The Journey to the Top: Women's Paths to the University Presidency

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DePaul University
College of Education

THE JOURNEY TO THE TOP:
WOMEN’S PATHS TO THE UNIVERSITY PRESIDENCY

A Dissertation in Education
Curriculum Studies

by
Ann Marie Klotz

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for
the Degree of

Doctor of Education

June 2014
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The history of women in higher education reflects a constant battle for access and equity. Although the number of post-secondary institutions steadily increased after Harvard University opened its doors in 1636, almost two hundred years would pass before women students were allowed at some institutions. In the last 50 years, the number of women graduating from four-year institutions has dramatically increased. The same delayed access for women students to gain admittance mirrors the challenges that women faculty and staff have seen in obtaining leadership roles within higher education. Despite enrollment numbers that indicate women students are enrolling and graduating at faster rates than their male counterparts, very few women attain the highest level of leadership within a university. Several reasons for this lack of representation include historical inequalities, stereotypical notions about women’s leadership styles, the presence of a chilly climate on college campuses, and the male-dominated history of academia, which can impact the speed of advancement and professional options for women.

This is a narrative inquiry study that examines the role of gender and meaning-making and how it impacts the career trajectory for women in leadership within higher education, specifically at the level of the university presidency in the United States. The author conducted 10 interviews with current women presidents at institutions of higher education across the United States. The emergent themes from the study indicate that gender does influence how these women leaders make meaning of their professional experience. The study suggests that these women have employed a series of strategies to help them navigate some of the challenges they have encountered on their professional journeys. This research provides an in-depth look at how
women leaders in academia experience their professional journeys and provides lessons and strategies for women who aspire to the presidency.
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To say “it takes a village” to complete this journey might be the understatement of the century!

I am incredibly indebted to the people who believed in me (even when I didn’t believe in myself), pushed me, invested in me, called in favors, sent me emails and cards of support and “liked” every Facebook status that I posted about pushing through this process.

Every single one of you were critical to my ability to cross the finish line. From the bottom of my heart—THANK YOU.

To my dissertation committee, Dr. Rich Whitney, Dr. Karen Monkman and Dr. Peggy Burke: Thanks for taking a chance on me and for pushing me past my own (perceived) limits. I learned something valuable from each of you.

To my dissertation editor Jennifer Keplinger—you literally make everything better! I cannot thank you enough for your never-ending patience and keen editing eye.

I am grateful to my supervisors who supported me as I went through this process. Your blessing and understanding made a world of difference. Thanks Deb Schmidt-Rogers and Tom Scheuermann for allowing me to work for and with you while concurrently pursuing my scholarly dreams!

I am grateful to the Residential Education staff at Oregon State University who (without hesitation) took over when I was away from the office conducting interviews and supported me in the last year of this program. Dave Craig, Dave Akana, Jill Childress and Ben Medeiros—you are amazing and I am lucky to have had the opportunity to work with you.

My research took me all over the country and I owe that to the 80 people who monetarily invested in me. Your commitment to support this research lifted a huge financial burden off my shoulders. Words cannot express how much I am indebted to you for your extreme kindness and generosity.


There are a few folks who were difference-makers in this process and I would be remiss acknowledging how much their love, guidance and support have meant to me. To special friends who have supported, inspired, sponsored, advocated for me and cheered me on over the years—I am incredibly indebted to you:

Norb Dunkel, Cissy Petty, Art Munin, Deb Schmidt-Rogers, Lynn Gangone, Carolyn Golz, Shannon Greybar-Millikin, Mark Manderino, Paulette Dalpes, Beth Moriarty, Liz Braun, Myra Morgan, Todd Porter, Amber Garrison Duncan, Laura Hardy, Christa Hinton, Karen Warren Coleman, Daniel Newhart, Vicka Bell-Robinson and my #TwoAndAHalfDocs sisters, Sumi Pendakur and Gail Cole-Avent—now we are officially #3Docs!

To the many, many Starbucks locations—the majority of my dissertation was written in your cafes across the country. It is my writing home. Thanks to all of the baristas who always take the time to know my name and ask about my research. You know who you are!

Some extra-special thank you’s:

Mom: Thank you for all that you have given me and all that you have not. All that I have achieved has been because of your unwavering belief in me. I love you.

Fran: You believed me since you first met me as a 14-year-old girl from Detroit. You are the first mentor, sponsor and educator who opened my eyes to what my life could be. You altered the trajectory of my life and there is not a day that goes by that I am not grateful for you.

Rich: The difference between the people who finish this degree and people who do not is having a dissertation chair who is invested in their success. Thank you for believing in me and for pushing me to try again and again—even when I didn’t think I could! I am so blessed to have had the opportunity to work with you.

Patrick: Home isn’t a place, it’s the people. When I’m with you, I am home. Grateful for your presence in my life.

Teri: You have been instrumental every step of the way—believing, connecting, generating ideas for fundraising, etc. Everyone should have a friend who believes in them and constantly demonstrates this in all that they do. I hope to one day pay forward the kindness you have bestowed on me. Thanks for being my “person.” Love you!
Vijay: What a wild ride, my friend! We have been a unified team from the very beginning and there will be no better feeling when we complete the journey at graduation this June that we first started in September of 2009. The greatest gift from this whole process has been your incredible friendship. I will always support you in all that you do. Your talent knows no limit. Thank you for making a difference in my life. P.S. I’m glad no one has to eat that Crustable.

Finally, to my dissertation study participants—thank you for providing me the opportunity to speak to you and learn about your journey. I know other women will learn from your stories as I have. Thank you for opening the door for women who aspire to sit in your chair one day.
Dedication

To all the women and girls who have ever been told “you can’t,”
may your response always be “watch me!”
CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

Despite increases in both women’s undergraduate enrollment and graduation rates within higher education, women remain a leadership minority at the presidential level at American universities. In 2011, 23% of university presidents were women. However, most of those women can be found at community colleges, so the adjusted percentage of women university presidents leading four-year colleges is at 13% (Pierce, 2011). Without visible gender diversity at the top level of leadership, the position of college and university president may be perceived only as an option for male administrators. This perception may contribute to campus climate issues that impact the career advancement of women in higher education (Martinez Aleman & Renn, 2002).

This study explores the some of the barriers that may prevent women from professional progression. They may include work/life negotiation, perceptions about women’s leadership style, a lack of mentoring relationships, and structural and self-imposed barriers (Martinez Aleman & Renn, 2002; Basinger, 2007; Pierce, 2011). Additional areas that will be discussed include understanding the experience of being women in a position of power in higher education, learning participants’ worldviews and how they frame their lived experiences as university presidents, and understanding their perceptions of how campus climate affects their ability to be successful in their current roles.

Background and Context

The overall number of women presidents at four-year institutions has not significantly increased in the last 10 years (Pierce, 2011). While women continue to be more represented at
lower levels of leadership within the institution, the presidency still remains largely out of reach for women, and they do not hold these positions in equal numbers with their male counterparts.

**Problem Statement**

A disproportionately low number of women hold the position of university president. Exploring some of the reasons for this disparity could help expand advancement possibilities for women who seek this professional role in the future. What needs to be known is why women are not equally obtaining the position of the presidency. Understanding the reasons for this unequal representation, from women’s own perspectives, is the problem that is examined in this study.

**Statement of Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to explore how women college presidents experience their role and make meaning of their gender and leadership experiences. The relationship between gender and career progression will also be examined. By interviewing women college presidents about their experiences, themes emerged about the advancement opportunities and barriers for women in the academy. The study creates new knowledge about the career trajectory of women in higher education that might benefit future generations of women seeking the presidency as it relates to understanding the skills needed for the job as well as strategies for career advancement. This dissertation is organized around two central research questions that consider the role of gender, leadership, and meaning-making throughout women’s careers and in their current role as college presidents.

**Question 1**: How do women college presidents experience and make meaning of their professional trajectory?
Question 2: How does gender inform the personal and professional experience of women college presidents? What shapes that experience and meaning-making?

Research Approach

With the approval of DePaul University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) (Appendix B), I studied the experiences and meaning-making of 10 women college presidents. The research questions guiding this study are specific to understanding how women university presidents understand their career trajectories, how they make meaning of their lived experiences as women, and how these two areas may intersect. It may also provide insight to create advancement strategies to increase the number of women who will attain the presidency in future years.

An in-depth interview was conducted individually with each of the 10 participants during the summer of 2013. Each president is identified in this study by a pseudonym, and all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. In this narrative inquiry study, individual stories are told by the 10 participants who are all women and currently employed as college presidents.

Specifically, the approach in this study is from a social constructivist perspective, which posits that individuals hold assumptions that inform how they make meaning of the world in which they live and work (Creswell, 2009). This requires me, as the researcher, to fully understand the stories told by the participants and consider how their experiences have been shaped by the social and historical context. It maintains that there are multiple meanings of their lived experiences, which vary based on the particular individual.
The Researcher

I am currently employed in an institution of higher education as a professional staff member within the division of Student Affairs. I have 13 years of professional experience working in higher education; therefore, I bring practical knowledge and an environmental understanding of the nature of colleges and universities to this study. I have been interested in the experiences of women in leadership for the past 15 years, and I have a master’s degree in Women and Gender Studies, which has helped me to understand issues of power, privilege, and oppression for marginalized and/or underrepresented groups, including women.

Rationale and Significance

The rationale for this study emanates from my goal of sharing the leadership and meaning-making experiences of women presidents in higher education more broadly. When we understand the opportunities and challenges faced by women leaders more clearly, it may encourage other women to consider this as a potential career path. This study may serve as a resource for higher education faculty and staff to understand the structural and environmental challenges on the career path for women in higher education. It may also encourage a broader dialogue about how to widen the pipeline to the top position at colleges and universities for women.

This study is significant because it impacts the future leadership of higher education. The work of faculty and staff members in higher education is important and requires a diversity of thought, so leadership opportunities should not solely be limited to any one group. As each new class of students enters the doors of higher education, it becomes increasingly necessary to employ university faculty and staff members that represent their diversity. This lack of gender
diversity in senior administrative positions (like the presidency) negatively affects college campuses and sends messages to our students about what leadership (narrowly defined) looks like (Pierce, 2011). The disparity between the high number of women college students and the lack of women in the college presidency role is problematic and sends the message that women can enter the doors of higher education, but they are not able to assume a position of leadership within it. Institutions that determine that gender diversity within their leadership greatly benefits the campus culture will be more likely to encourage more representative hiring processes, thus opening the door for more women to assume the presidency (Pierce, 2011; Keohane, 2010).

**Conclusion**

Chapter one provided an introduction to the study. Following the review of literature in chapter two, I present the methodology and methods utilized in the study in chapter three, along with the introduction to the participants. Chapters four and five present the findings and the analytical framework of the study, respectively. Chapter six will discuss implications from the study.

The demands of university leadership outweigh any effects of gender (Keohane, 2010), and the hiring of future university presidents should be based on the most talented candidate, not simply the most talented male candidate. Research focused on discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied offers the greatest promise of making major contributions to the knowledge base and future practice of education (Merriam, 2009). Let us hope that the lessons learned from the journeys of these women can open this important position to future leaders.
CHAPTER TWO: Review of Related Literature

Introduction

A review of the literature is analyzed by looking at several areas that directly impact women’s career mobility. This chapter looks at the past, current and future realities for women in higher education. First, understanding women’s historical roles at work and home is discussed. Because of this context, leadership may be understood through different lenses based on gender, which will be discussed in the next section. The challenges that women have historically faced (and may continue to endure), including environmental, structural, and self-imposed barriers, are reviewed.

The four main barriers for women’s career progression are discussed; they include familial obligations, women’s leadership style, the glass ceiling, and a lack of access to mentors. This review of the literature also contains the evolution of women administrators in higher education, and it describes parallels within the corporate sector. The chapter concludes with an examination of commonly found traits of the presidents as well as paths to achieve this position. Finally, it discusses the evolving climate for women presidents.

In order to fully situate the topic of women employees in the workplace, it is necessary to understand the context and the terms associated with their career advancement. Within women’s leadership research, there are several key terms and analytical concepts surrounding this topic. Each of these reveals the challenges and opportunities for women’s advancement in postsecondary education and provides a framework for understanding the culture for women on college campuses. In order to begin the exploration of the literature on this topic, we begin with examining the role of women at work and in the home.
Women’s Roles at Work and Home

The role of women in the United States has shifted over time as their role within the family and the changing nature of employment have evolved. There is historical context that frames how women’s roles have been perceived over time. These include the notion of *separate spheres, second and third shifts, and third gender*. Most of these roles consider how women are positioned as wives and mothers and discuss the implications for her in the workforce.

