 50% of the population by the year 2050 (Passell & Cohn, 2008; Lau & Kleiner, 2012). As is becomes increasingly difficult for institutions to attract, recruit, and retain talent, it becomes even more important that institutions have a diverse workforce to remain competitive in the labor market as minoritized individuals are likely searching for employers who exhibit the

diversity and inclusion they proclaim to be a priority (Lau & Kleiner, 2012; Wolfe & Freeman, 2013; Logan & Dudley, 2021).

More diverse and inclusive culture

Teague (2015) states, "a culture of inclusivity helps to drive innovation and creativity, widen the institution's worldview, and increase retention and productivity" (p. 15). Moving diversity and inclusion initiatives forward on college campuses for its employees begins with ethnic and gender minorities having access to leadership pipelines and having their earned seat at the table of authority (Chance, 2021). A more diverse and inclusive campus will also create a greater connection with minoritized students (Jackson, 2001; Museus et al., 2017), which should ultimately lead to greater student success, higher retention rates, more engagement and productivity and more advancement for faculty, staff, and minority on campus. Senior administrators on college campuses have the ability to define an institution's culture, which impacts how supported students feel, their self-perception and their ability and motivation to succeed (Lockett et al., 2018).

One of the greatest contributions leaders within higher education can make towards fostering student learning and success is to create and cultivate an inclusive culture (Patitu & Hinton, 2003; Gallos & Bolman, 2021). Gallos and Bolman (2021) describe how learning from differences is a trademark of higher education as it provides students the chance to study and collaborate with others within the campus community from different backgrounds and experiences. Similarly, Thomas (2020) discusses how a racially diverse campus could be more beneficial to White students by producing long term social and psychological gains by allowing them to interact with others of different ethnic backgrounds.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter will provide a review of literature and research related to Black women in executive leadership positions at PWIs. While the body of literature on this topic has increased in recent years, research related to how Black women have successfully navigated the challenges and barriers in their professional and personal lives to achieve an executive administrative leadership position at PWIs remains limited. As such, this literature review will focus on women in higher education leadership, Black women in higher education, the institution's role in the advancement of Black women, barriers faced by Black women in advancing their careers, and strategies for overcoming those obstacles.

Women in Higher Education Leadership

A significant focus has been placed on increasing the number of women in leadership positions in global higher education (Cheung, 2021; Chance, 2022). The literature regarding women in leadership positions at IHEs highlights that despite obtaining higher levels of educational credentials, women are not obtaining leadership positions at the same pace suggesting the lack women advancing into leadership positions is systemic (Singh et al., 1995; Bonner, 2001; Redmond et al., 2017; Allen & Flood, 2018; Cañas et al., 2019). In 1976-1977, women earned approximately 21% of total doctoral degrees conferred compared to approximately 55% of total doctoral degrees conferred in 2019-2020 (NCES, 2021). However, women in full professorship or upper-

level administrative positions remain underrepresented (Lewis, 2016; Chance, 2021). The American Council on Education refers to this as "the higher the fewer" when describing the reality of women attaining more education than men but not being offered higher ranked positions (Johnson, 2017). Dean et al. (2009) state that women in higher education "continue to experience bias in the hiring process; inequitable workloads, salaries and resources; and limited opportunities for professional development and advancement" (p. 2).

Barriers

Research suggests several reasons why women are not attaining leadership roles in higher education, including challenges associated with work life balance (Brown, 2005; Ward & Eddy, 2013; Hill et al., 2016), salary disparities (Moore & Wagstaff, 1974; Singh et al., 1995; Hannum et al., 2014; Hill et al., 2016; Johnson 2017; Gregory, 2001; Regulska, 2021), and lack of support from other women (Redmond et al., 2017). One of the most significant barriers for women who desire to be leaders is balancing their personal and professional lives (Hannum et al., 2014; Hill et al., 2016). Ward and Eddy (2013) noted, "women actually lean back from the ladder of academic progress, promotion, and leadership because of the perception that advanced positions in academe are not open to women, and particularly women who hope to make time for a family or life beyond work" (p. 2). Further, splitting time between personal and professional obligations has often resulted in women reducing the time they devote to their career progression, but not necessarily impacting their productivity, causing women to postpone their promotions, or abandon the field of higher education completely (Regulska, 2021). It has been noted that women who are presidents and chief academic officers are less

likely to be married or to have children compared to their male colleagues (Johnson, 2017). If institutions are serious about increasing the number of women in leadership roles, they should develop and nurture environments that support women who want to mix family life, personal goals and their career goals for leadership and growth (Ward & Eddy, 2013).

The ongoing pay disparity issue is another significant challenge that women experience in trying to achieve equity (Singh et al., 1995; Hill et al., 2016; Johnson 2017; Regulska, 2021). The salary gap between women and men has narrowed in recent years. For example, the state of California was ranked number one for narrowest gender wage gap with an average gap of approximately $13,000 in 2017 between women and men. States such as California and New York have strong equal pay laws attributing to narrower gaps in salaries (Cañas et al., 2019). The average salary of women in full-time instructional faculty positions at four-year public institutions in the United States was $83,454 in 2020-2021 versus $100,175 for their male counterparts creating a disparity of almost $17,000 (NCES, 2021). Some institutions, although still uncommon, are working towards addressing pay disparities, such as Princeton University, who recently announced they would pay approximately $1 million dollars in backpay to women faculty members (Regulska, 2021).

Another factor attributing to the shortage of women in high level leadership positions in higher education is the belief that women do not support other women (Ramey, 1995, Redmond et al., 2017). Women leaders ascending the ranks of leadership face negative interactions with women colleagues and supervisors at work (Hannum et al., 2014; Redmond et al., 2017). Results from Allen and Flood's (2018) qualitative study

are consistent with these themes and indicate that women, especially Black women, are more likely to experience episodes of aggression exhibited by other women. This behavior was commonly displayed through "attempts to sabotage professional work, the consistent undermining or challenging of authority, personal verbal attacks, negative and/or overt body language, and ongoing challenges of authority" (Allen & Flood, 2018, p. 22). Further, women already in senior leadership roles who did not have supportive women colleagues during their ascension, often view other aspiring women leaders as a threat to their own careers (Redmond et. al., 2017) or distance themselves from other women, which is sometimes referred to as the queen bee phenomenon (Ramey, 1995; Derks et al., 2016; Arvate et al., 2018). The term queen bee, considered derogatory by Derks et al. (2016), is used to characterize women seeking individual success in organizations where men typically dominate the executive leadership positions. Research indicates that one factor of success in women's career advancement towards upper-level administrative positions are mentors and role models (Brown, 2005; Dunbar & Kinnersley, 2011; Block & Tietjen-Smith, 2016; Ford 2016). Brown (2005) emphasizes this point by stating "mentors can have a critical effect on the career paths of women who aspire to advance in higher education administration" (p. 659). However, the perception and behavior of queen bees may negatively impact mentoring opportunities for women serving in lower ranked positions at IHEs, which could eventually hinder their rise to leadership positions in higher education (Derks et al., 2016). This may further exacerbate the shortage of women serving in leadership positions, due to a smaller population of women in the leadership pipeline, as well as minimize the population of women who could serve as mentors in the future (Block & Tietjen-Smith, 2016).

Most of the existing research regarding women in higher education is related to women of all races and ethnicities leaving a gap in the literature related to how to resolve the specific concerns of Black women in higher education (Gray, 2021).

Black Women in Higher Education

It is important to understand the history of Black women in higher education to provide context when discussing the lack of Black women achieving executive administrative leadership positions at PWIs, almost 400 years after the first college was established in the United States.

History of Black Women in Higher Education

Oberlin College was founded in 1834 and became the first college to admit Black students in the mid 1830s (Waite, 2001; Jones, 2012). While the records at Oberlin between the late 19th century and early 20th century are limited regarding the Black student population, it is known that the first Black women to earn a bachelor's degree, Mary Jane Patterson, graduated from Oberlin in 1862 and went on to become principal at the first Black high school in Washington, D.C. (Waite, 2001; Bates, 2007; Jones, 2012). Fanny Jackson Coppin would become the second Black women to earn her bachelor's degree from Oberlin in 1865 and she went on to become the first Black women to lead a college at the Institute for Colored Youth in Philadelphia (Glover, 2012). In the beginning, Oberlin was an example of how Black and White students could not only learn together, but also live together. However, Black students would later go on to experience increasing segregation and discrimination at Oberlin. Many factors impacted this change at Oberlin, including the attitudes of White people in the North towards Black people, increasing independence of Black people after the Civil War and the Supreme

Court decision in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case (Waite, 2001). This Supreme Court case legalized the separate but equal concept, that one could argue still exists today (Moore & Wagstaff, 1974; Waite, 2001; Wright et al., 2006; Bracey, 2017).

Historical records show that in the late 1800s and early 1900s, Black women were responsible for the founding of three colleges: Lucy Laney founded the Haines Institute in 1866, Mary McLeod Bethune founded Bethune-Cookman College in 1904, and Anna Cooper and Rosetta Lawson founded Frelinghuysen University in 1906 (Wolfman, 1997). Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander earned her Ph.D. in 1921 from the University of Pennsylvania (Penn), making her the first Black women to receive a doctorate (Malveaux, 1991; Jones, 2012). After being unable to obtain a position in higher education, which was not unusual since the only employment available to Black women in higher education was at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in the 1920s, she enrolled in law school, becoming the first Black women to graduate from Penn's law school. Dr. Alexander never worked in higher education (Malveaux, 1991). In 1922, Lucy Diggs Slowe became the first known Black women to serve as a student affairs administrator, serving as the dean of women at Howard University (Glover, 2012). Finally, almost 25 years later, in 1946 Dr. Willa B. Player became the first Black women to be appointed as president at Bennett College, a four-year Black institution (Glover, 2012).

Impact of Legislation

Court decisions and several laws impacted the ability for Black women to work at PWIs. In 1954, the Supreme Court decision in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case illegalized the separate but equal decision in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case (Wilson, 1989;

Wright et al., 2006; Bracey, 2017). The Civil Rights Act in 1964 prohibited discrimination based on race, color or national origin which meant higher education could no longer discriminate against Black employees or Black students in their enrollment processes, including admissions and financial aid, giving Black students significantly more access to higher education (Wright et al., 2006; Jones, 2012). The affirmative action policy issued via Executive Order in 1965 made it illegal for federally funded organizations to discriminate in employment (Mosely, 1980; Wright et al., 2006; Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015; Lewis, 2016). The affirmative action policy was not as effective in increasing the number of black administrators or faculty on White campuses and some believe it resulted in tokenism (Mosely, 1980; Holmes, 2003). Wolfe & Dilworth (2015) stated, "colleges and universities devised sophisticated internal mechanisms to subvert affirmative action in recruitment, hiring, retention, and promotion to the advantage of the privileged gender and rate that dominate the academy" (p. 675). The *Adams v. Richardson* court decision resulted in eleven states increasing the number of Black employees in administrative positions after it was determined they were illegally operating segregated systems of higher education (Wright et al., 2006). Collectively, this legislation and court cases resulted in more opportunities for Black women in higher education (Glover, 2012).

Prior to the legislation in 1960s, Black women only held teaching and administration positions at HBCUs. After these legislative changes, many Black employees were appointed as directors of the federally funded TRIO programs at PWIs or directors of special programs or affirmative action (Mosely, 1980; Wilson, 1989; Jackson, 2001; Crawford & Smith; 2005, Wolfe & Freeman, 2013). The increase in

Black administrators in the late 1960s and 1970s coincided with demands from students to increase the number of Black faculty and administrators on their campuses (Mosley, 1980). However, in the mid-1980s, half of the Black administrators and staff in higher education were employed at HBCUs (Wright et al., 2006). In a study conducted by Moore and Wagstaff (1974) exploring Black employees working in White colleges, they noted "the greatest number of Black administrators continue to be coordinators and directors of special programs and projects with unusual and prestigious-sounding titles, but which mean very little in terms of job authority and decision-making power" (p. 31). Their findings were substantiated 23 years later in a study conducted in 1997 which noted that while there was a significant increase in the number of Black employees in senior-level Black administrator positions at PWIs, giving the impression of progress, the positions lacked power and authority. At the time of the study, 80% of the positions held by Black employees at more than 200 PWIs were in student, multicultural or minority affairs roles (Brown, 1997), and these positions generally lack career development opportunities, responsibility, control of financial resources, are excluded from committees with decision making power and lack authority (Moore & Wagstaff; 1974, Mosely, 1980; Moses, 1989; Ramey, 1995; Lewis 2016). Similarly, Mosley (1980) stated that "Black women, where they are represented, are most often in positions peripheral to the policy-and decision-making core of higher education" (p. 296). Brown (1997) emphasizes that Black employees should remain cognizant of their career goals and not pursue and accept these limited career growth type roles offered to them.

Black Women at Historically Black Colleges and Universities

Black women have served in various leadership roles, including department chairs, deans, and presidents at HBCUs for a long time (Moore & Wagstaff, 1974; Mosely, 1980; Gregory, 2001; Crawford & Smith, 2005; Tevis et al., 2020; Logan & Dudley, 2021). HBCUs were created in the United States in the 19th century to provide educational opportunities "to newly emancipated Black African slaves because they were mostly banned at White colleges and universities" (Bracey, 2017, p. 675) as it was against the law to educate enslaved Black people prior to the Civil War (Jones, 2012). While HBCUs were created to benefit Black students, they have also employed a diverse workforce (Bonner, 2001; Bracey, 2017) while providing greater opportunities for career advancement for Black employees, specifically Black women (Wright et al., 2006). In Fall 2001, 44% of all faculty and staff were Black women and 44% of executives, administrative and managerial positions were filled by Black women at HBCUs (NCES, 2004). However, at HBCUs, Black women still have the burden of sexism to contend with resulting in inequities between men and women (Moses, 1989; Bonner, 2001) and while Black women attain presidencies at higher rates than PWIs (Commodore et at., 2020), Black men are more likely to attain presidencies at HBCUs (Commodore, 2019). Multiple studies noted that while men and women have similar career tracks at HBCUs, it takes women longer to achieve high level leadership positions while earning less and taking on different responsibilities than men (Moses, 1989, Bonner 2001). Commodore (2019) argues that one of the barriers preventing more Black women from achieving presidencies at HBCUs is the conflict between the conservative nature of HBCUs in their hiring processes and Black women who do not authentically agree with conservatism.

Black Women at Predominately White Institutions

Black women in administrator positions experience sexism and racism in their roles at PWIs (Moore & Wagstaff, 1974; Howard, 1986; Moses, 1989; Mosely, 1980; Ramey, 1995; Jackson, 2001; Crawford & Smith, 2005; Logan & Dudley, 2021; Townsend, 2021; Johnson & Delmas, 2022). This discrimination manifests into significant barriers for Black women, including, marginalization and isolation impacting their ability to be successful and progress in their careers (Howard, 1986; Ramey, 1995; Patitu & Hinton, 2003; Crawford & Smith, 2005; Gardner et al., 2014). Black women "are more underrepresented in leadership positions than any other group, especially positions that lead to university presidential appointments" (Crawford & Smith, 2005, p. 55). This is evidenced by Dr. Marguertie Ross Barnett becoming the first Black women to serve as president of a PWI in 1990, only 33 years ago, at the University of Houston (Bates, 2007). As discussed, Black women are more likely to occupy administrative positions that execute policy instead of developing policy at institutions (Crawford & Smith, 2005; Jones, 2012) indicating they have limited power in their roles (Moore & Wagstaff, 1974; Moses, 1989; Lewis, 2016). Mosely (1980) asserted that "Black female administrators in white academe are endangered species. They are still tokens in higher education" (p. 296). Black women receive minimal support from their White or Black peers and are overworked and underpaid causing many Black women to consider resigning from their positions (Moore & Wagstaff, 1974; Mosely, 1980; Townsend, 2021; Tevis et al., 2020).

