A Phenomenological Examination of Womanist Leadership in an Urban Community College

Cynthia Denise Armster
carmster2@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXAMINATION OF WOMANIST LEADERSHIP IN AN URBAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Cynthia D. Armster, Ed.D.
Department of Counseling and Higher Education
Northern Illinois University, 2021
Laverne Gyant, Director

There is an absence of research addressing Women of Color leaders in the academy, specifically relative to the influence of their cultural identity on their leadership styles. The purpose of this study is to understand the lived experience of Women of Color leaders who served in cabinet-level positions at an urban midwestern multi-campus comprehensive community college system, how their leader persona impacted their decisions and policy making as Women of Color leaders, and their perception of their impact and legacy in the mentoring of the next generation of Women of Color leaders within community colleges. This study is necessary to increase the understanding and value that Women of Color leaders embody as they increasingly enter and contribute to shaping higher education institutions, particularly community colleges.

This phenomenological study documents the Womanist influence in decision making and policy development at an urban community college and offers practices for Women of Color in leadership to operate as change agents within institutions. Utilizing Critical Race Theory and Womanism as the analytical lens, the study documents the lived experience of Women of Color leaders, granting them visibility, legitimization, and affirmation of their legacy influencing
decisions positively impacting institutional human resources, policies and procedures, and ultimately supporting the success of people of color.

Through purposeful sampling, 18 Women of Color leaders qualified to be interviewed. Participants responded to 16 questions matched to the four research questions. Findings revealed six overarching themes impacting their leadership experience, influencing their decision making, mentoring received or rendered, and a compilation of detailed enduring programmatic legacies at the institution.

The concept of Womanist educator is introduced, defined, and advanced as a result of this study. The confluence of historical, intellectual, and cultural experiences and social constructs shaped Women of Color leadership, resulting in Women of Color in higher education bearing a responsibility to become the embodiment of Womanist educators. Womanist educators balance their service as institutional leaders with service as advocates for the ethnic/racial community aligned with their cultural identity and become educational activists for equity relative to institutional resources, policies, personnel, and curriculum to champion diversity and inclusiveness within institutions and organizations.
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXAMINATION OF WOMANIST LEADERSHIP IN AN URBAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

BY

CYNTHIA D. ARMSTER

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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF COUNSELING AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Doctoral Director: Laverne Gyant
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I must extend sincere gratitude to a number of people who have inspired, encouraged, nudged, and pushed me over the years to “complete my paper”! First, a bouquet of red and white roses to Dr. Jacqueline Kane, a phenomenal woman who was one of the founders of the Association of Black Women in Higher Education (ABWHE). Dr. Kane reached out to me via the cyber world and offered to hold me accountable when I needed someone to walk with me on the final leg of this journey. She required me to call her each Sunday evening for a 15-minute conversation to update her on where I was with my paper. By extending herself to me, and because I hold her in such high esteem, it made me dig deep to make sure each Sunday I could report some progress! Thank you, Dr. Kane, for believing in me and shoring me up to get across that finish line. You modeled exactly what my research highlights, which is the need for Women of Color to support each other in their personal and professional development and practice allyship to reach higher heights.

Thank you to Dr. Audrey “Nana” Turner, who completed her doctorate at the age of 60. At the time, I had the nerve to think that was way too old! Twenty years ago, I was a single parent when Dr. Turner literally inserted herself into my life by adopting my son as her grandson when my career demanded more of me in order to succeed. Because of Dr. “Nana” Turner, as my son affectionately called her, I was able to rise to the challenge without worrying about my home front because she had it covered. Conversely, she continually pushed me to finish my education, even when I had walked away a couple times. Growing up in the Deep South during the era of
Jim Crow, Dr. Nana Turner was adamant that we must get our schooling, no matter what! A month wouldn’t go by without her asking me how was I progressing with completing my paper. As annoyed as I was, I’m absolutely grateful to complete this journey and be able to thank her for her years of continued support...and now that I’m 60 years old getting my doctorate, I don’t think it’s way too old after all!

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Saving the absolute best for last, I am forever grateful for my siblings Michelle, Deborah, and Michael just for being who you are in all of your uniqueness. I am because you all are who we are: the Armster Family brood, and I love you for all the good times we’ve shared growing up and through the years! Our ways of being have kept me humble and connected to my power source of love, God Almighty! May She continue to carry us forward as we operate in our purpose and embody and advance the dreams and hopes of our ancestors and our parents. Ase’.

“God of mystery and mercy, as we leave, may we be inspired by Cynthia’s Black girl magic and be emboldened to speak truth that is full of love, life and liberation! Ase’ & Amen.”

~~Rev. Michelle E. Armster, 11/20/20
DEDICATION

"Only the BLACK WOMAN can say 'when and where I enter, in the quiet undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enters with me."” ~ Dr. Anna Julia Cooper, 1892

THIRTY YEARS! This has been a journey of 30 years...three doctoral programs...three different universities...three different committees...four committee chairs...four different research topics...finally, my doctoral degree marathon has finally come to an end! Thank you sounds so very empty after all these years, so I say Hallelujah to Jesus for always reminding me that He was always on the throne sitting high and cheering me on as I trudged forward conquering self-doubt, imposter syndrome, depression, despair, and hopelessness. Nevertheless, when people say, “But GOD,” I now know beyond a shadow of a doubt that to be true in my case and am here to bear witness!

God, in Her infinite wisdom, used my father (my first love) to spur me on. At the age of 81, my father had emergency triple bypass surgery. Thankfully, he lived. (I say it was due to my catching the first flight out to be by his bedside questioning his doctors’ every move!) Following his recovery, he shared with me the one thing he wanted from me was for me to complete my doctorate degree. (This statement was made after I had retired and walked away from completing my degree. I had made peace with being ABD for the rest of my life! I figured I wouldn’t need it since I was retired.) Nevertheless, my father implored me to return to complete the degree because no one on his side of the family had achieved such a feat...to which I dryly replied, “If it is so important to you why don’t you go back and get one then?” He looked me in my eyes and
said, “I want you to do it!” So, being the forever Daddy’s girl, I begrudgingly resumed the process as long as he promised to change his diet by reducing his meat consumption and increasing his vegetable intake. He agreed, although I knew it would be impossible since he doesn’t cook! Nevertheless, I kept my word to him!

Therefore, I dedicate my contribution to Womanist scholarly work to both of my octogenarian parents (Franksin Armster & Dorothy Armster), both of whom were born and grew up in Mississippi during a time when limitations were foisted upon them due to the racist policies that existed in America, such as the idiocracy of Jim Crow. They actively supported the hope the Civil Rights Movement attempted to bring forth to create a better world for their descendants and believed in unlimited opportunities offered by accessing higher education, which they instilled in me and my three siblings. All four of us have obtained at least an undergraduate degree! Without my parents there would be no me. I pray their good genes allow me to be around long enough to know my grandchildren and, prayerfully, my great-grandchildren, so I can instill in them the desire to achieve irrespective of what societal barriers they may encounter!

I dedicate my terminal degree achievement to my children, Sobenna and Khary, both of whom have always known me to be in school doing something, and at varying times in their lives they accompanied me to class! May they “nevuh evuh” know limitations in their lives, and if/when they encounter supposed boundaries, my fervent prayer is that they catapult over, maneuver around, or power through until they reach their desired goals! Always stay focused on your end game!

I owe a debt of gratitude to my final dissertation committee, all of whom are African American women scholars with earned doctorates (Drs. LaVerne Gyant—Chair, Vernese
Edgehill-Walden, Vinni Hall, and Janice Hamlet), who inspired me to complete the final leg of my doctoral journey by having a vested interest in my topic, freely sharing resources, and expressing how my work will contribute to the growing body of knowledge regarding Women of Color leaders in the academy, thus inspiring me to bring my absolute best to this project! They all embodied the spirit of my sheroes, Dr. Anna Julia Cooper and Lucy D. Slowe, the earliest “Womanist educators” advancing educational justice in the early 19th century. Both fully understood the indomitable ability of Black women to achieve and dedicated their lives to making it a reality then and for us Womanist educators now!

In memory of Dr. Aqualyn Toy Caldwell-Colbert, who embodied the concept of a Womanist educator. Toy was my soror, professor, and mentor during my undergraduate and graduate studies who totally embodied the tenets of Womanist educator in the way she imparted education, conducted relevant research, positioned herself professionally, and urged others to strive for excellence all the time. When I graduated with my master’s degree, it was Dr. A. Toy Caldwell-Colbert who said, “Your journey isn’t finished until you receive your doctorate.” She planted the seed for me to continue my educational pursuit, which has finally come to fruition. Only now I realize that you never stop learning and growing.

Finally, I dedicate my lifelong pursuit of a terminal degree to all the Sandra Blands and Breonna Taylors of our world. Young, vibrant, gifted African American women whose lives were cut short at the hands of rogue law enforcement officers who operate with impunity in a racist system that does not value the lives of Black people! Who knows what these young women would have achieved in life and what contributions they would have made to advance our society/world, if only given a chance to live! May my life work to inspire Women of Color to
achieve against all odds be accomplished by the removal of systemic barriers, so everyone has
the opportunity to realize their God-given talents and reach unfettered heights! Black Lives
Matter! Ase’
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The United States Census Bureau (2004) projected by 2050 that ethnic and racial minorities would become 50% of the population in the United States. By 2030, 14.4% of the population is expected to be composed of African Americans, 18.9% Latinx, 7.0% Asian Pacific Islanders, and 1.0% Native Americans (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Women are expected to comprise 46% of the workforce. Women of Color entering places and spaces previously monopolized by White males is a growing reality across the U.S. as America experiences a “browning” of its entire workforce.

In the 2018 election, 106 women were elected to serve as representatives from their communities in the 116th Congress of the United States, the most diverse to date in gender, race, and religious beliefs (Johnson, 2018). This is an increase of 15% from the 115th House of Representatives. The 116th Congress has experienced an increase of 52% women and 34% of people of color, including three African Americans (two of whom are women), two Muslim women, and two Native Americans (Panetta & Lee, 2019).

Newly elected Representative Deb Haaland, from New Mexico, one of two first-ever elected Native Americans in Congress, summed up the importance of this moment in the history of this country, saying:

There’s never been a voice to advocate for the things Native Americans need. I want other Native American women, and women of color, to run and succeed. I know what I do in my term will make a difference for those who come behind me. (Romero, 2018)
During this time of advancement when women and people of color occupy places and spaces where entry has been previously denied or restricted, their very presence upsets the status quo. The chances of other women and people of color to follow are measured based on the effectiveness and legacy of those who initially occupied the space which previously reflected a deference to the traditional power structure, namely White males. This reality is true in the two American institutions tasked to uphold and perpetuate the power structure instituted since the founding of America: the church and higher education (Wilder, 2013). When seeking to change ideologies and resulting outcomes in this land, one would need to begin by examining these two institutions for dismantling and reconstructing systemic processes which serve as gatekeepers of inclusion for persons viewed as “other,” particularly for persons of color who are women.

Applicants in business and industry are viewed favorably because their skills, knowledge, and expertise are believed to enhance the organization and can make a difference in the bottom line. Gupta asserts that “diversity in organizations increases creativity, innovation, and leads to higher quality decision-making” (WIA, 2019). However, the opposite is the reality in the academy, where African American and other Women of Color are perceived as less qualified than their White counterparts because the academy is structured around traditional “White male good ol’ boy networks” and race is viewed as more central in their hiring than their skills, knowledge, and expertise (Wilson, 1989). “‘Others’ are often regarded by administrators and full-time faculty as second-class citizens or outsiders who must fend for themselves” (Wallace et al., 2012, p. 436).

Women were not participants in early college or university leadership. Initially the intent of higher education was to provide opportunities to educate the sons of affluent White families to
carry on the family business or to practice politics, law, medicine, or commerce. Not until 1833 were women allowed to attend all-male colleges (Cremin, 1997). Catherine Brewer became the first woman to earn a bachelor’s degree when she graduated from Wesleyan College in Macon, Georgia, in 1840. In 1850, Oberlin College in Ohio awarded the first literary degree to Lucy Sessions and a bachelor’s degree to Mary Jane Patterson in 1862, both Black women (Graham, 1978). Once granted access to higher education, Black women pursued it fearlessly as the sole means to improve the conditions affecting their people’s existence.

Wilson (1989) notes how Women of Color in the academy were more an anomaly than the norm:

It is ironic that the two institutions most identified with preserving the nation’s ethical mores and democratic philosophical values—the church and the university—are the two institutions most resistant to diversity and democracy in their practices and leadership. Thus, it is apparent that the limited presence of women of color in higher education administration has its roots in the history of America and cannot be understood separately from that history. (p. 85)

Johnetta Cole, former president of Bennett College and president emerita of Spelman College, asserted at a national summit for executive Women of Color, “There are three W’s that define American higher education: Western, White, and Womanless” (Cole, 1990, p. 34). Collins (2009) stated, “Black women’s exclusion from positions of power within mainstream institutions has led to the elevation of elite White male ideas and interest, and the corresponding oppression of Black women’s ideas and interest in traditional scholarship and culture” (p. 7). Collins (2009) continued by encouraging Black women to “engage in knowledge creation and to give voice to their experiences” (p. xii).
The steady increase of Women of Color in the academy challenges the basis upon which higher education has operated in America for centuries. Previously viewed as impenetrable and devoid of representation of people of color in disciplines, classrooms, staff, administration, and leadership, research on Women of Color in the academy is necessary to guarantee their visibility and ensure their contributions matter in deconstructing and reconstructing the very institution established to maintain the status quo (Lorde, 2007). The Women in Higher Education press release (Cook, 2012) concluded that “the imperative rapid change in the racially and socioeconomically diverse student body in America’s colleges and universities suggests a need for adaptability and diversity in higher education institutions, and their leadership” (p. 47).

Background

As the face of America’s workforce changes, college enrollment and graduation rates among people of color are steadily rising. According to the Minorities in Higher Education report (ACE, 2010), minimal research exists focusing on Women of Color leaders in higher education. Research regarding Women of Color as leaders in higher education traditionally has focused on career pathways (Choates, 2012; Humphrey, 2012; Zell, 2017), leadership styles (Bordas, 2007; Wardell, 2010), confronting racism and/or sexism in the workplace (Huang, 2012), and balancing bicultural identities in the work environment (Bell, 1990). Pratt-Clarke (2017) believes “women of color scholars who are writing about leadership, higher education, and women are critical to documenting the journeys of women of color leaders that’s absent from books about higher education leadership” (xiii). Pratt Clarke (2017) asserts:

We are to engage in transformational work around diversity, involving traditionally underrepresented, and marginalized groups based on their intersecting identities that have
been disempowered by society. As Black feminist scholar-activist[s] in the academy, our role is about challenging borders, boundaries, and barriers. (p. 11)

Pratt-Clarke (2017) surmises that “the very act of social justice begins by challenging hegemonic domains” (p. 27). By challenging institutions which previously existed to perpetuate inequality and oppression, a new narrative springs forth which is inclusive and has no end relative to institutional impact and advancement.

Penny and Gaillard (2006) spoke of the “paucity of research on African American women in administration in higher education” (p 197): “The very act of producing research and contributing to the body of literature including the voices and perspectives of women of color in higher education is an act of social justice” (Pratt-Clarke, 2017, p. 23). The goal of capturing the voices and experiences of Women of Color, especially those who served as leaders in spaces of White male dominance, addresses “the invisibility, silence, and marginalization of women of color presidents by providing visibility, affirmation, and legitimacy of their experiences, journey, and lives” (Pratt-Clarke, 2017, p. 27).

Wardell (2010) identified Women of Color executives as exercising their leadership practice by challenging the process. Their factors of “culture and gender” contributed to their behavior being most engaged as executives in supporting and facilitating growth and development of others (pp. 109–110). Quantifying that executive Women of Color have a positive presence on organizational performance due to leadership behaviors, Wardell (2010) documented that “executive women of color seek innovative ways to change, grow, improve and experiment, and take risks by constantly generating small wins and learning from mistakes” (p. 8). Executive Women of Color are “more active and engaged in helping others within their
workplace environment by challenging and supporting them” (p. 121). Andrews (2000) highlighted how Women of Color, specifically Black women, strive to bond with peers and create a sense of “sisterhood” and the support they need to perform their roles in order to excel.

Traditionally, feminine attributes, traits, and ways of being have been associated with ineffective leadership (Curry, 2000, p. 15). Curry argues that “leadership development for women does not follow regimented acquisition of defined tenets of leadership, but rather is part of a phenomenological process as women navigate sociocultural and psychosocial terrain in their adult identity development” (p. 9). Defined as a leader persona, Curry (2000) viewed the Women of Color leadership style to be a confluence of historical, intellectual, and cultural experiences and social factors constructed over time that shapes Women of Color’s leadership identity and subsequently influences their leadership style/role. Likewise, Ausmer’s (2009) study revealed that “leadership is a connected process, with various life experiences contributing to views, relationships, and goals” (p. 119). The acquisition of a “leader persona” for Women of Color occurs over time and reflects their intellectual and cultural experiences and object relations (Curry, p. 19).

Pratt-Clarke (2017) maintains that “by providing visibility, affirmation, and legitimacy of the experiences, journeys, and lives of women of color in the academy it becomes a tool in addressing their invisibility, silence, and marginalization” (p. 27). Gupta (2018) highlights several key nurturing competencies that enhance diversity and stresses that “diversity in leadership increases creativity, innovation, and leads to higher quality decision making leading to … more democratic and inclusive organizations” (p. 1). Green (2008) posits that the “voice of
experience helps to add meaning to what it means to live as a woman leader of color within these institutions” (p. 812).

Women of Color must become visible within the academy and at all levels for their contributions and expertise to become valued in the global society. Preservation of America’s values resides in the hallowed halls of the academy, and change is necessary in order to usher in the creation of new knowledge and processes in the academy to ensure the relevance of these institutions. Examining how Women of Color view their leadership style based on their acquired leader persona will offer insight to the depth, talent, and unique perspective Women of Color bring with their diverse leadership experiences at community colleges, where most Americans first experience college, especially people of color.

Purpose of the Study

The leadership experiences of Women of Color in the academy are sparse in the literature. The purpose of this study is to understand the lived experience of Women of Color leaders who served in cabinet-level positions over a span of 13 years at an urban midwestern multi-campus comprehensive community college system (UMCCCS), how their leader persona impacted their decisions and policy making as Women of Color leaders in community colleges, and their perception of their impact and legacy in the mentoring of the next generation of Women of Color leaders at community colleges.

This phenomenological study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on Women of Color leaders in community colleges by examining and documenting their lived leadership experience. Throughout this study, the terms African American and Black are used interchangeably, as are Hispanic and Latino/a. Asian Americans are inclusive of Pacific
Islanders, and Indigenous or Native American is inclusive of all original inhabitants of the land now referred to as the United States of America.

Statement of the Problem

There is an absence of research addressing Women of Color (WOC) in the academy, specifically whether their leadership styles are influenced by their cultural identity, necessitating them to employ culturally unique leadership strategies impacting institutional effectiveness. Studying the experiences of Women of Color will increase knowledge and create leadership practices for future WOC assuming leadership roles in the academy in their work for equity and social justice, specifically at community colleges, where the bulk of students of color access the higher education experience in pursuit of the American dream.

Pratt-Clarke (2017) stated the importance of continued research of Women of Color and the telling of “our” story in the academy is to “fight against our invisibility” (p. 13). Some research captures the journey of Women of Color in the academy and demonstrates that it has been one of social justice. Pratt-Clarke states, “They are journeys about claiming space, claiming belonging, asserting rights, claiming voice, and claiming power and authority” (p. 23).

Curry’s (2000) phenomenological study on Women of Color leaders at a four-year university utilized “leader persona” to determine how the WOC leaders engaged in decision making based on their historical and cultural experiences. Zell’s (2017) phenomenological research studied the pathways and mentoring of Women of Color presidents, and Humphrey’s (2012) phenomenological study looked at the lived experience of African American community college presidents and their ascendancy to the presidency. These phenomenological studies are
precursors to understanding how Women of Color leaders navigate spaces where they are “the only.”

Significance of the Study

This phenomenological study documents the leadership experience of Women of Color who served in decision-making and policy-development positions at urban community colleges and offers practices for Women of Color in leadership to operate as change agents within higher education institutions in general, specifically community colleges. Documenting the lived experience of these Women of Color leaders legitimizes their experience, grants them visibility and affirmation, and captures their legacy at the institution where they influenced policy, personnel, and students.

Sanchez-Hucles and Davis (2010) highlight the absence of research on Women of Color in leadership roles in the academy and encourage further leadership and intersectionality studies of the “multiple aspects of identity that elicit stereotypes surrounding gender, race, sexual orientation, and ethnicity, particularly for African American women, Asian women, Latinas, and Native American women” (p. 177). Allen et al. (1991) note that “women from underrepresented populations face barriers due to historical, cultural, and social factors that have shaped their experience and development in American society...pervasive racist and sexist attitudes continue to limit educational opportunities for women of color” (p. 190).