**Separate spheres.** Some women may struggle with how to balance work and family life in ways that are given equal value and time (Sandberg, 2013; Eagly & Carli, 2009). This is because of the history of *separate spheres*—the idea that men should be the breadwinner and women should take care of the home. This may also impact the culture of women and men in the workplace, as traditional notions have relegated men to the office and women to the home (Evans & Chun, 2007; Henry, 1990). This notion is antiquated because the percentage of jobs held by women grew by nearly 20% from 1964 to 2012 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). Figure 1 illustrates this trend.

Separate spheres do not account for equitable division of labor in two-income households. In committed partnerships, both adults may work a job outside of the home, yet there may be housework and childcare responsibilities that are not so clearly divided when there is not one person primarily devoted to the duties at home. More often than not, these roles are relegated to the mother, despite employment status. Separate spheres can also lead to a commonly discussed barrier to women’s career advancement that is known as the “mommy effect” (Heilman, 2001). The steady increase of women in the workforce has changed the office environment and has created the culture of the working mother (Heilman, 2001). As the idea of the working mother has become more intertwined with society, some industries have been forced to adjust to new legislation and the recommendations of human resources departments.
Increasingly, workplaces have created policies to provide arrangements for working mothers that were unheard of 20 years ago (Evans & Chun, 2007). Flexible hours, telecommuting, the ability to work part-time, nursing rooms, family leave, on-site childcare, and other advantages that benefit working mothers have become commonplace in many companies (Basinger, 2001). While these advancements are supported by some, they may create a hostile work environment for working mothers when people believe that these accommodations are unnecessary and costly (Basinger, 2001).

**Second and third shifts.** Another term that discusses similar challenges as separate spheres is the concept of the “second shift.” The work/family balance can lead to conflicts in the home (Hochschild, 1989). Many women work one shift at their place of paid employment and are expected to work a second shift at home taking care of their spouse and children, which results in the equivalent of an additional month of work over the course of a year (Hochschild, 1989). Second shift is used as a metaphor to describe the challenges faced by women who seek to work outside the home but who are still expected to contribute full-time to the care of home and family life.

For women who also seek to obtain additional education, the term “third shift” has been coined to indicate that after a paid workday, and after home and family needs have been tended to, many women are taking online classes at night or are doing homework late into the evening. Because of the increased demands on women from work, family, and school responsibilities, there may be ways in which women who have these competing priorities outside of their paid employment are overlooked (Madsen, 2007).
**Third gender.** Another term that has been used when describing women in the workplace is the “third gender”. This concept presupposes that there are three types of people in the workplace: men, women, and women with children. This notion marginalizes women with children because it insinuates that women with children are an entirely different category with different skill sets and abilities (Madsen, 2007). The term “third gender” has also been used to describe the change in work style that may be evident when a (pre-mother) woman who used to work extra hours and take on extra projects now has some time constraints or is unable to accept extra responsibilities because of her parental duties. It is noted that when men become fathers there is not a noticeable difference in terms of availability and job responsibilities (Madsen, 2007). It is further noted there is a higher number of male presidents who have children than women presidents, thus reinforcing the notion that it is difficult to balance executive-level work and family as a woman (Ewalt, 2010). While this is a parental issue not a woman’s issue, the traditional notion of a woman’s roles within the family posits her as the primary caretaker and has implications for how she may view her role and how she may be perceived—both within the home and in her paid employment environment (Fochtman, 2011).

These notions about women’s roles affect how women are viewed, particularly as they relate to family responsibilities and division of labor in the home. The next section discusses the challenges created for women who aspire to become university presidents when leadership is viewed through a gendered lens.

**Gender and Leadership**

Traditional notions of gender roles may impact the ability for women to be perceived as credible leaders. In order to understand the challenges associated with women’s leadership, it is
important to situate it in larger context that examines the history of both women’s and men’s leadership and how gender influences the experiences of women in the workplace. It is also important to showcase the benefits of women’s leadership.

**Women’s leadership style.** Traditional notions of executive leadership have excluded women’s styles, in particular relational and flat leadership models (Rich, 2000). In these models, consensus building, collaboration, and an absence of hierarchical leadership is the framework that guides decision-making processes (Bornstein, 2005; Rich, 2000). This is a team approach that values every voice being heard. It also emphasizes relationship-building, which is traditionally a work strategy employed by women (Keohane, 2010; Pierce, 2011). While these styles of leadership are becoming more widespread, in recent years the male model of leadership, in which leaders are authoritarian decision-makers, still dominates the business world, and in many ways, the educational sector as well (Kampel, 2006; Pierce, 2011).

Because there are so few women presidents, institutions may still be managed by antiquated models of leadership that may devalue women's leadership styles, thus making even the most qualified candidate seem like she is not a good "fit" for the position because her leadership style may be drastically different than what the institution is used to (Chliwniak, 1997; Fitzgerald, 2014). The “woman as leader” model is in direct conflict with traditional gender roles, which is a barrier for some institutions. Because of traditional notions of separate spheres, there may be some resistance to the idea of men reporting to women because their sphere, for centuries, has been inside of the home (Chliwniak, 1997). Until recognition of diverse leadership styles as a value-added approach to the university becomes commonplace, women may struggle to infuse elements of their leadership style into an environment that tends
to hire, sustain, and promote based on male leadership characteristics (Basinger, 2001; Fitzgerald 2014). The opportunities that women’s leadership may provide an institution need to be highlighted and affirmed in order to have legitimacy in the workplace.

**Benefits of women’s leadership.** The literature describes the benefits of women’s leadership in organizations, citing the ability to lead and manage people as a strong source of their power (Asplund, 1988; Shakeshaft, 1995). There are three common traits about women as leaders of organizations that may work to the benefit of women seeking executive-level positions. First, some women managers are perceived as being tougher than men, as they expect strong results and work productivity from their employees. Second, women are more prepared and organized for professional meetings. Third, women are better listeners and care for the whole employee more than their male counterparts (Asplund, 1988; Shakeshaft, 1995). Studies have indicated that women may be better administrators because of their commitment to knowing their employees, their strong communication skills, and their ability to motivate their team. These skills combine traditional notions of leadership (communication, results-oriented) with the soft skills that are typically attributed to women managers (organization, care for the person) (Asplund, 1988; Shakeshaft, 1995).

These benefits of women’s leadership are similar to what is needed in the role of university president, even if this may look different than the traditional male leadership style (Pierce, 2011). As women continue to seek the office of the presidency, it is critical to demonstrate their unique skill set and highlight how the benefits of women’s leadership can support the advancement of the university’s goals (Jablonski, 2000). In a study of seven women college presidents, each president perceived that her leadership style was different from the style
of her male colleagues. The primary themes of their self-described leadership style include using participatory strategies, focusing on collaboration, employing empowerment techniques, and power-sharing (Jablonski, 2000). The participants rejected traditional notions of a hierarchical model, instead opting for a more flat structure of leadership that emphasized contributions from employees at all levels.

Women’s ways of leading may also emphasize a decentralized system (Rich, 2000). This challenges patriarchal models of institutions and posits that the process of leadership should involve people at all levels of the university. This purposive leadership model stresses support, sustainability, and the value of community based on collective responsibility. Its primary strategies are creating a shared vision and focusing on individual development (Rich, 2000). Purposive leadership may be perceived as weak, given the lack of formal, hierarchical leadership. It also relies on honest communication, relationship building, and a team-focused approach, which may be different from traditional notions of male leadership that stress individual accomplishment over collective gain (Rich, 2000). Gender may impact some women’s credibility and the perceived effectiveness of their leadership based on the history of men’s and women’s roles both at home and in the workplace. These specific leadership challenges are discussed in more detail in the next few sections.

**Patriarchal leadership.** Male leadership may look more familiar to those currently at higher education institutions because it has been the norm for most colleges and universities since their creation. Patriarchal leadership refers to leadership that is male dominated and based on the experiences and values of male standards (Chliwniak, 1997; Jablonski, 2000; Pierce, 2011). This patriarchal style posits male leadership as the norm and women’s ways of leading as
marginalized or even excluded (Brown, 2005; Miller, 1995). The challenge for women has been
to either assimilate to a more patriarchal style of leadership or continue their relational model of
leadership at their own professional risk. Women’s leadership may be viewed as deviant from
the norm, which perpetuates a standard view of leadership, one in which patriarchal leadership
reigns supreme and any divergence from that model is ostracized (Chliwniak, 1997; Simeone,
1987).

This emphasis on only one type of accepted leadership creates a gender gap that divides
the experiences and values of men and women into two distinct groups: male leadership is the
standard and women’s leadership is less valued (Chliwniak, 1997; Evans & Chun, 2007). It has
been noted that the lack of women represented not only in leadership positions but also in the
curriculum only further widens this gap within the university setting (Evans & Chun, 2007;
Pierce, 2011). If women students do not see themselves represented both in texts used in the
classroom and among faculty/staff at all levels of leadership within the university, they may
internalize the idea that higher education does not value the contribution of women, which may
impact women’s self-perception and self-esteem (Hall & Sadler, 1982; Madsen, 2007; Somers,
2002).

In the realm of alliances and activities, women do not have the same opportunities as men
and thus have less access to positions of power (Jackson & Harris, 2007). A preference for men
and male decision-making in leadership is a preference for power (Kanter, 1977). Whether
intentionally or unintentionally, women may be left out of decisions that are made (both in
formal and informal environments), and some male colleagues may seek to preserve a patriarchal
framework for their own professional gain (Heilman, 2001; Jablonski, 2000). One way to
attempt to dismantle patriarchal leadership is to recognize and affirm the leadership style of women. The benefits of women’s leadership need to be demonstrated and given merit despite any perceived differences.

**Challenges for Women in the Workplace**

Women who do advance to the presidency should be prepared to navigate an institutional culture that may (both structurally and environmentally) attempt to discredit and/or thwart their leadership agenda. Two specific challenges that have historically impacted women’s career advancement include a chilly climate and the glass ceiling.

**Chilly climate.** A lack of women in positions of power may lead to creating a chilly climate on college campuses (Jablonski, 2000). An example of how a chilly climate can be experienced in the classroom can be seen in the numerous studies that indicate that male faculty pay less attention to women students and tend to value their contribution and academic work less than their male students (Hall & Sadler, 1982; Henry, 1999). It also refers to environments that do not provide equal resources for the diversity of people they serve, which may also be proportional to the lack of opportunities for women administrators. This climate of gender inequity on campus contributes to the glass ceiling that prevents women from advancing (Henry, 1999; Reynolds, 2002).

Some examples of how women experience this chilly climate include (Hall & Sadler, 1982):

1. Grouping women in ways that indicate they have less status or are less capable.
2. Making seemingly helpful comments that imply women are not as competent as men.
3. Doubting women’s work and accomplishments.
4. Addressing women in ways that reinforce social and/or sexual roles rather than intellectual ones.
5. Expressing stereotypes that discourage women from pursuing academic and professional careers.

A chilly climate can manifest itself for women faculty and staff members in several ways. The career implications resulting from a chilly climate can include salary disparities between men and women and a lack of women in top leadership positions on campus. A chilly climate can also manifest itself in campus policies and resources, including inadequate support for campus departments like a women’s center or on-campus daycare facility, or in not providing flexible work options to account for family needs (Henry, 1999; Reynolds, 2002).

While there has been an increase in providing these resources since 1990 (Henry, 1999), in an economic downturn they tend to be the first resources that are considered expendable, thus demonstrating a lack of commitment to creating a supportive environment for women (Pierce, 2011). An economic downturn may also affect salary and leadership opportunities for women, who may be encouraged to take on more responsibilities at work without being compensated for the additional duties. This culture of doing more with less may continue to support a chilly climate, and the mandates of management may feel unreasonable, especially without additional support, resources, or compensation.

Women of color can experience a chilly climate in ways that marginalize them both as women and as racial minorities on college campuses. African American women have been asked to continuously justify their presence to White faculty, White students, and White
administrators who openly question their qualifications and intellectual capabilities and may treat them as tokens of undeserved affirmative action (King, 2002; Woods, 2002). Once women of color enter the academy, they report a multitude of challenges that impact their ability to be successful—and this differs from how White women experience this form of discrimination. As a result, the experiences of women of color in higher education have been characterized by higher attrition rates, greater alienation when compared to their White peers, and less than satisfactory relationships with White faculty (King, 2002; Woods, 2002).