The Institution's Role in Advancing Black Women

Prior to discussing the barriers and challenges Black women encounter in their quest for executive administrative leadership positions, it is important to acknowledge that institutions share a role in increasing the number of Black women in leadership roles in higher education (Ford, 2016). "The glass ceiling is a long-standing metaphor for the intangible systemic barriers that prevent women from obtaining senior-level positions" (Johnson, 2017, p. 20). Institutions of higher education perpetuate the idea of the glass ceiling and prevent Black women from progressing due to complacency and the broader academic community (DeLaquil, 2021). To value diversity, institutions should "create a workspace that respects and includes differences; 2) recognize the unique contributions that those individuals can make, and 3) create a work environment that maximizes the potential of all employees" (Wolfe & Freeman, 2013, p. 2). Thomas (2020), suggests that the focus put on diversity outcomes by PWIs has been displaced as racial conflict and inequality remains on their campuses, exacerbating the issue of lack of Black women in executive administrative leadership positions. Thomas (2020) coined the phrase diversity regime, which he defines as:

> The set of meanings and practices that institutionalize a hollow commitment to diversity and in doing so obscure, entrench, and even intensify existing racial inequality by failing to make fundamental changes in how power, resources and opportunities are distributed. (p. 159)

Public statements and declarations of diversity, equity, and inclusion related initiatives made by institutions do not result in tangible and meaningful changes in racial equality on college campuses, including transitioning Black women into executive administrative

leadership roles (Wolfe & Freeman, 2013; Thomas, 2020). The literature provides several strategies institutions can employ to combat these findings.

Higher education institutions play a significant role in transitioning and supporting Black women in executive leadership positions by working to remove stereotypes of bias towards Black women from their campus culture (Logan & Dudley, 2021) including fostering open and honest diversity discussions about privilege, power, and oppression (Njoku & Evans, 2022). Institutions must champion an environment with zero tolerance for stereotypes, bias, and discrimination against Black women and institutions should review and modify their hiring practices (Logan & Dudley, 2021; Njoku & Evans, 2022). Breeden (2021) argues, "institutions should audit their hiring and supervisory practices and consider ways to recruit, promote and retain Black women in all functional areas and position levels" (p.183). The literature suggests several ways in which institutional leadership can recruit and retain Black women, including, proper representation on hiring committees (Webster & Brown, 2019), providing professional development programs (Brown, 1997; Jackson, 2001; Wright et al., 2006; Hill et al., 2016; Gray, 2021; Johnson & Delmas, 2022), implement formal hiring policies and procedures with a direct focus on recruiting diverse personnel (Jackson, 2001; Webster & Smith, 2019), provide flexibility in their policies to provide better work life balance, reevaluate the requirements of the institution's promotion and tenure process (Gray, 2021; Njoku & Evans, 2022), implement succession planning (Webster & Brown, 2019), develop a rotational leadership program giving Black women more exposure to institutional leadership (Gray, 2021), and include an element of diversity in all training programs administered by the institution (Jackson, 2001). Once an institution has

developed these types of support services, they must be emphasized in their recruiting efforts of Black women (Patitu & Hinton, 2003).

The perception of Black women by their colleagues is often guided by stereotypes such as being loud, unapproachable, bossy, and threatening (Cook, 2013; Townsend, 2021). As a coping mechanism, some Black women conform to norms that may not be true to their authentic self while others develop cautious and closed personalities to be accepted and identified as credible (Townsend, 2021). However, Logan & Dudley (2021) contend that Black women can present their authentic self and be successful if they are supported by their institution and stated,

> Higher education institutions must first recognize the leadership potential, expertise, service commitments, scholarly activities, and teaching abilities of the Black women on already their campus. This recognition of leadership potential must also extend beyond diversity related work and seek to support their efforts as program coordinators, directors, department chairs, deans, vice presidents and even presidents. (p.1558).

Further, Black women need to be supported and uplifted by their institutions, which may include, enhancing existing or creating mentoring programs for Black women (Owens, 1995; Ramey, 1995; Jackson, 2001; Brown, 2005; Patitu & Hinton, 2003; Jones, 2012; Breeden, 2021), providing additional funding opportunities for Black women (Jones, 2012; Breeden, 2021) publicly honoring, and rewarding Black women (Breeden, 2021). Another form of support for Black women is sponsorship, by someone within the same institution, which allows Black women to be connected to career opportunities and provided with better visibility to leaders within an institution (Hill et al., 2016; Johnson &

Delmas, 2022). It can be advantageous for Black women to have a White man as their sponsor as they currently have significant power in higher education and greater access to networks of power, leading to a positive impact on Black women's professional development and growth (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). Lewis (2016) revealed that Black men in administrator positions have greater access to sponsorship opportunities than Black women in administrator positions. More recently, some scholars have indicated that sponsorship relationships are more effective than mentoring relationships as sponsorship is more specific and influential (Hill et al., 2016) while some Black women feel excluded from mentoring and collaborative partnership opportunities with peers on campus (Wright et al., 2006; Hill et al., 2016). PWIs can address these concerns by providing and supporting formal and informal leadership development and professional networking opportunities, both on and off campus, allowing Black women to feel integrated into the campus, respected and valued (Patitu & Hinton, 2003; Hill et al., 2016; Redmond et al., 2017; DeLaquil, 2021; Logan & Dudley, 2021; Townsend, 2021). Since many Black women have not felt supported by their institutions, they have sought support and comfort from sources outside the workplace, such as family, friends, communities, and peers across the nation (Townsend, 2021; Logan & Dudley, 2021).

As previously mentioned, to support Black women, institutions must implement and uphold a zero-tolerance policy towards racial discrimination and harassment that is strictly enforced on their campuses. The extent of disciplinary actions charged to offenders should be consistent with the extent of the offense. Minorities, including Black women, often leave an environment where they experience hostility, racism, prejudice, or sexism, do not feel like an offender(s) has been held accountable by an institution for

their actions (Patitu & Hinton, 2003) or have not been welcomed and are instead met with inhospitableness (Jones, 2012; Lewis, 2016).

Lastly, leadership at PWIs must implement continuous assessment programs to ensure racial discrimination does not persist at their institutions (Patitu & Hinton, 2003) and their campus culture is inclusive for the continued growth of diverse student and employee populations (Guillory, 2001; Gaetane & Lloyd-Jones, 2011; Wolfe & Freeman, 2013). Institutions should be intentional about focusing on the duality of race and gender discrimination in their actions and not one or the other which would ignore the challenges faced by Black women (Logan & Dudley, 2021). Given the change in workforce demographics, recruiting, and retaining diverse leaders within an institution is astute and the right thing to do (Lau & Kleiner, 2012; Wolfe & Freeman, 2013; Logan & Dudley, 2021).

Barriers Impacting Advancement

While Black women have made progress in achieving leadership positions at PWIs since the 1960s, they continue to face barriers in their career advancement in higher education in working to achieve the highest levels of executive administrative leadership at White institutions. In addition to the barriers previously discussed, Black women face additional barriers due to their race and perception of their status (Moses, 1989; Davis & Maldonado, 2015).

Stereotypes and Bias

Research identifies stereotypes and bias as a barrier for Black women advancing in their careers in higher education (Gaetane & Lloyd-Jones, 2011; Hill et. al, 2016; Webster & Brown, 2019; Johnson & Delmas, 2022; Njoku & Evans, 2022). Black

women must battle the perception other people hold of them as leaders, which may conflict with expected leadership characteristics (Rosette & Livingston, 2012) resulting in less career and educational opportunities (Njoku & Evans, 2022). The following stereotypes have been identified for Black women: difficult to work with, aggressive (Breeden, 2021), loud, lazy (Cook, 2013; Townsend, 2021), lack appropriate education for their work responsibilities, have questionable ethics, have a bad attitude, are emotional, and are hired to meet affirmative action requirements (Tevis et al., 2020).

In addition to stereotypes, research indicates that stereotype threat leads to Black women experiencing increased anxiety, self-doubt, negative thoughts as well diminished performance (Hill et al., 2016; Chance, 2022). Stereotype threat is defined as:

> A construct that refers to the risk of self-confirming negative beliefs or stereotypes about one's racial, ethnic, gender, or cultural group in the eyes of others or one's self and has hindered professional advancement of Black women in and out of academic leadership (Chance, 2022, p. 6).

The impact of stereotypes, stereotype threat and bias has resulted in a confidence gap between men and women with women, including Black women, often underestimating their competence, abilities, and skills (Hill et al., 2016).

Microaggressions

Traditionally, employees who have long tenure at an institution are considered more qualified to lead and progress through the leadership pipeline (Redmond et al., 2017). Black women often encounter microaggressions which have a negative impact on an institution's ability to retain Black women in order from them to move through the pipeline. Black women experience microaggressions to a greater extent than Black men

due to their gender (Lewis, 2016). In research related to underrepresented minority employees in higher education, the term microaggression is often used to describe, brief and daily verbal or behavioral interactions, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative feelings and insults towards minoritized individuals, disabilities, and sexual orientation (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2020). Chester Pierce (1970) asserts that egregious offensive actions are not the most harmful, but rather the subtle, routine, and negative racial slights and insults are most impactful to underrepresented minorities. Microaggressions can negatively impact mental health and job performance and ultimately results in some feeling less valued than others (Young et al., 2015). One common type of microaggressions experienced by Black women are racial microaggressions (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2020; Tevis et al., 2020). Examples of racial microaggressions include the assumption of lack of intelligence or honesty due to race, treating another person with less respect, or acting afraid of another person due to their race (Sue et al., 2007; Franklin, 2016). Research suggests that racial microaggressions are prevalent at the administrative level in higher education and that these microaggressions are usually expressed by White faculty, staff, students, and administrators and by limiting microaggressions on a college campus, the climate will improve which will result in greater success for students (Young et al., 2015).

Sue et al. (2007) contributed significantly to the body of literature about racial microaggressions by classifying microaggressions into three forms: microassualts, microinsults and microinvalidations. “Microassaults are explicit racial verbal slurs or more overt actions, while microinsults, and microinvalidations are more subvert, subtle

actions such as insensitivity or taking for granted the experiential reality of a person" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 46).

Microinsults degrade the racial heritage or identity of another person while microinvalidations ignore the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of minorities (Sue et al., 2007). Black women faculty and administrators working at PWIs often felt treated as second-class citizens through microinsult actions (Sue et al., 2007; DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2020). Microaggressions at PWIs are perpetual due to the "Whiteness and White privilege embedded in that climate and culture" (Franklin, 2016, p. 46). For example, one Black woman assumed to be a temporary staff member instead of a full-time tenure track faculty member when she first started working at a PWI (DeCuir-Gunby et al. 2020). In a particular study conducted by Townsend (2021) it was noted that Black women who participated in the study shared an example of a common racial microaggression they experienced when they were referred to as being articulate by others. To the participants, this comment suggested that typically Black women are unable to speak in an educated and refined manner (Townsend, 2021). This is important because "the racial differences in speech and socialization have been identified as reasons why some women of color find themselves not placed in leadership positions" (Townsend, 2021, p. 594). The same group of participants shared their experiences in difficult work settings due to alienation, exclusion, feeling discounted and being questioned, which are all examples of microaggressions, and how it was difficult to overcome other barriers to leadership while dealing with insults and underhanded comments throughout the day (Townsend, 2021).

Another common type of microaggressions experienced by Black women are hierarchical microaggressions. Sue et al. (2007) discuss racial microaggressions based on

traits that are permanent, but Young et al. (2015) explore microaggressions based on workplace identity within an institution and define hierarchical microaggression as "everyday slights found in higher education that communicate systemic valuing (devaluing) of a person because of the institutional role held by that person" (p. 66). As discussed earlier, it is more likely to see Black women in lower level administrative, maintenance, service type positions rather than leadership positions on a college campus (Taylor et al., 2020). The research conducted by Young et al. (2015) indicates that hierarchical microaggressions are somewhat unique and experienced at a greater extent in higher education because employees take on an identity associated with their status, which is also linked to the amount of higher education they attained. The concept of hierarchical microaggression appears to be relatively new and existing literature is limited. Further research exploring the intersection of hierarchical microaggressions, and Black women is needed to understand the experiences of Black women in varied levels of workplace identity on a college campus (Young et al. 2015).

Microaggressions can cause mental and physical health issues for Black women (Logan & Dudley, 2021). Mentally, Black women experience frustration, anger resentment, or fear due to microaggressions (Franklin, 2016). Research has linked racism to high blood pressure for Black men and women who did not address unfair discriminatory practices versus lower blood pressure for those who did directly address the issue. Other physical ailments caused by microaggressions may include headaches, sleep disorders, and heart palpitations (Franklin, 2016). Black employees at PWIs were found to employ two types of unhealthy coping forms when dealing with racial microaggressions and stress at work: 1) utilizing avoidance strategies, and 2) working

harder. The latter strategy resulted in Black employees trying to be twice as good or work twice as hard as their White colleagues (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2020).

Twice as Good and Twice as Hard

Another unique barrier for Black women is the notion of being twice as good and working twice as much as others. Research has revealed that Black women feel they must outperform their White colleagues and peers in higher education (Wolfman, 1997; Webster & Brown, 2019; DeCuir-Gunby et al.; 2020, Breeden, 2021, Johnson & Delmas, 2022). Black women discussed the idea of being twice as good, meaning being all things to all people despite burnout and mental and physical exhaustion (Holmes, 2003; Breeden, 2021). Black women administrators do not feel as though they are in control of their own time at work as they spend a considerable amount of time serving the campus community over their own professional pursuits, usually without recognition (Tevis et al., 2020). Black faculty and administrators can have higher service expectations at institutions than their White colleagues (Tevis et al., 2020; Thomas, 2020). Additional expectations arise from institutions asking Black faculty and staff to serve on committees to provide a diverse perspective, addressing racial issues on campus when they arise, and serving as a resource to Black students (Gardner et al., 2014), including mentorship, unofficial listening, or counseling sessions, and attending their events to show support (Tevis et al., 2020).

It is important for Black students to interact and connect with Black employees during their college careers as it increases their retention as well as their progress towards graduation (Luedke, 2017). Black female administrators have been questioned as to why Black students were spending so much time in their offices (Townsend, 2021). These

frequent interactions with students often took their time away from scholarly work, which is generally valued higher than service work when discussing tenure and promotion (Gray, 2021; Townsend, 2021). Black women in administrator roles felt the need to work twice as hard to meet the needs of Black students in addition to producing scholarly work to be considered for tenure and promotion. However, these expectations are exacerbated by the lack of Black faculty and staff at PWIs who can perform this type of service, thereby increasing the workload of existing Black employees (Thomas, 2020; Townsend, 2021). The increased workload and lack of recognition for the additional duties leads to Black employees leaving institutions, contributing to the perpetuation of a lack of Black women in executive leadership positions due to the pipeline being small because of turnover (Moore & Wagstaff, 1974; Townsend, 2021). The small pipeline for promotion to higher level positions creates one of the significant barriers to Black women reaching executive leadership positions in higher education (Townsend, 2021).