More recently, Delgado and Allen (2019) identified the need for more research regarding Women of Color leaders to further understand the experiences of Women of Color leaders as well as their perspectives regarding “cultural knowledge, assets, [and] strengths in order to achieve success in leadership positions” (p. 727) due to the lack of inclusion of women’s
perspectives. Recommendations from their study included a call for future studies to “provide insight into the best strategies for mentoring women of color emerging leaders,” and more specifically to “learn how women of color cultural background can be used as an asset for their success in their leadership roles at community colleges” (p. 727). Thus, this study is necessary to increase understanding of Women of Color and the value they possess as they enter and contribute in shaping higher education institutions, particularly community colleges.

Research Questions

Research questions for this study were:

1. How does leader persona influence Women of Color leaders’ leadership style and policy making?
2. What strategies do Women of Color leaders utilize to overcome challenges and barriers?
3. How have Women of Color leaders mentored other Women of Color?
4. How do Women of Color leaders perceive their leadership legacy?

Theoretical Framework

When examining the journey of Women of Color leaders in community colleges, it is appropriate to utilize theoretical frameworks that represent their voices in the academy and their unique experiences as leaders (Collins, 2000; Giddings, 1996; Newman, 2007; Waring, 2003). Theories selected to affirm the voice of women of color’s existence are Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Womanist Theory, both of which take into account “societal, cultural and personal phenomena as addressing race, gender, and class” (Ausmer, 2009, p. 28).
The utilization of Critical Race Theory and Womanism allows for the intersection of theoretical constructs sensitive to the challenges Women of Color (WOC) experience based on race, gender, and class to determine intergenerational connectedness of their current leadership roles (Houston, 2004). Womanist Theory (WT) captures the influence of spirituality, social justice, empowerment, and agency in the lives of women of color.

Methodology

Research examining Women of Color leaders in urban community colleges relative to their acquired leader persona, policy making, and mentoring legacy does not exist. Phenomenology was the chosen research method enabling Women of Color to share their leadership experience as educational executives while at a particular community college with overlapping time served. Phenomenology allowed me to capture the experiences of Women of Color leaders and how they viewed their leadership in relation to leader persona, policy making, and legacy.

Phenomenology is an examination of human experiences through detailed descriptions of the people being studied. According to Patton (2002), the foundational question for phenomenology is, “What is the meaning, structure, and the essence of the lived experience of this phenomenon for this person or group of people?” (p. 104). This approach explores human experiences and how they influence actions taken. The phenomenological approach “thoroughly captures how people perceive, describe, feel, judge, remember, talk about and make sense of a particular phenomenon” (Ausmer, 2009, p. 55). The use of a qualitative phenomenological paradigm enables researchers to be more intentional and meticulous in collecting “the experience or stories of individuals” (Creswell, 2007, p. 40). The utilization of phenomenology allowed
participants to freely express their awareness and recollection of their respective application of leader persona and mentoring legacy for this study.

This study examined whether the collective WOC leadership experiences diversified the institution relative to policy, programs, and personnel. Pratt-Clarke (2017) states Women of Color serving as leaders should “transform spaces that were not meant for them…use education to transform lives…change the fabric of higher education, one woman of color at a time!” (p. xi). This study examined how Women of Color leaders were influenced by their leader persona in decisions and policy making, how they engaged in mentoring to impact the institution, and whether Women of Color serving as leaders resulted in a lasting legacy in the community college system where they served. Research results will contribute to the body of knowledge regarding WOC leadership and their value in diversifying personnel in higher education, advancing Womanist Theory, leader persona, and mentoring in community colleges.

Jackson (2019) states, “It is the responsibility of those of us within the academy with greater privilege and proximity to power to leverage our positions for the liberation of all people” (p. 196). McClaurin et al. (2017) speak to how the very presence of WOC in institutions is transformational. Their existence must be acknowledged in their positions of authority and power to receive the respect that goes along with their roles.

Definition of Terms

**Cultural Identity** - Knowledge of one's racial or ethnic origin; affinity to associate and represent cultural groups of origin in appearance and ethos without apology.

**Intersectionality** - Denotes the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women’s social and political lives (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 358).
**Leader Persona** - A confluence of historical, intellectual, and cultural experiences and social factors which shape a woman of color’s leadership identity and style, which influences their leadership role (Curry, 2000).

**Legacy** - Positive effect of the leadership experience of a WOC to include: programs initiated, service rendered, policy instituted, and/or other Women of Color mentees.

**Self-Efficacy** - A sense of control over one's environment; belief of being able to control challenging environmental demands by means of taking adaptive action (Schwarzer, 1992).

**Womanist** - Having or expressing a belief in or respect for women and their talents and abilities beyond the boundaries of race and class; inclusive of persons of color who are committed to the economic, political, and social equality of other persons of color, as well as those in the dominant race who use their position and power to marginalize and oppress people of color. Womanists have a more “affirmed connectedness to the entire community and the world” (Walker, 1983, p. 81).

**Women of Color** - Refers collectively to women identified as Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino/a, Native American, or Asian/Pacific Islander.

**Personal Story**

I worked at UMCCCS for 23 years and ascended through the ranks from tenured faculty into an upper administrative position at the largest urban community college system in the Midwest. As an administrator I provided leadership oversight to 400+ front-facing personnel, managed $17M budgets, and engaged in program development. As an African American woman observing Women of Color leaders over the years, collectively they had a profound impact on my
perception of leadership, and I eventually came to realize that I could become an educational leader in the same manner in which other WOC served as leaders.

While ascending through the ranks, I often wondered how the Women of Color leaders I observed balanced their leadership roles in relation to their cultural identities in an environment that was racially and ethnically diverse. I wondered if their cultural identity influenced decisions regarding developing policy, managing resources, and rendering services. I observed a camaraderie that existed among them that appeared familial in nature. I also noted overtures by the Women of Color leaders to mentor other WOC in the pipeline.

During my administrative tenure, I was overt in expressing my “cultural identity” by the manner in which I dressed, hairstyle (sisterlocs), programs initiated, and events supported on behalf of the institution. I was always keenly aware of how my presence was perceived when serving on college or community committees and that I was not only representing the institution but the community where I resided and culturally identified. I observed how others responded to my appearance, both positively and negatively, depending on the nature of the gatherings. Several times comments were offered regarding the professional manner in which I presented myself, the level of comfort and pride exhibited regarding my cultural identity as a professional, and that it freed up other Women of Color to do the same vs. remaining bound by the prescribed dress code of what was defined as “professional attire” as defined by the dominant culture. As a woman of color administrator, my cultural identity did not impede my ability to perform my duties efficiently and effectively as I worked to positively impact systems and processes to improve programs and services administered under my leadership.
Chapter Summary

This phenomenological study examined the lived leadership experience of Women of Color (WOC) leaders who served in executive administrative positions and were involved in decision and policy making at an urban multi-campus comprehensive community college system (UMCCCCS). The Women of Color (WOC) leaders’ reflections on their leadership roles at the institution relative to leader persona, mentoring legacy, and policy making were captured for the purpose of contributing to the body of knowledge regarding leadership experiences of WOC leaders. When examining the lived experiences of Women of Color who served as leaders in an educational environment, the operationalization of their individual leader persona and collective leadership experiences were examined based on how they contributed to defining or redefining leadership where they served.

Chapter 2 will entail a survey of the research literature related to the history of Women of Color in higher education with a focus on community colleges, theoretical constructs of Critical Race Theory and Womanism, higher education leadership, and Women of Color in leadership, culminating with the basis for this study to capture the lived experience of Women of Color who served in leadership at UMCCCCS. Chapter 3 presents the methodology used for conducting this phenomenological study, along with data collection, analysis, and trustworthiness. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study along with emergent themes. Chapter 5 provides an interpretation of the study results in relation to each research question, conclusions, recommendations, and personal reflections.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter contains a review of literature regarding the historical background of people of color in higher education, Women of Color in the academy, leadership in higher education, Critical Race Theory, other race-specific “crit lit” and its usage in interpreting various racial cultures, as well as the evolving Womanist Theory.

Since the inception of institutions of higher education in America, the educational system was designed primarily for the purpose of preparing White males for leadership and continued dominance in America’s power structure (Bright, 2010; Goodchild, 1997). Colleges and universities reflected the patriarchal model of education, administration, and distribution of power where White privilege was a significant asset (Myers, 2002). The institutionalization of racism and sexism is inherent in America’s higher educational systems, as Kawewe (1997) states, “The processes of employment, retention, and tenure are shaped by the racist and sexist choices and preferences of the most dominant and powerful group in academia, white males” (p. 246). The very culture, operational structures, and processes within institutions of higher education are designed to perpetuate the “-isms.”

Land-grant colleges for Blacks were established in the 1860s as Latinos were beginning to access educational opportunities in the Southwest, Asians in the West, and Native Americans established the Haskell Institute (Wilson, 1989, p. 87) in an attempt to effectuate change within America’s institutions of higher education. Access to higher education accelerated in the 1960s and 1970s through legal cases, legislation, executive orders, student activism, and community
engagement, “thus ushering in the era of diverse persons of color accessing higher education in larger numbers” (Pratt-Clarke, 2017, p. 14).

With the dawn of the 21st century, multiple reports forecasted the “graying of the academy” (Astin & Leland, 1991; Cook, 2012; King & Gomez, 2008) and the need for the development of future leaders to fill the anticipated void. Rodriguez-Vargas (2014) stated:

[I]n the 1960s the social and political changes in the United States initiated counter cultural practices that, in turn, gave underrepresented people greater opportunities...including public and private education. The forecast reckoned time had come to change the prevailing face of higher education and diversify based on sex, race, ethnicity, and other factors used to maintain the status quo. (p. 1)

The time was ripe for change in these institutions that served as the keepers of the last vestiges of White supremacy under the guise of being institutions fostering independent thought and critical thinking.

Women of Color in the Academy

Like men of color, Women of Color arrived in America through either slave trade or political or economic duress (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Research on the experience and impact of WOC in the academy, particularly at the administrative level in higher education, has been limited. Wilson (1989) indicated the invisibility of Women of Color in the academy is a result of the difficult and complicated history people of color have endured in the United States.

Pratt-Clarke (2017) summarizes that most of the Women of Color studies are about community college presidents and women at minority-serving institutions:

Research methodology primarily utilizes a qualitative approach of storytelling, narrative analysis, surveys, and interviews. The theoretical foundations are based on leadership theory, organization theory, race, class, and gender scholarship, Black feminism, critical race theory, Latino critical race theory, and critical race feminism. (p. 18)
Early scholarly research on Women of Color and their journey in the academy was primarily reflected in dissertations and included studies on various levels of administration, including college presidents. Not until after the end of slavery and the Civil War did Black people begin accessing educational opportunities, primarily via what are now known as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Cheyney University of Pennsylvania, founded in 1837, is recognized as the first HBCU.

Latinos began accessing higher education in the Southwest in the early 1900s as their population grew; Asians in California and other western states increased their presence in colleges as well (Bordas, 2007; Pratt-Clarke & Maes, 2017). Several institutions were founded primarily for Native Americans in the late 1800s as a byproduct of various signed treaties (Manuelito-Kerkvliet, 2018). Access to higher education accelerated in the 1960s and 1970s through legal cases, legislation, executive orders, student activism, and community engagement, “thus ushering in the era of diverse persons of color accessing higher education in larger numbers” (Pratt-Clarke, 2017, p. 14).

African American

Formal education for most Blacks was not available until after the Civil War, when the Freedmen’s Bureau, Black communities and their churches, and private philanthropists organized schools for Blacks (Donohue, Heckman, & Todd, 2002). Most HBCUs opened immediately following the Civil War to train newly freed slaves to become self-sufficient, independent workers (Gasman et al., 2007). Since most of the predominantly White schools refused to admit newly freed slaves, churches and other missionary societies opened schools to “civilize” the Blacks. Through unselfish acts, Black women educators such as Anna Julia
Cooper, Mary Church Terrell, and Mary McLeod Bethune facilitated social change and economic stability among Blacks by advocating racial uplift and advancement through education (Cooper, 1892; May, 2007; Perkins, 1981). Their role as educational leaders was not to simply operate educational institutions in a predetermined or prescribed manner, but rather to insure they were operating “transformative educational institutions.” Madden (2002) states that individuals who entered their institutions were exposed to a transformative educational experience which empowered them so much so that when they completed their education, they were committed to become ‘agents of change’ to improve the condition of their communities, address social justice issues, encourage racial uplift and advancement. (p. 13)

Over the past two centuries African American/Black women have actively pursued higher education as a means to seek redress for the socio-economic conditions of Blacks/African Americans in America. Initial scholarly research on Women of Color and their journey in the academy primarily was in the form of dissertations and included studies on various levels of administration, including college presidents. Perkins (1981, 1993) shares that the protracted struggle of Black women addresses the issues of educational access and opportunities as a way to improve the conditions for their people and demonstrates their humanity and contributions to American society. Pratt-Clarke and Parker (2017) assert the primary characteristics of African American female presidents should be “performance, perseverance, and a commitment to social justice” (p. 86).

Over the past forty years, the presence of African American women in higher education has steadily increased, with some even ascending to presidencies. Penny and Gaillard (2006) reported, “African American women have ascended to top ranking administrative positions in academia, including university presidents” (p. 196). The majority of Black women president
appointments occurred at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Currently, Dr. Javaune Adams-Gaston serves as the seventh president of Norfolk State University; Dr. Lily D. McNair is the first female and eighth president of Tuskegee University; others include Dr. Heidi Anderson, president of University of Maryland Eastern Shore; Dr. Glenda Glover, president of Tennessee State University; Dr. Johnetta B. Cole, president of both Spelman and Bennett Colleges (both historically Black colleges for African American women); Dr. Julianne Malveaux, president of Bennett College; and Dr. Paulette R. Dillard, president of Shaw University (Deen, 2019).

At the age of 38, Dr. Mary Frances Berry was chosen as the first Black woman president of a PWI (Predominantly White Institution): University of Colorado–Boulder (Taylor, 2001). Dr. Ruth Simmons was the first African American woman president of Smith College, a predominantly White all-female school, and of Brown University, one of America’s prestigious Ivy League institutions, and is currently president of Prairie View University, an HBCU. Other African American women college presidents at PWIs have included Dr. Charlene Drew Jarvis, president of Southeastern University; Dr. Thelma B. Thompson, president of University of Maryland Eastern Shore; Dr. Jewel Plummer Cobb, president of University of California–Fullerton; Dr. Shirley Jackson, president of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute; and Dr. Cheryl F. Green, president of Governors State University (Gaston, 2015; Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2012, 2020; Latimore, 2009; NovaSkegee, 2009).

Hispanic

Following World War II, Mexican Americans emerged to have a noticeable presence in higher education. Prior to that time, most were blocked from ascending past the eighth grade.
Thus, the presence of Hispanics in higher education is sketchy at best until the 1960s, with the majority of Hispanics in higher education predominantly clustered in community colleges. Latinos comprised less than six percent of first-year college students in southwestern higher education in 1958 (Carter, 1970). The lack of Hispanic access to higher education began changing in the 1960s.

Although literature regarding Hispanic women leaders in higher education is limited, it is growing. Career development of Hispanics, primarily in staff and faculty positions in higher education, was studied by Hernandez and Morales (1999). Self-efficacy of Hispanic women leaders was studied by Montas-Hunter (2012), who utilized Bandura’s (1997) theory of self-efficacy to identify four core themes regarding leadership: strong sense of value, support networks, self-awareness, and professional experiences. Avalos (2011) studied female Mexican American community college presidents and their journey to the presidency through a feminist lens. Results showed Hispanic women leaders all subscribed to Chicana liberal feminism and transformational leadership as a means to ascend the ladder to access and subsequently lead their institutions. More research is needed to document the experiences of Hispanic/Latina women in the academy as more begin their ascension to serve as a roadmap to others in the pipeline on ways to deal with challenges and successes (Munoz, 2009).

Latina American women college presidents include Ana Mari Cauce, University of Washington; Juliet V. García, University of Texas–Brownsville; Zulma Toro, Central Connecticut State; Elsa Núñez, Eastern Connecticut State University; Adela del la Torre, San Diego State University; Cynthia Teniente-Matson, Texas A&M University–San Antonio; Ana Solley, Phoenix College; Diane Cordero de Noriega, California State University–Monterey Bay;
Noelia Vela, Cerritos College; Maria C. Sheenan, College of the Desert; Gloria Harrison, Crafton Hills Community College; and Sandra V. Serrano, Kern Community College District (de los Santos & Vega, 2008).

Asian

Similar to Hispanics/Latinas, limited research exists specifically capturing the lived experiences of Asian women in the academy. Asian Americans represent only 1.5% of college and university presidents (American Council on Education, 2013, 2017, 2020), with Asian American women presidents primarily visible at two-year colleges (Mella, 2012). Most of the research on Asians leaders in higher education is by way of dissertations, thus Asians are often considered the “invisible” minority due to their low numbers in the administrative pipeline and are referred to as “arguably one of the most marginalized and misunderstood populations in higher education” (Museus & Kiang, 2009, p. 104). The invisibility of Asian Americans in the academy has resulted in little scholarly work on Asian American women administrators (Pratt-Clarke, 2017, p. 115).

Research conducted on Asians in higher education by Ideta (1996) concluded that most Asian women leaders experienced challenges based on their race and gender roles in traditional White male environments. Somer (2007) asserts that despite challenges in the workplace or society, Asians believe they “must have a positive attitude, strong work ethic, good mentors, role models and networks” (p. 137). Torne (2013) studied career and leadership experience of Asians and identified strategies for success included the reliance on cultural values about leadership, mentors, networks, and support groups in addition to extensive preparation through credentialing, documented accomplishments, strong people skills, and contributing to other
leadership roles locally and nationally. Neilson and Suyemoto (2010) also highlighted the important role cultural values play in influencing success: work, honor, legacy, and moral obligations; collaboration as interconnection; and risk taking for future generations.

Mella’s (2012) study of Asian American administrators highlighted the impact of minority stereotypes on representation. Asians were viewed as accidental administrators who had to overcome stereotypes and barriers. Once appointed, they focused on making transformational difference and relied on mentors for support and guidance. Chung (2008) researched challenges, leadership styles, networking, and cultural identity. The study concluded that Asian women administrators had to fight to break stereotypes while being the “only one.”

More research on Asian women in the academy is needed as Asian women decide to move out of the shadows and become more visible in leadership roles (Kobayashi, 2009). Wise (2016) states, “I am talking about creating an Academy that listens and learns from the broadest spectrum of voices so that it increasingly grows in strength and excellence from those voices and perspectives” (p. 111). Asian American women college presidents or chancellors include Renu Khator, University of Houston and Chancellor of the University of Houston System; Phyllis Wise, University of Illinois–Urbana-Champaign; and Rose Tseng, University of Hawaii–Hilo.

Native American

The history of Native Americans in higher education is a reflection of the wholesale efforts by America to whitewash or eliminate their very existence prior to the colonization of America. From the colonial period to modern times, Native Americans have fought for the right to be recognized as a free-thinking people with their own cultures, languages, and God-given rights to land and self-determination. In the late 19th century, after displacing them from the land
of their ancestors, the American government converted military installations into boarding or reservation schools designed to remove Native American children from their tribes/families to Christianize and assimilate them into adopting a Eurocentric way of thinking and operating by stripping away their language, culture, and history (Davis, 2001). From a high of 106, there are now three tribal colleges in America today, and the journey and relationship of Native Americans to higher education has been a long-fought struggle.

Fighting against the colonization efforts to erase Native Americans from the annals of American history is the basis from which Native American women (NAW) have fought to reclaim their identity as well as define who they are in the academy. NAW currently comprise half of the students enrolled in tribal colleges/universities. A small but growing body of work on Native American women in leadership in higher education is emerging. Scholarship on NAW leadership reveals a strong commitment to nation building, commitment to tribal communities, the incorporation of cultural values and traditions, and NAW as a bridge and liaison in community relationships (Fox, Luna-Firebaugh, & Williams, 2015; Pratt-Clarke, Maes, Leal, & Winder, 2017). Krumm (1998) revealed, “Tribal college leadership is the embodiment of a lifestyle and expression of thought and behavior. Tribal college leadership is inseparable from culture” (p. 27). It can assuredly be stated that the cultural identity of Native American women is intricately woven into their leadership style and their way of being.

Native American women college presidents include Dr. S. Verna Fowler, College of Menominee Nation; Dr. Cassandra Manuelito-Kerkvliet, Antioch University Seattle; Margarett Perez, Fort Belknap College; Dr. Karen Swisher, Haskell Indian Nations University; and Tanya Ward, Cheyenne River Community College.
Women of Color in Higher Education

As recently as 2016, the American Council on Education (ACE) reported 83% of college presidents were white, and only 17% were racial minorities, with 36% of those leading community colleges. Only 5% are Women of Color (ACE, 2017, 2020). Women of Color in the academy often report experiencing stereotypes that adversely affect self-confidence and self-efficacy, lower promotion rates, more occupational job segregation, and (most commonly) powerful stereotypes regarding gender, race, and ethnicity (Sanchez-Hucles & David, 2010). Madden (2002) found that the intersection of race and leadership often leads to racial and sexual stereotyping, unfair assessment of work performance, token status, and unrealistic expectations that subvert most opportunities for career advancement. Women of Color reporting negative work experiences often report minimal access to professional networks or possibilities of receiving mentoring. Many Women of Color state they feel invisible, marginalized, and excluded and experience salary inequity and unrealistic work expectations (Gorena, 1996).