**Glass ceiling.** The phrase “glass ceiling” was first widely used in the mid-1980s, when national statistics provided by the U.S. Department of Labor indicated that as of 1985 women held only two percent of top-level management jobs and five percent of corporate board positions. The inability of women and minorities to achieve a critical mass at the top level of leadership is due to the glass ceiling (Harvey, 1999; Morrison, 1987). The Civil Rights Act of 1991 created a Glass Ceiling Commission to tackle gender inequities. The statistics compiled from the Commission indicated that the glass ceiling existed years before the term was introduced. The obstacles to women’s career progression had previously been without clear definition; however, in the late 1980s the glass ceiling became part of the discussion of leadership among the literature (Evans & Chun, 2007; Harvey, 1999). While employment statistics indicate the increase in the number of women in upper-level jobs (across disciplines) from 24 to 37 percent over a period from 1976 to 1987, the glass ceiling still prevented women from obtaining executive-level management positions (Harvey, 1999).

Previous studies have discussed the challenges to career advancement, outlined the primary obstacles, and suggested a method to minimize these barriers (Chliwniak, 1997;
Morrison, 1987). The conclusions of these studies indicated that there are only a few true
differences between men and women in psychological, emotional, or intellectual qualities, but
they found that contradictions in the professional expectations for women were a primary reason
for the existence of the glass ceiling. Women were expected to be tough but not show any
masculine characteristics, and they were expected to take responsibility yet be obedient in
following orders. Women employees were expected to be ambitious yet not to expect equal
treatment, thus reinforcing the chilly climate that maintains the glass ceiling (Morrison, 1987).

The glass ceiling still exists in higher education, but within certain institutional types, it
may be slightly less prevalent (Pierce, 2011; Rich, 2000). For example, there are much higher
numbers of women in leadership positions at community colleges and small, private, liberal arts
schools. However, the ceiling remains intact for research institutions and Ivy League schools,
thus indicating that the less prestigious a school may be considered, the easier it is for women to
infiltrate the ranks of leadership (Jackson & Harris, 2007; Pierce, 2011). The Carnegie
Foundation reported that the largest percentage of women college presidents (28.8%) are found
within the community college system. Table 1 lists the distribution of women college presidents
across all of the different types of institutions of higher education.
Table 1

Women College Presidents by Institution Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institutional Type</th>
<th>College Presidents</th>
<th>Women College Presidents (Percent)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>28 (13.8 %)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s Degree</td>
<td>448</td>
<td>96 (21.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baccalaureate</td>
<td>421</td>
<td>97 (23.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate Degree</td>
<td>749</td>
<td>215 (28.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Focus</td>
<td>292</td>
<td>48 (16.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Institutional Types</td>
<td>2,148</td>
<td>494 (23.0%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Specifically, the glass ceiling may prevent women from achieving their career goals due to differing leadership styles, which may create an obstacle for professional advancement (Evans & Chun, 2007; Fitzgerald, 2014). Women leaders are often more relational and less aggressive compared to male leaders (Kanter, 1977). Because some women may not exhibit leadership qualities traditionally viewed as male based on gendered norms, they may be perceived as less effective leaders (Bond, 1996; Evans & Chun, 2007; Fitzgerald, 2014).

The notion of the glass ceiling also describes the limited career advancement opportunities for other underrepresented groups, such as the hearing impaired, visually impaired, disabled, elderly, and people of color. Any distinction of being different from the male and/or Caucasian norm may have a negative impact on career trajectory (Fitzgerald, 2014; Johnson, 2011). Currently, women of color comprise less than 5% of college and university presidents (Pierce, 2011), and these candidates may face additional challenges to obtaining the presidency.
As more and more underrepresented students enter higher education, it is important for a diversity of thought and visual representation to be present within all leadership levels so that students, faculty, and staff may see themselves represented within the academy (Fitzgerald, 2014; Harvey, 1999; Pierce, 2011).

Recent articles have encouraged women to look at breaking through the glass ceiling as a work in progress rather than an all-or-nothing approach (Eagly & Carli, 2007). The odds of success are low when university faculty and staff overtly attempt to deconstruct the status quo (Johnson, 2011), but when underrepresented groups make progress from the periphery by attempting to educate one mind at a time, the glass ceiling will slowly start to diminish. The current system of leadership in higher education took hundreds of years to develop, and it cannot be radically transformed quickly (Johnson, 2011; Pierce, 2011).

Eagly and Carli (2007) challenge the term glass ceiling because they believe that it is no longer applicable due to the ceiling becoming more permeable in the last decade. They believe that obstacles to women’s career progression have been characterized by three distinct eras: the concrete wall, which asserts that no women shall obtain/be promoted into certain roles based on barriers that have been imposed; the glass ceiling, which allowed some women (but certainly not the majority) to rise to high-level roles but still often prevented them from the top position within an organization; and a new metaphor, the labyrinth, which captures the complexity, twists and turns, false starts, and dead-ends of women’s career progression.

One reason that the glass ceiling may be changing for women is because of the cultural attitude shift that is occurring within the youngest generation of workers (Twenge, 2007; Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2013). The millennial generation, born between 1980 and 2004, is less
willing to be constrained by traditional notions of authority, leadership, and to a lesser extent, gender norms.

Chilly climate and the history of the glass ceiling have long-lasting implications for women in higher education, even if some of those concepts are shifting over time. These campus climate and structural challenges are complicated by barriers that women may also impose on themselves, creating limiting their own success. They are discussed in detail in the following sections.

**Self-Imposed Challenges**

Because of the legacy of chilly climates and the glass ceiling, women may self-impose some of their own career advancement challenges. Their notions of self and gender may cause them to think about themselves differently than how their male counterparts think about themselves. These challenges include the tiara syndrome, ambition gap, and work/life balance.

**Tiara syndrome.** A contributing factor to women’s stalled career progression may be their own way of thinking about their possibilities for advancement. Specifically, the tiara syndrome, a term created by Carol Frohlinger and Deborah Kolb, founders of Negotiating Women, Inc., occurs when women expect that a promotion or new opportunity will be provided for them, and they do not advocate for themselves and what they want at work. A woman simply hopes that her strong track record at the office will speak for itself and she will be rewarded, i.e., the tiara will be placed on her head. Usually, it is not. While hard work should be recognized by others, if it is not, then it becomes necessary to advocate for oneself—something with which some women may struggle (Barsh & Cranston, 2011; Fitzgerald, 2014; Sandberg, 2013).
Ambition gap. When women consciously or unconsciously opt to stop striving for career advancement opportunities, they may be self-imposing their own glass ceiling, which is called the ambition gap. While women are earning more undergraduate degrees than ever before, that kind of academic progress is not translating into the workplace in terms of the number of women in senior-level leadership roles (Sandberg, 2013). Women may hold themselves back in conscious and unconscious ways and may stay at entry or mid-level professional roles because they have not been encouraged, inspired, or offered an opportunity to advance. Without internal or external motivation to professionally advance, some women may not believe that it is possible to make progress in their career trajectory. The ambition gap results in a large number of untenured women faculty or practitioners who are stuck at middle management.

These self-imposed challenges may be as strong barriers as the structural challenges because they require women to think differently about themselves and their work. Because of these challenges, women may be faced with specific barriers in the workplace. These are discussed in more detail in the next section.

Barriers to Advancement

The challenges presented in previous sections may lead to barriers that some women may experience in the workplace. Within the literature on how the notion of women’s leadership has progressed in the last 200 years, there are three common obstacles that may halt career advancement for women. Recognizing these barriers may allow for structures, policies, and hiring processes to become more inclusive and support women in leadership (Pierce, 2011).
**Familial obligations.** A primary obstacle for women leaders is time constraints due to family obligations (Fochtman, 2011; Kampel, 2006; Madsen, 2007). The required job functions in some executive administrative positions may not allow for women to balance work and motherhood and/or elder care (Basinger, 2001). Therefore, women opt to stay in mid-level roles with less responsibility or leave the profession altogether and seek less time-consuming jobs. Professionals in higher education work non-traditional hours and frequently may have evening and/or late night obligations to attend faculty meetings or university events (Basinger, 2001). These afterhours work activities leave less time for professionals to spend time with their children and families. Women are often forced to choose between work and quality time with their families (Keohane, 2010). An increased strain may be put on their marriage/partnership if women have a partner who works, particularly if the partner is the primary breadwinner in the family (Bornstein, 2005). In 2011, 63 percent of women presidents were married, compared to 89 percent of male presidents (Pierce, 2011). These numbers reflect that the women who are being promoted to the highest levels of the university may be more inclined to get there if they do not have the added responsibility of a partner, while this is not an apparent barrier for men.

While a president may have the financial resources to hire assistance for child care, housekeeping, and eldercare expenses, faculty and staff members employed in less lucrative positions are compensated at much lower levels and are thus not allowed the financial freedom to employ similar strategies (Brown, 2005; Jablonski, 2000). Recent strides have been made to adjust for work/life balance issues often faced by both men and women professionals at colleges and universities such as flextime, job sharing, etc. This same sort of flexibility, however, may
not be readily available in practice to executive-level leaders because of the constant demands of the position (Brown, 2005; Jablonski, 2000).

**Glass ceiling.** The second barrier is the aforementioned glass ceiling. While there are women represented at graduate, entry, and mid-level positions, women are underrepresented in executive levels of leadership, up to and including the presidency (Bengiveno, 2000). There is some supporting literature that states that the selection process of a university president may also inherently disadvantage women (Pierce, 2011). Women are often represented in much smaller numbers on the institutional board of trustees, which has the final approval and hiring rights in a presidential search. In short, a woman's ability to lead is determined by her influence, and with women’s representation at such low levels in positions of influence, women cannot seem to gain the influence they need to advance to executive levels of leadership at the same rate as their male peers (Kampel, 2006).

There are specific pipeline issues at the faculty level. Few women are employed in tenure-track roles, which means they do not have job security (Fitzgerald, 2014). Women hold the majority of adjunct positions, which often do not include medical benefits, are paid on a per-class basis, and may not be lucrative enough to keep them in the profession long-term (Kampel, 2006; Pierce, 2011). Tables 2 and 3 provide data on the number of part-time and full-time faculty positions held at different types of institutions and the number of part-time and full-time faculty positions held by women and men.
Table 2

Proportion of Part-Time Faculty by Institutional Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institutional Type</th>
<th>Part-Time Faculty</th>
<th>Full-Time Faculty</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>41.6%</td>
<td>58.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research</td>
<td>23.4%</td>
<td>76.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctoral</td>
<td>32.2%</td>
<td>67.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comprehensive</td>
<td>38.6%</td>
<td>61.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private Liberal Arts</td>
<td>35.4%</td>
<td>64.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community College</td>
<td>60.2%</td>
<td>39.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Other</td>
<td>48.3%</td>
<td>51.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3

Part-Time or Full-Time Status of Men and Women

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Faculty</th>
<th>Part-Time</th>
<th>Full-Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>37.2%</td>
<td>62.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>48.9%</td>
<td>51.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>41.6%</td>
<td>58.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


As these tables indicate, 41.6% of all teaching faculty are part-time, and over 60% of faculty (i.e., community college) are employed part-time. According to this study, almost half of all women faculty are part-time, while a smaller percentage of men (37.2%) fill part-time
positions. Campus climate may be negatively impacted when the majority of women professors are not granted tenure-track positions. It sends a message about who is qualified to teach and lead in academia and who is not (Basinger, 2001).

**Lack of mentors and sponsors.** The third barrier is the lack of mentors for women at the executive level. Women on the presidency track need women mentors, who can be hard to find given the scarcity of women in this role (Basinger, 2001; Wolverton et al., 2009). The presidency requires the ability to successfully navigate campus politics and constituents. Without other women to help prepare them for this role, women must figure out on their own the best way to manage this, while their male counterparts have plenty of resources, nationally, in other male presidents (Bornstein, 2005). Additionally, men can and should serve as mentors to women. Presidents require mentoring throughout their career, and while there is no clear-cut data that preferences same gender mentors as a support to success, the necessity of mentors is clearly an important strategy for career advancement (Barsh & Cranston, 2011; Basinger, 2001; Sandberg, 2013).

In a previous study, a sample of 91 women presidents were surveyed about their experience in mentor/mentee relationships (Brown, 2005). The findings indicate that a slight majority of the respondents had primary mentors who were both men and women (56%) and served as mentors to others (64.4%). Mentoring relationships assist women in advancing to the top ranks of higher education and directly increase the number of women college presidents (Basinger, 2001; Brown, 2005; Wolverton et al., 2009). Mentoring creates a pipeline of qualified women who are supporting each other along the path to the presidency. This allows
talented young women to enter the pipeline early in their careers and to have support structures in place throughout their careers (Wolverton et al., 2009).

Many of the women presidents interviewed in this study cited early mentoring experiences, more opportunities for participation and leadership, and *can-do* philosophies as key elements of their success (Brown, 2005). In addition, all of the women presidents in this study described their leadership styles as different from the styles of their male counterparts. They used phrases such as *consensus-building*, *collaborative working relationships*, and *positive enforcement* to describe their leadership styles. These women presidents’ descriptions reflected an inclusive approach to leadership. Inclusivity may look different to both genders based on traditional notions of how these relationships should be built and sustained (Barsh & Cranston, 2011; Brown, 2005; Kampel, 2010).