Overcoming Barriers to Advancement

Despite these barriers, Black women are resilient (Chance, 2022) and have been able to overcome these challenges (Townsend, 2021), however, once in those positions, Black women sometimes must justify their success or fight the perception that they were hired as a result of affirmative action or as a token (Chance, 2022). Research suggests several strategies Black women can implement to overcome barriers to their success (Guillory, 2001; Chance, 2022; Webster & Brown, 2019).

The first strategy is that Black women should perform their current job duties well (Howard, 1986), and seek responsibility beyond their scope to help them stand out amongst their peers (Guillory, 2001). Black women working beyond their scope of

responsibility seems to conflict with idea of having to work twice has hard to achieve career mobility, previously identified as a barrier, however, Guillory (2001) suggests channeling the extra effort into better understanding departmental rules, regulations, and issues to add further value. Another strategy includes leadership development, which is crucial in overcoming barriers to career mobility (Chance, 2022). Leadership development comes in many forms, including formal internal or external programs (Ramey, 1995; Webster & Brown, 2019), creating a leadership culture and developing Black subordinate employees (Guillory, 2001), or by not giving up and overcoming adversity (Chance, 2022). Black women must also be highly motivated to achieve high level leadership positions (Gardner et al., 2014; Webster & Brown, 2019). A report issued by the Center for Talent Innovation indicated that Black women are almost three times more likely to aspire to hold a position of power with an impressive title than White women (Hewlett & Green, 2015).

Other strategies identified in the literature include, finding and establishing a relationship with a mentor (Howard, 1986; Ramey, 1995; Guillory, 2001; Gardner et al, 2014; Webster & Brown, 2019; Chance, 2022), having an adequate support system, inside and outside of the workplace (Howard, 1986, Gardner et al., 2014, Chance, 2022), obtaining an advanced degree (Howard, 1997; Guillory, 2001; Gardner et al., 2014), and being willing to move to a new state or institution for career advancement (Gardner et al., 2014).

The purpose of this research is to contribute to the existing literature on how Black women can overcome challenges in attaining executive administrative leadership positions in higher education by examining the lived experiences of Black women who

have been able to achieve these positions. The goal of the study is to lengthen the list of strategies in place to overcome obstacles.

The next section of this chapter discusses the theoretical framework that will be used to guide this study related to Black women and their experiences in achieving an executive administrative leadership position at a PWI.

Theoretical Framework

Howard-Hamilton (2003) asserts that it can be difficult to discover an appropriate framework to apply to understanding the experiences of Black women, as historically, frameworks developed for the majority population were applied to Black women, a minority population.

> Selecting appropriate theories for understanding the needs of African American women should, however, be based on their cultural, personal, and social contexts, which clearly differ significantly from those of men and women who have not experienced racial and gender oppression (Howard-Hamilton, 2003, p. 20).

Several theories have been developed to include the voices of women and other marginalized and oppressed groups, but only a few consider Black women who are doubly oppressed, including black feminist thought (Howard-Hamilton, 2003), which has been selected as the theoretical framework for this study. The following section will outline the theory and rationale for selection.

Black Feminist Thought

Black feminist thought (BFT) offers a frame to understand the unique experiences of Black women, oppressed by racism and sexism, while recognizing their experiences may differ. To empower Black women and fill the gap of Black women's voices and

ideas in existing feminist theories, Patricia Hill Collins (2000), a Black woman, developed BFT. Collins (2000) considers BFT to be a critical social theory because of its "commitment to justice, both for U.S. Black women as a collectivity and for that of other similarly oppressed groups" (p. 9). BFT is meant to resist oppression, in practice and in justification and acknowledges that Black women can have varied responses to similar experiences (Collins, 2000). The goal of this study seeks to understand and articulate the successes of Black women in higher education executive administrative leadership positions and not focus on the challenges of their journeys, which have been articulated in existing studies (Gaetane & Lloyd-Jones, 2011; Hill et. al, 2016; Webster & Brown, 2019; Johnson & Delmas, 2022; Njoku & Evans, 2022). The use of BFT will allow the researcher to explore the varied journeys of study participants and give them space to share their experiences. Several scholars have applied BFT in their research of Black women and their experiences in higher education. As previously mentioned, Howard-Hamilton (2003) studied theories that could be applied to understand the developmental and societal issues experienced by Black women, such as BFT. Commodore (2019, 2020) utilized BFT to study Black women and the challenges they face in the context of presidencies at HBCUs. More recently, scholars have studied the leadership of Black women in higher education and the difficulties encountered and solutions to those difficulties through the lens of BFT. However, many of these studies focused on Black women in student affairs roles, which is one reason this study focused more on Black women in executive leadership roles other than student affairs (Davis & Maldonado, 2015; West, 2019; Breeden, 2021; Logan & Dudley, 2021). Many of the findings from these existing studies are discussed throughout chapters one and two.

In higher education, BFT suggests that Black women are viewed as an "outsider within" meaning Black women are included in spaces with majority populations, but they hold peripheral positions, and their voices remain invisible (Howard-Hamilton, 2003), which is consistent with the literature reviewed. Given the purpose of this study, the underlying research questions, and the ability of BFT to provide oppressed Black women the space to speak from their own experiences, which differ from all other women (Davis & Maldonado; 2015, Logan & Dudley, 2021), the researcher has selected BFT as the theory to frame this study exploring Black women's experiences in their successful pursuit of executive administrative leadership positions at PWIs.

Collins (1986) states that "Black feminist thought consists of ideas produced by Black women that clarify a standpoint of and for Black women" (p. s16). BFT as defined by Collins (2000) assumes 1) only Black women can produce Black feminist thought, 2) Black women have both an individual unique viewpoint on their experiences and common viewpoints with other Black women, 3) the individual characteristics of Black women impact their expression of these shared viewpoints and 4) that the shape of Black women's standpoint may not be apparent to Black women. The overall notion of BFT is that the "universal themes included in the Black women's standpoint may be experienced and expressed differently by distinct groups of Afro-American women" (Collins, 1986, p. s16) and that "Black feminist thought contains observations and interpretations about Afro-American womanhood that describe and explain different expressions of common themes" (Collins, 1986, p. s16). As such, the goal of utilizing BFT as the framework for this research study is to understand the varying experiences of Black women who have

been successful in their journeys to executive administrative leadership positions at PWIs and provide those women with an opportunity to share their experiences.

Black Feminist Thought Key Concepts

Collins (2000) identifies several key concepts in BFT related to the lived experiences of Black women, including self-definition, self-valuation, outsider-within status, and intellectual activism. This section will discuss each of these concepts in further detail.

Self-definition and Self-valuation

Collins (2000) asserts that underlying BFT is finding a collective, self-defined voice for Black women to express their standpoint. Collins (2000) defines self-definition as "the power to name one's own reality" (p. 300) and rejecting how Black women have been defined by other dominant groups. Self-valuation "addresses the actual content of these self-definitions" (Collins, 2000, p. 114) by using authentic images of Black women versus images from outside groups. Self-definition and self-valuation empower Black women, individually and collectively, to change their consciousness and subsequently encourage Black women to change the conditions of their lives (Collins, 2000).

Outsider Within Status

Another key concept is the outsider within status of Black women. Collins (2000) suggests that Black women have long held the outsider within status in academic spaces as evidenced by relying on White women for feminist thought and Black men for Black political and social thought. Howard-Hamilton (2003) describes the outsider within status for Black women in higher education as being "invited to places where the dominant group has assembled, but they remain outsiders because they are still invisible and have

no voice when dialogue commences" (p.21). However, in contrast, Collins (2000) highlights that Black women can gain a unique perspective from their outsider within position and help build coalitions with other groups also in the outsider within position.

Intellectual Activism

Collins (2000) asserts that it is essential to reclaim "Black feminist intellectual traditions" (p.13) as part of intellectual activism and the development of BFT. BFT considers works beyond traditional scholarship as intellectual traditions and indicates that essays, music, and poetry are also sufficient forms intellectual tradition (Collins, 2000). Reclaiming these traditions includes "discovering, reinterpreting, and in many cases, analyzing for the first time the works of individual U.S. Black women thinkers" (Collins, 2000, p. 13) whose previous work went unpreserved as well as continuing the intellectual contributions to black feminist thought. This study seeks to be a contributor by exploring the experiences of Black women servings as leaders in PWIs.

Tenets of Black Feminist Thought

BFT is related to Black women in the United States and contains several tenets, including six core themes and two interpretive frameworks, or paradigms which are a set of ideas used to explain social phenomena (Collins, 2000). The following section will discuss significant components of BFT related to this study and how the researcher will utilize each theme to guide parts of this study.

Thematic Content

The first characteristic is the relationship between oppression, race and gender for Black women, and activism. BFT is meant to serve as an activist response to the oppression experienced by Black women by collectively empowering these women

(Collins, 2000). This study seeks to explore the individual experiences of Black women who have been successful in their higher education careers while also analyzing the results to determine if any similarities exist among the collective group of study participants.

Second, BFT recognizes that Black women experience common difficulties with race and gender discrimination, but also that experiences and responses to those difficulties may differ by individual Black women (Collins, 2000). BFT describes "group knowledge or standpoint" (Collins, 2000, p. 25), which acknowledges that not all Black women personally experience discrimination in specific situations; however, Black women acknowledge that collectively Black women experience discrimination in those situations (e.g., Black women being followed by an employee in a retail store for fear she may be a shoplifter) (Collins, 2000). Standpoint is considered a bond among Black women and their shared struggle against racism and sexism (Henry & Glenn, 2009). One goal of this study is to provide Black women an opportunity to articulate their successful, but different, career journeys and experiences while facing the common double oppression of racism and sexism from their standpoint.

The third characteristic of BFT is the dialogical relationship among Black women's individual lived experiences, group knowledge or standpoint, and activism. Black women's collective lived experiences with discrimination in the United States may trigger their standpoint resulting in activism (Collins, 2000). BFT empowers Black women by identifying the power of knowledge plus action to improve the lived experiences of Black women to help them "survive in, cope with, and resist our

differential treatment" (Collins, 2002, p. 31). The results of this study may provide other Black women with knowledge in ways to consider achieving their career goals.

The fourth characteristic recognizes the contributions made by and the importance of intellectual Black women, those inside and outside of the academy, in the United States (Collins, 2000). Several reasons are provided to support how critical Black women intellectuals are to BFT. First, "the primary responsibility for defining one's own reality lies with the people who live that reality, who actually have those experiences" (Collins, 2000, p. 35), meaning Black women are more likely to have critical insights into their experiences with oppression than other groups. Additionally, Black women involved in research and scholarship related to Black feminism are "less likely to walk away from Black women's struggles when the obstacles seem overwhelming or when the rewards for staying diminish" (Collins, 2000, p. 35). Next, Black women intellectuals can empower other Black women by encouraging them to speak up for themselves and supporting the creation of their own agendas. Lastly, these women can promote alliances with other groups involved in social justice efforts (Collins, 2000). These exact reasons are why Black women will be the sole research participants in this study.

The fifth characteristic of BFT is the notion that Black feminist thought must remain nimble in response to social conditions as they change for Black women despite the ability of dominant groups to establish superior viewpoints of Black women versus Black women themselves. Black women and their ideas have experienced increased exposure as PWIs reluctantly began including the work of Black women, such as Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, in their curriculum which has provided opportunities to other Black women at PWIs (Collin, 2000).

The last characteristic of BFT is the relationship with other social justice movements because of the unique position of Black women situated at the intersection of racism and sexism. Black feminism is also committed to human solidarity and working towards social justice for all by rejecting the stereotypes of others (Collins, 2000). The results of this study may provide information about overall discriminatory practices at PWIs and methods for reducing or eliminating such practices at these institutions.

Interpretive Frameworks

Another component of BFT are the two interpretive frameworks utilized to understand doubly oppressed Black women, which are intersectionality, and matrix of domination. The term intersectionality was created by Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) to describe how aspects of an individual's social identity (i.e., race, gender, class, sexual orientation, disability, etc.) intersect with one another to impact the individual's experiences. In the context of BFT, intersectionality considers how race and gender impact the experiences of and shape Black women by recognizing that to fully understand a Black women's experience, these identity categories should be not considered separately (Collins, 2000). Intersectionality provides the opportunity to understand social inequalities from a multi-dimensional approach. For example, and as previously discussed, women may experience sexism in the workplace, but the experience of Black women may be different because they also experience racism in addition to sexism. Intersectionality reinforces that notion that various types of oppressions work together to create social injustice for Black women and other minoritized individuals (Crenshaw, 1991).

Collins (2000) leverages Crenshaw's idea of intersectionality by defining matrix of domination as the "overall social organization within which intersecting oppressions originate, develop, and are contained" (p. 228). The matrix considers various oppressed identities, such as, race, gender, age, sexual orientation, and social class within four different domains of power: structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal (Collins, 2000). The structural domain "encompasses how social institutions are organized to reproduce Black women's insubordination over time" (Collins, 2000, p. 277) through policies and procedures resulting in Black women being excluded from "the best jobs, schools, health care, and housing" (Collins, 2000, p. 277). The disciplinary domain creates barriers for Black women via bureaucratic hierarchies and surveillance through the implicit operations of organizations. The hegemonic domain seeks to legitimize oppression through manipulation of ideas and culture. Lastly, the interpersonal domain allows routine discriminatory practices to become normalized by converting the thinking of oppressed groups to align with the thinking of dominant groups (Collins, 2000). The matrix of domination provides further evidence that although Black women experience common struggles with racism and sexism, the experiences and perspectives of Black women can differ. This study will seek to understand the different experiences of successful Black women in executive administrative leadership positions at PWIs and not focus on the challenges of their journey. Therefore, certain aspects of BFT, such as the matrix of domination may not as applicable to this study as other aspects of BFT.

Social scientists support and encourage the use of BFT as a theory to illuminate the distinct experiences and standpoint of Black women. Specifically, with the goal of advancing knowledge about the experiences of a marginalized group in higher education,

BFT allows Black women to share their experiences and have their voices heard in an intellectual space (Harris, 2007). Additionally, Henry and Glenn (2009) suggest that BFT is imperative in aiding Black women in effectively dealing with racial barriers and challenges in higher education. For these reasons, the researcher has selected BFT as the theoretical lens with which this study will be conducted, with the objective of amplifying the voices of Black women who have successful attained executive administrative leadership positions at PWIs.

Summary

Based on the literature review, Black women are unique because they are positioned at intersection of race and gender resulting in significant barriers in their career pursuits. Despite the numerous barriers identified in this literature, Black women have persisted and overcome these barriers to achieve leadership positions at PWIs, including executive administrative level positions. While research related to Black women in administrator positions in higher education has been conducted, the focus of these studies has not been on the experiences related to their attainment of leadership positions (Townsend, 2021) resulting in gaps in the literature related to Black women administrators and their development and career experiences (Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015). Chance (2022) echoed these sentiments:

> Further research is suggested to explore the experiences and perceptions of the Black women that have and do hold these positions with particular emphasis on PWIs and top-tier research schools. More advanced research will help understand the challenges these women face and their recommendations to increase Black

> women's representation in these positions where they may not have initially felt they had a place (p. 71).

Similarly, Lewis (2016) noted that minimal information has been studied about the career mobility experiences of Black women. More specifically, there appears to be little research related to the career pathways of Black women who successfully transitioned into executive administrative leadership roles at PWIs (Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015; Townsend, 2021), and this study aims to fill that gap. This information may help institutions understand better the challenges that must be addressed to increase the representation of Black women at the highest levels of leadership.