As Mertz (2011) summarizes:

Women of color must contend with the multiple identities imposed by their gender, race, and ethnicity[, each of which sets them apart from the norm in the academy (white males), and all of which collectively brands them as “other.” Women of color must negotiate their multiple identities in a context [in] which other identities are outside the norm for the academy. Thus, the “other-ness” of women of color marks their entry into and persistence in the academy. (p. 57)

Intersectionality

The eminent Audre Lorde wrote extensively about the obstacles faced by persons of color, particularly Black Americans doing scholarly work in the academy (Lorde, 2007). When confronted with the messiness of intersecting identities, it is difficult for Black scholars,
especially those at the intersection of class, gender, and sexuality, to fully enter academic spaces (Jackson, 2019). Lorde wrote, “in the University that is certainly no easy task, for each one of you by virtue of your being here, will be deluged by opportunities to misname yourselves, to forget who you are, to forget where your interests lie” (2007, p. 142). Slaughter and Rhoades (2000) assert:

Universities are growing increasingly neoliberal, orienting itself [sic] towards quotas, commodification of 'diversity and inclusion,' and market-driven processes of supply and demand, resulting in underserved and minority populations remaining vulnerable to institutional agenda-setting and policy that serve their gravest interest. (p. 78)

Aforementioned historical factors contributed to the historical absence of persons of color in the educational system. Whether it was the extensive legacy of exclusion, substandard educational facilities, or limited opportunities for students of color (Mosley, 1980; Weinberg, 1995), pervasive racist and sexist attitudes continue to limit education opportunities for Women of Color (Allen et al., 1991). “Racial and ethnic stereotyping, gender biases, and cultural differences have led to feelings of dissonance and contradictions in the workplace for women of color in the academy” (Turner, 2007, p. 7).

In 1989, Moses detailed a list of major issues describing the “otherness” that Black women encountered in the academy, which included:

1. constant challenges or being viewed as other and therefore believed to be inferior;
2. lack of professional support systems;
3. excessive scrutiny by peers, superiors, and students;
4. an unstated requirement to work harder to gain recognition and respect;
5. assumptions that the positions were acquired through a friend and that therefore the members lack the necessary qualifications;
6. tokenism, that is, being viewed as a symbol of a race other than as an individual;

7. denial of access to power structures normally associated with their position.

Oftentimes Women of Color experience having their scholarship devalued or ignored, are torn between familial and community representation and involvements, or are pressured into conforming to career expectations (Turner, 2007, p. 3). Turner (2002) documented Women of Color in the academy “feeling isolated and underrepresented,” “being underemployed and overused by departments and/or institutions,” “being torn between family, community, and career,” “being challenged by students and unsupported by colleagues,” all while having to challenge the interlocking manifestation of race and gender bias and navigate challenges from academic good old boys’ networks (pp. 80–83).

These barriers, real yet invisible, adversely restrict Women of Color’s access to higher level administrative positions and oftentimes relegate them to “academic caste” systems in the academy (Turner, 2007, p. 7). Latina and Asian women in the academy attest to experiencing similar cultural differences and expectations while fighting invisible barriers surrounding racist stereotypes, language differences, or “accent discrimination” (Turner, 2007, p. 7). When confronted with situations where there’s a clash of cultural and professional worlds, how does a woman of color decide to operate at that time in that workspace without compromising herself? Cognitive dissonance ensued, as was described by Aleman, (1985):

I am struck by my lived contradiction: To be a professor is to be an anglo; to be a Latina it’s not to be an anglo. So how can I be both a Latina and a professor? To be a Latina Professor I conclude means to be unlike and like me. Que locura! What madness! As Latina/o professors, we are newcomers to a world defined and controlled by discourses that do not address our realities, that do not affirm our intellectual contributions, that do
not seriously examine our worlds. Can I be both Latina and professor without compromise? (pp. 74-75)

Navigating these barriers within the academy perpetually challenges Women of Color to preserve their sense of cultural identity while ascending the ranks into administrative leadership. Women of Color constantly encounter situations where they have to decide between operating in the space “either/or” or “both/and.” Waring (2003) stated, “More research has been conducted about how gender might influence leadership. However, rarely is race considered and even less frequently is there a discussion of how one’s race and gender might influence one’s conception of leadership” (p. 31). Turner and Kappes (2009) stress the importance of mentoring and networking for Women of Color aspiring to high-level positions in academic administration to address the challenges of inequity and overcome barriers when race, gender, and class intersect in the academy.

Mentoring

The request for mentoring is a common refrain for Women of Color (WOC) in the academy. Since WOC comprise such a small number in the academy, they are more prone to experience isolation and exclusion, thus restricting their access to networks or organizational systems essential for their professional advancement and success (Gibson, 2006). Confronted with traditions and practices which were the norm in the hallowed halls of the academy, WOC are challenged to seek out mentoring relationships as a means of accessing encouragement, acceptance, and friendships in order to survive and advance.

For Women of Color, concrete walls, sticky floors, bamboo ceilings, and glass cliffs experiences monopolize their narrative relative to accessing the C-suite in many organizations.
These obstacles to advancement have resulted in Women of Color utilizing a labyrinthine path for upward mobility, which is complicated by childcare needs, sexism, and discrimination on the basis of race (Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Betters-Reed & Moore, 1995; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Hymowitz & Schellhardt, 1986). “The requirement for women of color to negotiate the labyrinth career path solo, and, in addition to mastering both agentic and communal skills, they must acquire social capital for advancement, usually is a tiring and most isolating experience” (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010, pp. 176-177).

Sorcinelli and Yun (2007) concluded mentoring networks are vital support structures in a successful academic career for emerging scholars seeking to navigate complex racial and gender dynamics found in most academic institutions. Tillman (2001) asserts the types of mentoring networks in the academy are integral to the emotional, cultural, and social adjustment in institutions to effectuate career success.

Mentoring provides WOC supportive networks to enhance socialization, impact productivity, and increase persistence (Gibson, 2006). Mentoring has been identified as taking on two forms: one informal and the other formal. Tillman (2001) states, “Mentoring facilitates the emotional, cultural, and social adjustment to institutions in which women faculty of color often face alienation and isolation” (p. 320). Anderson and Shannon (1988) define mentoring as a nurturing process in which a more skilled or experienced person, serving as a role model, teaches, sponsors, encourages, counsels, and befriends a less skilled or less experienced person for the purpose of promoting the latter’s professional and personal development. Mentoring functions carried out within the context of an ongoing, caring relationship between the mentor and protégé. (p. 40)

Formal mentoring usually entails a superior or a seasoned person intentionally providing structured guidance and direction to help bolster a person’s success. Informal mentoring can take
on the appearance of being a peer mentoring relationship or situation where a person seeks out another person to assist in acquiring knowledge, resources, or access to another situation or level within the institution or profession. Since mentoring also “impacts scholarly productivity, and increase[d] persistence in women faculty of color” (Jean-Marie & Brooks, 2011, p. 93), it is suggested that traditional mentor-protégé relationships be monitored because usually they reflect the power interests of the organization of the mentors and may not advance the scholarly career interests of the protégés (Diggs et al., 2009; Hansman, 2002).

An emerging approach to mentoring is “network mentoring,” which provides greater access to information, structural and social resources, and sponsorship; enriches resource dissemination; and lends diversity to mentorships (Higgins & Thomas, 2001; Kay & Wallace, 2009; Siebert et al., 2001). Sorcinelli and Yun (2007) offer:

Network mentoring builds upon a robust network of engaging multiple partners in non-hierarchical collaborative, cross-cultural partnerships to address specific areas of faculty activity, such as research, teaching, working towards tenure, and striking a balance between work and life. (p. 58)

As Women of Color pursue success in the academy and contemplate rising through the ranks to become leaders, their success will be contingent on their ability to seek out mentors to guide them through the landmines inherent in the hallowed halls, in addition to acquiring a network of mentors to leverage varied talents, skills, and connections. Delgado and Allen (2019) stress the need for more research to “understand how women of color use mentoring networks to achieve higher ranking administrative positions” and “the best strategies for mentoring emerging women of color leaders” (p. 727).
Leadership

“From corporate boardrooms to the halls of Congress, from universities to the courts, from religious institutions to philanthropic organizations, men are simply much more likely than women to be leaders” (AAUW, 2016). Purportedly, since men have occupied leadership roles throughout society for centuries, leadership has primarily been defined based on masculine characteristics and attributes and advanced as the normative baseline. The vast majority of research that examines leadership in higher education has focused on the experiences of White males, leaving out women and persons of color (Amey, 2006; Shakeshaft, 1990).

Leadership is customarily defined in terms of traits, values, processes, skill(s), competencies, relationships, and constructs (Gill, 2011). Hockaday and Puyear (2000) focused on traits versus skills of leaders in Community College Leadership in the New Millennium (Hockaday & Puyear, 2000). Important traits identified for community college leaders were inherent, learned, or developed. Traits identified included being visionary, courageous, collaborative, and possessing sound judgment and integrity. The list of identified traits was intended to provide opportunity for learning and development to facilitate competence and mastery of successful leadership.

The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC, 2014) surveyed chief executive officers to identify key critical skills important for future leaders’ effectiveness. Skills identified included financial literacy, political savvy, and adaptability as essential for educational leaders. Kouzes and Posner (1996) focused on personal best behavioral commitments of leadership, consisting of searching for opportunities, risk taking, and experimenting with the leadership charge; engaging organizational community in attainment of a shared vision;
development of the talents of members of the organizational community and sharing power; modeling and mentoring along the way to organizational achievement and success; and encouraging these commitments in others (p. 14). Their focus was to garner increased communal involvement in the leadership process on the part of the leader.

Gardner (1990) highlighted character attributes essential for a leader, such as physical vitality and stamina; intelligence and judgment in action; willingness to accept responsibility; understanding followers and their needs; people skills; need to achieve, capacity to motivate; courage and steadiness; capacity to win and hold trust; capacity to manage, decide, and set priorities; and adaptability and flexibility of approach (pp. 48–54).

Extensive research pertaining to leadership in community colleges has been conducted over decades by Vaughan (1989), Vaughn, Weisman, and Puyear (1998), and Weisman and Vaughn (2001, 2002, 2006) highlighting the need for community college leaders to be proficient in shared governance, mastery of technology in business operations, ability to mediate conflict, high level of tolerance for ambiguity, appreciation and commitment to multiculturalism, and coalition building. Vaughan et al. and the AACC indicated a need for “an even greater entrepreneurial spirit and more adaptive approaches” (Schultz, 2001, p. 3).

Diversity in Leadership

Newman (2007) encourages capturing the leadership experiences of women community college leaders of African descent and including their experiences to provide a written record that may be used to memorialize their professional accomplishments, lifetime achievements, and leadership styles. Penny and Gaillard (2006) stressed the need for more research specific to women in higher education, especially Women of Color.
The seminal work of Bordas (2007) introduced the cultural element of leadership from the Hispanic, African American, and Native American cultural perspectives. Bordas recognized the need to define leadership based on cultural differences and attributes unique to people of color. Bordas stated, “Until a more inclusive form of leadership embodies our diverse society, a truly multicultural society will not be attained” (p. 9). With this in mind, Bordas defines multicultural leadership as

an inclusive approach and philosophy that incorporates the influences, practices, and values of diverse cultures in a respectful and productive manner. Multicultural leadership resonates with many cultures and encourages diverse people to actively engage, contribute, and tap their potential. (p. 8)

Bordas’s multicultural leadership definition seeks to transform leadership to “encourage synergy, innovation, and resourcefulness” (p. 8). Bordas’s affirming aspect of multicultural leadership attributes encourages leaders of color to “maintain their cultural identity while at the same time participating in and contributing to the larger society” (p. 8). Huang (2012) determined that Women of Color must be “confident, well-prepared, and assertive. They must have a diverse, collaborative, entrepreneurial, and inclusive leadership style” (p. 348).

Leadership Identity

The acquisition of leadership identity has evolved over time and is viewed as part of a developmental process in the leadership discussion. Pettigrew and Whipp (1992) suggest insufficient evidence of evolutionary leadership should be included as part of the discussion. Curry (2000) surmises that “writings on leadership have been primarily weighted based on issues of instrumentation and the experiences of ‘white’ men” (p. 18). Curry (2000) argues Women of Color becoming leaders involves “questions of identity, balancing socially constructed and
normalized roles, and responsibilities, and issues of marginality” (p. 4). Curry posits, “Leadership development for women of color does not follow regimented acquisition of defined tenets of leadership, but rather is part of a phenomenological process as women navigate sociocultural and psychosocial terrain in their adult identity development” (p. 18).

Waring (2003) posits the need to discuss the intersectionality of race and gender influences of African American female college presidents in their decisions to assume positions of leadership. Waring’s research revealed “African American female college presidents perceive their social class and educational background as part of their leadership emerging process and their view of themselves” (p. 31). Most importantly, female African American presidents stressed the importance and role their racial identities played in their decision to assume leadership.

Curry (2000) advanced the acquisition of leadership identity as part of a developmental process in the leadership discussion, especially in relation to Women of Color. The concept of “leader persona” developed by Curry (2000) outlines “leadership lacking in the phenomenological aspect of including developmental experiences of women of color and their construction of ‘leader persona’” (p. 4). Through examining the leadership identity evolution of Women of Color at four-year universities, Curry posits, “Their leadership persona is a result of self-constructed identity which encompasses life histories, individual pathways of intellectual and cultural development, and object relations” (p. 19). Curry argues that as Women of Color become leaders, the “questions of identity, balancing socially constructed and normalized roles, and responsibilities, and issues of marginality” (p. 4) are always on their minds and influence their leadership decision making.
Curry posits leadership development for Women of Color does not follow the defined tenets of leadership advanced by most leadership models based on experiences of (White) men, but rather is part of a phenomenological process as women navigate sociocultural and psychosocial terrain in their adult identity development. Thus, leadership identity cannot be defined by simply learning about leadership styles or assessing your leadership traits. Instead, leadership identity is a compilation of lived experiences, responding to situations when encountered, and weighing against personal identity, values, and lived cultural experiences. WOC leaders embody a sense of self-determination, the influence of principles and values that govern, and a strong knowledge of self to create individual meaning systems that conceptualize leadership (Curry, 2000, pp. 19–20).

Leadership Programs

Leading educational organizations like the American Council on Education (ACE), Higher Education Resource Services (HERS), and the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) have designed educational leadership training institutes, programs, and seminars seeking to increase the number of persons, especially women and persons of color, qualified to ascend through the pipeline into administration. As a result, from 1995 to 1998, 34.4 percent of presidents hired were female, and 15.7 percent were minority, an increase over past years that demonstrated a commitment to diversity in leadership (ACE, 2008). Efforts made to address the lack of women and persons of color in the leadership pipeline prepared to ascend through the academy and take the helm at America's higher education institutions. Harvard (1986) reported in 1978 that less than 1% of 7,000 administrative positions at the dean’s level or higher were held by minority women.
The Colorado Women’s College’s *Benchmarking Women's Leadership in the United States* (Lennon, 2013) reported women’s representation increased from 23% of presidents in 2006 to 26.4% in 2011. However, the number of female presidents remained constant at about 500. The percent at different types of institutions shifted slightly, with women presidents at associate degree-granting institutions rising to 33% in 2011 (Lennon, 2013).

The presence of Women of Color in the academy is ever increasing and is measurable at both two- and four-year colleges and universities across the landscape of this country. In 2012 the American Council on Education (ACE), arguably the leading organization preparing leaders to become college presidents, reported the increase in the racial and ethnic composition of students and faculty on many campuses, although increased diversity among college and university presidents was immeasurable (Cook, 2012). ACE reports:

- Women of color have made significant strides in attaining college presidencies, comprising 17 percent of all positions in 2011 compared to 4.4 percent in 2006. Among African American presidents, 34 percent are women, topping the 25 percent who are White female presidents. Women are 39 percent of all Hispanic presidents, 20 percent of all Asian American presidents, and 54 percent of all other or multiple races. (Cook, p. 20)

Ladson-Billings (1998) highlighted the importance of seeking out peers in the academy who share similar research interests and provide much-needed support to avoid feelings of isolation (p. 57). Sotello and Turner (2002) noted how Women of Color purposely formed bonds across disciplines and rankings to support each other as a way to keep from feeling isolated in an environment where they are the “only one.” Sotello and Turner (2002) stated:

Many individuals of color feel that to succeed in academia requires them to leave themselves, who they are, at the door. This loss would be a tragedy for both current and future women of color in the academy. Instead, by bringing ourselves through the door and supporting others in doing so as well, we can define ourselves in and claim
unambiguous empowerment, creating discourses that address our realities, affirm our intellectual contributions and seriously examine our worlds. (p. 89).

Womanist Leaders of Color

Women of Color leaders represent what I view as “Womanist leaders.” “Womanist leaders are giving visibility to the experience of African American and other women of color who have always been on the forefront of movements to overthrow the sexual and racial caste systems” (Hayat, 2014). Women of Color leaders who originate from other ethnic groups who ascend to positions of power can be considered “Womanists” by virtue of their ethos, cultural awareness, and commitment to make a difference in the community from which they originated. Womanist leaders bring a strong sense of racial history awareness and social justice; thus, they carry the movement forward so it will positively impact, uplift, and advance the education of their communities.

The 2017 American Council on Education American College President Study reported the growth in minority presidents across the country from 12.6% in 2011 and 13.6% in 2006 to 16.8% in 2016. Almost all of the growth came from African American presidents. The number of African American presidents grew from 5.9% five years earlier to 7.9% in 2016. The number of Hispanic presidents rose 0.01% from 3.8% to 3.9%. In contrast, the number of American Indian and Alaska Native presidents decreased 0.01% to 0.7% in 2016 from 0.8% in 2011. The percentage of Asian American presidents rose slightly from 1.5% to 2.3% (ACE, 2017).

The 2017 ACE President’s report illuminated a sobering statistic of Women of Color in leadership in the academy. ACE reports the percentage of minority college presidents has slowly increased over the last 30 years. Racial minority college presidents were 17% and more likely to
lead public institutions than private institutions. Most were presidents in minority-serving institutions. Women of Color, however, are the most underrepresented in the presidency. Three out of 10 college presidents were women, with only 5% being Women of Color (ACE, 2017).

Community Colleges’ Leadership Pathways

Community colleges are a uniquely American phenomenon. Since their inception, community colleges have been viewed as truly opportunities (Cohen & Brawer, 1996). Community colleges have provided persons who differ from traditional higher education leaders (meaning White males) the unique opportunity to ascend into higher education leadership positions and begin shaping the way education should look in the future. This shift opened opportunities for persons of color who were historically locked out of the administration process. Community colleges offered both women and persons from various ethnic and racial backgrounds access to occupy all ranks of the educational spectrum as part of a democratized society.

The result of “separate but equal” educational institutions for over half a century resulted in the institutionalization of racism and the permeation of negative stereotypes and racist ideals within academia. Learning in segregated environments devoid of opposing facts resulted in the perpetuation of misinformation and perceptions between races or people viewed as “other.” Both two-year and four-year colleges sustained a long-lasting adverse effect on how Blacks are perceived and accepted in the academy to this day (Anderson, 1988; Holmes, 2001). Racism coupled with the restricted advancement of women in higher education doubled the negative effect on Black women’s advancement in the academy, which has persisted to this day (Holmes, 2004).
Community colleges have not been exempted from the discriminatory practices that have befallen other established institutions throughout America, yet the preponderance of WOC in leadership roles in education has been primarily concentrated in community colleges.

Due to massive demographic shifts at the end of World War II and the GI Bill benefits to access education to retrain military personnel returning home, community colleges opened up opportunities for those traditionally excluded from accessing college. Anticipating a growth surge of both women and persons of color, community colleges recognized the need to “absorb and move women and minorities upward” (Stephenson, 2001, p. 193). Stephenson suggested that “community colleges were positioned to become the model incubators for the advancement of women leaders” (p. 198).

Weisman and Vaughan (2002) noted the increase in women presidents climbed from 11% in 1991 to 28% in 2001. By 2006 there was only a 1% increase. Their work shows that over a 15-year span there was an 18% increase of women and minorities in community college leadership, which leveled off by 2010. In 2011, 56% of community college executive/administrative/managerial staff were women, but they comprised only 36% of college CEOs. Compared to other racial ethnic groups, women African Americans held more leadership positions in community colleges (Weisman & Vaughan, 2002).