In addition to mentorship, sponsorship is critical to career success for women (Barsh & Cranston, 2011; Sandberg, 2013). A mentor may guide and advise, but a sponsor advises on a person’s behalf when she is not in the room. Sponsors can be especially important to have when a traditionally used (male) leadership trait or tactic backfires because of how it is perceived on/in a woman. For example, being direct and assertive are traits typically connected to strong male leadership; however, they can backfire for women, and when this occurs, sponsors can promote your accomplishments widely and advocate on your behalf if you are on the receiving end of unfair treatment (Barsh & Cranston, 2011). They nominate people for job opportunities, advocate for them for high-ranking committees, and are a primary factor to enhance career acceleration (Sandberg, 2013). Another key aspect of sponsorship is that it is a reciprocal relationship. The sponsor gains the joy of seeing high-potential women excel and can view them
as a credit to their own success in spotting top talent. The person being sponsored, in turn, may have the opportunity to help the sponsor because of their talent and future high-level position (Barsh & Cranston, 2011).

Mentors and sponsors can also help women infiltrate informal networks that may have been previously closed to them and that are critical to their success (Barsh & Cranston, 2011). Mentors can advise them about their options, and sponsors can find a way to get them an initial invitation so they can have a seat at the table where important decisions are being made. They may also help them gain access to social opportunities in which they would previously have not been invited to participate. For decades, men have created social opportunities to connect with men outside of work; the most frequently cited examples of this are golf outings (Barsh & Cranston, 2011). However, women may not have similar opportunities due to a lack of women colleagues and time constraints caused by additional responsibilities at home, as well as a lack of access to men’s social networks. The literature supports the need for more informal networks of women leaders (Jablonski, 2000; Pierce, 2011; Sandberg, 2013). Without a social network of women colleagues, women may feel a sense of social isolation throughout their careers, especially as they advance to the highest levels of leadership, where women become scarce (Barsh & Cranston, 2011; Jablonski, 2000).

Additionally, these women need to be integrated into men’s formal and informal networks in order to have a real impact on collaboration (Pierce, 2011). Social exclusion hurts women’s careers most because it limits their exposure to managers at the top (Keohane, 2010). Without a relaxed atmosphere in which to meet leaders, women professionals have no access to top university decision makers other than during the workday (Chliwniak, 1997). These out-of-
office opportunities may help other women find mentors and supportive colleagues within their geographical location.

The increased number of women gaining access to higher education has led to a re-examination of women’s roles and work and at home. The next section discusses how women’s historical participation as students, faculty, and staff have influenced higher education.

**History of Women’s Access and Involvement in Higher Education**

The history of women in higher education impacts the current status of women in leadership positions (Madsen, 2007). The exclusion of women as not only leaders, but also students, faculty, and administrators for more nearly 350 years is reflected in women’s struggle for equality across many time periods. In the 17th century, it was widely believed that women were intellectually inferior to men, and advanced education was an opportunity offered primarily to wealthy White men (Chliwniak, 1997). When Harvard College opened its doors in 1636, this first institution of higher education in the United States set the precedent for student admissions and selection of faculty and staff, creating a blueprint for higher education. The only higher education option for women was women’s academies, which essentially were finishing schools that prepared women for marriage and domestic life (Madsen, 2007). Because the education of women was not deemed as important when institutions of higher education were first being created, this may have had a long-lasting impact on the ability of women to advance at the university (Basinger, 2007).

Formal education was discouraged for women due to reproductive health concerns and a concern about the potential breakdown of the social order (Madsen, 2007). Research from the 17th and 18th centuries suggested that rigorous education could make a woman infertile, which
discouraged many women from pursuing advanced education (Madsen, 2007). It was also believed that having men and women in the same classroom would harm the academic environment. Propaganda from that time period warned that men would not be as academically successful if surrounded by women in the classroom (Chliwniak, 1997).

In 1850, about 50% of women could read and write at a primary school level (Chliwniak, 1997); however, this percentage steadily increased as common schools were created in the mid-1800s. These schools sought to provide basic instruction to girls. The curriculum focused on reading, writing, and introductory arithmetic. These skills were increasingly valued as a way for women to enhance the education of their male children (Reynolds, 2002). Republican Motherhood, the notion that women were expected to teach their male children in the home as a supplement to their formal education in school, was the dominant ideology in this era. Thus, it became increasingly more important for women to have at least minimal education so that they could raise the next generation of men to become successful and gainfully employed (Nidiffer, 2001; Reynolds, 2002).

The Morrill Land Grant Act, which affirmed the importance of public education, was passed in 1862, and women gradually gained access to the university as colleges expanded. In the mid-1800s, women were often annexed to a certain section of the university, and these schools had fewer resources and were deemed inferior to the rest of the college that served men (Chliwniak, 1997); however, some single-sex schools opened, and they focused on providing a quality education for women. These institutions include Vassar (1865), Wellesley (1870), Smith (1871), Radcliffe (1879), Bryn Mawr (1885), Mount Holyoke (1888), and Barnard (1889) (Nidiffer, 2001).
As colleges started to open their doors to women and as men were leaving home to fight in the two World Wars, the role of women continued to evolve (Reynolds, 2002). Women’s growing independence during World War II and the increased number of women in the workforce were the two main factors that shaped a country that was growing more accepting of the idea of women pursuing higher education (Nidiffer, 2001). The women’s liberation movement in the 1960s combined with the social ideas surrounding equity also accounted for the growing numbers of women entering higher education (Nidiffer, 2001). The 1970s and 1980s saw an influx of women students obtaining advanced degrees. Since 1988, the number of women in post-baccalaureate programs has exceeded the number of males. Between 2000 and 2010, the number of male full-time students seeking additional education after completion of a baccalaureate degree increased by 38 percent, compared with a 62 percent increase for women (U.S. Department of Education, 2012).

In addition to increased access to education, women have advocated for equity in other areas of campus life. Title IX is one of the pieces of legislation that drastically improved the landscape for young women.

**Title IX.** Although most universities and colleges opened their doors to women by 1970, continued gender discrimination against women students persisted. Title IX, as supported by the Women’s Equity Action League (WEAL), the National Organization for Women (NOW), congressional representatives, and various academic women across the country, was a positive step forward in maintaining equity within schools (Somers, 2002). Under Title IX, which was passed in 1972, the following areas regarding women’s equality were addressed: employment discrimination, comparable facilities, financial assistance, health insurance benefits, marital or
parental status, athletics, textbooks and curricular material, and sexual harassment (Mid-Atlantic Equity Consortium, 1993).

After Title IX’s passage, there was a marked increase in women enrolling in college, and progress could also be seen in admittance to professional programs. In 1972, women received 9% of medical degrees, but by 1994 that number had increased to 38%; in the same time period, 1% of dental degrees grew to 38%. The percentage of law degrees earned by women grew from 7% in 1971 to 43% in 1994. In 1997, more than 100,000 women participated in intercollegiate athletics, a four-fold increase from 1971 (U.S. Department of Education, 1997). These percentages have continued to increase since the early 1990s, as illustrated in Figure 2.

**Deans of women.** The early dean of women position is the role through which women made their professional entrance into the academy. Around the turn of the 19th century, this position was a pivotal role in which well-educated women exercised their professional, academic, and administrative skills to assist women undergraduate students (Nidiffer, 2000). The deans of women sought to improve the educational experience for women on their campus. They fostered a sense of community among students and created opportunities for student leadership on their campuses. They also understood the challenges women faced in receiving equitable treatment on campus and in the classroom and advocated for educational parity (Nidiffer, 2002). The first few fully established dean of women positions were created at the University of Chicago, Indiana University, University of Minnesota, and University of Wisconsin.

These deans of women established new identities on the campuses they served by asserting themselves as valuable members of the campus community as well as senior-level leaders on the university administrative team. This position opened up the realm of possibility for other women to serve in a campus leadership role. In the early 1900s, it was noted that there was a correlation between the number of admitted women students and the presence of women administrators (Nidiffer, 2000). Where there was a higher than average number of women in leadership, there was also an increased number of women students. The deans of women advocated for genuine access to learning—not simply just getting admitted to the university—but access to all of the support needed to be academically successful. These deans maintained that without providing differentiated support for women students to succeed, simply admitting women was not true educational access (Nidiffer, 2000).
**Women as practitioners in higher education.** As bachelor’s degree conferment continues to increase for women, there remains a disparity between the high number of women students and the low number of women in executive positions of leadership within colleges and universities (Fitzgerald, 2014; Nidiiffer, 2001). While there is no shortage of information that chronicles the history of access to higher education for women as students, considerably less has been published about the evolution of women as administrators in higher education (Reynolds, 2002; Simeone, 1987). The increasing number of women university students has not correlated to a larger percentage of women in leadership roles at the university. Women are most frequently employed as administrative staff and in entry-level jobs (Reynolds, 2002). After mid-level leadership, the number of women drops sharply (Harvey, 1999; Pierce, 2011).

Recent trends would indicate a slow rise in women advancement at the presidential level. In the Forbes “50 Best Colleges” list (Ewalt, 2010), women lead 30% of these institutions, and eight of these women are the first woman president in their school's history. In 2014, 50% of Ivy League institutions were headed by a woman president. The women presidents of the Ivy League include Amy Gutmann (University of Pennsylvania), Ruth J. Simmons (Brown University), Shirley M. Tilghman (Princeton University), and Drew G. Faust (Harvard University) (as of March 2014).

In 2011, 40% of college presidents are 61 years of age or older (Pierce, 2011). As many current university presidents are getting closer to retirement (presidents typically retire in their late 60s), some researchers believe this may open the door for more women (Pierce, 2011). This may impact both the percentage of women presidents and the number of women appointed to trustee boards—which influences the selection of college presidents. In order to better situate
these trends in a larger context, we examine the corporate sector to see if it is experiencing a similar phenomenon related to women in leadership.

**Parallels within the Corporate Sector**

Because the career progression of women in higher education to the presidency remains a rather recent phenomenon, we can also look to other professions that have experienced the same trend. Women’s leadership is also woefully absent in the business sector, where women lead less than 4% of Fortune 500 companies (Keohane, 2010). Because the business sector often follows educational trends, an influx of women to university president positions could lead to doors becoming open for women in other fields where their leadership is scant or non-existent (Aspaas, 1999). If education is the great equalizer, then the educational sphere should take the lead in creating open doors and recognizing women’s leadership as important (Eddy & Cox, 2008; Harvey, 1999).

The preferred leadership characteristics in the corporate sector seem to mirror the qualities that executive officers must possess in higher education. Leadership can be divided into two groups: tasks and relationships (Northouse, 2004). Tasks refer to the actual duties of the job and the skills required to successfully complete them. Relationships are the social capital that allows for compromise, decision-making, and collaboration to occur. Because these two areas must work together, the most effective leader will be highly competent in both areas in order to both accomplish the goals of the position and instill credibility in him/herself as a leader. Relationships can be built differently based on gender and can impact the career mobility of the employee based on how adept they are at building successful relationships—particularly ones that can assist them in successfully completing their tasks. In addition to tasks and relationships,
three important characteristics that are essential in any leader are ethics, character, and values (Northouse, 2004). The ethics of a leader direct his/her actions and influence how the leader’s character acts as a moral compass that guides the values s/he espouses in the organization.

Women may be critiqued harshly within leadership roles because of the scarcity of career opportunities at the executive level (Keohane, 2010). Women are just as susceptible as men to treating other women as competition in the workplace, and they are repeatedly evaluated lower than their male counterparts when they demonstrate male leadership characteristics (tough, decisive); however, they are rated even lower when they lead in a traditionally feminine way (nurturing, collaborative) (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Keohane, 2010).

In her recent book, Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead (2013), Sheryl Sandberg, Chief Operating Officer of Facebook, said that the reason women are not reaching parity in the workforce is because they are leaning back when they should be leaning in. Sandberg argues that women are holding themselves back in small ways that relate to office politics and in big ways with regard to accepting stretch assignments (defined as challenging opportunities that deviate from their regular duties) and saying no when they should be saying yes to new opportunities. Women tend to avoid stretch assignments because they worry about whether they have the skills needed to take on a new, more complex responsibility or position (Sandberg). When offered an opportunity, they may make the excuse that they are not familiar with that type of project or say it is not what they were trained to do in an attempt to not have to accept it.