The use of BFT as the underlying theory of this study allowed the voices, experiences and successes of the Black women who participated in this study to be highlighted. This research will focus on how the participants have been able to achieve success in an environment that has not historically welcomed Black women and understand how the key concepts of BFT were experienced in their journeys. Specifically, this research study focused on the concepts of self-definition, self-valuation, outsider within status and intellectual activism and these concepts impacted the success of the participants. Certain aspects of BFT, such as the matrix of domination, received less focus in this study as the purpose of this study is to understand the success of Black women in executive administrative leadership positions and not the challenges they experienced in their journey. The key tenant of BFT is to create a response to the oppression experienced by Black women. One goal of this study is to develop this response through the creation of knowledge and actionable items that can assist Black women in achieving executive administrative leadership positions at PWIs in response to

the oppression they experience on their career journeys, in addition to equipping institutions with knowledge and action to recruit and retain Black Women into these leadership positions.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research is to fill a gap in the literature and better understand the pathways and persistence of Black women who have been successful in attaining an executive administrative leadership position at PWIs across the southern region of the United States. Findings from the study may allow other Black women to consider these pathways as they begin or continue their journey in higher education. Additionally, institutions may use the results of the study to enhance efforts toward recruiting and retaining Black women in executive administrative roles and diversifying their leadership teams. To meet the purpose of this study, the following research questions guided the researcher:

- How do Black women describe their experiences successfully navigating their professional journeys toward an executive administrative leadership position at a PWI?
- How and to what extent do Black women perceive their background and personal lives as contributing to their persistence in their professional careers?

Methodological Approach

Based on the research questions, purpose, and the theoretical framework selected, a "basic qualitative study" was utilized to conduct the research through a constructivism lens, which allows research to help construct knowledge versus finding knowledge and "assumes that reality is socially constructed; that is, there is no single, observable reality"

(Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 9). A basic qualitative study lends itself to gaining an understanding of how people perceive their lived experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). As Miles et al. (2020) argue, "Qualitative data, with their emphasis on people's lived experiences, are fundamentally well suited to locating the meanings people place on the events, processes, and structures of their lives for connecting these meanings to the social world around them" (p.8). A qualitative study is appropriate for this research as it allowed Black women to share their interpretations of their lived experiences in their pursuit of executive leadership positions within higher education. As a constructivist project, this study will also allow the researcher to describe, understand and interpret participants' experiences along with them (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Research Methods for Data Collection

In-depth, one-on-one semi-structured interviews were held with each research participant. Marshall et al. (2022) note that the benefits of semi-structured interviews include "immediate follow-up and clarification" (p.163) which contributes significantly to the "richness of an interview" (p. 161). Semi-structured interviews also allowed the researcher to begin with a predetermined plan while maintaining the ability to adapt to the direction of the discussion. Semi-structured interviews are appropriate for this study as they allowed the researcher to include several open-ended questions in the interview protocol but provided the researcher with the opportunity to explore certain topics and issues on a deeper level based on responses from the participants as the interview progressed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The interview protocol (refer to Appendix A) was designed with the intention of receiving thick descriptive data via participant responses to answer the research questions and support research findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

The protocol was also developed with the intention of gathering evidence to answer the study's research questions and with consideration of the literature previously reviewed as it relates to Black women in leadership positions in higher education. While the same interview protocol was used in each interview, additional topics were discussed in interviews as themes started to develop from previous interviews.

Prior to the interviews, each participant was researched via the internet (i.e., LinkedIn, institution websites, etc.) to gather general demographic information, including education and career information. This approach afforded the researcher more time during the interview to ask substantive questions to gather evidence in support of the overall research questions rather than verbally obtain demographic information. All interviews were scheduled for 60 minutes and conducted virtually in real time via Microsoft Teams (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) in May through August of 2023. Originally, this study was designed to allow for in-person participant interviews by limiting the geographical location to the southern region of the United States; however, scheduling the interviews became difficult, resulting in the decision to conduct all interviews virtually to allow for ease of scheduling. The interviews were audio recorded and most of the interviews were also video recorded, with approval from the participants, and later transcribed verbatim. Conducting virtual interviews provided the researcher with the added ability to video record the interviews and later go back and review the recording for nonverbal signs during data analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). During the interviews, written descriptive and reflective field notes were captured (Marshall et al., 2022). The descriptive notes included information about the setting, participants, and the discussion resulting from the interview protocol (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The

reflective notes included the researcher's thoughts and comments, including "feelings, reactions, hunches, initial interpretations, speculations and working hypotheses (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 151) identified during the interview. These notes served as a backup in case of unforeseeable challenges with the audio recording, however, no challenges were encountered.

Sample

Researchers consider data saturation when discussing sufficient sample sizes supporting good qualitative research studies (Guest et al., 2006). Researchers argue that saturation is "reached when the researcher gathers data to the point of diminishing returns when nothing new is being added" (Bowen, 2008, p. 140) Based on a study conducted by Guest et al. (2006), data saturation was achieved, and code definitions and variability were stable, in a qualitative study after their analysis of the twelfth interview in a homogenous sample. The authors argue, "If the goal is to describe a shared perception, belief, or behavior among a relatively homogeneous group, then a sample of twelve will likely be sufficient" (Guest et al., 2006, p. 76). After interviewing 12 women who self-identify as Black and have held or currently hold an executive administrative leadership position at a PWI located in the southern region of the United States, saturation was achieved, and no additional participants were interviewed. In selecting the sample, participants included Black women of all ages and various types of predominately white institutions (i.e., public, private, 2-year, 4-year) where the executive administrative leadership position is or was held.

The Black women were selected by applying purposive sampling (Miles et al., 2020). Purposeful sampling requires researchers to select participants based on

"predetermined criteria relevant to a particular research objective" (Guest et al., 2006, p.61). Purposive sampling is suitable for this study as it will allowed the researcher to "discover, understand, and gain insight" from Black women who have been successful in achieving executive leadership success at PWIs (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 96). Specifically, the type of purposive sample selected will be unique, which "is based on unique atypical, perhaps rare attributes or occurrences of the phenomenon of interest (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 99). As previously mentioned, there are a lack of Black women in executive leadership positions at PWIs, thereby classifying those who have achieved that level of success as unique or rare.

Participant Recruitment

To recruit participants for the study, I utilized my professional and personal networks in higher education as I am currently working at an institution in the southern region of the United States and am a student at a PWI in the same region (i.e., colleagues, professional organization affiliations, current and former coworkers, current and former students in my doctoral program, employees at enrolled institution, etc.). Initially, the southern region of the United States was chosen as the geographic location for this study to allow for in-person interviews and ease of travel since I am located in the southern region of the United States. I successfully recruited three participants leveraging these networks. To recruit the remaining nine participants, I researched executive leadership teams at PWIs in the southern region of the United States on the internet by using Google to search for colleges or universities in each state in the southern region of the United States. Next, using that list generated from my search I went to each institution's webpage and searched for their leadership team or president's cabinet to identify current

or past Black women in executive administrative leadership positions. Many of the institutional websites included photos and titles of their leadership teams, which made it easier to identify potential study participants, and I created a list of possible participants including their name, title, institution, and email address. However, some institutional websites did not include photos or email addresses for their leadership teams which made it difficult to identify potential participants. From the compiled list of 35 potential participants, I solicited their participation in the study via email. Initially, I planned to use snowball sampling to identify additional participants by asking participants to refer me to other participants who meet the requirements of these study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). However, that was not necessary, as enough participants responded to my initial request to participate in this study. The participants successfully recruited for this study are or were employed at different institutions and none of the participants work at the same institution as executive administrative leaders.

During the recruitment phase, I intentionally tried to exclude Black women working primarily in diversity, equity, and inclusion areas, as the limited existing studies of Black women in leadership in higher education focus on Black women working in this area (Moses, 1989; Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015). Refer to Table 1 for participant data including pseudonym, which was assigned to each participant by myself, institution type, institution size, area of responsibility and years in executive administrative leadership role at a PWI for each participant:

Table 1

Participant Data

Pseudonym	Institution Type	Institution Size	Area of Responsibility	Years in Role
Lisa	Public 4-year	Large	Student Life	< 1 year
Joy	Public 4-year	Medium	Legal Affairs	> 5 years
Lee	Public 4-year	Small	Administration and Finance	< 5 years
Tina	Private 4-year	Small	Development	< 5 years
Amy	Private 4-year	Small	Athletics	< 5 years
Kelly	Public 4-year	Large	Finance	< 5 years
Sarah	Private 4-year	Small	Administration and Finance	< 1 year
Connie	Public 4-year	Large	Administration and Finance	< 5 years
Jennifer	Private 4-year	Small	Enrollment	< 5 years
Tiffany	Private 4-year	Medium	Student Life	< 5 years
Jenna	Private 4-year	Medium	Enrollment	< 1 year
Mary	Public 4-year	Large	Legal Affairs	> 5 years

Note. For purposes of this study, the size of the institution is defined by the number of enrolled students. Large institution's enrollment exceeds 20,000 students, medium institution's enrollment exceeds 10,000 and small institution's enrollment is less than 10,000. All of the participants were actively working in an executive administrative leadership role with the exception of one participant, Tina.

Data Management and Analysis

The data set for this study includes biographic information, interview data and descriptive and reflective field notes. To analyze the data obtained during interviews, Microsoft Teams was used to transcribe the interviews, which were be audio and video recorded, if the participant chose to turn their camera on during the interview. Next, while cleaning the transcription data, pseudonyms, created by myself, were added to the transcript to protect the identity of study participants and any identifying characteristics of the participants were removed from the transcription. To mitigate the risk of overlooking interview details, each interview transcription is accompanied by written

descriptive and reflective field notes and was transcribed and cleaned within two weeks of the initial interview. The descriptive and reflective field notes include participant verbal and nonverbal behavior, considerations for previous or future interviews, initial themes identified, and my critical reflection of the interview. These field notes were reviewed prior to each subsequent interview to help hone the established interview protocol and track any potential leads on information presented during the interviews. These field notes were helpful in identifying preliminary codes during data analysis.

After transcription, the data was coded to identify patterns and themes to draw conclusions using MAXQDA, a computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS). Miles et al. (2020) highlight the importance of coding by asserting that "coding is analysis" (p.63) as coding necessitates intense reflection and interpretation of the data by the researcher. Codes are defined as "labels that assign symbolic meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study" (p. 62) and as suggested, the coding of the data collected during this study occurred in two separate cycles (Miles et al., 2020). My coding included a combination of deductive and inductive coding to allow flexibility during analysis. Deductive coding starts with an initial list of codes derived from the literature review, theoretical framework, research questions, etc. (Miles et al., 2020). The initial list of deductive codes for this study included college choice, outsider within, mentor, perceptions of others, support system, and other success factors. Inductive coding provides the opportunity to discover new codes from the raw data collected during analysis (Miles et al., 2020). During the first cycle, I used descriptive coding and in vivo coding. Descriptive coding allowed me to condense data into one word or short phrases. I also incorporated in vivo coding during the first cycle,

which allowed me to "prioritize and honor the participant's voice" (Miles et al., 2020, p.65) by capturing direct quotations from the participants.

Next, the second cycle of coding, or pattern coding, allowed me to begin identifying themes or categories based on the codes identified in the first cycle. These pattern codes focused more on the whole picture allowing me to begin drawing conclusions based on the data (Miles et al., 2020). During the analysis, I also utilized jotting and memos as a tool to capture my initial thoughts and development of themes (Marshall et al., 2022).

To assist in managing the voluminous amount of data collected during this study, an Excel workbook was maintained and updated on a timely basis with two sets of information. The first included data processing information such as, participant name, date of interview, transcription date, coding status, consent status, etc. The second set of information included participant information, such as, name, institution, job title, etc. All data was stored in MAXQDA and a back-up of the data was stored using cloud-based Microsoft OneDrive associated with my student account at the University of Georgia.

Trustworthiness

Credibility, dependability, and transferability are considered by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to be the standards of trustworthiness in qualitative research. To enhance the trustworthiness of my research, I employed several strategies. The first was continuous formal and informal member checking (now referred to as participant review by Marshall et al., 2022), which is imperative in establishing credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) by providing the written interview transcript to each participant, if requested, in advance of data analysis. This allowed the study participants to review and correct inaccuracies in

the data, provide the participant the "opportunity to assess intentionality—what it is that the respondent intended by acting in a certain way or providing certain information" and "provides the respondent an opportunity to give an assessment of overall adequacy in addition to confirming individual data points" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314). I also participated in the peer debriefing process by engaging colleagues to critically review and discuss my research findings "to ensure that analyses are grounded in the data" (Marshall et al., 2022, p. 51). Specifically, this was be achieved through reviews analyses conducted by colleagues and considering and/or incorporating their feedback into the analyses. My research analysis contains thick descriptions "necessary to enable someone interested in making a transfer to reach a conclusion about whether transfer can be contemplated as a possibility" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314). These robust descriptions may allow others to determine if the findings are applicable to other similar situations or populations. To maintain an audit trail of this study, I used MAXQDA to manage all the evidence collected (i.e., transcripts, memos, coding, etc.) during his study. Lastly, I practiced ongoing reflexivity throughout the research process and critically examine my actions to ensure my bias did not influence the process or my findings, including being transparent in my data collection and analysis and utilizing reflexive memo-ing throughout the process (Marshall et al., 2022).

Reflexivity Statement

I have been working in higher education for approximately five years, after spending 13 years working at a large public accounting firm, and my goal is to remain in higher education long term while progressing my career. As a Black woman currently serving in an administrative leadership role at a predominately White institution, I am interested in

the career opportunities and barriers I may encounter as I strive to achieve an executive administrative leadership position. This study will allow myself and others to gain knowledge from the Black women who have been successful in achieving such roles. My hope is that my findings will identify similar experiences or themes that may allow myself and other Black women to consider as they move forward in their careers.

I performed this research with an understanding of my empathy towards Black women in recognizing that they most likely encountered significant barriers endured a challenging professional journey. However, my research focused on the factors attributing to their success and not on the barriers and challenges, for which a robust amount of literature already exists. Additionally, I recognize my sensitivity as I am a Black woman striving to achieve an executive administrative leadership position. Through this lens, my findings may be impacted by my identification as a Black woman and career goals.

I acknowledge these feelings and continuously practiced ongoing reflexivity throughout the research process. I revisited this statement throughout the research process to maintain timely awareness of my senstivity as the study is conducted. I also relied on my descriptive and reflective field notes as an outlet to express my bias, prejudice, or judgment instead of implicitly or explicitly expressing these thoughts during data analysis.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study is to better understand the pathways of Black women who have successfully attained an executive administrative leadership position at a PWI in the southern region of the United States and highlight their voices. Conducting this study through the lens of Black Feminist Thought allowed the voices and unique experiences of Black women to be spotlighted. As described in BFT, the results of this study may provide insightful knowledge to assist Black women in resisting the double oppression of sexism and racism through understanding how other Black women were able to persist and achieve a successful career at a PWI (Collins, 2000). The findings from the study suggest that Black women attribute their career success in higher education to various factors and aspects of their personal and professional lives. These findings can be categorized into three primary themes, which emerged from 12 interviews conducted with Black women who either previously or currently held an executive administrative leadership position at a PWI.