Watson (2017) states, “Throughout the 1990s, the number of Black community college CEOs hovered at about 4.9 percent. By 2017 the number of Blacks who were community college presidents has only grown to about 8 percent. Of the 1,067 community college CEOs, only 93 are Black.” This was supported by ACE’s 2017 report showing only 5% of college presidents were Women of Color.
Community Colleges

The number of African American women in upper-level administrative roles at community colleges is low compared to their White counterparts. The experiences of African American women in mid-level or lower level administrators’ positions or faculty research focus on their presence and contributions and give voice to their experience in community colleges. Community colleges continue to lead all other higher education institutions in the enrollment of minority students, leading the nation at 48% (Logan, 2006). This increased presence of minorities is attributed to community colleges’ charters and missions mandating they meet the needs of the entire community which they serve (AACC, 2010). However, there is a need for more representation of minority faculty, staff, and administrators at these colleges so minority students have role models to help foster students’ success and improve graduation rates (Logan, 2006, p. 16). Logan (2006) argues that “these students do not always have access to diverse mentors and role models who can illustrate pathways to overcome barriers to success” (p. 16). Thus, one can reason that a community’s success is interconnected with the advancement of persons educationally to access and excel within the educational process. Everyone who is successful is destined to become a beacon of success and hope to those who follow (Logan, 2006, p. 17). If community colleges are the most likely venue for the majority of people of color to obtain a higher education, then one could conclude that the majority of people of color should be represented in these educational institutions at all levels.

In higher education, the concentration of Women of Color in administrative leadership positions is primarily in community colleges. Since 1986 when nine African American women served as presidents, the number has doubled over the last decade—to 71 in 2005 (Richardson,
The concentration of African American women presidents at community colleges is attributed to the openness and commitment to diversity on the part of community colleges (Waring, 2003). The larger number of African American women presidents at community colleges suggest that community colleges may be the new venue to connect African American women educators to leadership roles in higher education.

**Critical Race Theory**

Derrick Bell, a law professor at Harvard University, is widely considered the progenitor of Critical Race Theory (CRT; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Bell’s legal courses challenged the basis upon which law was being interpreted and perpetuated and proposed a radical legal approach to address the inequities the Civil Rights Movement intended to confront and correct, yet were stalled in their efforts due to the reality of the pervasiveness of institutionalized racism (Isaksen, 2007). CRT emerged as a legal strategy to confront the “inescapable and inherent racism in the American legal system and the preserving of power, rather than the demands of principle and precedent, as the guiding force behind legal judgments” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). CRT has since grown to be an “interdisciplinary collection of activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism and power. CRT is purported to be an outgrowth of two converging movements, critical legal theories and social justice” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 8).

Critical Race Theory (CRT) stresses the importance of examining policies in the appropriate historical and cultural contexts to deconstruct racialized content (Crenshaw, 1995). CRT uses forms of discussion, archive, and storytelling/personal testimonies to acknowledge members of marginalized groups by virtue of their marginal status and help them to tell
previously untold or different stories based on experiences that challenge the discourse and beliefs of the dominant group. “The use of voice or ‘naming your reality’ is a way that CRT links form and substance in scholarship. CRT scholars use parables, chronicles, stories, counter-stories, poetry, fiction, and revisionist histories to illustrate the false necessity and irony of much of current civil rights doctrine” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 13). Delpit (1998) states, “The tragedy of the field of education is how the dialogue of people of color has been silenced” (p. 296).

The word intersectionality was introduced into the grander lexicon by CRT practitioner and critical legal theorist Crenshaw (1989) as a metaphor to explain how racial oppression and gender oppression manifests in Black women’s lives daily:

Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in an intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination. […] But it is not always easy to reconstruct an accident: Sometimes the skid marks and the injuries simply indicate that they occurred simultaneously, frustrating efforts to determine which driver caused the harm. (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 149)

Crenshaw (1995) posits that CRT provides another framework for a critical race-gendered epistemology and focuses theoretical attention to issues of critical race-gendered laws originally developed to address the civil rights issues of African American people. CRT in education is activist in nature and inherently contains a commitment to social justice. Embedded in this notion is a “liberatory, or transformative response to racial, gender, and class oppression” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2007, p. 8). Those who rely on CRT “integrate their experiential knowledge, drawn from a shared history as ‘other,’ with their ongoing struggle to transform a
world deteriorating under the albatross of racial hegemony” (Barnes, 1989, p. 1865). Scholars utilizing CRT in education explicitly argue that their work must move toward eliminating the influence racism, sexism, and poverty have in the lives of students and faculty (Bernal & Villalpando, 2002; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001).

The holistic intersection of Critical Race Theory and Womanism is reflected in the LatCrit (Latina Critical Race) definition which posits the transdisciplinary Critical Race Theory with other forms of oppression inclusive of “exploitation, and power used to oppress African Americans, Latinos, Asians, Pacific Americans, American Indians, and other people on the basis of ethnicity, culture, mannerisms, and color” (Marable, 1992, p. 6). Matsuda et al. assert:

Where racism intersects with other forms of subordination such as classism, sexism, nativism, monolingualism, and heterosexism, LatCrit theory in education is conceived as a social justice project that attempts to link theory with practice, scholarship with teaching, and the academy with the community. LatCrit acknowledges that educational institutions operate in contradictory ways, with their potential to oppress and marginalize co-existing with their potential to emancipate and empower. (Matsuda et al., 1993, p. 9)

As a result, Latino Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) and Asian Critical Race Theory (AsianCrit) have evolved to meet and reflect the specific needs of those populations. For example, LatCrit emphasizes issues that affect Latina/o people in everyday life, including immigration, language, identity, culture, and skin color (Bernal, 2002; Espinoza, 1990; Hernández-Truyol, 1997; Montoya, 1994; Villalpando, 2003). AsianCrit emphasizes and critiques the nativistic racism embedded in the “model minority” stereotype, immigration and naturalization, language, and disenfranchisement issues that relate to Asian people in the United States (Chang 1993, 1999). While these theories have developed to meet the specific needs of Latinos/as and Asian Americans, they largely maintain the basic premise of CRT that racism is
endemic in society (Brayboy & McKinley, 2006). In contrast, the basic tenet of Tribal Crit Lit emphasizes that colonization is endemic to society (Brayboy, 2001).

Native American or Tribal Crit Lit recognizes the impact of colonization and the role of social structures and institutions in perpetuating oppression and marginalization (Brayboy, 2001; Waterman & Lindley, 2013). Tribal Crit Lit focuses on the concepts of sovereignty, obligation to the community, native resiliency, nation building, language, cultural traditions and practices, and ceremony (Garoutte, 2003).

Black Feminist/Womanist Theory

Womanism is a direct outgrowth of Black feminist thought originated by Collins (2009). Black Feminist Theory (BFT) is defined as a demonstration of

Black women's emerging power as agents of knowledge. By portraying African-American women as self-defined, self-reliant individuals confronting race, gender, and class oppression, Afrocentric feminist thought speaks to the importance that knowledge plays in empowering oppressed people. One distinguishing feature of Black feminist thought is its insistence that both the changed consciousness of individuals and the social transformation of political and economic institutions constitute essential ingredients for social change. New knowledge is important for both dimensions of change. (Collins, 1990, p. 221)

Black feminism existed for a century prior to it actually being given a name, yet it was represented in the educational work performed by Dr. Julia Anna Cooper, Mary McLeod Bethune, Lucy D. Slowe, Mary Church Terrell, and many other women during that time. (I call their names to honor their brave revolutionary work, and upon whose shoulders this study is being conducted.) Rooted in the concept of “empowerment and social justice,” Collins (2009) skillfully traces the evolution of Black women’s form of feminism in America, and their social-
political activism that served as the foundation for Black feminism to emerge, and what would eventually be defined as Womanism by Walker (1983).

Black feminists emerged and separated from the Women’s Liberation Movement as well as the Civil Rights Movement in the 1970s (“But some of us are brave: A History of Black Feminism in the United States,” n.d.). Feeling pressured to choose sides, Black feminists chose to stand for themselves since neither side appeared to offer Black women equal footing or a voice in either movement (Collins, 1996; Tally, 1984; Taylor, 2001). Taylor (2001) believed the ultimate goal of Black feminists was to “create a political movement that not only struggled against exploitative capitalism and the racialized construction of sexuality, but to develop institutions to protect Black women’s minds and bodies” (p. 18).

A distinguishing characteristic of the pioneering Black feminists/Womanists was their focus on rebuilding and strengthening their communities versus operating from a Eurocentric position of individuality and competition (Hayat, 2014; Tally, 1984). Black feminists/Womanists perceived that a healthy, safe, and balanced community would be the source of their strength versus the need to go outside their base to acquire a sense of validation or affirmation (Collins, 2009). African American women’s role in the upliftment of their community through a traditional educational process originated in the African villages where they learned from birth how they were interconnected with members of their village (Newman, 2007), whereas for the progenitors of the village, it was inherent in their passing on of multifaceted intergenerational roles to sustain and uplift their village. 

Womanist Theory

Walker (1983) coined the term “womanist” to reflect Black women who
love women and appreciate … women’s culture and power as something that is incorporated into the world as a whole. Womanism addresses the racist and classist aspects of feminism and actively opposes separatist ideologies. Womanism is unique because it does not necessarily imply any political position or value system other than the honoring of Black women’s strength and experiences. (p. xiii)

To define themselves separately from White women after experiencing isolation in the “White” Feminist Movement, Womanist Theory emerged, first in the form of Black feminism. At the Combahee River Collective in 1973, Black women renamed themselves “Black feminists,” asserting that “Black women must use new words to describe and define themselves, their experiences, and their movement versus assuming names from others whose purpose was to marginalize, oppress and subordinate” (Collins, 2009, p. 19). An outgrowth of Black feminist thought, Womanism provided a socio-cultural political lens to advance the voice and cause of Black women and challenge the current power structure of patriarchy, power, and dominance (Taylor, 2001). Collins (1996) asserted that “womanism seemingly supplies a way for Black women to address gender oppression without attacking Black men” (p. 11).

Walker’s construction of the term “womanism” was an attempt to “situate the Black woman in history and culture, and at the same time rescue her from negative and inaccurate stereotypes which make and restrict her in American society” (Nnaemeka, 2008, para 3). The Black woman, Walker inscribes, is a knowing/thinking subject who is always in pursuit of knowledge, thus interrogating the epistemological exclusions she endures in intellectual life in general, and feminist scholarship in particular. Highlighting Black women’s strength, agency, capability, and independence, womanism presents an alternative for Black women by framing their survival in the context of the survival of their community. (Nnaemeka, 2008, para 4)
Defining and Operationalizing Womanism

Womanism is recognized as a relatively new empowerment theory which to date has primarily existed in the annals of theology to reinterpret biblical passages (Johnson, 2002; Mitchem, 2014; Williams, 1995; Willis, 2016). It is also noted that Womanism has not undergone a critical examination by scholars (Taylor, 2008, p. 27). Nevertheless, the term “Womanism” is the preferred term used by many female theologians due to the perception that it is a more mature, inclusive, holistic, communal concept concerned more about the connected well-being of both Black women and Black men to build their community. Collins (1996) summed up the relevance of the “Womanism concept” by stating, “Womanism allows Black women to frame their survival in the context of the survival of their community. Womanism supplies a way for African American women to address gender oppression without attacking Black men” (p. 11).

Defining Womanism or Womanist, and how it is operationalized, is a challenge (Jain & Turner, 2012). Although the original definition was offered by Alice Walker, its originator, it became distilled into, “Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender” (1983, p. xii), implying that Womanism and Womanists operate at a deeper, richer inclusive level than feminism or feminists, which offered Women of Color validation and political capital. Walker further explained:

Womanism is simply another shade of feminism. It helps give visibility to the experience of black women and other women of color who have always been at the forefront of the feminist movement, yet marginalized and rendered invisible in historical texts and the media. (p. xii)
The American Heritage Dictionary defines Womanism as “having or expressing a belief in or respect for women and their talents and abilities beyond the boundaries of race and class; exhibiting feminism that is inclusive, especially of Black American Culture.” Hayat (2014) adeptly clarifies that Womanism differs from feminism along the lines of political and social issues, as well as feminism’s primary focus being male and female inequality, totally ignoring the impact of racial inequities adversely affecting Women of Color. Hayat (2014) states:

Although feminism addresses and fights for gender equality, it rarely addresses equality and justice for Black women. It was never involved in the civil rights movement to guarantee Black women social equality. Womanism not only fights for gender equality but for justice against racial oppression against African American men and women. (p. 2)

Womanism brings a racialized and often class-located experience to the gendered experience suggested by feminism. It also reflects a link with history that includes African cultural heritage, enslavement, women’s culture, and kinship to other women, especially Women of Color. Womanist Theory and Womanism help give visibility to the experience of African American and other Women of Color who have always been on the forefront of movements to overthrow the sexual/gender and racial caste systems. Tally (1984) offers that Womanists choose to define themselves to “encompass the whole sense of being a woman” and not solely focused on their relationship to males.

Thus, Womanism is viewed as more inclusive of persons of color who are committed to the economic, political, and social equality of other persons of color, as well as those in the dominant race who use their position and power to marginalize and oppress people of color. It has more of an “affirmed connectedness to the entire community and the world” (Walker, 1983, p. 81) Or, as Tally (1984) posits, Womanism “is a belief in the development of a heretofore
wasted human potential which has the power to enrich every human” (p. 221). Ultimately, as Walker (1983) summarizes, “The world is not good enough; we ‘womanists’ must make it better” (p. 37).

Within the context of making the world better, Walker (1983) posits:

We must create a new set of values that will suit the lives and purposes of women as seen by women: a system of authentic emotional relations and interconnected beliefs drawn from lived experiences that will develop the force of social myth. (p. 37)

Womanism flows from a “both/and worldview,” a consciousness that allows for the resolution of seeing contradictions not through an “either/or negation” but through the interaction of wholeness. Womanism is centered in a “holistic consciousness” which most African American women find most appealing and familiar.

Nnaemeka (2008) continues:

Walker’s construction of womanism and the different meanings she invests in it is an attempt to situate the Black woman in history and culture, and at the same time rescue her from the negative and inaccurate stereotypes that mask her in American society. First, Walker inscribes the Black woman as a knowing/thinking subject who is always in pursuit of knowledge, “wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered ‘good’ for one,” thus, interrogating the epistemological exclusions she endures in intellectual life in general and feminist scholarship in particular. Second, she highlights the Black woman’s agency, strength, capability, and independence. Opposed to the gender separatism that bedevils feminism, womanism presents an alternative for Black women by framing their survival in the context of the survival of their community where the fate of women and that of men are inextricably linked. (p. 2)

A distinguishing characteristic of Black feminist/Womanist practitioners is their focus on rebuilding and strengthening their communities versus operating from a Eurocentric position of individuality and competition. They perceive that a healthy, safe, and balanced community would be the source of their strength versus the need to go outside their base to acquire a sense of validation or affirmation.
Phillips’s (2006) inclusive definition of “Womanism” states:

Womanism is a social change perspective rooted in Black women’s and other women of color’s everyday experiences and everyday method of problem solving in everyday spaces, extended to the problem of ending all forms of oppression for all people, restoring the balance between people and the environment/nature, and reconciling human life with the spiritual dimension. Unlike its name, womanism does not emphasize or privilege gender or sexism; rather, it elevates all sites and forms of oppression, whether they are based on social-address categories, like gender, race, or class, to a level of equal concern and action. (p. xx)

Phillips (2006) continues by outlining five overarching characteristics of Womanism, consisting of:

ANTI-OPPRESSIONIST - a womanist knows oppression when she sees it, and she is against it. She lives her life in such a way as to fight and dismantle oppression in whatever ways she can, individually or in organized formations with others. The term “anti-oppressionist” conveys that womanism is identified with liberationist projects of all sorts and womanism supports the liberation of all humankind from all forms of oppression.” (p. xxiv)

VERNACULAR - identifies womanism with “the everyday”—everyday people and everyday life. The soul of womanism is grassroots, identified with the masses of humanity. Womanists place trust in non-elites to envision and accomplish social justice ends, inside or outside formal structures like organizations or social movements. (p. xxiv)

NONIDEOLOGICAL - womanism abhors rigid lines of demarcation and tends to function in a decentralized manner. (p. xxv)

COMMUNITARIAN - womanism views commonweal as the goal of social change. Commonweal is the state of collective well-being; it is the optimization of well-being for all members of a community. For womanists, community is conceptualized as a series of successively overlapping tiers, beginning with Black women or women of color (the level of the self or identity), followed by the Black community and other communities of color (the level of “tribe” or “kin”), followed by all oppressed people (the universal level). (p. xxv)

SPIRITUALIZED - womanism openly acknowledges a spiritual/transcendental realm with which human life, living kind, and the material world are all intertwined. For womanists, this reality is actual and palpable, and the relationship between it and humans is neither abstract nor insignificant to politics. (p. xxvi)
Beauroeuf-Lafontant (2018) distilled Womanism into three central points:

First, womanists understand that oppression is an interlocking system, providing all people with varying degrees of penalty and privilege. Second, they believe that individual empowerment combined with collective action is key to lasting social transformation. Last, they embody a humanism, which seeks the liberation of all, not simply themselves. (Yahwon & Amuchie, p. 7)

Womanism is an ever-evolving concept defining Women of Color’s identity and activism in their effort to preserve humanity while advocating for the survival and advancement of themselves and others in the world community.

Chapter Summary

This phenomenological research study allowed Women of Color leaders in higher education to examine their leadership experiences through a Womanist lens to ascertain how their leader persona (grounded in their cultural identity) influenced the execution of their leadership duties, including engaging in policy making, as part of the executive decision and policy-making team of an urban community college system and describing what was their lasting legacy at the institution.

When examining the lived experiences of Women of Color who served as leaders in an educational environment, the operationalization of their individual and collective leadership experiences was examined in relation to how they coalesced within a system that existed without acknowledging their unique “leader persona” experiences which placed them in positions of power as women leaders of color to effectuate systemic changes and how they contributed to defining or redefining leadership within a multi-campus community college system.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This phenomenological study examined and documented the lived experience of Women of Color leaders who served as executive administrators in an urban multi-campus comprehensive community college system (UMCCCS) and how they perceived their leader persona impacted their decisions, policy making, and mentoring. Research documenting Women of Color leaders in urban community colleges relative to their leader persona, decision and policy making, and mentoring legacy does not exist. This chapter includes a description of the research design utilized, participants, data collection, data analysis, and trustworthiness.

Phenomenological Method

Phenomenology was the chosen research methodology for this study to enable the researcher to interview Women of Color leaders who shared “similar lived experience” as cabinet-level administrative policy makers in an urban multi-campus comprehensive community college system (UMCCCS) over the identified time period of 2000–2013 (Merriam & Associates, 2002; Moustakas, 1994). This study examined whether their collective leadership experiences diversified the institution in ways previously undocumented.

Creswell (2007) defines phenomenology as “providing a deep understanding of a phenomenon experienced by several individuals” (p. 57) and outlines the characteristics of phenomenological research as group experience of a phenomenon vs. individual and answers
questions of “what” or “how.” Moustakas (1994) explains phenomenology as being a “lived experience of persons…. focus on the description of the experience of the participants. Phenomenon is perceived freshly by participants” (p. 26).

Moustakas (1994) offered procedures for conducting phenomenology research which include understanding several persons’ views of a shared experience in order to develop practices and policies and a deeper understanding about the features of the phenomenon; collect data from individuals who may have experienced the phenomenon via interviews to provide understanding of common experiences of the phenomenon, highlighting specific statements, sentences, or quotes that provide an understanding of participants’ experience of the phenomenon (pp. 60–62). Polkinghorne (1989) and Van Manen (1990) mention taping conversations, formally writing responses or accounts of vicarious experiences.

Van Manen (1990) describes the focus of phenomenological research as “describing what all participants have in common and reducing the individual’s experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence” (p. 177). Creswell (2013) asserts “phenomenological research focuses on the commonality of a lived experience within a particular group. The fundamental goal of the approach is to arrive at a description of the nature of the particular phenomenon” (p. 58). Bloomberg and Volpe (2016) state the researcher’s attempt is to “capture the essential characteristics of the phenomenon. Phenomenology is not only a description of the phenomenon, but the researcher also interprets the meaning of the lived experience” (p. 49).

Phenomenological research views participants as “co-researchers” (Waters, 2017). Through a Womanist lens, the participants’ collective reflections utilized tenets of Curry’s (2000) “leader persona” in the workplace as a result of their self-constructed cultural identity
which encompassed their life histories, individual pathways of intellectual and cultural development, and object relations (Curry, 2000, p. 19). This study explored how these WOC leaders viewed the impact of their leader persona on the educational organization during a specific time period and what identifiable, lasting impact their WOC leadership had on the organization.

Phenomenology was chosen as the research methodology due to the subjects being Women of Color leaders with lived experiences as administrators at the same urban midwestern multi-campus comprehensive community college system during the period of 2000–2013, responsibility for managing units of 25–100+ personnel, and involvement in developing and implementing policy and managing budgetary resources.

This study reflects the use of the qualitative phenomenology paradigm to enable the researcher to be more intentional and meticulous in collecting “the experience or stories of individuals” (Creswell, 2007, p. 40). This qualitative approach allowed participants to freely express their recollections through personal interviews of their respective acquisition of a leader persona, overcoming challenges, engaging in mentoring, and their legacy, which is foundational for this study.