There is an increasing number of women who are obtaining advanced degrees, yet that same kind of achievement is not translating to upward mobility in the workforce (Sandberg 2013). This disconnect may be due to women’s fear of taking risks and advocating for
themselves—traits that women and girls may be discouraged from exhibiting. The professional pipeline that now contains an educated workforce is primarily filled with women at the entry-level, but when that same pipeline is looking to hire senior leadership positions, it is disproportionately filled with men (Sandberg, 2013).

A McKinsey report (2011) indicated that in the corporate sector men are often promoted based on potential, while women are promoted based on past accomplishments (Sandberg, 2013). This creates a disparity in who is selected for promotion because there are inherently unequal criteria for career progression. Another key indicator of promotion is actually having the desire to be promoted. The aforementioned ambition gap, which indicates that more men than women aspire to attain senior jobs, is also cited a reason for the lack women in senior roles (Barsh & Cranston, 2011; Sandberg, 2013). Another factor that may affect the ambition gap is how younger employees view women in senior positions. Sandberg indicates that of millennial men and women (born 1980-2004) who work in a department with a woman in a senior role, only 20 percent seek to replicate her career.

Figure 3 on the next page shows data on the status of men and women in the workforce. Women’s representation in Fortune 500 leadership positions has stagnated in recent years. In conclusion, a lack of women in the top levels of leadership in the corporate sector mirrors the inequity seen in higher education. (The number of women executive officers prior to 2009 was not measured.)
The corporate sector appears to share some of the challenges that women in leadership in higher education currently have in the workplace. In order to combat these challenges, it is important to understand the career paths that may lead to the presidency and encourage women to pursue opportunities that position them for continued leadership opportunities.

The Presidency

The presidency is a complex position that requires both significant educational and professional experience as well as the temperament and personality to manage the competing
priorities of the job. This section discusses the multiple career paths that may lead to the presidency and the commonly associated traits found in people who hold this position, as well as the evolving priorities and climate for current presidents.

**Paths to the presidency.** While there is no specific career path that all university presidents take, a few different paths have historically led to the presidency. The most frequent path is the faculty route (Pierce, 2011). The number of women faculty members doubled between 1970 and 1993, but despite these increased numbers, women still hold more part-time, adjunct, and non-tenure track positions than men (Martinez Aleman & Renn, 2002). The only institution type where women are on par with men in this area is community colleges. The two primary barriers for women faculty are (1) sex differences in access to tenure-track positions, and (2) sex differences in outcomes of tenure and promotion decisions (Martinez Aleman & Renn, 2002; Pierce, 2011).

Within universities, tenure promotions are often awarded based on the trifecta of research, teaching, and service. Women co-author articles more often than their male colleagues and are less likely to appear as the lead author of the publication (Martinez Aleman & Renn, 2002). This may impact the rate of tenure promotions for women and affect their career trajectory. Women are also asked more frequently than their male colleagues to engage in service to the institution in the form of committees (Fitzgerald, 2014). Because service is often the least weighted item in the tenure process and women are asked to do more than their share in this area, a woman’s ability to receive tenure is not equal to that of a male colleague who frequently publishes and does minimal service (Pierce, 2011). Regardless of discipline, women indicate that there is more pressure to volunteer their time for service-related tasks due to
pressure to appear nurturing and supportive (Martinez Aleman & Renn, 2002). Caplan (1994) stated that several of the traits associated with being a woman, including being nurturing, warm, and supportive, are incongruent with the role, duties, and expectations of faculty, whereas traditionally masculine traits (i.e., being assertive, strong, and directive) may be rewarded.

**Faculty path.** The faculty path to the presidency typically involves many years of formal education, including a terminal degree in a specific area of study that leads to a faculty position at an institution of higher education. Success metrics for professors include service, research, and teaching performance based on student evaluations. If they are in a tenure-track position, these professors will typically teach for several years and eventually obtain tenure. They may then choose to take an administrative route, for example department chair or academic dean. Eventually, they may progress to the highest levels of the university hierarchy—the provost or the president (Pierce, 2011). In 1986, 23 percent of university presidents previously served as the chief academic officer (provost) before assuming the presidency, and in 2011, that number increased to 31 percent (Pierce, 2011). Additionally, 38 percent of chief academic officers are women (Pierce, 2011). The lack of gender equity in this role results in a lack of women in the presidency (Pierce, 2011).

**Practitioner route.** Another career path to the presidency is the practitioner route. This typically requires similar educational credentials as a faculty member, although the employment path differs. It often begins with an entry-level position within a university division (enrollment management, student affairs, etc.), then progresses to mid-level management (typically an assistant or associate director), next comes senior level management (director/dean), and then executive leadership (vice president/executive vice president) before obtaining the presidency.
Increasingly, presidents are expected to have a terminal degree in their field—typically an Ed.D. or Ph.D. (Lively, 2000b). In 2011, 23 percent of incoming presidents came from the non-academic side of the university, primarily from the divisions of development, finance, student affairs, and enrollment management (Pierce, 2011).

**Corporate route.** A third option on the path to the presidency can occur when a corporate professional is hired. This has been a more popular path in recent years because of the increased need for schools to be financially sound and operate more as business entities (Pierce, 2011). On this path, successful individuals in their respective (non-education) fields progress professionally through the ranks and make a crossover to higher education late in their career (Pierce, 2001). Typically, these professionals have skills within their respective fields that translate to the duties of a university president, like fundraising, budget management, and even previous political experience (Lively, 2000a). Their advanced degrees may include a J.D. or M.B.A. In 2011, 17 percent of new presidents came from outside of higher education (Pierce, 2011).

While there is no prescribed road map to the presidency, these three models most typically describe the path to obtaining this position. All three paths require significant work experience and advanced degrees. They also require specific characteristics to manage the competing priorities from faculty, staff, students, parents, alumni, and community members. The remaining 22% of university presidents who do not fall into any of the three aforementioned categories have a variety of career paths. Some have a political or religious background, and at some institutions, successful entrepreneurial alumni may assume the role of the president. In
addition to the career path, aspiring leaders in higher education should consider the leadership traits often associated with this kind of position.

**Traits of the presidency.** The language surrounding the traits required to be a successful president has shifted over the years. The literature pre-1970 really focused on the traits of male leaders, because over 90% of institutions of higher education had a male president (Evans & Chun, 2007). The current language used in job descriptions is shifting to be more gender inclusive, yet the number of women holding the top position is still low. Within the literature, the early biographies of college presidents used phrases such as “Great Man” and “Man on a White Horse” to describe the kind of leader required to lead an institution of higher education (Evans & Chun, 2007). Terms like this described the presidency in very patriarchal and paternalistic ways that positioned the president as the lead educator and moral leader—the person who preserved the soul of the organization (Reynolds, 2002).

The traits that are needed to serve in the role of president include being politically savvy, a skilled fundraiser, and above all, a confident leader (Pierce, 2011). For much of history, leadership in all realms and at all institutions in higher education has been based on a masculine ideal (Lively, 2000b), and the aforementioned skills have been described as masculine traits (Nidiffer, 2001). More feminine attributes like being relational, nurturing, collaborative, and supportive are often characteristics that can be seen in entry-level practitioners, defined as the first job in higher education, which is typically a coordinator-level one that works directly with students. Women are most commonly found in these positions (Lively, 2000b; Reynolds, 2002).

Conventional thought pre-World War II clearly dictated that the university was an arena where (Caucasian) male leadership was the sole option (Evans & Chun, 2007). At some faith-
based institutions, there is an additional restriction because women may not be permitted to seek the presidency simply because of their gender (Madsen, 2007). Because women cannot hold positions of leadership in some faith traditions, women would not even be eligible for leadership at those particular universities. The patriarchal rule of some organized religions, particularly ones in which women cannot conduct the church service, manifests itself in the leadership of faith-based institutions.

The culture of the university can also impact career opportunities for women. If the university values the traits that women bring to the workforce, then they should be present amongst the university’s faculty and staff at all levels. If women are actively encouraged to apply for upper-level management roles and are represented at decision-making levels, then advancement to the top level of leadership is more possible at these institutions (Lively, 2000b; Reynolds, 2007). The landscape is changing for university presidents, and this impacts how they manage competing priorities and the campus climate.

**Evolving climate and priorities for university presidents.** The climate of higher education is rapidly changing, and as previously mentioned in the discussion of paths to the presidency, there is currently an upward trend to hire presidents who possess prior business experience in order to help the university reach their financial and strategic goals (Pierce, 2011). Dwindling state appropriations for higher education over the last five years have increased the need for presidents to be skilled fundraisers (Pierce, 2011). Because of this, presidents with previous business and/or governmental employment experience may be well suited for this type of role. The dual objectives of maintaining a strong on-campus presence (particularly at smaller institutions) while also being an external fundraiser for the institution are competing priorities
that each president must learn to balance to appease different constituencies. Other priorities for university presidents may include maintaining a strong relationship with the neighborhood surrounding the campus, navigating the politics associated with the board of trustees, signing off on tenure and promotion paperwork (and managing the issues that can arise from that process), working with faculty governance, managing local media requests, and working with local and state government officials.

Ethics is another important factor to consider. Given recent scandals within political and educational entities, institutions are looking to hire presidents that are a low risk for personal scandal because that can influence donations, admissions numbers, and community support (Pierce, 2011). Presidents must also understand the changing nature of the college student experience in the 21st century, which includes but is not limited to the following: mental health concerns, compliance requirements, multicultural competence, evolving technologies in teaching and learning, changing communication mediums, social media, and campus safety and security issues in a post-9/11 world (Pierce, 2011).

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, the evolution of women in higher education has been discussed. Women have progressed from having little formal education pre-1850 to surpassing their male counterparts in admission to colleges and universities in the United States (Fitzgerald, 2014); however, increased enrollment of women in higher education at the student level has not readily translated to women’s presence at the highest level of university leadership (Pierce, 2011). Several factors impact women’s ability to professionally advance within the university. First, chilly campus climates can create a hostile work environment for women. Second,
ceiling may position some men to block women in their quest for career advancement instead of acting as collegial partners (Keohane, 2010). External pressures may also detract from career advancement, such as family commitments, raising children, and caring for elderly parents. These factors may also delay mid-career promotions and advanced degree attainment, which may impact women’s ability to attain the presidency in comparable numbers with their male counterparts (Basinger, 2001).

There is much work to be done in creating policies and work environments that actively support women throughout their career and encourage them to consider the path to the presidency (Brown, 2005). Gender-equitable policies may be needed to address the campus climate, workday structure, and process for career advancement so that institutions will not (consciously or unconsciously) disadvantage women who choose to be parents and/or place a priority on caring for elderly family members.

An area for future study is the experience of underrepresented groups in university leadership. Candidates of color may face additional barriers to obtaining the presidency. In 2006, only 14 percent of university presidents identified as a racial minority, and a majority of those presidents were men (Pierce, 2011). For women of color, a lack of representation at the top levels of the institution continues to exist. Further research needs to be done to examine how the career path for women of color and women who have multiple identities, for example, lesbian women, woman who are physically disabled, non-Christian women, etc., are impacted (Harvey, 1999). If the literature is any indication, the path for Caucasian women is challenging on its own, but the intersectionality of multiple layers of identity deviate from the master narrative of who is viewed as a “leader” in our country and may pose additional challenges for
these women as they seek the presidency. It is my hope that this study will provide a starting point to examine the current landscape for women in university leadership and derive strategies to support, affirm, and enhance the diversity of voices in higher education.
CHAPTER THREE: Methodology

Introduction

Chapter two discussed several areas of literature that provide context to the study of women college presidents. This chapter outlines the methodology and methods that were used to conduct the research and analyze the participant stories. It also discusses the theoretical perspective and ethical issues and includes a statement on the positionality of the researcher. It concludes with an introduction to the participants in the study.

This is a qualitative study with a narrative inquiry methodology, organized around two central research questions that consider the role of gender and leadership throughout women’s careers. It also focuses on their meaning-making and personal experiences.

Question 1: How do women college presidents experience and make meaning of their professional trajectory?

Question 2: How does gender inform the personal and professional experience of women college presidents? What shapes that experience and meaning-making?

Theoretical Perspective

As a researcher, it is important to explicitly state the philosophical framework that guides the research agenda. Specifically, a feminist lens was used to examine the lived experience of these women. Feminist research studies the social conditions of women in a sexist and patriarchal society (Harding, 1998) and enlightens people about sexist practices that have limited opportunities for women to advance in society and in the workplace. Feminist research is based on the assumption that the world is socially constructed and that power resides in the social
structure, with patriarchy shaping the ways that gender is manifested (Tong, 1989). Feminist researchers assert that gender is at the center of social inquiry; therefore, making women visible and representing women’s perspectives are major components of feminist research (Code, 1991). Feminist theory also places an emphasis on women’s experiences, which are considered a significant indicator of reality (Harding, 1998). It considers the development of women’s experiences by encouraging history to take account of women’s perspectives and by sharing the unique history of the experience of women (Harding, 1991). It also understands the role that patriarchy has played in terms of reproducing oppression and supporting privileged identities.