This chapter provides a detailed analysis and discussion of the emerging themes resulting from this study. The first theme, “you can’t do the job if you don’t believe in yourself” relates to how Black women self-support their professional journey and overcome challenges and barriers. The second theme, “I am one of your biggest fans, one of your biggest champions, and I want to help you” relates to the importance of external support received by the study participants as they pursued career success. The third and final theme, “if you have a seat at the table, you have to use your voice there” is related to

career readiness and how participants view preparedness for the next step in their successful career journeys.

"You can't do the job if you don't believe in yourself."

To rise to an executive administrative leader at a PWI, an environment that historically has discriminated against Black women, the participants in this study attributed their success and ability to overcome obstacles to several methods of self-support and belief in themselves. These methods include reliance on their faith in a higher power and self by being confident and trusting their skills and abilities, being their authentic self and remaining true to themselves, and rejecting other people's perceptions of them. These mechanisms described by participants encompass several tenants of BFT, including using the participant's experiences as an activist response to combat the oppression experienced by Black women as they maneuver through their careers, and the ability to use this knowledge to empower other Black women as they cope and resist racism and sexism at their institutions (Collins, 2000).

Faith in a Higher Power and Self

Nearly all of the study participants referenced their faith in a higher power or in their self during the interviews, either as a factor of their success or in reference to persisting through their career. Generally, faith in a higher power and self was a response from participants when asked to describe the influences or factors that led to their successful career or how they persisted through setbacks. One participant, Lisa, summed up shared sentiments among several of the participants regarding religious faith, "I'm a person of strong faith and that is a hallmark. That is a defining piece for me." Mary stated that she is a woman of faith and "you have to be aware you can't control everything and

that's ok. You're not meant to control everything, so being able to let go is very important." Jenna echoed similar thoughts when she said, "I think, especially in moments of setbacks, faith has kind of helped get me through and have a greater purpose and sense." Having faith in a higher power seemed to be an important characteristic of how the participants described themselves, that it was truly part of what makes them who they are, and they were able to rely on that during difficult situations. Sarah was the most passionate about the impact her faith in a higher power has had in career journey, sharing, "I am an extreme person of faith and I truly believe that I am currently living the answer to prayers. I am walking in God's manifestation in my life." Sarah, who was recruited for her executive administrative leadership position by her predecessor, described her hesitation in accepting the role, "I literally talked myself out of [accepting the role], and I know God was probably like, what the heck? I'm putting the plan in front of you on a silver plate." She went on to say, "I was not searching for [the position], but I truly believe it's because not just my prayers, but my grandma's prayers and my momma's prayers and this is centuries of prayer manifesting in my life." Similarly, Joy believes she is in her current leadership role because of her faith in God and stated "I'm a person of faith too, so I believe God is very intentional about where he leads me…" Connie, who recently began working in public institution of higher education, explained:

> When you have faith in something that is clearly bigger than you, it reinforces the faith you need to have in yourself. You can't move into executive leadership or C-suite leadership with impostor syndrome. You can't think, I know I got the job, but I'm really not supposed to be here.

Connie's comment connects faith in a higher power to having the faith in yourself necessary to transition into an executive leadership position.

The idea and importance of faith in self surfaced from participants who emphasized the importance of self-confidence in their skills, abilities, and knowledge when describing their experience in higher education. This theme aligns with one of key concepts of BFT, self-valuation, which is the content for how Black women define themselves. Self-valuation empowers Black women to not only recognize but declare their worth (Collins, 2000). Connie continued the discussion by capturing the sentiments of several participants when she stated "you can't do the job if you don't believe in yourself. That is definitely a key to success." She went on to say, "you can be the smartest person, but you need the faith in yourself and the confidence every day to go in and be that. Be the boss!" Lee reiterated that point, "I have confidence in myself, and I persevere. Whatever I am, I can do the work and I've always felt confident in being able to deliver and to meet the needs of the institution." In terms of where participants obtained their self-confidence, Jenna shared how her father was influential:

> I also have a constant reminder of my abilities. My dad was fortunate to give me some great advice in terms of trying to overcome the notions and feelings of imposter syndrome and thinking through if you have the same, if not more education than those that are here, you know this information and you know people have come to rely on you and share your expertise. Yes, there are gonna be instances where someone might question what I'm doing but I have the confidence of knowing that I've been doing this work for 23 years, that I gained the education, the professional development and can provide that level of

> expertise. So, it is just a constant reminder to overcome some of that impostor syndrome being at a PWI in particular.

Another participant, Sarah, who worked in corporate America before recently joining higher education, attributed her self-confidence to her upbringing and her postsecondary institution of choice:

> I grew up in Atlanta in an all-Black environment with strong Black parents who taught me I could do anything. I went to Florida A&M University School of Business and our mantra was 'there was nothing we can't do'. I joined corporate America with a whole lot of confidence of who I was and my skills.

Sarah also shared her confidence and experience have given her a "I'm gonna prove them wrong" mentality when responding to how she does not allow others to perceive her as incapable of being successful. While the study participants highlighted their reliance on faith in themselves and their self-confidence, some participants shared how their self-confidence was sometimes impacted by certain situations or the struggle of maintaining self-confidence. Jenna mentioned that her confidence can sometimes take a hit when she is questioned by others, but leans on her experience to persist:

> I'm open to the question, but to get over the sense that people are just questioning me and my knowledge, I think it's also a challenge and so just constantly reminding myself that no, I've been doing this for a while. I've been at big name institutions, so I think I know what I'm doing here.

Tina shared a different take on self-confidence when she shared a story with me about her coaching group, comprised of all women, who recently had a guest speaker present to the group. The speaker said, "women have courage and men have confidence." Tina believes

that women “often exist on courage when we could do more, if we existed on confidence.” She said men are able to lean on their confidence more than their skills resulting in “so many posers out here and very mediocre posers at that.” She encourages women to not “be afraid to own what you know in your own space. I've able to walk more in that truth now than I than I used to, and I would encourage women to do the same.”

The study participants leaned on their religious faith and self-confidence throughout their career in times of uncertainty and to help guide the next step in their career. Their faith in a higher power allowed them to have greater confidence and faith in their own abilities. Multiple participants find their confidence in their years of professional experience and the types of institutions they have worked at in their journey, while others, found their confidence from their parents or upbringing. Despite where the confidence comes from, it is evident that the participant’s confidence contributed to their successful journeys in overcoming self-doubt as well as doubt from others, which Mary summed up by saying “know that you have what it takes to be successful.”

Authentic Self

Several participants identified being their authentic self and having a defined sense of self, although not always easy, as a method of self-support in their successful journeys. Recognizing that she struggles with this, when asked what advice she would give to Black women seeking executive administrative positions at PWIs, Tina said, “I would encourage them not to compromise who they are.” She went on to say:

> This is something I struggle with though and I am probably not gonna say this particularly eloquently, but I think we operate where we code switch and we are

> in situations where we put on a different face and I think that is unfortunately necessary for some of us to be successful in certain organizations, some people feel like it's inauthentic or selling out. In my upbringing I've been in these [types of] institutions. I went to a private White high school. I went to Duke for grad school. It doesn't feel as much like it's inauthentic to me because that's what I experienced. What I always say to people is when you're communicating, your objective is that you get your message across, and you have to think about how am I gonna get my message across?

Jenna shared similar thoughts:

> I want people to be their authentic selves and be themselves. Unfortunately, we work at a predominantly white institution where being your authentic self may not necessarily be valued. So, finding spaces and places and people who can appreciate your authentic self is very important.

She goes on to say there is a place for everyone to be appreciated as their true selves, which may take time to find, but it is better for people to be who they are and happy in their professional setting rather than "wearing the mask" and being unhappy. Tiffany attributes her "very defined sense of self" to how she grew up, her parents and spending time on a college campus:

> A lot of it is based on how I grew up and how my parents raised me and the incredible foundation I had growing up on the campus of historically black colleges, where I saw faculty and staff and students and your local veterinarian and doctor and everyone in your community is a person of color with a degree. They were just high standards for achievement and a lot of joy in that.

Tiffany said she works “really hard to preserve my sense of self” and that helps her persist through negative perceptions or challenges she may encounter in her professional life. Other participants shared their advice for Black women seeking similar executive administrative leadership positions and provided words of encouragement to not compromise who they are and to continue to know and lean into who they are throughout their journey to attain their career goals.

Rejecting Other People’s Perception

Black Feminist Thought provides a collective, self-defined voice for Black women to express their standpoint and Collins (2000) defines self-definition as “the power to name one’s own reality” (p. 300) and rejecting how Black women have been defined by other dominant groups. When study participants were asked how they handled rejecting other’s perceptions of them, the overwhelming response was simple, to just reject those perceptions. Mary shared an experience when she encountered a faculty member on her campus who told her she speaks well despite her ethnicity and how she “had to certainly in that situation be able to assert myself, my worth, and reject the trope that he had put on me and move forward.” When she became a leader, Connie shared:

> There were some people who had a problem with having a Black woman as their boss and they left [the organization]. I'm not going to be offended that you leave if you can't do it, please go. I'm not going to apologize for being the leader that I am because I was clearly asked to take this job because of what I bring to the table. I'm not going to change or shrink to be to make you more comfortable.

Joy emphasized a similar point:

> People ask me sometimes; how do you deal with discrimination or how do you overcome. I just don't accept it, like it's not reality. I know when I walk in rooms that I'm confronting all sorts of biases and assumptions about me, but it's not something that I that I wear. I don't take their expectations for me.

Tina explained “I have to filter the voices that I deem credible when it comes to how I'm defined. And they've definitely seeped into my own psyche and I'm getting better at doing it.” While still rejecting some of the perceptions placed on her, Tina also recognizes that some of the perceptions may come from individuals worth listening to in order to help be successful, which she has realized over time and with experience. Another participant shared that over the years, she has become more assertive in directly addressing people when they make offensive comments:

> Probably 10 years ago, five years ago, I would never have told a White male that [his comment] is not a compliment. But at this point, if you never tell anyone that what they say is offensive they'll continue offending you and the smile. Microaggressions will continue.

The ability to simply reject the perceptions of others and not allowing others define them stems from the methods previously discussed. Faith, confidence, being true to self and practicing self-care allow Black women to define their own reality.

Summary

The theme of self-support is classified into three areas: faith in a higher power and self, authentic self and rejecting other people’s perceptions. The Black women included in this study partially attribute their success in attaining executive administrative leadership positions at PWIs and being able to persist in their careers to these categories.

They support themselves by relying on their faith in a higher power, developing and maintaining a can-do mindset with tunnel vision on their career goals, not allowing others to infiltrate their minds leading to self-doubt in their skills and abilities or allowing the perceptions of others to impact their self-definition as defined by BFT as the ability for Black women to claim their own reality (Collins, 2000).

"I am one of your biggest fans, one of your biggest champions, and I want to help you."

The first theme focuses on the support that study participants provided to themselves in their successful career journeys. The second theme focuses on the external support that study participants received on their journeys. The most common responses received from study participants when asked to describe the factors or influences that led to a successful career in higher education or in responding to how they ultimately received their executive administrative leadership opportunity, can be categorized into external support from their families, sponsors, their networks and other groups, mentors, professional organizations and development and other professional relationships.

Family Support

The first group of external support mentioned by a large majority of study participants were their families, with parents being the most identified source of support and encouragement. The study participants were quick to identify family support as a factor of their success and often they were the first group mentioned when asked to describe the factors or influences of their success. Study participants identified various ways in which they received support from their family, including, creating a solid foundation during their upbringing, providing encouragement throughout their lives, and

providing support for their children to help the participant navigate their career and personal lives.

Solid Foundation

As it relates to their parents laying a solid foundation during their upbringing, participants shared similar insights. When asked who has been influential in their career success, either inside or outside of the workplace, Mary noted:

> I would have to start with my parents if anything, just because of the foundation, I mean they raised me and my siblings to be proud of who we are and to bow down to no one. They really encouraged us to have inherent self-worth.

Similarly, Lisa attributed much of her success to her upbringing, and specifically her mother, who she described as:

> A professional [working] in city government in the 1970s when there weren't any black people and particularly black women and her [sharing with me] how she functioned in that space and the old adage, you have to be twice as good to be considered half as good, you know, going the extra mile and that's what's expected. I am totally a child of those attitudes. I'm totally a student of those. I was raised with that in my mind.

Lee also identified her family as a big influence in her success and that her "mom and dad have great work ethic" which she witnessed while growing up. One factor Connie attributes her success to is the work ethic she believes she gained from the matriarchs in her family:

> I also watched my mom go to work and be there at 7:30. I watched my grandmother work her way up to the manager and leader of the company. I

> watched all my great grandmothers work, as well as taking care of their grandchildren and great grandchildren.

She continued by stating, "just knowing their stories, their history provides for one, the motivation, but also the work ethic." The parents of these study participants provided a foundation solid enough to withstand the challenges in their careers and also displayed strong work ethic in their own lives, which was observed by the study participants. This provided the participants with someone who they could emulate or motivation to work just as hard as their families in their careers.

Encouragement

The study participants shared several examples of the types of encouragement provided by their families during their formative years and their careers. As it relates to general encouragement, when asked if certain people were influential in her success, Tiffany captured the sentiments of several participants, "my entire family has been supportive of me professionally and proud. My family has not been just a role model, but also people who've encouraged me." Sarah shared "my parents have always been supportive of everything that I have done and my greatest cheerleaders. They've always just been there to support every goal, everything."

Several participants mentioned their parents appreciated the value of postsecondary education and encouraged, or mandated in some cases, that they go to college. Amy shared that the majority of her family have college degrees and that her mother and aunt were educators, so education is very important in her family. She said "there was never a question about me going to college" because of the importance of education emphasized by her family. Jennifer's mother was also an educator and served

as a college professor, “before she passed, she laid out a plan for me on how to think about navigating being in higher education, one of which was, you have to get this PhD if you're gonna do this.” Likewise, Lee initially thought she wanted to be a teacher and major in early education, however, her father encouraged her to think differently by saying:

> No, no, go and get a business degree. If later on, if you want to be a schoolteacher, good. But go get a business degree just in case that doesn't work out. And then you can go and be business manager and all kinds of other stuff.

Lee, who currently works in enrollment management, considers this advice and her father “very influential in terms of my journey.” Tina shared, “my parents were very supportive. My mom died when I was in college. My dad died when I was 25. But they gave me every kind of opportunity and always encouraged me, and said higher education was important.”

Specifically, as it relates to her current position as an executive administrative leader, Kelly’s parents were instrumental in encouraging her to apply for the position. She had been serving in the role on an interim basis and decided not to apply for the position permanently because she wanted a less demanding job because she felt like her career success was causing her personal life to suffer. In her interview, Kelly said:

> It was my parents who said I would encourage you just to apply for the position to give yourself more time to think about it. They said by the time they fill the position [permanently], I would have already done a lot of the things to stabilize [the department].

After telling her parents she was not sure if she should apply because she sacrificed her personal life for so many years, her parents continued to encourage her to apply:

> I listened to my parents and applied for position and in June, I got the job permanently. My mom's thought was if I was really not supposed to have it permanently, then I wouldn't get the job. But I wouldn't know if it's a no or a yes until I applied.

Without this encouragement from her parents, Kelly may not have applied for the leadership role she currently occupies.