Research Design

Research Process

Participants were asked to indicate their willingness to consent to a recorded face-to-face or Google Meet interview to provide their reflections relative to their tenure in their respective leadership roles in relation to their cultural identity, overcoming barriers and challenges, mentoring, and legacy at the institution.
Research questions addressed in this study included:

1. How does leader persona influence Women of Color leaders’ leadership style and policy making?
2. What strategies did Women of Color leaders utilize to overcome challenges and barriers?
3. How have Women of Color leaders mentored other Women of Color?
4. How do Women of Color leaders perceive their leadership legacy?

Participants

Purposeful sampling was used to select the participants for this study, which allowed for the selection of particular settings, persons, or events to purposely inform and provide an understanding of the research problem (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016, p. 148). Focusing on the “commonality of a lived experience within a particular group” (Creswell, 2013), participants were purposely selected as this was deemed the most appropriate kind of non-probability sampling.

All participants in this study were previously employed in upper administrative leadership positions and actively engaged in decision and policy making to govern the complex community college system. As integral members of the cabinet-level leadership team, they were dubbed “Officers of the District” and previously served in leadership roles entitled Chancellor, Executive Vice Chancellor, Provost, Chief Academic Officer, Vice Chancellor, President, Chief Information Officer, Chief Financial Officer, and Executive Director of Public Relations at the same urban multi-campus comprehensive community college (referred to as UMCCCC for this study) from 2000–2013.
Following Holmes’s (2001) theoretical sensitivity approach, which extends to the researcher the ability to recognize the significance of the data being collected and ascribe meaning to it, I inserted myself as a “situated knower” in the manner that Collins (2000) asserts, thus allowing me to “reject the pronouns of ‘they’ and ‘their’ when describing women of color and our ideas, and replace these terms with the terms ‘we’ ‘us’ and ‘our’” (p. 22).

The goal of phenomenological research is to describe a “lived experience” of a phenomenon (Waters, 2017). Participants were asked to describe their lived experience as executive leaders in a decision-making capacity at UMCCCC. Following the tenets of phenomenological research outlined by Waters (2017), participants were asked “non-directive questions and encouraged to provide full descriptions of their experience including thoughts, feelings, images, sensations, memories, and stream of consciousness along with their description of the lived experience that occurred” (p. 1).

Institutional Review Board

The Northern Illinois University Institutional Review Board approved my field procedures (approval number: HS20-0060; 28-Aug-2019) to assure the protection of the participants, who are human subjects (see Appendix A). Additionally, I successfully passed the required Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (record number: 20794972; 28-May-2018).

Data Collection

For this research study the data collection method consisted of face-to-face interviews or interviews via Google Meet. Data collected for this study began October 2019 and ended by
December 2019. Participants were invited to participate based on their being a woman of color who previously served in a cabinet-level executive role at UMCCCC between 2000–2013.

Participants

The cabinet-level administrative participants were Women of Color leaders who ethnically self-identified as either African American, Latina/Hispanic, or Asian/Pacific Islander. A total of 24 WOC were identified to participate in this study. Women of Color leaders were recruited via email, phone calls, text message, Facebook, and LinkedIn. Two leaders outright declined to participate, and four never responded to texts, calls, or other contact efforts. The demographic breakdown of the 18 women leaders of color who agreed to participate was 12 African Americans, 5 Latinos, and 1 Asian (see Appendix B for recruitment letter and Appendix C for participants’ demographic data).

Once participants agreed to participate in the study, appointments were made with each participant for a recorded face-to-face interview using a Dictaphone to capture their responses to 16 interview questions. Prior to each interview, participants received an overview of the proposed study in writing as approved by Northern Illinois University's Institutional Review Board, which included the study purpose, research questions, and interview questions. Upon review of the study proposal, each participant was requested to sign and return the consent form, thus consenting to be an active participant in this study. Participants interviewed via Google Meet were requested to sign and return the consent form either by scanning and emailing or forwarding via the U.S. postal service. (See Appendix D for the interview questions and Appendix E for the consent forms.)
Participants unable to participate in face-to-face recorded interviews consented to recorded interviews via Google Meet to ensure accuracy of reflective responses to all interview questions. To protect the identity of study participants, prior to each interview, participants were asked to self-select a pseudonym of a notable woman of color from their respective native culture to serve as their identifier when reporting collected data. Interestingly, most participants preferred to use the name of a family member or mentor who had a profound impact on their lives and to whom they attributed their success.

Each of the 18 recorded interviews lasted between 45–75 minutes and included notes taken by the researcher. Each recorded interview was transcribed by the researcher and reviewed by a methodologist. Participants were given the option of reviewing their transcript, with most declining. Two participants indicated upon reflection they preferred certain comments be deleted due to concern of possibly being identified despite the use of pseudonyms.

Data Analysis

An analysis of data in qualitative research entails the preparation and organizing of text data for analysis through the process of coding (Creswell, 2013). To analyze my data, I matched interview questions to research questions to begin the analysis of data collected by coding. The matching of interview questions (coded as Qs) to research questions (coded as Rs) were as follows (see Appendix F):

**R-1** How does leader persona influence Women of Color leaders’ leadership style and policy making? Q-1, Q-2, Q-3, Q-4, Q-5, Q-6, Q-7, Q-12

**R-2** What strategies did Women of Color leaders utilize to overcome challenges and barriers? Q-8, Q-9, Q-10, Q-11
R-3 How have Women of Color leaders mentored other Women of Color? Q-13, Q-14, Q-15

R-4 How do Women of Color leaders perceive their leadership legacy? Q-16

After coding by hand, I created a table of each participant’s responses to interview questions. Using participants’ pseudonyms, their responses were matched to research questions. Once each research question was categorized with respondents’ interview questions, I moved into interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), focusing on making meaning of participants’ experiences (Willig, 2001). I reviewed and re-reviewed participants’ transcribed responses associated with each research question to identify emerging themes that occurred in relation to leader persona encompassing participants’ life histories, individual pathways of intellectual and cultural development, and object relations (Curry, 2000, p. 19), as well as decisions, policy making, mentoring, and participants’ impact on the institution. Once emergent themes were established, I looked for connecting patterns between them. Next, I coded the themes and looked for patterns between the participants’ responses and each research question. The essential themes (shared across groups of participants having a similar experience) or individual themes (unique to one or a few individual participants; Waters, 2017) were captured as the six emergent themes conveyed in Chapter 4.

Themes were labeled and placed into tables according to research questions. Clusters of ideas emerged that were appropriate to each identified theme. The six themes were color coded and participants’ relevant statements placed under each theme. My methodologist reviewed the coding and emergent themes, and through dialogue I settled upon my interpretation of the lived
experience of the study participants relative to Womanist tenets of social justice rooted in community or career project rooted in individual achievement (Jean-Marie, 2004).

Trustworthiness

The strength of qualitative research is contingent on trustworthiness (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002). A trustworthy study involves the researcher and the participants to ensure its authenticity (Groenewald, 2004). I utilized member checking, peer review, and rich, thick descriptions.

For member checking I offered participants the option to review and comment on their transcripts for accuracy and credibility (Creswell, 2013). Most opted not to review; however, the two who did review requested the removal of certain statements.

For peer review I requested a peer review of the transcribed interviews, input on matching the interview questions to research questions, coding and categorization of emergent themes relative to research questions, and my interpretation of the themes relative to the research questions per Willig (2001).

For rich, thick descriptions (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002), descriptions were gleaned from the interviews and included in the narratives to allow a reader to gain an understanding of each individual and common experiences of the study participants as a group.

The utilization of these various strategies to ensure the trustworthiness of this phenomenological study will add to the body of knowledge and assist future researchers who will engage in scholarly work regarding Women of Color leaders in higher education, particularly in community colleges.
Chapter Summary

This chapter detailed the data analysis process utilized to interpret the lived experience of Women of Color leaders who served in cabinet-level positions at an urban midwestern community college system. This included 18 Women of Color leaders who served at the institution between 2000–2013. The data was collected through face-to-face recorded interviews and using Google Meet, that were recorded using a Dictaphone. Participants responded to 15 questions which were subsequently matched with the research questions in consultation with a peer reviewer. To ensure reliability and validity, member checking, peer review, and rich, thick descriptions were utilized.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This chapter discusses emergent themes and presents the findings from this phenomenological study on Womanist leadership at an urban midwestern multi-campus community college system. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the lived experience of Women of Color leaders who served in upper administration at an urban multi-campus comprehensive community college system (UMCCCC) over a 13-year span, how their leader persona impacted their decisions and policy making as Women of Color leaders, and their perceptions of their impact and legacy in mentoring the next generation of Women of Color leaders.

Participant Demographics

A total of 24 Women of Color leaders were identified as eligible to participate in this study based on having served in leadership positions at the urban midwestern comprehensive community college (UMCCCC) system between 2000–2013. Eighteen of the 24 agreed to be interviewed regarding their lived leadership experience at UMCCCC. Twelve self-identified as African Americans, four self-identified as Puerto Rican/Latinx, one self-identified as Mexican American/Hispanic, and one self-identified as Asian (Figure 1.)
The educational credentials of the study participants consisted of eight doctoral completers (5 Ph.D., 3 Ed.D.), one Juris Doctorate, three Master of Education, two Master of Business Administration, one with a dual Master of Business/Certified Public Accountant, and one Master of Public Administration. One had industry certificates from IBM; another did not complete her higher education program yet excelled due to natural talent, professional network, and “need to survive!” (Figure 2).
Introduction of Participants

The following is an introduction of the 18 study participants (Table 1). This section includes their ethnicity, educational attainment, role while at UMCCCC, and the impact or legacy she perceived to have made on the institution during her tenure at UMCCCC.

Anna is an African American woman with over 30 years at UMCCCC. Anna did not have a degree but had accumulated industry certificates during her career in computer technology at a time when it was predominantly a male-dominated profession. Anna retired as the chief information officer after leading the implementation of a new information data system.
Table 1

*Description of Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Highest Degree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>None; computer certificates via IBM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lolita</td>
<td>Latinx/Puerto Rican</td>
<td>Juris Doctorate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toni</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Master of Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maya Davis</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Master of Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Petra</td>
<td>Latinx/Puerto Rican</td>
<td>Master of Business Administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elaine</td>
<td>Latinx/Puerto Rican</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teresa</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Doctor of Philosophy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>Hispanic/Mexican American</td>
<td>Doctor of Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisa</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Doctor of Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Master of Public Administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eddie Mae</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Master of Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harriette</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Doctor of Philosophy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pierness</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Doctor of Philosophy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keisha</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Master of Business Administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catherine</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Doctor of Philosophy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Francisca</td>
<td>Asian/Filipino</td>
<td>Master of Business Administration/Certified Public Accountant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sally</td>
<td>Latinx/Puerto Rican</td>
<td>Doctor of Philosophy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bobbie</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Doctor of Education</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
for the institution. She was one of five Women of Color leaders interviewed for the study who spent the majority of their career at UMCCCC and worked her way up through the ranks. Anna states her legacy includes mentoring other Women of Color, addressing disparity in hiring, and career advancement of people of color within UMCCCC.

**Toni** is an African American woman with over 30 years at UMCCC. Toni possesses a bachelor’s degree and two master’s degrees, with some hours towards a doctorate. Toni retired as the executive vice chancellor after over 30 years working her way up from a staff position at UMCCCC. After being retired for a year, Toni agreed to return and serve as interim chancellor for a year at UMCCC while the Board conducted a search for a new chancellor for the institution. Toni cites her legacy includes standardization of placement exam criteria and matching to the appropriate general education courses or developmental courses to support students achieving academic success. Toni believes her lasting legacy was her advocacy for service excellence to promote civility among personnel and rendering quality customer service to students.

**Maya Davis** is an African American woman who possesses a bachelor’s degree and two master’s degrees and a semester of courses towards a doctorate. Maya Davis served as president at one of UMCCC’s predominantly Black colleges for 16 years and was one of the women who retired after working her way up the ranks, having worked on both sides of the house in student services and academic affairs. Maya Davis cites her legacy includes standardization of general education courses, offering leadership development opportunities for other Women of Color, and institutionalizing the celebration of African American heritage with annual Kwanzaa programs.
**Francesca** is the only Asian woman in upper administration at UMCCCD. She earned her bachelor’s degree in accounting before leaving the Philippines and her dual Master of Business Administration/Certified Public Accountant degree once she arrived in the United States. After working at Price Waterhouse Cooper, she worked her way up through the ranks at UMCCCD to be appointed chief financial officer. Francesca proudly asserts her legacy includes fiscal stability and being a good steward of public funds. She fought to protect the assets of the organization, instituted sound fiscal internal controls, and ensured fiscal operations across the system were in compliance with state and federal regulations.

**Louisa** is an African American woman with over 30 years working at UMCCCD who proudly claimed she was fully capable of working in various roles in both the student services and academic affairs side of any college. She possesses bachelor’s, master’s, and doctorate degrees. Having ascended through the college faculty ranks to vice president, she decided to retire after working at UMCCCD for over 30 years to assume a pivotal leadership role at an online educational institution where she designed the entire undergraduate online curriculum, which led to her being appointed acting president. Louisa lists her legacy at UMCCCD as securing accreditations for various academic programs, encouraging camaraderie between colleagues, and empowering women leaders to seek higher level positions in higher education matching their leadership abilities and aspirations.

**Mary** is a Mexican/Hispanic woman who worked and retired as president from two different community college systems, one in the South and UMCCCD in the North. Mary possesses bachelor’s, master’s, and doctorate degrees, all from private schools. She was recruited to come north to provide leadership for UMCCCD’s predominantly Hispanic-populated college.
Mary took great pride in her political acumen to read situations in order to survive and advance her agenda to positively impact her college and advocate for her students. Her legacy includes serving as a role model for other Women of Color to excel in community colleges, creating new academic programs with clear pathways, thus offering more Hispanics access to educational opportunities, and navigating places and spaces where they are “the only.”

**Lolita** is a Puerto Rican/Latina woman who possesses a bachelor’s degree from Puerto Rico. She acquired her Juris Doctorate during her tenure at UMCCCC. One of five Hispanic/Latina women interviewed, Lolita retired from UMCCCC as an associate vice chancellor after working in the system for 20 years. In her administrative role, Lolita utilized her legal training to transform the adult educators’ contracts. She viewed her legacy as having revamped performance evaluations of adult coordinators, establishing workforce pathways for adult education students, and opening the door for more Latinos to access employment opportunities in the system.

**Petra** is a Puerto Rican/Latina woman who stated that she viewed herself as White Puerto Rican. She had a thriving career in government before joining the leadership team at UMCCCC. Petra possesses a bachelor’s degree and a master’s degree in public administration. She served as the vice chancellor of human resources for six years before choosing to depart due to the politics becoming unbearable. Petra viewed her legacy as being fair and giving people of color an opportunity to rise through the ranks, especially Latinos. She believed she offered personnel of color a sense of hope and empowerment.

**Elaine** a Puerto Rican/Latina woman who views herself as Black Puerto Rican. She was recruited for her writing skills to work in city government while attending college. Being a single
mother, she accepted the offer and never had the opportunity to return to complete her degree. She ascended through the ranks in government prior to landing at UMCCCC, which she felt would allow her space to raise her expanding family. As a member of the executive team, Elaine viewed her role as a voice for people of color in relation to the equitable allocation of resources to colleges, particularly those with a high number of students of color. Elaine’s legacy includes establishing a community affairs department from scratch, presenting UMCCCC in a positive light to the public in spite of its systemic disparities, and telling students’ success stories.

**Teresa** is an African American woman who obtained her undergraduate degree from a “baby ivy” college and doctorate from an HBCU (Historically Black Colleges or University). She served at UMCCCC in various capacities under two different administrations, eventually ascending to the position of provost/CAO. Teresa’s legacy includes being student centered, maintaining academic integrity, and upholding the values of higher education.

**Marie** is an African American woman who worked in government before transitioning to education. She possessed a bachelor’s degree when she began working at UMCCCC and pursued her Master of Public Administration at the insistence of her supervisor, whom she viewed as a mentor and positive influence in her life. During her role in marketing/public affairs, Marie proudly interpreted her role as presenting to the public a positive story which reflected growth and stability in the institution. The positive statistics she conveyed include record high enrollment, budget allocation increases, and national recognition for operational best practices. Marie touts her legacy as the introduction of a multi-year marketing plan and a series of positive local and national press coverage for UMCCCC.
Eddie Mae is an African American woman who possesses bachelor’s and master’s degrees. She had a career in government overseeing technology and workforce development programs before transitioning to UMCC, where she merged the two as the face for workforce development. Eddie Mae lists her legacy as increased funding for workforce programs across the institution, institutionalized testing policy for nursing programs, and introduction of industry specializations so students could receive certificates to seek employment upon completing their training program.

Harriette is an African American woman who possesses bachelor’s and master’s degrees and a doctorate in nursing as well as a Master of Business Administration. Harriette worked her way up through the ranks from tenured faculty to inaugural provost/CAO. Harriette viewed her legacy as including improvements to the nursing programs across the system, engaging in succession planning, and increasing recruitment of diverse people into the leadership pipeline.

Catherine is an African American woman recruited to work at UMCC as associate vice chancellor due to her administrative success in opening and growing a new college in the Midwest from the ground up. Catherine possessed bachelor’s and master’s degrees and earned her doctorate degree while serving at UMCC. Catherine was appointed president of one of UMCC’s flailing colleges, which she stabilized, introducing new academic programs and strengthening institutional partnerships. Catherine viewed her legacy as advancing systemic changes to advance the functions of adult education, redesigning data collection to increase state reimbursements to the district, and introducing professional development for adult education professionals.
**Keisha** is an African American woman who experienced the transition between administrations during her tenure as vice president at one of UMCCCC’s predominantly Black colleges. She possesses a bachelor’s degree from an Ivy League school and a Master of Business Administration from a “sister ivy” school. Skilled in grant writing, Keisha viewed her legacy as having successfully secured $2.5M in additional resources to enable infrastructure building, upgrading studio laboratories, targeting programming to promote student success, and offering faculty professional development opportunities.

**Pierness** is an African American woman who joined UMCCCC to begin her first college presidency and was excited by the prospect of working in a predominantly Black environment, since all her prior experiences were in environments where she was “the only.” Pierness possesses bachelor’s, master’s, and doctorate degrees. Although Pierness’s tenure as president at UMCCCC’s predominantly Black college was short lived due to tumultuous institutional leadership, she perceived her legacy as being one of support to staff in a toxic environment. She continues to encourage persons of color, especially women, to pursue advanced degrees in order to avail themselves of leadership opportunities.

**Sally** is a proud Puerto Rican/Latina woman who views herself as an ardent advocate for women’s rights and advancement in education. Sally possesses bachelor’s, master’s, and doctorate degrees. She joined UMCCCC as a vice president to utilize her expertise in navigating UMCCCC colleges through the accreditation process. She also became known for incorporating industry standards in evaluating faculty credentials within UMCCCC. She viewed her legacy to be the institutionalization of standards and assessment for faculty and students.
Bobbie is an African American woman who derived fulfillment in creating need-based industry programs which met the needs of contractors and generated revenue for UMCCCC. Bobbie possesses bachelor’s, master’s, and doctorate degrees. Bobbie was adamant about formalizing mentoring for young Women of Color in the pipeline and established an accountability process to provide support to the participants. Bobbie viewed her legacy as being the “guru for non-credit.”

Five participants served over 30 years and retired from UMCCCC. One participant retired from another urban community college system prior to serving seven years at UMCCCC and subsequently retired from UMCCCC (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Time served at UMCCCC.

Reporting of Data Collected

The 18 study participants responded to 16 interview questions to ascertain how they perceived their leadership experience. Each interview question was matched to research
question(s) to collect the participants’ perceptions of their collective lived experience as women leaders of color at UMCCCC.

Emergent Themes

Six overarching themes emerged from the participants’ responses to structured interview questions for this research study. The six major themes are finding your voice/agency, educational/social justice agenda, allyship, acquiring a political lens, mentoring, and continued personal/professional development to transcend “-isms.” The identified themes are described below:

**Finding your voice/agency** is an awareness of one’s experiences as part of the developmental process to speak your mind with intention and power, particularly after a period of being marginalized or silenced by those perceived as being in authority or functioning as the dominant group.

**Educational/social justice** reflects a concerted effort to diversify all levels of educational institutions to adopt practices which reflect diversification of culture, personnel, and advocacy for the equitable distribution of resources to change institutional policies and procedures and enrich the curriculum.

**Allyship** is a strategy utilized to pursue partnerships by linking with other persons in general, Women of Color specifically, who are of like mind and share space at the policy and decision-making table. Allyship is viewed as a way to ensure a sense of collective power in addressing issues that adversely affect disenfranchised persons, specifically women and/or people of color, in addition to a means to facilitate personal support and camaraderie.
Acquiring a political lens is the act of becoming politically astute and acquiring innate knowledge of key internal and external stakeholders associated with the institution which directly influences how decisions are made to advance or protect their interest.

Mentoring is the process of having a person who is interested in your personal and professional growth providing guidance in planning career advancement as well as navigating political landmines.