A liberal feminist framework, which is an individualistic approach that stresses personal empowerment (Tong, 1989), is the specific inquiry paradigm in this study. It maintains that women demonstrate and maintain their equality through their personal decisions and actions. Liberal feminism claims that women are societally viewed as less capable, competent, and talented than men are and therefore are marginalized and discriminated in the workplace and the broader society (Tong, 1989). Liberal feminists believe that legal recognition of rights will lead to larger reform in the workplace and a more progressive attitude in the home.

This liberal framework is rooted in the second wave of feminism, in which women fought for the right to vote (Tong, 1989). It became less active after the 19th amendment was passed and then re-entered mainstream consciousness during the civil rights movement when equity for women once again entered the mainstream (Tong, 1989). Liberal feminism believes that women have the power to achieve equality by advocating for policy reform. Some of the chief issues for reform for liberal feminists include child care and reproductive rights, welfare, equal pay in the workforce, education, health care, and domestic violence. Women authors and activists such as
Betty Friedan, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Gloria Steinem are outspoken liberal feminists who have shaped ideas surrounding this framework.

Liberal feminism differs from other forms, like radical feminism, because they believe that it is possible to seek reform by modifying the current structure. They do not see the necessity of dismantling the structure in order to achieve their goals of equality (Tong, 1989). A common critique of liberal feminism is that it places the experiences of middle-class White women at the center of its inquiry and disenfranchises poor women and women of color (MacKinnon, 2005). Finally, this type of research studies the social conditions of women in a sexist and patriarchal society (Harding, 1998) and enlightens people about sexist practices that have limited opportunities for women to advance in society and in the workplace.

Methodology

Qualitative research seeks to explore and understand the meaning people give to individual or collective problems/phenomena (Creswell, 2009). In qualitative research, and within this study specifically, there are as many realities as there are stories from participants, but similar themes may be gleaned despite different lived experiences. The participants’ reflections were viewed through a constructivist lens in order to discover how they see the world. The participants have their own knowledge of the world, based both on how they have constructed their own realities and on their experiences as women and leaders.

The qualitative approach for this study is narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry rose in popularity in the 1960s after the memoir boom and identity movements, which occurred at the same time in the United States. Since then there has been an increased focus on the power of personal narrative. Stories are ways of knowing (Seidman, 1991), and the primary way that
humans have made sense of their experiences has been through recounting narratives. At the heart of this methodology there is an interest in the stories of others because they are valuable and can inform us about the lived experience of the participants.

Narrative inquiry is grounded in the study of the particular (Riessman, 2008), where the researcher is interested in how the participant uses language and stories to communicate meaning. Individuals can share distinct pieces of their identities through the telling of their own experience, and narrative analysis seeks to uncover themes to their stories. The role of stories is an important facet of narrative theory (Riessman, 2008). The stories of the participants may reveal a pattern of thought and/or application in higher education that can be disrupted, challenged, or celebrated through acknowledgement and commitment to action. The researcher is charged with analyzing the intention of the language, including discovering how and why the story was told in that particular way and for what purpose. This form of inquiry requires close reading and attention to detail in order to both understand how the story is constructed and told and to infer themes based on the lived experience (Riessman, 2008).

Narrative inquiry is the study of how people share and discuss their lived experiences. Its roots were founded in the field of education and were shaped through the work of educator John Dewey. Dewey believed that experiences cannot be taken out of context, place, or time since each is an important part of an individuals’ past, present, and future (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The interview questions were developed in alignment with the narrative inquiry strategy in order to allow the participants to describe their experiences from their own perspective. Questions that begin with “how” and “what” allow the participants to freely share their
stories in ways that feel authentic to them (Riessman, 2008). In narrative inquiry, the interview questions should focus on four main areas:

1. understanding what experiences people have had by letting them tell their stories,
2. gaining an understanding of what is currently happening,
3. asking questions that focus on what they are doing, and
4. gaining an understanding of what it means to/for them (Elliot, 2005).

These questions speak to the primary area of interest—understanding the role of gender in the participants’ career trajectory.

Methods

In this section, the method for this study is discussed. It includes the sampling method, participant selection, data collection, and data analysis. This method provides a road map as to how the study was conducted.

Sampling method. This inductive study used purposeful sampling (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002). This method is based on the notion that the researcher wants to discover and comprehend new knowledge and therefore must obtain the best possible sample for the study. In order to locate participants and set up interviews, I first viewed the online profiles of women presidents on their university websites to identify potential participants. Then I sent them an email message inviting them to apply.

Participant selection. Selection criteria that drove the sampling strategy are:

1. Participant identifies as a woman,
2. Participant is currently employed as college/university president at a four-year institution,

3. Participant has been employed in her current role for at least two years, and

4. Participant has one or more of these identifiers:
   a. Currently employed at a research-focused university,
   b. Previously employed as a university provost,
   c. Identifies as a woman of color, or
   d. Has less than five years’ experience as a university president.

The first three selection criteria list the basic qualifiers for all participants in the study. In order to narrow down the pool, additional selection criteria were developed (see #4). I sought participants who fit one or more of these criteria (Carnegie Foundation, 2014). Below, I briefly explain the selection criteria listed in #4 and provide rationale for each one.

The first criterion (4.a) is a research-focused university. There are three primary classifications for these kinds of institutions; they include 1) Research University/Very High Research Activity (RU/VH); 2) Research University/High Research Activity (RU/H); and 3) Doctoral/Research Universities (DRU). The majority of these universities cater to faculty who are producing research in their respective fields. They are also committed to graduating students from terminal degree programs (e.g., Ph.D., M.B.A.). These institutions are considered the highest tier of academic excellence based on Carnegie classifications (Pierce, 2011). These institutions, which place great emphasis on research and scholarship, have been historically led by male presidents. Interviewing women who lead prestigious institutions that have traditionally been male-dominated for most of their existence may provide an opportunity to understand how
their path has led them to this position, despite historical legacies of exclusion of women. Two women in this study currently lead research-focused institutions.

Another selection criterion (4.b) is previously employed as a university provost, either at their current or former institutions. Because the literature indicates that the primary path to the presidency is through an academic route (Pierce, 2011), interviewing a president with this professional background, the university leader of the faculty, is congruent with the path that other women may take on their journey to the presidency. Four of the participants were employed as a provost prior to becoming a university president.

The third selection criterion (4.c) is woman of color. Because the vast majority of women college presidents are Caucasian (Pierce, 2011), interviewing a president from an underrepresented group provided a unique perspective and career insight for future generations of minority presidents. In this study, one of the participants was a woman of color.

The fourth selection criterion (4.d) is less than five years of experience in her current role. A relatively new president’s meaning-making process and career path to the presidency may provide a current perspective. Three of the participants had five years of experience or less at the time of the study.

Once participants responded to my initial contact by email and agreed to participate in an interview, they were contacted a second time by phone to set up an official interview time and date. During this phone contact, an review of the study was discussed so that the participant fully understood the scope of the research and felt informed enough to make a decision about whether she was willing to give consent to participate. I outlined the process for the participants before the interview and told them that they would not be audio recorded unless they consented.
to it. I reiterated that they did not have to answer the question if they had any concerns. The consent form was discussed in detail. During this phone call, I asked the participants if they verbally agreed to participate in the study, and all 10 agreed to be audio-recorded. I discussed that maintaining the privacy of the participants was of utmost importance. Names and other identifying information were changed in order to protect confidentiality. I selected a pseudonym for each participant and asked for approval to use it as her identifier for the study. I also omitted personally identifying details. A copy of the consent form was emailed to the participants for their review after the phone call but prior to the actual interview. Copies of the signed consent form were received two weeks prior to the start of the interview.

**Data collection.** The IRB approval was granted on May 21, 2013 (Appendix B). Interviews were conducted between June 30, 2013 and August 30, 2013. The interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis in an environment that the participant selected, typically her office or an off-campus location. The first priority was to see the participants in person; however, when necessary based on scheduling or geographical challenges, Skype interviews were conducted. Seven of the interviews were conducted in person, and three were conducted via Skype. All interviews were audio-recorded.

One approximately 90-minute, semi-structured interview was conducted with each of the participants. At the beginning of the interview, each participant was asked to share the story of her professional journey. This question provided context to her experience in higher education and helped to frame the discussion. This question also created a comfortable, open atmosphere in which the participant could freely share her story.
The interview questions (Appendix A) are based on the social constructivist worldview. I created open-ended questions to allow participants to share their stories as they wanted, with no defined start or end, and without the confines of narrowly tailored questions that might limit their ability to share their full stories in a way that felt authentic to them. This less-structured format allows participants to define the world and their experience in unique ways (Merriam, 2009). The interview questions are listed in familiar language that should resonate with the vocabulary of an administrator in higher education. The interview questions are rooted in personal experience, opinion, and values-based topics. These questions enabled participants to make meaning of their careers and talk about how their experiences have shaped their career trajectories.

The data collection process began after IRB approval was granted (Appendix B). I created an interview guide and followed it consistently for each participant. I conducted one semi-structured, approximately 90-minute interview with each participant; this interview serves as the primary tool for data collection. All interviews were transcribed by Medease Transcription, Inc.

As previously mentioned, the interviews were audio recorded digitally, and handwritten notes were taken during the course of the interview. These notes and digital files were kept on a password-protected flash drive. All data and files were kept in a locked file drawer in my office. Both of these data sets will be kept for two years after the dissertation is published and then will be destroyed. Data will be deleted/erased from all electronic files as noted in the IRB protocol.
Data Analysis

The interview protocol resulted in 10 narratives that were analyzed. The data analysis process is designed to discover what the data reveals. An inductive analysis was used to analyze the data and to create meaning out of the rich data from the participants’ stories. This approach simultaneously views participants as both the primary source of data and as those who can offer insight on their interpretation of the world around them (Mason, 2002; Merriam, 2009). This approach also allows for the participants to share their stories and for me to infer meaning based on their lived experiences. This approach searches for the subjective "why” in each person’s unique story. An interpretive approach is also useful when analyzing the stories of perspectives that have been traditionally marginalized (Riessman, 2008).

Narrative analysis allows me to infer a meaningful pattern on what would otherwise be random and disconnected (Riessman, 2008). The stories of the participants reveal how they see themselves and their place in the world around them. The role of these stories and how they are connected to power structures in society is an important piece in understanding narrative analysis. Because narratives are event and experience-centered, this approach allows ways for the participants to make sense of their past and to share a view of their perspective through the lens of their own identity and experience. A strong narrative analysis prompts both researchers and future readers to think beyond the surface of the transcribed text to understand the broader commentary that is being shared through the participants’ stories.

The first pass at the data occurred as the interview was happening. The second pass at the data occurred after each individual interview was completed, as I played the audio recording
and listened to it within one day of the interview. The third pass at the data occurred after all of the interviews were completed, when I reviewed each typed transcript individually.

I highlighted the data in different colors in a process that began with reading the material and simply underlining key phrases. Bernard (2000) calls this *eyeballing*. In this method, the researcher obtains a feel for the text by handling and reviewing the data multiple times. I then employed open coding, which is an analysis technique that is concerned with identifying, naming, and categorizing the data. Each line is examined to uncover what it is about and what is being referenced.

The data was inductively coded into 20 themes by going line-by-line through the data and coding them in the margins of the transcripts. These themes were identified by finding similar concepts, word repetitions, and repeated metaphors and analogies and identifying what may be unsaid in the narrative (Bernard, 2000). Some of those themes included *traits of the presidents*, *family background*, *leadership*, *workplace challenges*, *appearance*, and *how women are perceived at work*. The process of grouping the data into themes was informed by my theoretical liberal feminist framework.

Next, I looked for relationships in the data. I connected the themes in each narrative. The themes and their interrelationships come together to form a story about the experiences of the group. I used a spreadsheet of the 20 emergent codes to organize them into themes. Finally, four inductive themes emerged, including (1) challenges to advancement, (2) necessary actions and characteristics, (3) mentors and sponsors, and (4) presidential leadership.

The method provides an outline for how the study was conducted. It reveals the way in which participants were selected and then data was collected and later analyzed. In addition to
the technical issues surrounding the method, it is important to discuss the issues related to conducting an ethical study to the best of one’s ability. Therefore, the next section discusses the importance of research integrity.