Help Navigating Personal and Professional Lives

The last common type of support that families provided to the study participants was related to helping them navigate their personal and professional lives. When asked if her family has played a role in her career success, Joy identified her mom as being helpful:

> My mom with having children and trying to navigate that [because] she's literally 2 minutes from my house. So being able to rely on her if something happens to be able to help me with the kids so I can still be, you know, career woman. So that matters tremendously when you're trying to navigate your career and having family support.

Sarah shared similar sentiments when asked who has been impactful to her success:

> I have the most amazing [family] support system. I'm a single mom to a 5-year-old and I would not be able to be where I am today if I had not had their support, just the physical support they give me day in and day out with my child has

allowed me room to be able to do a lot of these things. If my daughter is sick, my mom can step in and having that village, truly the village around me.

Most of Black women who participated in the study have children, so it is evident that the support provided by their families have allowed them to have successful careers in higher education and balance their success with their family responsibilities. However, regardless of whether or not the participant has children, families and specifically, the parents of the participants, were identified as a significant factor in the successes of the participants and the participants are receiving varying types of support from their families.

Sponsorship

Sponsorship was also one of the strongest themes that emerged from this study as a factor or influence in the success of the participants. A sponsor as defined by Hewlett (2013) is someone who helps to provide the sponsored person with more visibility to other leaders, inside or outside of their institution, provides connection to career opportunities, and provides support when trouble arises, or a risk is taken. Research has shown that sponsors, and not mentors, provide the greatest career traction by impacting salary increases, working on high-profile projects and achieving promotions (Hewlett, 2013).

Without a specific question related to sponsorship by White men in the initial interview protocol, participants who were interviewed early during data collection specifically identified this as a factor or influence in their success. In subsequent interviews, if White men serving as sponsors was not discussed in response to my interview protocol, I specifically asked the participant if they if had any White men

serving as sponsors and if so, were they influential in their success. Every participant identified at least one sponsor they could point to who helped them in their career pursuits. The vast majority of participants identified a White male having served as a sponsor at some point in their career. Unlike family support, I observed some participants taking their time to really think about whether or not a White male served as a sponsor when asked to identify influential individuals in their success, which seemed to imply that some of the participants had not really stepped back to consider the impact these White men had on their careers. However, for other participants, they were very quick to identify their sponsorship from a White male as critical to their career success.

Tiffany identified her current boss "as an incredible advocate and sponsor and he identifies as a White male." Jenna shared a similar sentiment related to her previous supervisors who were White males, "I have been very fortunate to have good supervisors who saw something special in me and have pushed me and thinking through, the role and the career that I've had thus far." Mary explained that her previous boss was a White man and "he included me in a lot more than others had in some of the decision making within the legal department, and that helped me figure out that perhaps the job wasn't as daunting as I initially thought." This allowed Mary to gain insight into what it would be like to possibly have his job one day, which she did eventually become the vice president of that department. Another participant, Amy identified the positive and negative impact that White men have had in her career:

> I'll be very honest with you, the individuals that I've had the most difficulty with have been White men. But it's funny because on the flip side, when I think about

> those that have helped me get into the positions that I've been in, it's been White men.

Amy's higher education career origin dates back to her time as an undergraduate student athlete when two White men offered her a job as a graduate student working in the athletics compliance office when she realized she had one more year of playing eligibility. She received her master's degree in higher education while working in athletics administration and credits these White men with opening her eyes to the possibility of a long-term career in higher education. Amy also shared that one of her sponsors who is a White man works at a different institution, and they met while serving on a committee together and he told her, "I am one of your biggest fans, one of your biggest champions, and I want to help you in any way that I can" after being impressed with her and the value she added to the committee. Joy shared similar experiences when describing the development of sponsorship in her career:

> It's really just kind of like seeing you do your work, but they might be in a different place and then kind of admiring you from afar and then you have the occasion to work together and then all of a sudden, they're like, ok, there's a role that I think you'd be good for. Pretty much in all cases for sponsorship it has been organic.

Lisa also mentioned that some of her sponsorships were unofficial as well and really developed from seeing her perform well, "they've been the people who put my name forward or who have had the authority to be the decision maker to say, I'm the hiring authority and I would like for you to consider this role."

As previously mentioned, some participants were very quick to recognize the impact of sponsorship by a White man on their careers, while other participants had to take a few moments to think about if they did in fact have a positive influence on their success. Study participants also identified Black men, Black women, and White women as their sponsors as well, but not nearly as many were mentioned compared to White men serving as sponsors.

Supportive Networks

Another common type of external support received by the participants based on their responses to the interview protocol is from the participant's networks. These networks include varying individuals, such as friends, peers, colleagues, mentors, and professional networks. Participants most commonly mentioned networks in response to two interview questions related to describing the influences/factors that led a successful career in higher education and what advice would the participant share with Black women aspiring to hold executive administrative leadership positions at PWIs.

Lisa's comment summarized several of the participants thoughts regarding networks when she said "I would say build a broad network. So, it's almost like a support network." She continued by saying, "build a diverse network and I'm not actually talking about identities. I'm talking about in higher education across different areas." Lisa has worked at her current institution for more than two decades and held several progressive leadership positions and was recently appointed into an executive administrative leadership role. During the interview, she discussed volunteering or being willing to participate in various committees and initiatives across campus throughout her career, which helped her build strong relationships with people in different departments. She

made a concerted effort to let people know she wanted to be involved in initiatives outside of her home department, which she believes "has been so beneficial to me and it really it shows up in different points even in the appointment to this new role. I mean, that was part of the conversation the president had [with me]." Tiffany identified a group of sitting vice presidents in student life as an important professional network to her success, especially because it is important to not be siloed alone in the work she does. The group meets twice a year in person to "talk about the issues that we're grappling with institutionally and learn more from each other and just to have honest conversation about, you know, the joys and challenges of the job."

Jenna mentioned "building relationships with people who you can trust" as being important to career success and mobility. Related to trusting relationships, Kelly told me:

> I definitely have cheerleaders all over the place, but even in some of my former colleagues that I used to work with. One person that I worked for a couple of years, she and I worked together, and we still rely on each other to brainstorm things, because we could have truthful and honest conversations with each other and that friendship/work relationship has been very, very instrumental.

Tina also believes "you need those folks to cheerlead you" to aid in having a successful career in higher education. She is a part of a coaching group, comprised of all women, that she considers to be very important to her career success and counts the group as some of her cheerleaders. During the interview, Tina recalled relying on the group to discuss times when she felt invisible or unheard at work, as well as leaning on words of encouragement from the group. Quite similarly, Joy referred to one of her support networks as her "personal board of directors" made up of a diverse group of about 10

women that she can rely on to provide her advice. When I asked who is on the board, she said:

> When I think about it, some of them are in higher education and work at other institutions but our paths crossed, some of them are former colleagues that no longer work at the institution, but we became close friends, having worked together. Some of them are my friends.

The participants highlighted the importance of building trusting relationships inside and outside of their workplace as an important contributor to their success.

Mentors were also identified by the study participants as influential in their success. As the existing literature indicates, and based on the responses from study participants, mentorship is advantageous for Black women aspiring to be executive administrative leaders (Owens, 1995; Ramey, 1995; Jackson, 2001; Brown, 2005; Patitu & Hinton, 2003; Jones, 2012; Breeden, 2021), but may be less impactful than sponsors in regard to career advancement (Hewlett, 2013). Mentorship differs from sponsorship in that mentors help mentees build their confidence, provide the mentee with a space to share ideas, challenges, and frustrations, help the mentee figure out what they want in their professional life and offer the mentee empathy and support (Hewlett, 2013). Several study participants indicated that they benefited from having a mentor at some point in their career or recommended finding a mentor for those aspiring to attain an executive administrative leadership position.

Mary's comment summed up the experience of several participants when she said, "I had several mentors who really just believed in me." She goes on to recount when one of her mentors told her "I hope I'll be able to see the day when you run this place,

because you will.” Lisa identified one of her “mentors slash cheerleader” as a woman who hired her 25 years ago and they still keep in touch. Jennifer described how she has benefited from informal mentors, as “they just decided to impart some wisdom on me that I thought was helpful”, dating back to when she was an undergraduate student in college. As a student, Jennifer knew she wanted a career in higher education, and she told her dean of students at the time that she wanted his job, so he encouraged her to attend graduate school to get her started on the student affairs career track. Jennifer also shared that later on in her professional career she benefited from informal mentors “who have pulled me aside and said, I know this position is coming open." This advanced notice gave Jennifer time to prepare her application materials and she was successful in obtaining the position. Joy’s mentor, the president at her institution, told her “I believe you have what it takes to be president and I’m going to do everything in my power to get you there.” Joy shared that up until that point, the presidency at an institution was something she was interested in, but never shared those aspirations with anyone, so when her mentor called it out, that served as confirmation for Joy to move forward with the presidency as her goal. Joy’s mentor stood by her word and provided her with more experience and Joy was even named interim president after her mentor resigned. While Joy refers to her former president as a mentor, some of the support she received may also be described as sponsorship, such as naming her interim president. Amy shared a different experience with her mentors and recalled how one of her mentors provided her with advice that helped her gain the confidence and trust of people around her, which helped her be successful in her job. She also discussed the importance of having a variety of mentors who she can call on for different things because “each of them has their

strengths.” Several other participants also identified mentorship as an important factor in their success.

Lastly, a few of the study participants identified their Black colleagues as supportive networks on their journeys. Joy, who briefly served as the interim president at her institution before returning to her executive administrative leadership position, considers the Black Faculty and Staff Association at her institution as influential in her success. Regarding the association she said “they were tremendously supportive of me, especially as interim president. They would always have my back and we have lunch together at least once a month and retreats for staff and faculty.” She continued by saying “having supportive Black colleagues, I cannot underscore that enough.” Tiffany also shared a similar piece of advice related to Black women:

> Find connections that matter, and no one can define that for you. If your most salient, professional relationship is someone who doesn't look like you, then that is yours to determine but also understand that other women of color, especially Black women, can also be incredible partners to you.

Jenna briefly touched on how she feels fortunate to have experienced having multiple Black women as her bosses which provided a certain type of support, “I’ve been able to have others who can model different circumstances and that is something I can strive for and achieve and that has been helpful.” This thought captures the purpose of this study. Having more Black women in these leadership roles gives other Black women roles models to emulate and somewhat of a roadmap to follow, if possible.

Several of the study participants indicated they have different types of networks and groups they find to be supportive and a factor of their success. Based on participant

responses, it appears that each network offers varying levels of support, such as encouragement, career mobility potential, advice, aspirations, and trusting relationships.

Professional Development Programs and Organizations

When asked if any formal or informal programs were influential in their success, generally, study participants said yes and identified professional development programs and organizations as advantageous. Almost all of the study participants were actively or previously engaged in some sort of leadership or professional development program. During her career, Lee said she "went to conferences, I went to training, I went to everything I could get my hands on." She went on to share that she went to a conference one year and learned a new way to help students receive financial aid in their fourth year. She had not considered this method but was able to take that information back to her institution, implement it and provide retention scholarships to their students, she said "I never would have thought about that on my own."

Some of the participants identified industry specific organizations and conferences that were resourceful tools to them during their careers. Mary identified the National Association of College and University Attorneys "as an organization that has served as an invaluable resource and tool for me and as I've developed." Likewise, Amy said the National Association of Collegiate Directors of Athletics and National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) are important organizations to her career and "that when it comes to professional development, [the NCAA] do an outstanding job and definitely gets professional development right."

The most popular type of professional development opportunities mentioned by the study participants were leadership programs. Connie shared that she attended Harvard

University's program on leadership and governance. Tina also participated in an ivy league leadership program at Cornell University. Regarding that program, she said:

> That was a huge help in order to frame my thinking around what leadership looks like, what it takes to build consensus within an organization, not just to lead your own team, but to also, lead with other leaders. So that was an extremely beneficial program that I went through.

Jennifer highlighted a specific leadership program at her institution that she participated in "where I really started to understand in practice the interconnection and the operations of higher education" since prior to the program she was siloed in her unit within the university. Sarah said she is currently participating in a leadership program, which includes a mentoring component, sponsored by the executive leadership council. Lastly, during her interview Joy mentioned that was preparing to start the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges leadership program that prepares individuals for higher education presidencies.

Some of the study participants also sought other types of professional development they deemed to be impactful in their careers. Lee referenced *The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership book*, written by James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, which she keeps on her desk as a guide, as an important resource which she practices in her professional life. Jennifer said she has taken formal classes and workshops on design thinking that "has helped her professionally because it's an approach to problem solving and that has been tremendously helpful. I know it's not typical higher education." Jennifer continued by saying:

> I've tried to find professional development, like the design thinking or financial management, that if tomorrow I was to leave higher education it would still help me. I think having those skills and now interacting with our board of trustees, who all work outside of higher education, it has given me the tools and abilities to be able to connect and/or to be able to translate things in a way that resonates with them.

Summary

The second theme from the study findings is related to the external support that the participants consider to be influential in their career success in attaining an executive administrative leadership position at a PWI. The external support was described in many different shapes and sizes by participants, including various types of support from their families, sponsorship, specifically from White males, supportive networks, including mentors, and professional development and organizations. Based on my observations during the interviews, family support appeared to be the easiest and first thing that came to the participant's mind when asked who was influential in their success, while the impact of White male sponsorship on their careers was less obvious to participants, although a very prominent commonality among participants.

"If you have a seat at the table, you have to use your voice there."

The first theme is related to how participants describe the support they provided to themselves in their careers, while the second theme is related to how participants describe the external support they received. The final theme is related to career readiness and what the participants believe helped them be successful in attaining their executive leadership positions at PWIs. One dictionary defines readiness as "1) the condition of

being ready and 2) ready movement; promptness; quickness" (Dictionary.com, n.d.). Career readiness described by the participants be can categorized as follows, be prepared, use your voice, and take the leap, which ultimately led to many of the participants being specifically recruited for their executive administrative leadership positions.

Be Prepared

When the study participants were asked what advice, they would give to Black women aspiring to hold executive administrative leadership positions at a PWI, many of the participants responded with various ways of being prepared for the next step in their career. Tiffany said, "hone your craft" no matter the discipline, whether faculty, student affairs, "really understand your discipline and practice and never lose sight of what brought you into the field." Lisa responded by telling me:

> Build out your toolkit of skills and look at the skills of those not just those around you, but those who are above you and say, how can I get that skill? You know, what are some things that I need so that when the opportunity comes, I will have the skills that I need.

Lisa also believes the hard skills are important to get the work done right, but she also said, "for me, I think there's so much of my success [related to my soft skills]. Honestly, people say, oh she's such a great administrator. I'm like, no, I'm good at soft skills." She believes it is important to be friendly to everyone and not develop a reputation of operating independently, and strong soft skills can help mitigate that concern.

Study participants also stressed the importance of being prepared. Connie said she would advise Black women seeking executive administrative leadership roles:

> To be prepared. I mean educationally, from a leadership development perspective. I don't want to say have thick skin, but not being a shrinking violet because you will have challenges to your leadership, so you have to be prepared to stand up to those challenges.