Continued personal/professional development to transcend “-isms” is critical for sustained awareness of advancement and trends in the profession as well as being viewed as the experts, thus bringing value to your role and the organization. Continued growth ensures both personal and professional relevance to the organization and career advancement and recognizing when/if encountering “-isms” in the workplace, ways to effectively navigate them.1

Finding Your Voice and Embracing Your Agency

When you are “the only” in the room, finding your voice becomes a means of empowerment to survive and advance in tenuous situations. Curry (2000) asserts the “leader persona” concept embodies a “sense of self determination...influence of principles...values that govern strong knowledge of self” to create an individual’s meaning systems essential to conceptualize one’s leadership style (pp. 19-20).

Participants articulated assessing situations encountered requiring them to create ways of being a “leader persona” as a way of operating in their leadership capacity effectively.

1“-isms” are all-inclusive: racism, sexism, ageism, heterosexism, elitism, etc., all of which could be used randomly to stifle personal growth and/or career advancement.
The leader persona developmental process certainly influenced Anna realizing the need to find her voice. This was evident as she recounted a situation where she was being terminated:

I got intimidated because all these people were all White. I was outnumbered and a Black woman and wasn’t confident about anything that I said was going to make a difference. I guess I was grappling with issues of “Am I good enough? smart enough? do I measure up?” Me being an African American female you got two strikes. So, you have to look the part, you have to be smarter than everybody else, or study harder than anybody else to make sure you stay in that capacity. And that’s still true today. So, you learn that you have to stand for yourself and speak your piece because that’s the only way you’re going to survive… other than that you’re a wimp and … a female. They feel you and what you’re doing and they will take advantage of you. So, I began speaking up for myself!

This encounter occurred early in Anna’s career and was pivotal to her extended tenure at the institution. By finding her voice and using it she was able to reverse her employer’s decision to terminate her employment. She also advocated to benefit other Women of Color by requesting they be retained as part of her team to manage the high-stakes technology conversion project.

Likewise, Francesca, a trusted colleague of Anna’s, was the only Asian woman in upper administration. She shared how she had to navigate being “the only” when challenged by supervisors:

I was denied salary increases but more work was expected of me. I believed it was because of people’s perception of Asians being hard workers, yet I was under-appreciated. I recall a male manager was acting discriminatory, demeaning and verbally marginalized me in an open meeting. I had to speak up and be assertive. You don’t just shut down and walk away complaining about it because he was not treating me, I thought, not treating me correctly. So I complained and he was fired! I couldn’t work under those conditions…I stood up to make sure others wouldn’t have to endure that level of obnoxious behavior. I think that made me stronger! Yeah, and I said “No, you cannot cry, you are going to have to talk back in a nice way.” You know, be assertive, and prove your point and stand by and let your conviction or whatever...I just am going to have to stand up! I stood for what was right and also knowing the law that you could not be discriminated against. You certainly aren’t allowed to be belittled or marginalized in the workplace. Know that you have the right to stand up!
By validating herself and her right to be in the space, Francesca garnered the intestinal fortitude to take a stand to be treated fairly, which resulted in her offender being terminated.

Sally was one of the most senior participants. Sally began working in educational institutions when being a woman of color was an anomaly and they had to fend for themselves. Sally recounts how at the onset of her career she had to threaten her offender with physical violence to interrupt his daily verbal assaults on her:

"I experienced soooo much discrimination through the years, so I know how it feels. I recall when I was a brand-new college graduate working as a teacher and a colleague screamed racial epithets each day...I had to threaten his life in front of students to get him to stop! As a result, sugar in my tank and other crap ceased as well! I put up with a lot of crap at that school. Discrimination was apparent in so many different ways...I still get angry about the harassment I was subjected to by [White] colleagues. Ultimately, I wanted to make sure [of] anything I could do to stop it from happening to others, especially women. I value...women of color in institutions and want them to realize their worth.

Sally’s early experiences of racial discrimination and harassment permanently defined her approach to leadership and commitment to uplifting Women of Color in the academy.

Catherine chose the route of dealing with slights she experienced by accessing her intellectual acumen as a defense to navigate inappropriate sexual overtures by her male supervisor, who was the same race:

"A lot of things worked against me but it gets reduced to race because it’s assumed that there are not issues of race amongst us, but there are. Like sexual harassment...low-key sexual harassment was more than just subtle advances. Biases against women...and certain women were, you know, treated differently based on his preferences. Thank God for being intelligent and grounded in who I was and focusing on what I needed to do! I knew far more about adult education than anyone in the surrounding area, which made me indispensable to the institution for a long time."
Recognizing the need to manage challenging situations encountered in the workplace, Anna, Francisca, Sally, and Catherine chose a way to find their voice and agency to adopt ways to assert themselves and navigate situations that proved to be critical in defining their leader persona, thus shaping their leadership style.

Educational (Social) Justice

Practically all of the participants embraced and advanced the concept of educational (social) justice in their approach to leadership. Educational justice consisted of advocating for educational equity regarding institutional policies, equitable distribution of institutional resources, impacting decisions surrounding the offering of quality educational instruction and programs accessible to the greatest number of students within the institution. Participants spoke of identifying systemic injustices and systematically dismantling them while maintaining their integrity in the face of opposition.

When Toni served as the vice chancellor of academic affairs, she encountered significant resistance to proposed policy changes she deemed necessary to modify curriculum and equitably distribute resources in a district which had traditionally allocated the largest share of the resources to those schools with majority enrollment of White students.

The institution was culturally diverse, which was an asset, not a liability. The institution was predominantly African American and Hispanic, so we had to bring credibility and value to the discussion. We had a commitment to educating and uplifting people, and now saw external forces which were present. The peeling back of those layers allowed for a more equitable distribution of resources of talent and skills. I presented data and provided facts that impacted the transformation, and essentially dismantled the perception of White superiority which had influenced policies and resource allocations for decades. We continuously strategized to address the uniform disparity in the allocation of resources across the system.
Maya Davis was president at one of the predominantly Black colleges in UMCC and a close comrade of Toni, who collaborated to identify policies which were discriminatory and worked tirelessly to dismantle them.

We confronted racist policies and took initiative to strategically and methodically dismantle them, thus giving legitimacy and credibility to all predominantly Black colleges in the system.

Elaine, who served on the chancellor’s executive leadership team, espoused how considerable time and energy was expended addressing the inequitable distribution of resources:

Policy was very important...lots of time spent banging the table and arguing for Black and Brown people to get the same thing, and to me that’s my mission even to this day. I would speak up that we must divide the pot whether it was money, classes, or whatever it was regarding policy, we must divide resources equitably. No other Hispanics were at the table, so I appeared to be the rabble rouser and the rebellious one. I learned the politics and spoke on matters related to equitable distribution of resources across the district irrespective of the students enrolled and programs offered.

Elaine proudly identified as Black Puerto Rican and was unwavering about using her voice to advocate for the equitable distribution of resources throughout the district.

Lolita is a Latina woman leader who embraces her role to speak up and ensure resources and policies include the needs of people of color:

Having people of color in positions of leadership allowed for the institution’s policies to be more specific and reflective of the people we were serving. They created the basis for me to feel confident and comfortable helping people and doing the best for them. It was understood we were supposed to be taking care of our own as opposed to working in an all-White environment and maintaining the status quo. I was around people who had influence so we could make things happen and directly impact policy.
Teresa’s experience as the provost and CAO was consumed with addressing issues of institutional retrenchment relative to advocating for continued equity in resource distribution and not hiding behind arguments of adversely impacting academic standards.

I was confronting institutional operations based on tradition which were actually racist and sexist. As I was pushing for change there was resistance by outing we were “lowering standards”! Racial constructs showed up as fiefdoms, silos, and financial decision making. I endured a withering chauvinistic management style which resulted in my being degraded and marginalized.

In her leadership capacity as provost and chief academic officer, her primary role was to advocate for academic integrity and equity in matters impacting student learning and resource allocation to ensure their academic success. Nevertheless, Teresa encountered resistance which also embodied patriarchal overtones designed to diminish her voice despite her positionality.

The commitment to raise their voices on behalf of students was consistently stated and explicitly expressed by Keisha as a core value:

I wanted to serve and advocate for those with limited voices and opportunities so they could improve their lives. My focus has always been on helping Black and Brown students when I felt we were talking about policy changes or things that would adversely impact Black and Brown students. That was when I felt like I needed to chime in and step up. So, that was the lens that everything I did revolved around. I always felt like I needed to speak up on those issues.

Likewise, Pierness, who was a president at one of UMCCCC’s predominantly Black colleges, passionately embraced her conviction to work on behalf of students and was alarmed when she observed decisions being made that adversely impacted those colleges heavily populated by students of color.

This was the very first time I worked at a predominantly Black institution and was quite excited...first time I worked where people looked like me! I lifted my voice to speak to inequity of resources and decisions regarding programs offered within the district.
Primarily service programs were assigned to predominantly Black schools vs. business/entrepreneurial or futuristic programs. Decisions were motivated more by numbers vs. actual students’ interest. Focus was on outcomes with little focus on process and future impact of decisions. Presidents were applauded for numbers vs. students’ academic success. Equity was needed in the decision-making process...colleges with predominantly Black and Brown students were targeted for primarily service industries programs (i.e., transportation, truck driving, taxis, hospitality), yet entrepreneurial and technology programs were shifted to schools with primarily White students.

Bobbie was another champion for the equitable distribution of resources to benefit colleges which were predominantly populated by Black and Brown students, and she spoke of her efforts to constantly advocate for decisions to be made which would afford all students the opportunity to access resources and programs to ensure a better future:

Disparity existed within programs. Inequity in the way the various programs were located because students were Black and Brown, their offerings were diminished when it came to technology. We were constantly battling to have programs offered across the system vs. just at the north side colleges, which were predominantly populated by White students. I found myself constantly engaging in sidebar conversations with staff persons who had the chancellor’s ear to influence policy. I wanted them to know what I was talking about was just fair. It’s an injustice what was going on with the new administration’s directive, from the Mayor’s Office no less! Reverse entrenchment of everything dismantled by the prior administration.

Bobbie positioned the source of the inequitable policies as being heavily influenced by external politics spilling over into the educational realm and adversely impacting the long-term outcome of Black and Brown students from diverse communities being denied access to resources. Consequently, the lack of educational access restricted their ability to have a constructive impact on the future of their families’ and communities’ agency.
Allyship

Participants were intentional in establishing relationships with other women in general, Women of Color specifically, who shared space creating policy at the decision-making table. As a result, there was a sense of their collective power to facilitate institutional change in addition to receiving needed support to bolster confidence and assurance as needed. Anna acknowledges the reality of being in the minority:

We were in the minority and we developed our own group. We used our group to fortify each other and used our collective voices in meetings to help dismantle racist policies which adversely impacted the advancement of Black and Brown students.

Toni expounds upon how camaraderie between the women was empowering to increase their effectiveness:

When conferring with other women leaders there was a sense of unity, togetherness, support, and encouragement in creating strategies for whatever we had to do. We strategized to address the uniform disparity in the allocation of resources across the system.

Maya Davis elaborates on how building relationship with others enhanced her ability to strategically advance her agenda:

I used my relationships, credibility, profile and political influence to shift policy. I managed to always be conscious of not being a threat to superiors. See, my mom taught me how to deal with White folk. How to manage their perceptions. A White colleague who was visible on the national level liked me and brought me into her inner circle and introduced me to her fellow White president comrades. They allowed me in because “she” saw me as legitimate. So I made them feel important so they could get what they needed and I could get what I needed. I matched my fellow Presidents and I armed myself with experience and opportunity.

Mary stressed the importance of building alliances to survive within systems:

We are all a compilation of our previous experiences and have to know how to work with people no matter the battle. I had to stroke people in various positions to make sure to
stay on their right side just to get along and advance my agenda to benefit students and my college.

Teresa summarized the importance of allyship and its impact on Women of Color to excel in hostile environments:

There was a need to support other women and each other. All the demeaning, marginalization, abuse done was harmful. I believe you’re human and deserve to be treated like a human being! I validated their humanity and being an African American woman and knowing what it means NOT to have your humanity validated was even more important after having previously being marginalized and minimized. I never wanted anyone to feel that. I thought I needed to do all I could while I was in a position of power and could make a difference.

Latina women participants aligned with their African American peers and worked to widen the pipeline for other Latina women to ascend, providing assistance to navigate the politics of the system. They felt empowered to embrace ethnic identity in their line of work and the opportunity to be at the decision-making table to engage in policy making. Participants collectively recognized the need to bring more Latinx people, specifically women, into the pipeline since most Latinx/Hispanics were in entry-level support staff positions or were students.

Lolita recognized that she was working during a time when embracing her ethnicity was expected in her line of work to be effective:

A culture of African American influence in the system was the era when I began. We dealt with students in the system who were students of color and supported ...which created a consciousness for me. Having people of color in positions of leadership allowed for the institution’s policies to be more specific and reflective of the people they served. It created the base for me to feel confident and comfortable helping people and doing the best for them. We were supposed to be taking care of our own as opposed to being in an all-White environment where the majority’s interest is protected at the expenses of the minority’s advancement.

As the chief of human resources, Petra embraced the opportunity before her to be allied with other people of color and diversify the institution’s workforce:
I perceived my time at the institution as the opportunity to diversify the workforce, which was practically lily White! I made sure to fit African Americans and Latinos into the right positions and help them to get those opportunities they needed so they could grow. I gave a lot of people of color an opportunity; most were African Americans. I tried to help as many Latinos in the district as I could, but there just weren’t very many in the pipeline. However, I was available for counsel for the Latinos who needed to navigate highly political personnel matters within the system.

Mary served as a leader mentor for Kaleidoscope, a national women's leadership organization, and took to heart her role to uplift other women in the profession: “I was always open to meeting with Women of Color regarding leadership opportunities. I counseled and mentored many on career issues.” A strategy espoused by many participants was not to be emotional and, as Mary stated, “learn to carry your own water.” The Women of Color leaders were keenly aware that they were in high-stakes situations and that “failure was not an option.” Therefore, it was imperative that they worked as allies in order to achieve their goals and objectives within their leadership roles.

Acquiring a Political Lens

Participants’ commitment to acquiring a political lens was strongly advised to support “reading” supervisors and constantly taking the temperature of the internal and external political landscape to remain relevant in the role of an administrator. Thus, constantly strategizing on ways to move progressive agendas forward became the norm. Mary illuminates the importance of acquiring a political lens:

Shortly after my arrival I realized I was working in a high-stakes environment so I had to be strategic in the execution of my duties and minimize “fires” that popped up at my college. If I was going to survive, I had to figure out why people behaved the way they did within orgs. I understand the business...it’s all a business! Be at the right place at the right time, or before time, even when you’re not told where that may be! Always study opportunities to move your agenda forward.
Elaine asserts that failure was never an option, particularly as a single mother:

> Failure was NOT an option...I had to make it happen so my son could eat! I developed an instinct for learning what I had to learn. Learned the politics of the org with total disregard for titles or positions...I just had to get the job done...and they better give me my money!

Maya Davis describes her approach to managing working in a highly political environment:

> I armed myself with experience and opportunity. Nevertheless, I managed to always be conscious of not being a threat to my superiors. Relationships...a lot of it had to do with the relationships and how people believe your cache.

Teresa details her adopted strategy for navigating the political environment:

> UMCCCC was a very political institution very connected to city politics, and so things just didn’t happen there, it’s always some sort of political affiliation. I always saw my role as a connector between district and the colleges. I mediated conversations between unions, faculty, staff and advisors. I was always seeking different perspectives. I validated their humanity, being an African American woman, and knowing what it means NOT to have your humanity validated was even more important. I thought I needed to do that….after having previously been marginalized and minimized...I never wanted anyone to feel that. I wanted them to see what good leadership looked like.

Likewise, Mary expounds upon her method of surviving and being effective in a politically charged space:

> I prided myself [on] studying behavior. I looked for similarities between northern and southern institutions. In order to allow me to keep doing my work there I always kept my eye on what was going on in the system because the system administrator…was very much in charge and that was what the chancellor would use to make decisions. I studied opportunities and figured out how to move my agenda forward as fast as I could.

Catherine’s perspective of working in a highly political environment laid bare the multiple racist and sexist nuisances she had to maneuver as a Women of Color leader which contributed to the complexity of her layered leadership experience. She recounts how she had to find her way through the intersection of multiple assaults on her sense of right:
I felt as though I was an academician in a very political situation. Many things worked against me, but it gets reduced to race because it is assumed that there were not issues of race amongst us, but there were. Like sexual harassment...low-key sexual harassment was more than just the issue. Bias against women...particularly certain women were, you know, treated differently based on the chancellor’s preferences.

Teresa shared how the organization’s dysfunction adversely impacted her mental and emotional state, which occurs more often than not within organizations and can have grave long-term implications on Women of Color’s performance and continued career advancement.

Lots of mean girl stuff occurred...terrorism cloaked as management. I’m still traumatized from working for insecure managers— insecure, abusive, jealous, egotistical, and narcissistic. …I know how people working with Trump in the White House feel and why they do what they do! They’re just trying to survive! I experienced trauma working for insecure managers—insecure, abusive, jealous, egotistical, and narcissistic.

Ultimately, there comes a point when a person has to take stock of the situation they find themselves in and determine what’s in their best interest to continue to excel. Do they remain in the situation and engage in the political gamesmanship in an organization, or move on to greener pastures? Louisa recounts how she identified her breaking point:

I came up through the ranks, knew the college, and had credibility with faculty due to my knowledge of the job. I had developed partnerships in both campus and the community, which was advantageous. I applied for positions for which I was qualified to perform; however, I obviously had reached a ceiling at UMCC, which is a very hard place to work because of intense political gamesmanship. Personal relationships or pettiness impacted my ability to advance within the organization. Hard work was minimized—marginalized—taken for granted by my supervisor, who asked me to leave once I obtained my doctorate. I essentially had out-achieved her! So, I began preparing my exit strategy before being pushed out. I eventually chose to retire and move on to develop the undergraduate programs for an expanding online educational institution where I thrived and was lauded by my peers.

Possessing political acumen is essential to survive in work environments, but it is also necessary to include an exit strategy for one’s professional survival. Knowing when to move on is extremely important to one’s continued growth and advancement.
Mentoring

All study participants indicated they intentionally mentored other Women of Color specifically for the purpose of feeding the leadership pipeline for future ascension. All except one identified at least one person who served as a mentor providing them guidance and support during their career. Mentors varied as far as gender and race. Nine identified a male who served as their mentor, whereas eight indicated they were mentored by a woman. The ethnicity of their mentors varied vastly across racial and ethnic lines (Table 2).

Table 2

<table>
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<th>Participants’ Formal Mentoring Experience</th>
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<th>Did not receive mentoring</th>
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<td>Did not mentor others</td>
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Mentoring other Women of Color in the pipeline appeared as a common commitment for most participants, with the overarching theme of mentoring being viewed as an integral part of their role as Women of Color leaders. Intentional mentoring occurred in various formal and informal ways, including support for accessing local, regional and national training or professional development opportunities. Most participants indicated they were mentored by others—thus their sense of responsibility to mentor other women and students of color. Maya Davis shared the circumstances which propelled her to become a mentor to other Women of Color and champion their success:
I had a bad experience with a Black male supervisor who was abusive. Because of that experience it made me become an intentional mentor to other Women of Color. I routinely hired Women of Color for administrative positions, thus giving them access and opportunities within the profession. I became a mentor in a national women’s leadership institute because it brought together a lot of lonely Black women who were all by themselves and had no mentors in their all-White institutions, and who needed to have hope. I admire strong Black women; it’s just that simple. I tried to encourage career advancement of the competent ones.

Inviting women to attend private gatherings at leaders’ homes in the evening or weekends to receive one-on-one instruction occurred to avoid mistakes being made which could jeopardize their job security or career advancement. Anna recounts her motivation to support Women of Color in the workplace:

I was committed to intentionally hiring or promoting Women of Color to grant them access to opportunities within the organization and growth within their profession. The ones who showed an interest would be mentored. I intentionally mentored many of them since technology was a male-dominated specialty. They would come over after work to learn the process and system. Most resulted in promotion whether they were Black, Brown, females and males and any others who were interested. No one is too low or too high that we can’t communicate. I tried to help any sister I could.

Toni states:

I identified Women of Color at UMCCCC who I felt deserved an opportunity; I was very intentional in providing opportunities to Women of Color and served as a mentor coach to most.

Mary also intimated that she “was always open to meeting with Women of Color regarding leadership opportunities and counseled and/or mentored many on career advancement issues.”

Bobbie was intentional in mentoring Women of Color to envision with specificity what they wanted career-wise and then to work collectively to hold each other accountable.

The majority of the people I hired were African Americans or women of color, unless in certain fields where it required people to be experts or have specific capabilities or
experience. I held monthly working sessions with Women of Color to outline goals and strategies on “where do you see yourself in two to five years?” We would have lunch or dinner meetings to envision next steps, and then share resources or contacts, and held each other accountable.

Francesca shared she was keenly aware that she was representing all Asians and was always in recruiting and mentoring mode when moving about the Asian community. She actively encouraged persons interested in working at UMCCCC to work on their language skills in addition to acquiring the necessary skills to get hired and/or promoted.

I directed interested people from the Asian community to pursue job openings as they became available. I would coach non-English-speaking employees on improving their English language skills by suggesting they watch soap operas to improve speaking English more fluently.