**Ethical Issues**

As with any study, there are ethical issues to consider. Because I am studying participants who hold a professional position higher than my own, I am “researching up” (Aguiar & Schneider, 2012). This implies that the relationship between the researcher and the participants is different from what it is in most research, one in which the researcher has the upper hand. Studying up allows the researcher to examine positions of power and the structures they support in different ways. In this study, all 10 participants are college presidents and are in positions of power and authority. They are seasoned professionals, and all of them have terminal degrees in their respective field. Because of their educational credentials, many of them are also experienced researchers, although not necessarily qualitative researchers. Protecting confidentiality and minimizing risks to the participants is especially important when studying up (Aguiar & Schneider, 2012).

**Protecting confidentiality.** While I assumed that the participants understand the ethical practice of research and potential risks to participants, I informed them of these potential risks. I felt their consent to participate was informed by their understanding of the study and what it entailed. Additionally, I used vague terms to describe each participant’s current geographical location and institution. I omitted information about their specific academic disciplines in order to hide some identifying details. Informed consent is an important part of ensuring that this occurs, and this strategy was employed for each of the 10 participants. Obtaining informed
consent is a primary way to be transparent about the study, the responsibility of the researcher, and the rights of the participant. Because these participants are public figures on their campuses and in their communities, it is important to maintain the confidentiality of their identities. In order to do this, I did not share my interview travel itinerary with anyone. I also turned off the location finders on all social media applications on my mobile device so as not to reveal my geographic location at any time during the interviews.

As described in the IRB proposal for this study, I let each of the participants choose where the interview would be held so that she could pick a place where she would feel that her privacy would be protected. I also asked permission to turn on the digital recorder when we started the interview so that each participant would be aware of when her words could be used for the study.

As previously mentioned, cautionary measures were taken in order to protect the data, so that only I had access to the notes and transcripts during and after the study. While I took the aforementioned measures to protect the privacy of the participants, I recognize that there are still risks to the participants in conducting this research. Their words may be used against them or taken out of context by people who may suspect their true identities, which could potentially affect their current position and limit future job opportunities. Therefore I asked the participants to review the transcripts with the option to remove anything that they did not want made public.

**Informed consent.** While I assumed that the participants understand the ethical practice of research and potential risks to participants, I informed them of these potential risks. Informed consent is an important part of ensuring that this occurs, and this strategy was employed for each of the 10 participants. Obtaining informed consent is a primary way to be transparent about the
study, the responsibility of the researcher, and the rights of the participant. I felt their consent to participate was informed by their understanding of the study and what it entailed.

Criteria for Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is about the quality of rigor in the research and is a term that provides for a parallel set of criteria to validity, reliability, and generalizability. A parallel set of criteria are preferred because the positivist-leaning logic of validity, reliability, and generalizability are problematic for the epistemological and theoretical orientation of qualitative research; Lincoln and Guba (1986) have re-defined these criteria. The four components of trustworthy research include dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba).

Credibility. Credibility is the parallel to validity in quantitative research, and it refers to the congruence between the participants’ perception/stories and how the researcher portrays and analyses their interview. It is about demonstrating confidence in the truth of the findings. The researcher is charged with depicting an accurate representation of the experience of the participants. There is power in having the opportunity to analyze and share the story of these women’s experiences. Therefore, the relationship between the participants and me is critical to consider, and issues of credibility are of extreme importance. Credibility also includes owning any bias that the researcher may bring to the study. Self-reflection and self-monitoring this potential for bias is an important step researchers can take to ensure high levels of credibility (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012).

Transferability. Transferability is concerned with how the findings produced from the research are applicable or transferable. It demonstrates that the findings from the study have
applicability in other contexts. As a researcher, I have provided substantial details about the findings so that readers can determine whether the study may be transferable to another setting.

**Confirmability.** Similar to objectivity, confirmability is about the interconnectedness of the relationships among the researcher’s findings and interpretations, so readers can understand how the researcher came to the stated conclusions in a logical way. It is concerned with showing that the findings of the study are a result of the participants’ stories and not any potential researcher bias.

**Dependability.** Dependability is a component of trustworthiness, and it is parallel to reliability in quantitative research (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). It asks the researcher to ensure that the process is logical, traceable, and documented. It is one way to assure that the findings from the study are consistent and could be duplicated.

**Strategies for achieving trustworthy research.** In order to ensure the trustworthiness of the study, I have employed several strategies that are appropriate for a qualitative study: using thick descriptive data, member checking, peer debriefing, and an audit trail.

*Thick descriptive data.* A technique for establishing transferability is having thick descriptive data. In the findings chapter, I have inserted direct quotations from my participants, and thick descriptive data emerges in some of the themes. This is important in order to convey the participants’ stories in their own words and to preserve the authenticity of their experiences, and then for the researcher to demonstrate the cultural and social relationships that put them in context (Holloway, 1997). The participant biographies at the end of this chapter provide some context to their experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), so that readers have a similar starting point to understand their career paths.
**Member checking.** Member checking is a quality issue for establishing credibility that allowed me to check my emerging analysis and interpretation with the participants to see if it resonates with them. It is important because it gives participants the opportunity to correct errors and/or perceived wrong interpretations. It may also allow them to volunteer additional information and clarify context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). When the data collection was completed, I sent each study participant a transcript of her interview via email in order to check the accuracy of the transcript and to ask if any part of the data should not be included. There were no edits or changes received from any of the 10 participants.

**Peer debriefing.** Peer debriefing was used as a strategy for establishing credibility and to examine alternative ways of looking at the participants’ stories. In order to support the trustworthiness of my research, I utilized one of my colleagues as a peer reviewer. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest finding a professional colleague who is not involved in your research to assist with accountability. My peer reviewer reviewed the interview transcripts, notes and coding. This helped to examine and check any assumptions that had been made throughout the process. My peer reviewer coded large sections of the data, and we talked throughout the data collection and analysis process to debrief what we both saw emanating from the data. We had similar conclusions in the coding process. This process helped to test the emergent findings to ensure plausibility. It also helped to minimize researcher bias (Lincoln & Guba).

**Audit trail.** An audit trail is a technique for establishing confirmability. The researcher must provide evidence of an audit trail that denotes how the data was collected, reviewed, and interpreted (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The data obtained in this study is available for review by other researchers. The categories for developing an audit trail include the raw data (i.e., written
field notes), data analysis products, data reconstruction notes (themes and relationships between the data), process notes, and instrument development information including IRB forms and interview schedules (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

**Positionality**

It is important for the reader to understand the unique lens through which I view this project to identify bias. Being as objective as possible is critical for all researchers. I am professionally invested as a current administrator at an institution of higher education. I am aware of my own interest in this topic as an aspiration for my own career. As a strong supporter of women’s career advancement, I am passionate about this research and what it can contribute to the next generation of women who seek the presidency.

I recognize how my privilege may influence my ability to conduct this research. My status as a Caucasian woman and doctoral candidate may have positively influenced my ability to recruit and obtain permission to interview the participants. All but four potential participants accepted my invitation to be interviewed. For those who declined, it was because of scheduling conflicts. I recognize that my identity may also have influenced my rapport with the participants, particularly because I hold some identities that are similar to those of many of the participants, such as gender, race, sexual orientation, and educational background. My identities helped me to both understand some of the challenges they mentioned and consider new ways of thinking about these issues from the perspectives of people who hold different identities than me.

**Limitations and Delimitations**

Limitations refer to those characteristics of design or methodology that impacted or influenced the application or interpretation of the results of the study. One limitation includes
trying to set up an interview time with women who have extremely busy professional schedules, and another includes taking as many precautions as possible to protect the identity of the participants given the high-profile nature of their positions.

Delimitations are choices made by the researcher that should be mentioned. They describe the boundaries that have been set for the study. One such choice is the decision to only interview women presidents at four-year institutions. Because the majority of women presidents are found at community colleges, I opted to interview women who were able to attain the presidency at a four-year institution, where there is a lack of female leadership, in the hopes of uncovering their advancement strategies.

**Participant Biographies**

During a two-month span, I interviewed 10 university presidents ranging in age from mid-40s to mid-60s. Their tenure in the role varied from three to 20 years, and they lived in various parts of the United States, including the Northwest, West Coast, East Coast, South, and Midwest. All participants have an employment history that includes one of three usual professional paths to the presidency, including (1) academic (e.g., professor, department chair, provost); (2) practitioner (e.g., student affairs professional, vice president); or (3) corporate (e.g., business, law, and public policy background). The institutions represented in the study included (1) large, public, land grant, research; (2) mid-sized, public, regional; (3) small, private, selective liberal arts; (4) mid-sized, private, comprehensive; (5) small, residential, single-sex; and (6) faith-based.

Below are descriptions of the 10 participants and their respective institutions. Their professional backgrounds are shared in order to provide context to their experiences and
stories. To protect anonymity, pseudonyms have been assigned to each president, and some identifying details have been masked.

**Sunny.** Sunny is the president of a highly selective, liberal arts, baccalaureate residential college located near a major city on the East Coast. She took the academic path to the presidency and has held various roles at previous institutions, including faculty member, director of an academic department, dean of the faculty, and university provost. This is her second presidency; her former position was also at an elite liberal arts institution. She is married with children.

**Betty.** Betty is the president of a large, public, research university system in the South serving over 45,000 students. She has previously held administrative and faculty positions in higher education. She has held major leadership roles in national organizations that shape the higher education agenda. She is frequently noted as one of the most powerful women in her community. She is married with children.

**Dana.** Dana is the president of a mid-sized, private college located near a major city on the East Coast that offers both associate’s and bachelor’s degrees. She came to the presidency by way of a practitioner path and previously held senior leadership positions at institutions in the Northwest and Midwest, including vice president of student affairs, prior to becoming the president of her current institution. She is married with one child.

**Monica.** Monica is the president of a mid-sized university located near a major city on the East Coast. She came to the presidency after a career in law, public policy, and the corporate sector. She serves on several corporate boards and has been noted as one of the 50 most powerful women in her professional and local community. She is married with no children.
Kim.  Kim is the president of a small, private, single-sex, residential liberal arts institution on the East Coast. She came to the presidency through an academic path and served as a faculty member, dean, and former provost at prior institutions. She is a celebrated scholar within her academic discipline. She is married with children.

Angela. Angela is the president of a mid-sized, private, multi-campus system located on the West Coast. She followed an academic path to the presidency, including prior roles as an experimental researcher, professor, author, vice provost, and dean at previous institutions. She has won numerous awards for excellence in teaching in her respective academic discipline. She is married with children.

Margaret. Margaret is the president of a regional, public, mid-sized, liberal arts university on the West Coast. She rose through the academic ranks to the presidency and is a former professor, researcher, distinguished author, and provost. She is Ivy League educated and is known for her strong performance in increasing university enrollments. She is married with no children.

Jessica. Jessica is the president of a private, large, multi-campus (domestic and international) university. The home campus is located in a major city in the Midwest. She arrived at the presidency through an academic path, including previous positions in K-12 schools and as a university faculty member, senior vice president, and chief operating officer. She serves on many leadership boards in her community and in higher education associations. She is married and has one child.

Sara Beth. Sara Beth is the president of a large, research-oriented, public institution in the Midwest. Her entire professional career has been at the same institution, at which she has
held a variety of academic and administrative roles, including professor, department chair, and provost, before assuming the role of president. Her major accomplishments and acknowledgements have been a result of her focused work on economic development and international engagement on her campus. She is married with no children.

**Monique.** Monique is the president of a small, Christian, liberal arts institution in the South that offers both undergraduate and graduate degrees. Her previous work experience includes serving as an administrator for national education organizations and two prior presidencies at different community colleges. Her work in both the public and private sectors has complemented her work in leadership, teaching, and faculty development. She is divorced and has children.

Table 4 provides a profile of the participants, including information about their career path, institutional profile, tenure in the position, familial education, and family status. The basic information regarding their years of service and current institution was located on their individual institutional websites. All additional information was shared through the participants’ stories. While there were not any specific interview questions regarding the education of their families, all 10 participants spoke about how their familial history of education and/or their first-generation status impacted their professional and personal journey in higher education.
Table 4
Profile of Participants in the Study (10 Participants)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Career Path</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practitioner</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic &amp; Practitioner</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporate</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institutional Profile (some institutions fit into multiple categories)</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal Arts</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RU/VH</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comprehensive</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single-Sex</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faith-Based</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tenure in Position</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Five Years or Less</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Five to Ten Years</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ten to Twenty Years</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Familial Education</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First-Generation College Student</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second-Generation or More</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family Status</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Married with Children</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married, no Children</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced, has Children</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conclusion

In this chapter, I outlined a detailed description of the method and methodology that were used in the study. This chapter included a rationale for conducting the study and a detailed description of how the participants were recruited and selected, both of which are important in understanding how the study was developed. In chapter four, the four themes and their respective findings that emanated from the study will be discussed in detail. The professional journey and personal stories of the participants provide many lessons that can be used to teach other women in the pipeline how to replicate the participants’ career success.
CHAPTER FOUR: Findings

Introduction

This chapter presents data gleaned from conducting one individual interview with 10 women sitting university presidents. I will present four overarching themes that emanated from the data, including (1) challenges to advancement, (2) necessary actions and characteristics, (3) mentors and sponsors, and (4) presidential leadership. These themes tell an overall story about how these presidents make meaning of their experiences. The first theme discusses some of the challenges that the participants have encountered on their professional journey. The second theme shares some of the ways they have tried to overcome these challenges, and the participants describe in detail specific strategies they have employed to manage them. The third theme talks about a particular asset to negotiating challenges in the workplace—having mentors and sponsors. Finally, in the fourth theme, the participants share their reflections on leadership and the ways in which they have experienced gender in their particular roles.