Connie also discusses the importance of staying abreast of trends in higher education that may impact your institution and that many of the issues at institutions with 5,000 students are the same at institutions with 50,000 students and Black women seeking these leadership positions "have to be prepared to deal with those [issues]. In an effort to expand her higher education knowledge and career path, Lee "was always asking for projects and new things" from her supervisor, who saw and appreciated her perseverance and tenacity. Somewhat related, Jenna believes that staying curious and asking questions helped her be successful. She said, "looking up information and researching what are our peers doing and being engaged in professional dialogue with others about what they're experiencing I think has also helped propel success." Similarly, Jennifer said, "some of the best advice that I've got gotten is to know the business, like knowing the finances are important, knowing the enrollment funnel, but knowing the business is very important." Jennifer said her both her previous and current boss "recognized or saw my ability and they let me do a whole bunch of stuff that was great because I got to experience the breadth of higher education." This range of experience obtained by Jennifer led to her current executive administrative leadership role. Her current boss asked her to serve in the role on an interim basis, which is an area not directly related to her previous two roles in higher education, and then she was later asked by the president and the board to stay in the role permanently.

Additionally, having the ability to navigate the political landscape of higher education and at your specific institution came up from multiple participants in regard to being prepared. Lee said:

> Prepare yourself for political nuances that will come your way. There are many things that have nothing to do with your skill set. They have nothing to do with your thought process. They have nothing to do with the practical application, right? You have to be able to understand the politics and communicate in a way that.

Kelly also mentioned that Black women should "figure out your social skills, meaning the networking and navigating the political landscape" which will help understand the issues better. She continued by telling me she has figured out one of way of doing this, "I hear and listen. I listen to the back and forth between people and a lot of times [they're] talking about the same thing and its cross communication." Kelly shared an example to highlight her point, where she attended her first board meeting when tensions were somewhat high because of issues Kelly identified in the financial statements. The attendees in the meeting were argumentative with Kelly, but she realized that as a Black woman telling the board bad news they had not previously heard, that some people needed to get their emotions out before they could hear anything else. Kelly let the discussion go on for "about 10 minutes and it just flew all over my head because I didn't take none of this personal" and afterwards, Kelly began addressing the situation with "may I suggest?" Kelly refers to this phrase as her "famous words" and said, "one thing I've learned is never dictate" and using "may I suggest invites them to be part of the conversation" and "that's how I've learned to calm the storms." In this particular

example, Kelly was able to move the conversation in a productive direction by soothing concerns and providing suggestions for how to resolve the issues she identified.

Use Your Voice

When participants were asked how they rejected other people's perceptions of them and defined their own reality, referred to as self-definition, or experienced outsider within status, as defined by BFT (Collins, 2000), many of the participants told me that over time they started using their voices more or started speaking louder in their responses. Joy captured the thoughts of several participants in her response when describing how she had to build her credibility with others:

> One of my favorite things to say is if you if you have a seat at the table, you have to use your voice there. Otherwise, why are you there? Now, I'm a lot more confident but it takes building credibility initially for people to listen to you. Then once you have that credibility, I feel like I've been able to go into rooms inside my institution and I don't have the issue.

She continued by telling me that early on, this was not easy, but she learned to interject "and at some point, I've learned to sometimes be the quiet person in the room until I have a valuable opinion" to share. After a while, this strategy led to others having increased confidence in Joy resulting in those people actively seeking her opinion and thoughts. Amy also subscribes to the same mentality as Joy and said, "we can't be silent, we can't just sit there and be happy that we're there. We have to have voice, so I'm very strategic in any space about what I say, when I say it, and how I say it." Amy goes on to say that even if you are at the table just because you are a Black woman, use that your advantage and do not sit idle. Kelly shared:

> I've learned to push back, if I have to say it 10 times, you're going to hear me. Whatever the decision is does not matter, but at least I'm going to make sure that my voice is heard, so I don't shy away from it. But it is frustrating.

Connie also mentioned being at the table or included in projects because she is Black, but that once people had the opportunity to work with her "you see the light go off" and people realize she is a valuable asset to the team. However, Connie also recognized that building credibility with others was helpful in allowing her to speak up and contribute and said, "there are some people who, once they realize the value you bring, they're completely your biggest fan and they want everything there is to do with you."

Sarah reflected on moments in her career when she did not speak up and that as she progressively got into more senior positions, and started speaking up, she realized she did have a lot to say and value to add. In Sarah's case, it sounds as though her career progression and practice of speaking up more contributed to her feeling more comfortable in doing so. Somewhat similar, when asked how she got the courage to tell people they were not listening to her and that was concerning, Tina said:

> It's experience and it's also because I'm healthier now in my mental state. I'm able to name it and have the courage to be more direct about it and yeah it comes with age. You know, when you've been kicked, you're more protective of yourself to not get kicked again.

Earlier in her career, Tina said she would often internalize the struggle of being treated as invisible or unheard at work. She described those situations as "unpleasant" and "so ridiculous" because she was being "compensated very well for expertise I supposedly have, but not being listened to." Tina also shared that gradually she got better at speaking

up and asking for help if she needed it to be successful at her job “what I've learned now is to better identify those situations to more quickly and ask for help if I need it.”

Take the Leap

The third part of the career readiness theme identified is related to taking the leap when a career opportunity presents itself based on the responses from the study participants when asked what factors they consider in their success and what advice they have for others seeking the types of leadership positions they occupy. Mary’s immediate response to the latter question was:

> My biggest advice is do it afraid. Also, don't discount your experiences, don't discount whether you're ready or not. If you see a position that's interesting and you have the qualifications for that position, apply for it. If that's something of interest, apply for it, because too often we discount ourselves and we count ourselves out before even asserting our candidacy.

Sarah also believes Black women should “take the risk, take the leap” if an opportunity comes their way because it’s probably coming your way because you are liked, and these opportunities do not come around often. Jenna also believes Black women are “probably better off at least trying to take the leap because you’ll always be questioning what if [you do not take the leap]. Tiffany provided encouraging words for Black women pursuing executive leadership at PWIs and told me, “it's so doable and don't be afraid by who's never had the role or the guardrails that have been created around certain roles. It's definitely doable.” When describing the factors related to her own success, Sarah also described taking risks and charting your own path:

> I think another factor that I haven't mentioned is kind of what I call taking the road less traveled. I'm gonna do that job that nobody else wants. I'm going to take that as a test that I'm gonna go and excel on something that nobody else wants to do.

Sarah provided an example of taking the road less traveled in her career. She shared that prior to joining higher education, she had an opportunity to work for General Electric, a large public company, or a smaller company led by a dynamic leader, and she chose the smaller company. Her choice allowed her to experience a level of responsibility, autonomy and learning that she would not have been able to experience at General Electric. Referring to the leader of the company, she said, "he just poured into me. He saw stuff in me I never saw in myself." She continued by telling me "He provided a safe place to fail because he wanted me to accept the challenge and take risk" and concluded by saying "it was an amazing experience at that point in my life and it really propelled me."

Taking the leap or risk was not always referring to applying for a position or accepting a progressive leadership appointment in participant responses. Lee and Tina both shared experiences in which they took the leap of leaving a situation that they no longer benefited from. Although Tina had experience working at PWIs, at one particular PWI, she was uncomfortable and "had to leave that environment." She continued by saying "not every PWI looks and feels the same" and that it is ok to leave if you feel disrespected or not valued. In her career, Lee described either leaving an institution or repositioning herself, she said:

> I decided I needed to make the change. I don't believe in being the victim. It's not always about them, you know? Maybe it's not my time and my place to be there. Maybe it's not my role to be there. Maybe that's for somebody else to serve in that role.

Based on the participant responses, taking the leap or the risk means accepting professional opportunities that come to you, and accepting those opportunities even if they scare you or make you nervous, or on the contrast, being willing to leave situations that no longer serve you well.

Summary

Career readiness is the third theme identified from the results of this study. The participants believe it is imperative to be prepared for opportunities that Black women may be offered, Black women must define their own reality by using their voice despite barriers, and taking a leap or risk, whether its accepting or applying for a higher-level position or removing oneself from a situation that my no longer be of service.

Conclusion

The data collected during this study indicates that Black women who have been successful in attaining executive administrative leadership roles at PWIs have experienced some differences in their journeys, but they also share some of the same experiences. The focus of this study was on the shared experiences of the study participants. The results of the study are categorized into three themes: self-support, external support, and career readiness. These themes capture how participants describe their journeys to executive administrative leadership positions as well as how their background and personal lives contributed to their success. Two of the three themes

identified, self-support and career readiness, describe methods within the control of Black women on how they can support and prepare themselves for achieving their professional goals.

Regarding theme one, self-support, without being confident in their skills and abilities, it may be difficult for Black women to be successful in garnering executive administrative leadership positions at PWIs. The self-support methods described by participants collectively work to assist Black women in being successful. Without having faith in a higher power, being confident, having a strong sense of self, and being true to that, it may be challenging to reject other people's perceptions placed on Black women and thereby making it difficult to achieve self-definition.

The second theme from the study findings is related to support received from external parties. The external support described participants varied, but the most prominent types of support received came from their families, sponsorship, specifically from White males, supportive networks, and professional development and organizations. The support from these groups ranged from providing encouragement, and advice, to helping with childcare all the way to being offered career advancement opportunities.

Career readiness is the third and final theme identified in the study results. The notion of career readiness in the context of this study means to be ready to move to the next phase of your career and being prepared to do so. The participants discussed the significance of being prepared, using their voice, and taking the leap assisted in their successful careers or as advice for Black women to consider in their own pursuits.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

The demographics of the student population enrolled in postsecondary education is changing in the United States and minoritized students are estimated to be the majority of enrolled students by the year 2030. However, the demographics of leadership on college campuses is not changing at the same pace resulting in underrepresentation of professionals working at all leadership levels. Specifically, there are a lack of Black women in executive administrative leadership positions at predominately white institutions (Mosely, 1980; Crawford & Smith, 2005; Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Tevis et al., 2020; Johnson & Delmas 2022), which was the focus of this study. This chapter provides a summary of the study, a discussion of the findings, implications, recommendations for future research and recommendations for policy and practice.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore the successful journeys of Black women who have attained an executive administrative leadership position at a predominately white institution located in the southern region of the United States. The results of the study may allow other Black women to consider these pathways as they begin or continue their own journey in higher education (Glover, 2012) or institutions may use the results of the study to enhance efforts toward recruiting and retaining Black women in executive administrative leadership roles and diversifying their leadership teams. This study is guided by the following research questions:

- How do Black women describe their experiences successfully navigating their professional journeys toward an executive administrative leadership position at a PWI?
- How and to what extent do Black women perceive their background and personal lives as contributing to their persistence in their professional careers?

This study was guided by Patricia Hill Collins' (2000) Black Feminist Thought, which offers a lens to understand the unique experiences of Black women, oppressed by racism and sexism, who have been successful in their careers in higher education. This study sought to contribute to intellectual activism, which combines intellectual and academic work with social advocacy as defined by BFT, by contributing to the existing scholarship about the lack of Black women in executive administrative leadership positions at PWIs and identifying actions to combat the social injustice they experience (Collins, 2000). The following section will provide a discussion of the findings related to the research questions.

Discussion of Findings

The findings from this study were derived from semi-structured interviews conducted via Microsoft Teams with 12 Black women who currently hold or previously held an executive administrative leadership role at a PWI in the southern region of the United States. During the interviews, the discussion with study participants felt organic and participants were willing to be candid and share their experiences with me in an in-depth manner that felt as though they were serving as my big sister or aunt. This level of comfort allowed for robust discussions which served as the evidence for the findings of this study. The findings reiterate the underlying core of BFT, which indicates that Black

women recognize that all Black women experience the double oppression of racism and sexism, but that their experiences and how they resist the double oppression may differ. Chapter four provided details of the emerging themes from this study and two of the three themes identified, self-support and career readiness, describe ways in which Black women can support themselves in their professional journeys. The discussion below will connect the findings to the overarching research questions for this study.

How do Black women describe their experiences successfully navigating their professional journeys toward an executive administrative leadership position at a PWI?

In BFT, the underlying theory of this study, the standpoint of a Black women refers to the idea that the experiences, perspectives, and knowledge of Black women are unique and valuable sources of understanding and insight for those who do not share their experiences. Their standpoint is derived from their lived experiences and the ways they navigate and resist the double oppression of racism and sexism. This study provided a space and opportunity for Black women to share how they have been able to navigate successful professional journeys leading to an executive administrative leadership position, at institutions that have historically discriminated against Black women. The study findings also increase the knowledge about Black women who have been successful at PWIs and provide actionable items to help Black women survive and cope with racism and sexism in the workplace (Collins, 2000). In alignment with BFT, **t**he findings from this study suggest that the experiences of Black women who have been able to achieve an executive administrative leadership position at a PWI vary, but aspects

of their journeys are similar. This section will focus on the similarities among the participants.

After interviewing the 12 study participants and learning more about their journeys leading to a successful career in higher education, and based on the findings of this study, there were several shared experiences and factors among the study participants in describing their journeys. Specific examples related to the experiences and factors were described primarily in the second theme, "I am one of your biggest fans, one of your biggest champions, and I want to help you" as well as the third theme, "if you have a seat at the table, you have to use your voice there." Chapter four contains detailed evidence from the participant interviews to support both of these themes.

From theme two, one of the most prominent shared experiences among the participants was the influence of White male sponsorship in their careers. I observed some participants being slightly hesitant in identifying White males as influential in their careers, but upon further reflection it became apparent that many of the participants benefited from having a White male advocate on their behalf. My observation is that the hesitancy from the participants appeared to be from the participants never specifically considering if a White man served as a sponsor and if so, considering whether or not it was it truly impactful in their career. These sponsorships appeared to develop organically and most commonly from their sponsors witnessing the participant perform at a high level either as a supervisor or colleague. While participants were able to identify a sponsor in their career, most of the participants also experienced outsider within status, as described by BFT, during their careers. The presence of a sponsor did not negate the feeling of being overlooked or unheard at some point in their careers by the participants.

The next commonly shared experience among participants is related to supportive networks. The networks described by participants included friends, peers, colleagues, mentors, and professional networks. The study participants credited having a broad network of support as instrumental in their success as well as in the advice they provided to other Black women seeking similar leadership positions. The support provided by the networks ranged from serving as a cheerleader to encourage the participant, serving as advisors to provide counsel to the participant, discussing issues and best practices or serving as a trusted colleague to provide a sounding board for candid discussions. Mentorship was another shared factor discussed by participants as most of them said they benefited from having a mentor at some point in their career or suggested that Black women find a mentor to help in their career pursuits. The experience of mentorship described by the participants included their mentor being confident in their abilities, encouraging the participant, providing opportunities to advance their careers, and sharing advice on how to achieve their professional goals. Several study participants mentioned their Black colleagues, and some specifically mentioned Black women, as a significant source of support. BFT identifies dialogical relationships as one of its core tenants, which is described as Black women building community with other Black women where open and honest communication can occur with the goal of empowerment, social change, or mutual understanding (Collins, 2000). Some of the participants were able to find dialogical relationships at their workplaces, which allowed them to gain a different perspective about attaining leadership positions by sharing their experience with other Black women. Participants spoke highly of these varied networks, and they were fairly quick to identify them as influential in their success.

Another shared experience amongst the study participants was the reliance on professional development programs and organizations. Almost all of the participants discussed being actively or previously engaged in a leadership or professional development program that they found to be valuable in their journey. The participants proactively sought out these opportunities or were nominated by peers, supervisors, or colleagues for programs either internal or external to their institution. These programs provided critical leadership skills, networking opportunities, practical advice to help the participant do their job or better understand higher education, mentoring opportunities, or other important skills deemed beneficial throughout their career.