Sally asserted that her life legacy was both her allyship and mentoring of other women, especially Women of Color:

The women stuck together and went out of their way to help each other. I was a champion of women of color, actually any woman that was put down or oppressed. I would come to their defense and encourage them to get their education so they would have more options available to them. I valued the Women of Color in the institution. I worked endlessly to see that many were promoted. I wanted them to realize they could do more than what they were doing in the organization.

Teresa clearly understood the importance of using her position to make a lasting difference with the institution, as well as impacting the lives of those she supervised:

I always wanted to find ways to support other women of color; I had the power, influence, authority, and the funds. Love talking to people about getting to their next level and what they need to do and how to navigate political landmines, make connections, and be politically savvy. I would appoint people to committees and other leadership opportunities to spotlight skills set. I understood the balancing act of working women with family, parenting, and advancing their career. I enjoyed being a mentor coach.

Keisha acknowledges the value in having mentors to support her advancement:
I was fortunate to have mentors who took me under their wings and provided direction on work appearance, appropriate behavior in meetings, and scanning the political landscape, etc.

Mentoring is essential for Women of Color to obtain understanding of the work culture they operate in. By obtaining guidance, Women of Color are equipped to effectively navigate, excel, and ascend.

Continued Personal/Professional Development to Transcend “-isms”

Participants emphasized the importance of accessing continued professional development, thus ensuring being viewed as experts in their disciplines, particularly as it related to analyzing data and being able to speak with authority on relevant matters as well as tangential issues.

Eddie Mae recounts how as a young Black woman she was keenly aware of race, sex, and age in her administrative role:

As a Black woman, race and age seemed to be an ongoing issue. Our legitimacy, competence, and intelligence was constantly questioned or challenged. I had to learn to use data to support the work I was doing. I encountered a closed system composed of elitism and stratification based on educational level with deep entrenchment based on educational/degree attainment. Invisible barriers existed between [the] district office and the colleges. Since it was an educational institution, everything had to be documented and substantiated. I presented data and research to support proposed changes and established benchmarks for reporting to funders. I challenged my peers to be held accountable based on their position, title, and salary. I felt they needed to step up and serve the people they were being paid to serve.

The commitment to continue personal/professional development was a constant theme which flowed through many of the participants’ responses. Anna attests to the value:

I always say you never stop learning; you just keep going on and on. I’m always bringing along other people and they’re learning just like I am. I didn’t leave behind the people that I worked with as computer operators. We became the experts in our particular fields to avoid being typecast or expendable.
Toni maintains that she actively supported the development of her team:

I continuously granted access to additional training and professional development opportunities at [the] local, regional, national level and cultivated cross-fertilization of skills and talents within my department to encourage staff to acquire new skills and realize their abilities. I wanted them to realize their possibilities were endless!

Maya Davis espoused the value she gained from continuing to access developmental opportunities:

I matched my fellow presidents’ level of involvement and established a standard, credibility, and brought legitimate prestige to the colleges. I became more influential with the state community college board and gained credibility for UMCCC which did not exist previously for a district our size amongst our colleagues across the country.

Marie viewed accessing continued development as the standard due to the high-level performance expectation:

High performing culture within, which did not allow for mediocrity...it was not an option! There was a push to establish high standards to counter negative stereotypes of people of color...higher standards for culturally, ethnically, gender, and community colleges as a whole. Strive for excellence was a clarion call by the chancellor, and his passion for raising standards was pervasive.

Conversely, Catherine’s experience of encountering sexism in her efforts to execute her duties was managed by becoming the expert in her specialty area.

I experienced discrimination with sexual overtones; I wasn’t responsive to flirtatious overtures from the chancellor. Although there were plenty of women in administration the manager didn’t respect our intelligence and seemed to revel in his superiority based on position. He didn’t want women to show him up, and once I got my doctorate, I became a threat because I was an expert in the adult education work I did. Possessing knowledge of finance and regulations as well as understanding teaching adults is how I made that work in terms of professional development.

Louisa extols that she was an ardent advocate for other women to access continued development in preparation to move into leadership roles:
I was actively involved in national and local women’s organizations that mentored me—like AAWCC, which coordinated workshops on women empowerment. I encouraged my staff, both women and men, to further their education and pursue additional training. I purposely promoted women into leadership roles when the opportunity presented itself.

Likewise, Teresa expressed her steadfastness in encouraging her team to continue developing: “I was always encouraging people to do their best and to think about their next step and how they would get there. I wanted people to be their best...to be better than me!”

Accessing developmental opportunities cultivated cross-fertilization of skills and talents, which was extremely beneficial in enhancing career advancement opportunities for Women of Color to become future leaders.

Women of Color Leadership Legacy

The Women of Color leaders who willingly participated in this study collectively understood their responsibility as leaders to utilize their opportunity to serve in a leadership capacity to leave the institution better positioned than when they arrived. The overarching legacies the participants perceived to have positively impacted were the institution’s infrastructure, policies, or personnel.

The final interview question inquired of them to identify and describe their perceived legacy during their time at UMCCCC. Their responses reflect the following institutional impacts:

A. Tapped into their positional power to address disparity and racial makeup within staff and students, ensuring increased training on the part of staff, thus empowering them to become more effective in their positions to benefit the institution.

B. Increase receipt of funds from local, state, and national agencies for various institutional programs; identifying and securing additional funds from various sources enabled the
expansion of learning opportunities and upgrading of classrooms so students of color learn in environments on par with their peers at other institutions.

C. Advocate for uniform academic standards across the district, including standardization of assessment instruments and placement into developmental courses, to ensure students’ academic needs were being addressed by the institution to support student success.

D. Always assist people of color to advance within the institution.

E. Redesign the data collection system to accurately capture performance data of adult educators, thus facilitating the assessment and evaluation of their classroom instruction.

F. There was a concerted effort to unify faculty teaching to pursue top-level accreditation in various high-demand programs within colleges across the district.

G. Active participation in institutional succession planning to ensure continuity of historical facts, institutional traditions, programs and culture.

H. Being good stewards of the organization’s resources and assets by utilizing fiscally sound practices closely aligned with fiscal governing agencies.

I. Promoted civility and showed compassion towards employees, staff, and students, thus fostering an environment of respect towards one another. Fundamentally built upon the concept of being consummate team players.

J. Exposure to regional/international professionals in the field was most beneficial and provided models of successful WOC for them to emulate.

Essentially, the Women of Color leaders recognized their responsibility to leave their mark on the institution in a way that would be a guide to whomever succeeded them.
Chapter Summary

This chapter reported the findings from interviews of 18 study participants regarding their lived experience at UMCCC as Women of Color leaders and how their collective experiences impacted policy making, overcoming barriers and challenges, importance of mentoring, and their legacy to the institution. Six themes emerged which captured their experiences as leaders: finding your voice, educational/social justice agenda, allyship, acquiring a political lens, mentoring, and continued personal/professional development to transcend “-isms.”

Although 125 years have passed since the early efforts to address educational opportunities, time has not erased the historical legacy of race, gender, and class oppression in higher education, particularly for women of color. Overcoming these obstacles requires a variety of tools, including strong networking skills, access to mentoring, and professional development opportunities. (Pratt-Clarke, 2017, p. 16)
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

In this phenomenological study I interviewed 18 Women of Color who met a certain set of criteria related to their tenure in upper administration at UMCCCC during the period of 2000–2013. Each participant responded to 16 questions which were matched to research questions to collect the participants’ perceptions of their collective lived experience as women leaders of color at UMCCCC. I sought to answer the following research questions:

R1. How did leader persona influence Women of Color leaders’ leadership style and policy-making?

R2. What strategies do Women of Color leaders utilize to overcome challenges and barriers?

R3. How have Women of Color leaders mentored other Women of Color?

R4. How do Women of Color leaders perceive their leadership legacy?

Utilizing interpretative phenomenology (Willig, 2001), a method of reviewing how participants’ lived experience helps us understand the phenomenon, this chapter includes an overview of the significant findings of the study, a discussion of the research questions with relationship to existing literature on the topic area of interest, conclusions, recommendations for future research, and this researcher’s self-reflections. Figure 4 depicts which emergent themes correlated with which research questions.
Findings in Relation to Research Questions

R1 = Leader persona - Finding your voice/agency, educational justice, acquiring a political lens, allyship

R2 = Challenges and barriers - allyship, mentoring, continued personal/professional development,

R3 = Mentoring - mentoring, allyship, finding your voice/agency

R4 = Legacy - Educational/social justice, allyship, political lens

Figure 4. Findings in relation to the research questions.

Research Question #1

How did “leader persona” influence Women of Color leaders’ leadership style and policy making?

Leader persona for women of color is a confluence of historical, intellectual, cultural experiences, and social factors constructed over time that shapes women of color’s leadership identity, which subsequently influences their leadership style/role. Leader persona, for women of color, occurs over time and reflects their intellectual and cultural experiences and object relations. (Curry, 2000, p. 19)

Based on the findings from this study, the Women of Color leaders were aware their lived experiences impacted their approach to leadership and policy making by highlighting how they were keenly aware of their “onliness” and the need to represent their community with integrity and include others whenever possible. The themes of finding your voice/agency, educational justice, acquiring a political lens, and allyship were quite evident, especially among the more senior participants who were the early wave of Women of Color leaders at UMCCC.
Anna spoke of how, as a woman in a male-dominated field where she was outnumbered racially and gender-wise, she recognized the need for her to “find her voice and learn to take a stand for herself and others.” Harriette spoke of “being a woman of color coming into her own and feeling alone but recognizing that you need to speak up on behalf of yourself and others.” Keisha stated emphatically that she recognized her life goal was to advocate for those with limited voice and opportunities so she can improve their lives through having an impact on policies being developed. The women shared how they purposely took steps to overcome their feelings of inadequacy to find their voices and exercised agency to be heard and viewed as relevant as they served in their leadership roles. Finding your voice and embracing your agency, especially when you are “the only” in the room, is a means of empowerment to survive and advance.

Thus, the participants’ leader persona developmental process shaped their leadership style and subsequently influenced their policy making. This aligned with Curry’s description of Women of Color leaders’ relationship to acquiring a leader persona as “embodying a sense of self-determination, influence of principles and values that govern strong knowledge of self to create individual meaning systems conceptualizing their leadership style” (pp. 19-20). Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) espouses the importance of “using your voice...naming your reality” as a way for people in education to overcome being silenced. As women leaders of color in the academy, it’s most appropriate to engage in self-efficacy, be self-defining, and incorporate cultural identities into the execution of duties while redefining how institutions operate more inclusively, devoid of oppressive policies and practices.
As was reported in Chapter 4, educational/social justice was a continued theme expressed by most of the study participants. The Women of Color leaders recognized it was imperative to use their position and power to impact the equitable distribution of resources; creation of academic programs and policies reflecting diversity and inclusion was an inherent responsibility they were charged to exercise. They were resolute in the execution of their duties as Women of Color leaders, or Womanist educators, to advocate on behalf of their people. A Womanist educator embodies the tenets to overthrow the inherited sexual and racial caste system designed to oppress and restrict advancement. Or, as Fournillier (2010) states, “Women were subject to experiences of oppression, denigration, dehumanization, marginalization, racism, and sexism from White men, White women, and even Black men. Many of my experiences as a Black woman in the academy involve oppression and marginalization” (p. 56).

Lolita recognized this point when she stated, “We were supposed to be taking care of our own as opposed to being in an all-White environment advancing their agenda to benefit primarily White students.” Elaine stated, “I would speak up so we could divide the pot of money, if it was money, or classes, or whatever it was regarding policy just to divide the resources equitably amongst the colleges.” Toni adamantly stated, “We had a commitment to educating and uplifting people...peeling back the layers of discrimination allowed for the more equitable distribution of resources, talents, and skills.”

Alice Walker (1983) asserts that “Womanists must create a new set of values that will suit their lived experiences...inclusive of persons of color who are committed to the economic, political, and social equality of other persons of color as well as those in the dominant race who use their positions and power to marginalize and oppress people of color” (p. 37).
Inherent in the third theme which reflected the participants’ leader persona was acquiring a political lens. The acquisition of a political lens was imperative for participants’ individual and collective survival. Emerging from an existence that was oppressive and non-affirming, their very livelihood was determined by, as Maya Davis stated, “always being conscious of not being a threat to superiors...I learned to read situations [so] as not to embarrass or humiliate people,” or as shared by Mary, “I prided myself in studying behavior, especially the chancellor, and would use it to move my agenda forward,” and in the words of Maria, “always be strategic in how you present yourself and your work.”

The study participants’ responses reflected their acquisition of a leader persona and it was reflected in how they found their voice/agency, advanced tenets of educational justice, and actively engaged in acquiring a political lens to survive and thrive.

Research Question #2

What strategies do Women of Color leaders utilize to overcome challenges and barriers?

All of the emergent themes could be included as strategies utilized by the participants to overcome challenges and barriers encountered as Women of Color leaders; however, allyship, mentoring, and continued personal and professional development will be highlighted due to the underlying focus on the importance of connecting to others while continuing to develop self. Strategies utilized to overcome barriers ran the spectrum of actively seeking out comrades to intentionally coalesce as willing allies. It was imperative to expand networks to build alliances: internal and external institutional and personal circles of influence.

Turner (2007) compared the challenges Women of Color encounter in the academy working in isolation to advance their careers to cognitive dissonance that ensues from being
relegated to an academic caste system in the academy. Andrews (2000) highlights how Women of Color, specifically Black women, strive to bond with peers and create a sense of “sisterhood” and support they need to perform their roles in order to excel. Thus, the effort to form alliances and allyship across gender, ethnicity, and disciplines is not only a form of claiming your agency but could easily be equated with one’s will to survive. The study participants’ responses reflected this truth; as Anna stated, “We were in the minority, so we developed our own group to discuss policy and strategies to influence decisions.” Toni asserted, “When conferring with other women leaders there was a sense of unity, togetherness, support, and encouragement to create strategies for whatever we had to do.” Sally was emphatic about connecting with other Women of Color and striving to make a difference in the lives of those who were subordinates in the institution. Thus, Women of Color building alliances in the academy preserves a sense of cultural identity while ascending the ranks of administrative leadership and is an act of self-preservation, thus empowering the Women of Color leaders to overcome challenges and barriers they encountered.

Continued personal and professional development was yet another means for personal empowerment. Anna, Toni, Louisa, Harriette, Sally, Catherine, and Bobbie stressed how the importance of accessing continuing development opportunities positively impacted their career advancement and subsequently those they supervised or mentored. Anna insisted, “Never stop learning! Become the expert in your particular field so you aren’t typecast. Then, encourage others to get their degrees.” Attending professional workshops and conferences enabled the Women of Color to see people who looked like them as experts functioning in positions they may want to aspire to achieve beyond their current circumstances. Harriette stated, “I saw a majority of Black women and men who wanted to change lives, communities, and families. With
live role models I was validated, heard, opinion was valued. It made a world of difference in how
I lead.”

Both Catherine and Louisa identified how they encountered a different level of
discrimination once they received their doctorate degrees. They realized they had either out-
achieved their supervisors or became a threat in the workplace, which prompted them to set
about the process of planning an exit strategy. In the words of Mary, “Keep your eyes on what’s
going on in the system but always leave at the top of your game!” (Or, in the words of Kenny
Rogers, “Know when to hold them, know when to fold them!”)

Acquiring or being a mentor was an overarching theme each participant stressed to
transcend barriers and challenges. Through formal and informal mentors these Women of Color
were able to receive insight to outline plans for their mastery of specialty, network with other
Women of Color, and create a vision for what they wanted to achieve professionally
accompanied with a plan of action to make it a reality. Keisha spoke of how her mentors “took
me under their wings and provided direction on work appearance, appropriate behavior in
meetings, scanning the landscape, and staying abreast of pressing issues.” As stated by Sorcinelli
and Yun (2007), networks are vital support structures in a successful academic career for
emerging scholars seeking to navigate complex racial and gender dynamics found in most
academic institutions, while Tillman (2001) asserts the types of mentoring networks in the
academy are integral to the emotional, cultural, and social adjustment in institutions to effectuate
career success.

The intersectionality of all three themes embodies the experiences Women of Color
encounter operating in a racialized gender-dominated environment and was the impetus for most
advocating for continued personal and professional development. Being Women of Color exposed some to discrimination, sexual harassment, and sexual assault. Harriette described how her supervisor would constantly make comments about her appearance when she was pregnant or would call her into one-on-one meetings and close the door. Catherine shared how her rebuffs of her supervisor’s advances left her feeling vulnerable in her role. In both instances they related that connecting with a network of other Women of Color leaders gave them the support they needed to continue working within the organization.

The Latinx women expressed the importance of connecting with other Women of Color leaders as integral to their career success. They acknowledged the lack of a sizable number of other Latinx professionals in the institution, thus their appreciation to attend conferences and network outside the institution where there was an increased presence of other Latinx people to affirm their cultural identity. Internally they recognized the importance of assisting other Latinx persons, particularly Latina women, to navigate the political landscape and access opportunities for educational and career advancement.

The one Asian participant, Francesca, was keenly aware of her being “the only” within the Women of Color leaders’ network, on top of being “the only” in the upper level of administration. Her comments were closely aligned with the critiques outlined by Asian Critical Race Theory, which highlights the racial stereotypes of the “model minority” perception which Asians often encounter in the workplace. Francesca was very intentional in presenting herself as the expert in her field, speaking up for herself, networking with other Women of Color leaders, and assisting other Asian women and men inside and outside the system.
Ultimately, the Women of Color leaders were committed to maintaining their integrity in the face of opposition, chauvinism, and/or racist encounters. Through allyship, continued personal and professional development, and mentoring they were determined to achieve despite the barriers and challenges they encountered. In the words of Maria, “Strategize ways to move progressive agenda forward and take risks to advance yourself!”

Research Question #3

How have Women of Color leaders mentored other Women of Color?

In Chapter 2 the importance of mentoring was presented as important for Women of Color in the academy due to the low number of Women of Color in the pipeline to effectuate sustainable differences in institutions. Therefore, Women of Color are challenged to seek out mentoring relationships in order to access support, affirmation, acceptance, and friendships which are essential to survival and advancement in a desolate environment. As Sanchez-Hucles and Davis (2010) noted, “The requirements [are] for women of color to negotiate the labyrinth career path solo, and, in addition to mastering both agentic and communal skills, they must acquire social capital for advancement usually in a tiring and most isolating experience” (p. 177). Sorcinelli and Yun (2007) stressed the importance of mentoring cannot be emphasized enough, irrespective of gender, race, or position in life.

Consequently, most Women of Color leaders who participated in this study stated they either had a mentor or mentored others (see Table 2). Only one stated she never had a mentor, which I wanted to challenge based on how she recounted beginning her career ascent. Nevertheless, it was her story to tell. The study participants who mentored other Women of
Color in the institution viewed it as their responsibility to develop a pipeline to engage in succession planning to effectuate sustainable institutional change.

Mentoring occurred both formally and informally. Formally, Bobbie shared how she established monthly working lunch sessions with Women of Color to outline goals and strategies to address varying topics, such as, “Where do you see yourself in two to five years?” Attendees would sketch out their vision, share amongst themselves, and hold each other accountable at monthly meetings to assess what kind of additional support was needed and ensure they reach their identified goals. Periodic dinners and theatre outings were also planned to allow the women to socialize outside of the workplace. Eddie Mae indicated she would oftentimes host lunches to have conversations on career-building topics.

Likewise, Anna, Toni, Francesca, and Petra partook in daily lunch outings to discuss pressing topics/issues and strategized on the most effective approach to handle them. They protected their lunchtime, and all voiced the value added from the experience as a leader because of the camaraderie and lifelong friendships that were formed. Informal mentoring occurred by providing Women of Color opportunities based on their stated interest in new challenges. Teresa was adamant about her commitment to find ways to support other Women of Color while I had the power, influence, authority, and access to the funds. I would appoint people to committees and other leadership opportunities to spotlight skills sets. I always enjoyed talking to people about getting to their next level and how to navigate political landmines.

Catherine referenced that when hiring people, especially Women of Color, she would interview them to understand their career goals. Then she would intentionally include them on committees with the college or local boards to support them in acquiring specific skill sets aligned with their
stated career goals. Pierness cited her mentoring focus to be supporting Women of Color to complete their doctoral programs. She created support groups for Women of Color at predominantly White spaces which received national recognition.

Most referred to participating in AAWCC (American Association of Women in Community Colleges), a women’s leadership development organization supported by the Association of American Community Colleges, as well as Kaleidoscope, another women’s leadership development organization specifically targeting Women of Color in community colleges. Both organizations provided a formal way for Women of Color to connect with other Women of Color in the profession and to engage in professional development to acquire essential skills to become effective women leaders. All who were mentored expressed gratitude for the opportunities afforded them to grow and ascend professionally. Most importantly, all were committed to paying it forward by mentoring other Women of Color.

Research Question #4

How do Women of Color leaders perceive their leadership legacy?