The entirety of theme three, career readiness, also provided shared experiences on the road to success for the study participants. The first component of theme three is the idea of being prepared for the next step in their careers. Participants described how building their toolkit of skills, staying apprised of trends and hot topics in higher education, seeking projects and opportunities to expand their knowledge of higher education, and learning to navigate the political landscape in higher education. The second component of the career readiness theme is related to participant's seizing the opportunity to use their voices. Participants shared that with time, more experience, and responsibility, they became more confident in speaking up and sharing their thoughts and opinions or even asking for help. The credibility of the participants increased with those around them after they realized the participant added value which led to some proactively seeking out the participant for their thoughts and opinions. Some participants highlighted that when given the opportunity to have a seat at the table, they must take advantage of that seat and use their voice, in a strategic manner, to make an impact. The last

component of theme three is summarized as taking the leap. The participants shared their advice on taking the leap if an opportunity presents itself and not undermining their qualifications and ability to perform well at the next level in their career or taking the less obvious career paths that could benefit them more. Some participants also believed that taking the leap or risk meant leaving a situation that no longer served them well and doing what is best for them. Career readiness is one method to resist the double oppression of racism and sexism that Black women experience. If Black women combine this knowledge of being ready to take the next step in their career with taking the appropriate action to get prepared, using their voice, and taking the leap, as suggested by the participants, this can serve as a response to the oppression experienced by Black women as they ascend to executive administrative leadership positions at PWIs, which is at the core of BFT.

Overall, the shared experiences described by the participants as they successfully navigated their careers towards an executive administrative leadership position at a PWI included sponsorship, mostly from White males, the importance of professional development and professional organizations, mentorship, being prepared, using their voices, and taking risks during their journeys.

How and to what extent do Black women perceive their background and personal lives as contributing to their persistence in their professional careers?

The findings from this study suggest that the background and personal lives of Black women are important in their persistence and success as the study participants identified several areas from their background and personal lives as a factor of their success. Theme one, **“**you can’t do the job if you don’t believe in yourself” primarily

responds to this research question, in addition to components of theme two, “I am one of your biggest fans, one of your biggest champions, and I want to help you.”

Within theme one, which includes findings related to participants personally supporting themselves during their career journeys, faith in a higher power was a notable factor identified by participants. Almost all of the participants referenced their religious faith during their interviews as a contributing factor to their success or their persistence. Their faith in a higher power provided the participants with a greater sense of purpose and sense to help persist through difficult situations and greater confidence and faith in their own skills and abilities helping them to be successful. Self-confidence was the second component identified as part of theme one that contributed to the persistence of the study participants. This theme directly correlates to BFT’s concept of self-valuation, which involves Black women recognizing their innate worth and capabilities, which can be difficult in environments that have historically discriminated against Black women. Several participants mentioned that without having confidence in themselves, it would be difficult to handle the responsibilities that accompany an executive administrative leadership position. Self-confidence gave the participants the ability to overcome imposter syndrome, persevere in situations, deal with their outsider-within status, and a mindset of proving other people’s perceptions wrong. The participants gained their self-confidence from their years of experience and their parents or upbringing. The next component of theme one was related to being your authentic self and having a defined sense of self which provided the participants with personal support during their careers. The participants recognize that this is not always easy, especially in predominately White

institutions, but stressed the importance of not compromising who they are and finding the spaces and places where they could be their authentic selves.

Lastly, the practice of rejecting other people's perceptions was the final component of theme one. One of the key concepts of BFT is self-definition, which means the ability and autonomy for Black women to define themselves and their experiences on their own terms, which is important in resisting the double oppression of racism and sexism and reject other people's perceptions and not rely on others to create their identity (Collins, 2000). The study participants shared that rejecting other people's perceptions and ideas of them became easier with experience and time. Some participants shared they not only rejected the other person's perceptions of them, but also directly addressed the person and told them they were being offensive in an effort to stop microaggressive behavior.

Within theme two, participants described the support they received from their families as seminal in their success. Most of the participants identified their families, often specifically their parents, as being very influential in their success. Based on my observation, parents and families were the easiest for participants to identify in terms of support implying the possibility of their support being the most significant. This support came in a variety of ways as described by participants including providing a solid foundation, providing encouragement, and helping the participant navigate their personal and professional lives. The Black women who participated in this study received a solid foundation and upbringing from their parents which in some cases provided the participants with behavior they emulated, such as their work ethic. Participants also noted that their families provided various type of encouragement, such as encouragement to

obtain a college degree, or even a doctorate, encouragement to apply for their executive administrative leadership position, or general encouragement and support during their professional journeys. Lastly, the family support received by participants also included helping participants navigate their personal and professional lives. Often this was in the form of providing childcare for the participants to allow them to balance their successful careers with having a family.

Overall, the study participants perceive their background and personal lives as significant in contributing to their persistence and successful careers. Mostly from being able to support themselves in overcoming challenges and moving forward to achieve their goals and from the support of their families. While participants referenced their families, they often called out their parents for being prominent forces of encouragement and support in not only their upbringing, but also their professional careers.

The responses to these two research questions provide the factors and influences as described by the study participants in navigating their careers that ultimately led to high-ranking executive administrative leadership role at a PWI. The final shared experience among these participants is that these factors and influences led to a significant majority of the participants being specifically recruited for their positions. The evidence obtained from the participants indicates that peers, supervisors, colleagues, and institution presidents nominated or encouraged the study participants to apply for their executive administrative leadership positions. Of the 12 participants, only three participants independently sought out their executive administrative leadership positions on their own and two of three were motivated by a desire to change their geographical location for their families. Therefore, it appears that being directly recruited by others is a

tactic that benefited Black women in attaining their executive administrative leadership positions.

Implications

The findings of this study extend the limited existing research on Black women's experiences as executive administrative leaders in higher education. By focusing this study on the experience of Black women in executive administrative leadership positions at PWIs, this study also adds to the literature about the environment at PWIs and offers information to the colleagues of Black women regarding their leadership experiences within that space. From this study, three implications were identified. First, as the literature suggests, institutions play a significant role in advancing the careers of Black women in higher education. Specifically, Black women can benefit significantly from professional development programs (Brown, 1997; Jackson, 2001; Wright et al., 2006; Hill et al., 2016; Gray, 2021; Johnson & Delmas, 2022) and White male sponsorship within an institution (Davis & Maldonado, 2015) or outside of an institution. Institutions have the ability to provide funding and the time away from work for Black women to participate in various types of professional development programs, which can also help Black women feel more connected to their institution and feel valued (Patitu & Hinton, 2003; Hill et al., 2016; Redmond et al., 2017; DeLaquil, 2021; Logan & Dudley, 2021; Townsend, 2021). Professional development programs were also highlighted as a factor of success for the participants of this study. Scholars have recently indicated that sponsorship may be more effective than mentoring relationships for career mobility (Hill et al., 2016) and research suggests that having a White male sponsor benefits Black women because White men often have the authority and ability to provide greater

visibility for Black women (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). The findings from this study provide further evidence of this notion.

Next, the evidence obtained during this study supports the notion that it is important for Black women to have an adequate support system, inside and outside of the workplace (Howard, 1986, Gardner et al., 2014, Chance, 2022). The theme of external support identified a variety of support networks which were instrumental in their success. As the literature suggests, study participants attributed their success to networks within their institutions and outside of their institution. Family support was the most significant external support network mentioned by participants in this study. Third, Logan & Dudley (2021) contend that Black women can present their authentic self and be successful if they are supported by their institution despite some research indicating that black women conform to norms and are not their true authentic self in the workplace (Townsend, 2021). The evidence from this study reaffirms the idea, that Black women believe it is important to have a defined sense of self and that presenting their authentic self allows them to be their best self. This strong sense of self allowed the study participants to define their own realities and reject the perceptions of others. Therefore, institutions should ensure they create and nurture environments with zero tolerance for stereotypes, bias, and discrimination against Black women (Logan & Dudley, 2021; Njoku & Evans, 2022) to encourage Black women to be authentic and true to themselves.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

The findings from this study offer insight into policy and practice considerations to benefit Black women who aspire to hold these positions as well as institutions seeking

to diversify their leadership teams. Based on the results of this study, the following are recommendations for policy and practice:

- Institutions should develop robust internal professional development opportunities or provide funding to attend external professional development programs for Black women. The objective of these programs should be to enhance leadership skills, orient them to executive leadership, better understand the business of higher education, and provide networking opportunities, including a mentoring component.
- Institutions should implement affinity groups for their employees, and specifically for the Black women who work on their campuses. Many institutions have affinity groups for Black employees, such as the University of Kentucky, Vanderbilt University, and Harvard University. However, affinity groups for only Black women do not appear to be as prominent in higher education. Supportive networks and groups are important to the success of Black women and this type of group may help create a greater sense of community as well as provide additional support for these women.
- Institutions should examine their existing leadership pipelines and identify Black women who have the potential to serve in an executive administrative leadership position and provide them with targeted resources necessary to prepare them for the next step in their career (i.e., mentoring, leadership training or other professional development programs specific to that individual) as well as a career framework to help them understand the possible paths to achieve this goal.

- Black women seeking these types of leadership positions should prepare themselves to the best of their ability for these roles. This includes, participating in professional development programs, strategically volunteering for committees or service that may benefit their career aspirations, networking on and off their campuses, and finding a mentor.

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings from this study offer insight into future research opportunities as well as practice and policy information to benefit Black women who aspire to hold these positions as well as institutions seeking to diversify their leadership teams. This study only included the perspective of Black women and their experiences achieving an executive administrative leadership position at a PWI, giving them space to share their stories by utilizing BFT as the theoretical framework. We learned from this study that the majority of participants included were specifically recruited or nominated for their leadership position. One area of future research would be to explore and understand from the individuals who recruited or nominated Black women to serve in these positions to better understand why they selected the person for the role. Understanding this information may allow others to utilize this data to increase the number of Black women serving in executive leadership positions at predominately White institutions.

The Black women who participated in the study discussed having a defined sense of self and knowing who they are, and while not always easy, not compromising that in the workplace. Study participants attributed the origin of their defined sense of self to their parents or their upbringing, however, developing a deep understanding of where Black women's strong sense of self originates and how it is maintained exceeded the

scope of this study. Additional research should be conducted to increase our understanding of where this strong defined sense of self originates and how Black women are able to maintain that strong sense of self during challenging experiences at PWIs. Additionally, research should be conducted to understand how this strong sense of self impacts the leadership style of Black women.

Another area for future research includes a deeper dive into the pathways of Black women who have successfully achieved executive administrative leadership positions. It should be noted that five of the 12 participants previously worked in local, state, or federal government prior to transitioning into higher education. In some cases, the connections, and networks of the participants within the governmental space led to the transition into higher education. This high number of participants who previously worked in government begs the question of whether or not that is a gateway into higher education leadership for Black women. Several of the participants also obtained their juris doctorate degrees and attributed their success to their legal backgrounds as well. Obtaining a deeper understanding of these pathways, both their career and educational, may help recruit more Black women into these roles and provide greater diversity at the leadership level at PWIs.

Lastly, the majority of the participants shared their challenges working at a PWI as a Black woman in a leadership role and how they overcame those challenges, but some of the participants shared that their experiences working at a PWI as a Black woman in a leadership role were positive and good. It is worth researching those environments at PWIs where Black women feel empowered, respected, and safe to glean any best

practices or policies that other institutions can adopt to increase retention of Black women working on their campuses thereby diversifying the pipeline for leadership roles.

Study Limitations

The design of this study included several limitations. These limitations include a sample of participants from only one region of the United States. The experiences and pathways of Black women in the South may differ from those in other regions within the United States, so the findings may not be able to be extrapolated to Black women across the country. Second, while the sample included a diverse population as it relates to the type of institution (e.g., public, private) where the participants served in executive leadership positions and the age of the participants, these factors were not specifically taken into consideration during this study. Certainly, these factors may impact the experiences of participants, but the evaluation of these factors exceeds the scope of this study. The third limitation is related to the modality in which the interviews were conducted. All interviews were conducted virtually, and some participants did not turn their cameras on which eliminated my ability to observe body language during the interview. Next, this study only included 12 participants, so developing generalizations for the entire population of Black women seeking executive administrative leaderships positions at a PWI is not possible based on this sample size. Lastly, this study is limited by the responses from the participants and their willingness to share information related to their professional and personal lives.

Conclusion

The title of this study came from the response of one of the study participants, who responded “do it afraid” when asked what advice she would give to Black women

aspiring to similar positions. The participant explained that Black women should not discount their experiences and their abilities when an opportunity presents itself, but rather, Black women should accept the opportunity despite being nervous or scared. The truth is that these types of opportunities do not come around often for Black women, so the participant stressed the importance of leaping and seizing the opportunity when it presents itself.

Despite the demographics of students enrolled in postsecondary institutions in the United States, the number of Black women in leadership positions at PWIs remains low (Mosely, 1980; Crawford & Smith, 2005; Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Tevis et al., 2020; Johnson & Delmas 2022) because the opportunities do not come present themselves often. This study provided a space for Black women who have been able to achieve executive administrative leadership positions at PWIs to share their lived experiences on their journeys to these leadership positions. Black Feminist Thought was the theoretical framework used in this study which allowed knowledge and insights to be gained from providing these marginalized women a voice to tell their stories. The Black women I was fortunate to interview provided details on how they experienced outsider within status, and how they persisted through those situations, rejected other people's perceptions of them as a Black woman in a leadership role, and details on the many factors they attribute their success to in their careers.

The findings of this study are categorized into the following three themes: self-support, external support, and career readiness. Some of the findings affirmed the importance of sponsorship, professional development, supportive networks and groups, family support and mentorship. However, the study also brought the importance of self-

confidence, taking risks, being prepared for the next step, and using your voice, to the forefront when understanding the experience of Black women who have succeeded at attaining executive leadership positions at PWIs. Despite the ongoing racism and sexism that Black women experience on a daily basis, my goal was to expand the existing literature and provide a spotlight for the Black women who have achieved the very career goal I aspire to myself.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Career

1) Can you tell me about how you started working in higher education?
    a. What made you want to work in higher education?
2) What motivated you to ultimately seek an executive administrative leadership role?
    a. Did someone specifically recruit or encourage you to apply for the opportunity? If so, who and why?
3) Can you describe your experience working at a PWI as a Black woman in a leadership role?
4) One key concept of Patricia Hill Collins's Black Feminist Thought or BFT is that Black women have "the power to name one's own reality" which she refers to as self-definition. How have you rejected how other people have defined you and named your own reality on your journey to an executive administrative leadership position?
5) Another key concept of BFT is the outsider within status of Black women, which means Black women have been "invited places where the dominant group has assembled, but they remain outsiders because they are still invisible and have no voice when dialogue commences." How have you experienced the outsider within status in your professional journey?
6) Did you experience any other setbacks along the way?
    a. If so, can you tell me more about that?
    b. How did you persist?

Factors of success

1) How do you describe the influences/factors that led to a successful career in higher education?
    a. Were certain people influential in your career success (in and outside of the workplace)? If so, who and how?
    b. Do you have mentors or sponsors that facilitated professional opportunities? If so, who and what is their race?
    c. Did your educational experiences and/or choices, both inside and outside the classroom, factor into your success? If so, how?
    d. Were any formal or informal programs offered by your institution(s) influential in your success? If so, which ones and why?
2) Do you believe any aspects of your personal life have attributed to your success? If so, how?
    a. How was your family influential in your success?
    b. How does work life balance impact your success?
3) What advice would you give to Black women aspiring to hold executive administrative leadership positions at PWIs?

4) Is there anything we have not discussed that you considered to be important in your career success?