Dr. Pratt-Clarke (2017) states, “Women of color scholars writing about leadership, higher education, and women are so critical for documenting the journeys of women of color leaders that are often absent from books about higher education leadership...to transform spaces” (p. xiii). It is within this context that this study was conceptualized and the final research question was formulated. When interviewing study participants, practically all delighted in sharing what they perceived their contributions were to the institution and the possible impact for the next generation to build upon in providing educational opportunities to students and professional advancement for staff as well as the institution.
Their perceived legacies were shared in Chapter 4 and essentially consisted of deconstructing racist barriers which perpetuated the continued discrimination against persons of color to equitably access educational opportunities across the district. The existing practices were evident in the way basic skills assessment was conducted, usually resulting in students of color being assigned to the lowest level of developmental courses. Once in low-level courses, few ascended into college-level courses and thus lost the opportunities to actively pursue an associate degree as well as transfer to a four-year school to pursue a baccalaureate degree. Overhauling this college entry blockade proved to be transformational in creating a learning environment accessible to all students. Standardizing the entire assessment/placement process and general education courses resulted in increased student performance, course completion, and graduation rates across the district.

Restructuring policies, procedures, and practices to become open and inclusive and fairly distributing resources across the district, including introducing progressive industry, supported academic programs. Offering progressive academic programs across the district and increasing the number of programs that received accreditation from their discipline’s governing body raised the perception of the district’s academic standing in the eyes of local and state universities, resulting in increased transferring and acceptance of UMCCCC graduates by partnering institutions statewide.

Considerable attention was given to being good stewards of the institution’s finances and instituted efficiency processes to ensure measurable outcomes. Increased grants and other resources were awarded to the institution, enabling the upgrading of infrastructure to foster a positive learning environment for students. Successfully lobbying for tax increment funding
ensured sound funding for the future. Diversification of the workforce, establishing criteria for performance evaluations and salary increases, and instituting customer service expectations impacted the workforce morale and provided personnel a tangible guide to measure their performance in order to pursue career advancement. Advanced efforts to always show care and compassion to every member of the institution/family became a standard expectation of students, staff, faculty, and administrators.

Looking towards the future of the institution, considerable attention was given to succession planning, leadership development, and continuity in the efforts to leave a fiscally sound, racially and gendered diverse, talented workforce. The overarching ethos was to preserve the advancements made and enable the next string of leaders to assume the reins and continue moving the institution forward.

Implications

“Black women should exist not in the shadows of White people or Black men, but in the light of their own selves and possibilities.” ~~ Lucy D. Slowe, 1915 (qtd. in Miller & Pruitt-Logan, 2012)

Women of Color leaders who serve in higher education executive positions have a dual responsibility in their high-visibility roles. Not only must they serve institutions where they are employed and charged to provide visionary leadership utilizing their expertise, they also have a responsibility to their ethnic/racial communities which they represent. The dual expectation can be perceived as overwhelming or an additional burden; however, it’s imperative that Women of Color leaders be aware of this dual role expectation prior to assuming the responsibility in order to manage it effectively. Defining themselves as “Womanist educators” will imbue them with a
renewed sense of purpose and encouragement to stay motivated as they toil in the vineyards of the academy. Walker stated:

I don’t choose womanism because it is “better” than feminism ... I choose it because I prefer the sound, the feel, the fit of it... because I share the old ethnic-American habit of offering society a new word when the old word it is using fails to describe behavior and change that only a new word can help it more fully see. (qtd. in Jain & Turner, 2012, pp. 77–78)

A Womanist Educator

The definition of a Womanist educator is one who embodies and operates in the spirit of 20th-century Womanist educators such as Dr. Anna Julia Cooper, Mary McLeod-Bethune, Ida B. Wells, Lucy D. Slowe, and Mary Church Terrell. These women were dedicated to uplifting, restoring, and advancing the Negro/Black/African American race when opportunities to do so were met with considerable challenge and meager resources. Nevertheless, these pioneer Womanist educators embraced the importance of fully developing people’s minds to prepare them for a future where they could have an impact on the community, expand their profession, and benefit humankind.

Womanist educators function as education/social justice activists inside and outside the classroom or academy. They are motivated to make things happen versus wishing they would happen. They occupy space with a sense of ownership and personal power, not timidity. Jackson (2019) stated, “It is the responsibility of those of us within the Academy, with greater privilege and proximity to power to leverage our positions toward liberation of all people” (p. 196). Study participant Keisha reflected a perspective when she stated, “We are accountable to our community and getting our students in and out; we’re making sure they are getting jobs so they can begin making a difference in their families, community, city, and nation.”
A Womanist educator challenges systems and all forms of inequity, discrimination, racist policies and/or practices and is a voice for change to benefit all. She reconstructs places and spaces to reflect inclusion, eliminates restrictions/limitations/barriers/boundaries and replaces them with possibilities for everyone at all levels based on their capabilities and possibilities. She must be intentional with rewriting policies to reflect the new operating processes and procedures.

Womanist educators shun hierarchical thinking and ways of being, and adopt communal approaches to leadership and work relations. They must create opportunities for others to excel. This can be accomplished by casting a broad net designed to identify talented persons and offer them mentoring to assist others in outlining their career plans and where/how they can be most effective and advancing within the institution. Francesca emphasized this when she stated, “Diversify skills and staff as much as possible, and underscore the importance of networking.”

Likewise, Sally expressed how she “encouraged women to want more and work for more for themselves versus accepting the way they were viewed or restricted in organizations.”

Womanist educators must engage in self-care, which translates into making time for continued personal development, relaxation, rejuvenation, and doing those things with people who uplift you, affirm your spirit, and support your personal and professional dreams, goals, and aspirations. Networking with other professionals is essential to bolster one’s sense of value and purpose...or to plan an escape when work performance is being minimized, marginalized, or challenged.

As Womanist educators in the academy, it is most appropriate to engage in self-efficacy, be self-defining, and incorporate cultural identities into the execution of duties while redefining how institutions operate more inclusively, devoid of oppressive policies and practices.
As Womanist educators, Women of Color must be affirmed in their right to assume their position at the policy-making tables to add their voices to decisions to transform these institutions of higher learning into welcoming bastions of diverse scholarly ideas and lived experiences.

Womanist educators should be comfortable advocating for educational equity relative to institutional policies, distribution of institutional resources, decisions surrounding creating and locating new educational programs within institutions, and making them accessible to the greatest number of citizens across the city/region, irrespective of socio-economic or racial background.

Womanist educators must understand their responsibility to utilize every opportunity to serve in a leadership capacity and work to leave the institution in a better position than when they arrived. Womanist educators must also remain resolute in the mission of education as a means to transform lives!

Recommendations

“A vision of self-determination through education and social uplift for African-American women. Its central thesis was that the educational, moral, and spiritual progress of Black women would improve the general standing of the entire African-American community. The violent natures of men often run counter to the goals of higher education, so it is important to foster more female intellectuals because they will bring more elegance to education.”

Dr. Anna Julia Cooper, A Voice from the South (1892)

The call for more diversity in the academy rang loud for decades (Delgado & Allen, 2019; Pratt-Clarke, 2017; Pratt-Clarke & Maes, 2017; Rodriguez-Vargas, 2014; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010; Waring, 2003). The need to reflect more diversity is needed within institutions, especially in scholarly research to affirm the value in different experiences persons of color bring
to the academy, their rich lens providing alternate views of the world, thus enhancing learning experiences, and how impactful their unique way of being can enrich the academic space. The same is true as it relates to Women of Color leaders in the academy.

Recommendations for future research include focusing on establishing or formalizing Women of Color networks to promote building alliances in pursuit of ascending into higher executive positions. It is commonly known that men have access to a buddy system which supports their advancement in their respective professions. As of this writing, Kaleidoscope, the one formalized leadership institute focused on preparing Women of Color in community colleges to ascend the ranks, has suspended its operations. It would be wise to research other industries offering Women of Color leadership development programs and examining how they manage to continue to operate. Their model can become a template to perpetuate opportunities for Women of Color to access structured mentoring and leadership training to build alliances, engage in career planning, and acquire political lenses to navigate institutions, along with techniques and strategies to address institutionalized barriers and boundaries preventing equitable advancement.

Research should commence on how Women of Color incorporate their leader persona not only into their leadership role in education but also how it shows up in the community where they serve as leaders. It would be worth examining whether Women of Colors leaders carry their mantle of leadership outside the institution where they serve in a leadership capacity into the community where they live or possess a cultural identification. Doing so would reflect their operating holistically out of a Womanist context and support the premise that Womanist educators make a difference in the spaces where they exist.
Ultimately, a leadership institute designed to affirm Women of Color would become foundational to sharpen Womanist educators’ lenses to engage in educational activism. Becoming acquainted with various models of success other Women of Color leaders have successfully implemented to transform educational institutions would be instrumental in moving America's educational system to become one that is liberatory in nature as opposed to reinforcing an archaic and oppressive approach to what is considered higher learning in a country embracing exceptionalism.

The study participants perceived their overarching legacies to positively impact the institution’s infrastructure, policies, or personnel. Towards that end I propose the following guide to support Womanist educators to effectively operate at all levels in the academy (Figure 5).

“The world is not good enough; we womanists must make it better.”
~~Alice Walker (1983)

Personal Reflections

I began my doctoral studies fully aware that I wanted to memorialize the experience of the Women of Color leaders I observed while building my career and whom I eventually had the honor of working with as an administrator. During my time as an administrator, I was keenly aware of my responsibility to the students for whom we were making decisions regarding distribution of resources. As Women of Color leaders, it was imperative that we tapped into our personal power to address the disparity and racial composition of staff and students, ensuring
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<td>A.</td>
<td>Women of Color leaders seek opportunities to connect with WOC regional/international professionals in the field to model themselves accordingly</td>
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<td>B.</td>
<td>Women of Color leaders insert civility into highly politicized situations prone to devolve into chaos</td>
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<td>C.</td>
<td>Women of Color leaders perceive their legacy as being foundationally built upon the concept of operating as consummate team players</td>
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<td>D.</td>
<td>Women of Color leaders advocate for academic standards across the board to ensure students’ academic needs are being addressed by the institution to support students of colors’ success</td>
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<td>E.</td>
<td>Women of Color leaders are good stewards of the organization’s resources and assets by utilizing fiscally sound practices</td>
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<td>F.</td>
<td>Women of Color leaders employ a genuine effort to recognize exceptional instruction and pursue top-level accreditation in high demand programs within colleges</td>
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<td>G.</td>
<td>Women of Color leaders intentionally assist people of color to ascend within the institution if they envision long-term advancement for themselves</td>
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<td>H.</td>
<td>Women of Color leaders are active participants in institutional succession planning to ensure continuity of progressive programs, culture, and vision for institutional advancement</td>
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<td>I.</td>
<td>Women of Color leaders identify and secure additional funding from varied sources enabling the expansion of learning opportunities, facilities upgrade, and essential learning tools to ensure students of color learn in environments that are on par with peers at other institutions</td>
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<td>J.</td>
<td>Women of Color leaders promote civility and show compassion towards employees, staff, and students, and respect each other</td>
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<td>K.</td>
<td>Women of Color leaders practice self-care and promote the same in others by way of adopting a healthy lifestyle including regular exercise, maintaining a balanced diet, daily meditation or recitation of affirmations, and regularly accessing de-stressors to reaffirm their commitment to speak truth to power.</td>
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Figure 5. Author’s guide to supporting Womanist educators.
increased training on the part of staff to empower them to be more efficient in their job performance. The efficient utilization of the institution’s resources was essential in the development of programs and services that enabled students to reach their academic/personal career goals and thus, conceivably, alter the trajectory of their lives and their communities for generations to come.

I wanted to examine how my esteemed colleagues perceived their leadership as Women of Color and ascertain whether they shared similar convictions in the execution of their leadership duties. I was curious to know whether their cultural identity influenced their decision-making and leadership styles, what kinds of barriers or challenges they encountered while serving in their leadership capacity, whether they were mentored and did they mentor others, and when reflecting upon their leadership experience, could they identify whether they made a lasting impact on the policies, processes, and culture of UMCCCC. Ultimately, as Women of Color leaders at the largest urban community college district in the Midwest, what lasting legacy did their leadership have on the institution? I hope I have accurately reflected the lived leadership experience of those who chose to participate in my study, thus capturing their contributions for future generations of Women of Color aspiring to become leaders in higher education.

“If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all systems of oppression.” ~ Layli Phillips, 2006
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APPENDIX A

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL
Exempt Determination

29-Aug-2019
Cynthia Armster (z149639)
Curriculum and Instruction

RE: Protocol # HS20-0060 "Womanist Leadership in Urban Community College"

Dear Cynthia Armster,

Your application for institutional review of research involving human subjects was reviewed by Institutional Review Board #1 on 28-Aug-2019 and it was determined that it meets the criteria for exemption 2.

Although this research is exempt, you have responsibilities for the ethical conduct of the research and must comply with the following:

Amendments: You are responsible for reporting any amendments or changes to your research protocol that may affect the determination of exemption and/or the specific category. This may result in your research no longer being eligible for the exemption that has been granted.

Record Keeping: You are responsible for maintaining a copy of all research related records in a secure location, in the event future verification is necessary. At a minimum these documents include: the research protocol, all questionnaires, survey instruments, interview questions and/or data collection instruments associated with this research protocol, recruiting or advertising materials, any consent forms or information sheets given to participants, all correspondence to or from the IRB, and any other pertinent documents. Please include the protocol number (HS20-0060) on any documents or correspondence sent to the IRB about this study.

If you have questions or need additional information, please contact the Office of Research Compliance, Integrity, and Safety at 815-753-8588.
APPENDIX B

PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT LETTER
Dear [Name],

I am contacting you as a doctoral student at Northern Illinois University to invite your participation in my research study about your former experience as a woman of color leader at [University Name] during the span of 2000-2013.

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to capture the lived experience of women leaders of color who served in upper administration at a multi campus community college system, and to offer practices for women of color in leadership to operate as change agents within higher education institutions. The intended benefit of this study is to include the lived experience of women of color leaders in the literature, and contribute to the body of knowledge surrounding: how women of color leaders perceive how their leader persona impacted decisions and policy making; how their leadership impacted institutions; and, their resulting legacy in mentoring the next generation of women of color leaders.

Your participation in my research study is voluntary. Invitation to participate in my study is only being extended to women who:

- Self identify as a woman of color (i.e. Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino, Asian/ Pacific Islander, or Native American)
- Served at [University Name] between 2000 - 2013 in upper administration in a supervisory and/or decision making role

Participation in the study will require a 60 minute individual recorded interview, preferably face to face. If you choose to take part in the study, we will arrange an interview time and place that is most convenient for you. I will then forward an overview of my research study, Consent Forms to allow me to record the interview via audio/video, as well as the interview questions. However, if you are unable to meet face to face we can use Zoom to record the interview.

There is no cost to participate in this study and remuneration is not being offered in exchange for your participation. Participating in this research is voluntary. If you decide not to participate in this study, your decision will not affect our current or future relations.

Please let me know if you are interested in participating by contacting me at either: [Phone Number] or, [Email Address]. I am happy to review any study details and answer any questions you may have prior to your consenting to participate.

Sincerely,
Cynthia D. Armster, Doctoral Candidate
Counseling, Adult and Higher Education
College of Education
Northern Illinois University
APPENDIX C

PARTICIPANTS’ DEMOGRAPHIC DATA
## Overview of Study Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethnicity</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>African-American</td>
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<tr>
<td>Latinx/Puerto Rican</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latinx/Mexican American</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Highest Education Level</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Ed.D</td>
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<tr>
<td>JD</td>
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<tr>
<td>Masters</td>
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<tr>
<td>MBA</td>
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<tr>
<td>MBA/CPA</td>
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<td>Industry Certificate</td>
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<tr>
<td>No degree</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Time served at UMCCCC</strong></td>
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<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>21 - 30+</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retired from UMCCCC</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*UMCCCC = Urban Multi Campus Comprehensive Community College*
APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Name________________________ Pseudonym ________________

2. Educational background

3. What were your title(s) and tenure from 2000–2013 at ____________________?

4. List tenure and positions held @ other institutions prior to employment at ____________________

5. Was your immediate supervisor at ____________________ a male or female, and what was their ethnicity?

6. Were you mentored during your career, and if so, were they male(s) or female(s), and what was their ethnicity?

7. How would you describe the circumstances leading to your working at ____________________?

8. Describe your perspective of the era & culture in which you served in a leadership capacity as a woman leader of color at ____________________, and how it impacted your decision making and job performance.

9. Describe how you perceived your role in the organizational structure at ____________________, and if your ethnicity and cultural identity impacted your decision making.

10. Describe what were the most important variables influencing performance, career advancement, community impact, and institutional advancement during your leadership at ____________________.

11. Describe how you perceived your leadership style as a woman leader of color, and how your ethnicity/cultural identity impacted your leadership style.
12. Describe how you perceived your leadership role relative to impacting policy and describe how you perceived your role relative to impacting the internal and external community.

13. Describe how you related to other women of color leaders, the camaraderie between you and other women leaders of color, and how was it nurtured.

14. Describe how you perceived your role in relation to the career advancement of other women of color within [insert name].

15. Did you mentor or coach other women of color during your tenure at [insert name], and if so, in what way?

16. Identify and describe your perceived legacy during your time at [insert name].
APPENDIX E

INFORMED CONSENT FORMS
Northern Illinois University

RESEARCH CONSENT FORM

Participant Name: ____________________

Pseudonym: _________________________

Date:_____________________________

Title of Study: A Phenomenological Examination of Womanist Leadership in an Urban Community College

Researcher:

Cynthia D. Armster
Doctoral Candidate
Counseling, Adult and Higher Education Department
Northern Illinois University

I agree to participate in the research study titled A Phenomenological Examination of Womanist Leadership in Urban Community College being conducted by Cynthia D. Armster, a doctoral candidate at Northern Illinois University. I have been informed that the purpose of this phenomenological study is to capture the lived experience of women of color leaders who served in upper administration at a multi campus community college system, to offer practices for women of color in leadership to operate as change agents within higher education institutions.

I understand that if I agree to participate in this study, I will be asked to do the following: select a pseudonym name and complete an interview approximately 60 minutes in length. I am aware that my participation is voluntary and may be withdrawn at any time without penalty or prejudice. If I have any additional questions concerning this study, I may contact Cynthia D. Armster @: [redacted], carmster2@gmail.com.
or dissertation chair Dr. LaVerne Gyant, lgyant@niu.edu. I understand that if I wish further information regarding my rights as a research subject, I may contact the Office of Research Compliance at Northern Illinois University at (815) 753-8588.

I understand that the intended benefits of this study is to include the lived experience of women of color leaders in the literature and contribute to the body of knowledge surrounding how women of color leaders perceive the impact of leader persona in decisions and policy making; how their leadership impacted institutions and their resulting legacy in mentoring the next generation of women of color leaders.

The researcher anticipates minimal risk to individuals choosing to participate in this study, which would not be beyond what they would expect to encounter in everyday life.

A potential risk and/or discomfort I could experience during this study may include being asked questions I find to be of a sensitive nature. I understand that I may decline to answer any questions I choose and that I may end my participation in this study at any time.

Finally, I understand that all information gathered during this experiment will be kept confidential and any reporting of data will be done by way of a chosen pseudonym to protect the identities of individual study participants. The audio-recorded interviews will be destroyed after they are transcribed following the conclusion of data collection efforts. Research records, including interview transcripts and demographic information on participants, will be kept in a locked file; only the researcher will have access to the records. These records will be kept for a period of up to 3 years upon which they will be destroyed.

I realize that Northern Illinois University policy does not provide for compensation for, nor does the University carry insurance to cover injury or illness incurred as a result of participation in University sponsored research projects. I understand that my consent to participate in this project does not constitute a waiver of any legal rights or redress I might have as a result of my participation, and I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent form and I am at least 18 years of age.

________________________________________  ____________
Signature of Participant  Date

________________________________________  ____________
Signature of Researcher  Date
CONSENT TO AUDIO-RECORDING AND TRANSCRIPTION

This study requires the recording of your interview with the researcher. Neither your name nor any other identifying information will be associated with the audio or audio recordings or the transcript.

The audio recordings will be transcribed and erased within 3 years after data collection procedures end. Transcripts of your interview may be reproduced in whole or in part for use in presentations or written products that result from this study. Reference to you will only be done by way of your chosen pseudonym in presentations or in written products resulting from the study.

By signing this consent statement, I am allowing the researcher to audio and/or video tape me as part of this research study. I understand consent for this recording is effective until the following date: 12/31/2019. On or before that date, the tapes will be destroyed.

__________________________       ____________________
Signature of Participant             Date

__________________________       ____________________
Signature of Researcher              Date
APPENDIX F

MATCHUP OF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS TO RESEARCH QUESTIONS
Matching of Interview Questions to Research Question

R-1 How does leader persona influence Women of Color leaders’ leadership style and policy making? Q-1, Q-2, Q-3, Q-4, Q-5, Q-6, Q-7

R-2 What strategies did Women of Color leaders utilize to overcome challenges and barriers? Q-8, Q-9, Q-10, Q-11

R-3 How have Women of Color leaders mentored other Women of Color? Q-12, Q-13, Q-14

R-4 How do Women of Color leaders perceive their leadership legacy? Q-15