Theme One: Challenges to Advancement

So there’s part of me that thinks it may be the same phenomenon we see with why women aren’t CEOs and women aren’t heart surgeons and neurosurgeons... because the jobs demand more than maybe women are willing to give. (Sunny)

The participants cited major reasons why women are not equally represented at the presidency level. In this theme, several findings support the challenges to advancement, including work/life negotiation, quality of life issues, mid-level career experiences, structural barriers, and the mirror effect. The most often repeated challenge was navigating the time commitments of both family responsibilities and work duties.
Work/life negotiation. Sunny discussed the familial choices she made in order to continue to professionally progress, including the sacrifices that her family has had to make for her career. She spoke about the demands on her time and her feelings about how she navigated those challenges.

When I was younger and I had a child, I consciously did not go into administration until he [her son] was older. I knew the demands it would take, and being a faculty member, though I lectured a lot around the country, I could, I guess, blend his needs and my desire to be with him. And, yeah, so I've always found it very comfortable. I've had two wonderful spouses that supported my career immensely; and my current husband has moved, God, I don't even want to think how many times he's moved for me, five or six times. So I think that's been, you know, I've been very fortunate there.

I think I should have slowed down when my son was small. I didn't realize how quickly his childhood would escape me. And I was getting tenure at that period and those kinds of things, which is an intense pressure, and that was an era where I think the tenure demands were extremely intense. I was expected to have two books by the time I came up for tenure. So I don't think it's a big thing. I don't think he particularly felt it. He didn't know anything different, but for my own pleasure I wish I would've just slowed it down a wee bit. But other than that I think I made pretty sensible choices. Again, the most sensible being was I was determined I would not take an administrative job until he graduated from high school.

Jessica also discussed the balancing act of navigating family and career and how challenging her professional choices could have been without a supportive partner.

But when she [her daughter] was very young, my husband and I had to balance childcare and somebody being home at nights and all that sort of thing, and we definitely made career moves based on where she was in school and when we thought was a time that would be least disruptive for her. So to me, I have had to balance it, and presidency is a whole different job than any other.

It really is a life, and I don’t know how I would do this presidency if I [still] had children at home, because I travel a lot and my husband teaches part-time and is a freelance writer, so he clearly has made career sacrifices for my career. He is portable, but it has meant that he didn’t have the same kind of progression in his career that I did, and he’s just a wonderful partner and a good friend. So I feel very fortunate, and I know that not everybody has that situation.
Monique talked about the necessity of being present for the important things and suggested finding creative strategies to manage the rest. She shared her priorities for her life and discussed how her work and family fit into that framework.

I think I got better at it all the time. I have three kids, so that by the time I had the third one, I just knew this was it and so I just needed a point of being at all the, like I never missed a single tennis game that my daughter had. She played soccer. I was at probably 85 percent of those games. So whatever was possible, I just showed up. I was there and I was supportive and I encouraged other people who worked for me to do the same. I would work late or I would work early, but I would stop and go see what was happening with my kids. And so, I’ve just kind of lived my life like that, saying family, God first, family second, job third, everything else falls in place.

Monique continued to reflect on what she has learned about balancing her professional aspirations with her personal goals or personal roles. She discussed her perspective on how she needed to spend her time while managing the dual demands of work and home. She also shared how the economic privilege she and her husband have as a dual-career couple has helped her to employ the resources necessary to help ease the burden.

I think one of the things that happens is that it’s really difficult to do if you don’t have resources. So when I was married, I had a husband who was a vice president [in higher education], so we always had [hired] help. So when you have help, you can make different kinds of choices. Somewhere early on, I determined I only do those things that only I can do. So showing up at an event for my kid, only I can do that. Cooking dinner, somebody else can do. Somebody else can go to the bank. Somebody else can clean the house. Somebody else can do all kinds of things. You need to clean out your life and say, “What is it that only I can do?” and then I do those things.

Kim discussed how she managed familial obligations in ways that were different from her male counterparts throughout her career. Being mindful of how others could perceive her familial obligations, she also noted how male colleagues are praised for having their kids around the office, but women would be penalized for the same exact thing. Kim said she saw a difference in how men and women view their roles as professionals and as parents.
Those kinds of issues were always present. I was the only woman in my department at [my university] for a number of years, and so not having a cohort, not being able to discuss issues without...so here's another example. My male colleagues always felt free to bring their children to work when the kids were sick and their wives or partners were doing something else. I would never, ever bring my children to work because of the perception that I would be on the mommy track or, you know, never took time off after I had my kids. Luckily, they were born in the summer, but it didn't even occur to me that I wouldn't go back immediately to teach because of that perception, and men don't have to deal with that.

It was like their [men’s] willingness to bring their kids to class or to meetings because they didn't have day care—it was like their right. They were entitled and it made them look like they were caring parents, and it would make women look like they...couldn't manage their lives and they weren't really committed to the profession. It's very difficult for women to gain the administrative experience because you have to be available all the time, and if you have a family then that's a sacrifice that many women aren’t willing to make.

Kim went on to talk about how she has dealt with questions about her status as a woman and as a mother. She exhibited courage by confronting the legality of her interviewers’ line of questioning. The following passage captures the meaning-making of her experience.

Every interview I went to—I had 14 interviews when I came out of [college]—every single place asked me what my husband would do if I took this job. Now that's illegal. So then you're confronted with, well, what do you say? So I said, "It's illegal for you to ask that question," but then your chances of getting the job are diminished.

Margaret also speaks to this work/life negotiation in the role. She discussed the difference in the division of household labor.

I probably don’t think any president can have a really balanced life because these jobs are 24/7, you know. So it’s hard, it is hard to have a good balance in these jobs. They are all-consuming and I think that may be one reason why some women don’t want to go into this. You don’t do it halfway. You don’t take your vacation days at the North Pole. You are in the spotlight all the time.

I know several women who just say, “I couldn’t do what you do. I don’t want to do what you do.” And part of that is the privacy thing. Part of that is the family thing, the moving, and the 24/7. It’s kind of astounding how many men want to do it, frankly. But I do think that a lot of men have the female behind them doing
the shopping and the laundry and taking care of them. And that makes it somewhat easier.

The presidents shared how they negotiated their time in order to make career choices that work for them while also acknowledging the reality that they still have a majority share of family and child-rearing responsibilities. Several presidents spoke specifically about balancing work and being partners to their spouses and/or mothers to their children. While work/life negotiation can mean other things, including elder care for aging parents, no participant mentioned this.

**Quality of life.** Sunny, Margaret, and Monique each shared their individual perspective on why men disproportionately outnumber women in the presidency. They cited quality of life issues and the high-pressure demands of this type of work as challenges to advancement.

Sunny shared her perspective about the complexity of the duties and long hours required in these types of roles. Both of these facets of the job impact the quality of life for presidents. There's part of me that thinks that they [women] don't want these jobs because women may be smarter. I think these are really difficult jobs, really, really difficult jobs. I would never say I do it well. I think they're getting more complex. They are 24/7. I don't even want to count the hours I work. I couldn't even imagine counting the hours I work. I can't. I look at my female colleagues who have young children, and I have no idea how they do that. So there's part of me that thinks it may be the same phenomenon we see with why women aren't CEOs and women aren't heart surgeons and neurosurgeons is because the jobs demand more than maybe women are willing to give.

Margaret continued to say that women might not jump at the chance to be the president because they do not believe the same level of support would be given to them as their male counterparts. This lack of assistance impacts quality of life issues at work and home.

You know, I mean, I've got a husband who's retired, but if you've got a working husband you probably don't have that support, you know. You could work something out, but the way these presidents' jobs have been set up historically, you are expected to be on that 24/7, and until that changes, I don't think that, I mean, a lot of people are going to be turned off by that.
Monique also juxtaposes work and family concerns through her own story and expresses concerns about quality of life issues for women in leadership.

I think women are too smart and they may choose quality of life over career to a larger extent than men do. Because no matter how much things change, and I see it with my own children, many men are just not as involved in the family as women are, and you see more of them, but women to a large extent are responsible for creating the quality of life for themselves and everybody around them. And so women say, “If I have to make a choice between being able to do this and that and being department chair or being provost or whatever, I don’t want it.”

Another challenge to advancement may be the quality of life issues that influence whether women actually want to pursue the presidency. Traditional notions about women’s role as primary caretaker of home and family responsibilities may impact whether women believe the presidency will still allow them to have a good quality of life while managing the complex needs of work and home. These quality of life issues may become worse as women take on progressively responsible roles. The next finding addresses the challenges that women may face at mid-career.

**Mid-level career experiences.** In addition to family obligations, several presidents talked about another challenge for women in the pipeline, the inability to move past mid-level roles. This is primarily because of the increased demands on their time and the increased amount of work at higher levels, which may deter women from making the move to a higher position. Betty talked about how women may get stuck at a certain level, and without gaining the appropriate experiences and credentials, they will never be a competitive candidate for a presidential position, particularly at research institutions. She believes that how women have been socialized may be detrimental for them in terms of the skills needed to progress in the career pipeline.
I know that several women get caught as administrators as an associate professor and that won't...you cannot do—at least through the research institution—you cannot do the job that you need to do and still be, and don't have full rank. So I think a lot of women get caught in the associate professor [rank] and they don't move on to the full professor level. And those that do move on to the full professor level that are ready to move into administration, and I don't know whether some don't wish to or I don't know. I really don't know why they don't, but I can tell you it's not for the faint of heart. It's simply not easy.

I have many women here that decide, "Oh, I really want to do something in administration and get back, so I'm an associate dean in the undergraduate school, a dean of undergraduate education. I'm the associate dean." Well, they can be associate dean, but they're not going to move on from there. They can't. You can't move on without being a full professor. You need to review credentials of people who are associate to full. If you're not a full professor, how can you grant somebody full professor status? You have to have the full and complete ranking of top professor or full professor level.

I asked if they simply did not want it, or if there may be a lack of foresight in terms of what they need. Betty provided some insight as to how women tend to work.

I think that they jump too soon to go into something that they enjoy, which is administration, and it's hard to write publications; it's hard to write grants. It's more of a loner sport, and women like to be helping, getting people oriented and so they stop their publications and get busy in administration; and administration can keep you very, very busy, but that doesn't give you your full professor status.

Sara Beth talked about the importance of obtaining academic credentials in order to be considered for senior-level leadership.

So you really need then to think about the academic credentials that give you an opportunity to be department chair and dean, which means you need to be department chair at some of the busiest times of your professional life and potentially your family life in order to get the progression right.

Monique said that women seem to be saying no, in addition to being told no, for the experiences they need in order to be viable candidates for senior-level roles.

And people are just saying no. And people are saying no, I think, but more women are saying no than men. And so they don’t get the experiences that put them in a competitive pool for some of those jobs. Even when they do, they still don’t want it.
Monica agreed that the challenge is especially prevalent at mid-career positions and discussed how women can become content at a certain level because they may be achieving more balance in life in terms of both work and home obligations.

So many women drop out at middle management, or stay in middle management roles and make decisions about work-life balance around how they’re…women can become satisfied with the road ahead. They see nobody that looks like them, and you can talk yourself into not leaning in any further, but being satisfied with where you are because you’re incorporating more personal time, family life, all the things that you’re trying to balance anyway. And you say, “Gee, I can have a more full life if I accept where I am now and build the rest of my satisfaction through other avenues.” So that’s interesting. You know the sort of the rap on the corporate world is that men get promoted based on potential and women on performance? That’s absolutely my experience.

Mid-career is an important time in one’s professional career, according to several of the presidents. It is the time when many women will decide if they want to remain in a mid-level position or if they want to obtain full credentials and other career experiences that may move them in the professional pipeline towards senior-level leadership. In addition to the challenges in mid-career, there are also structural barriers that may impact career advancement, as the next finding discusses.

**Structural barriers.** Structural barriers also affect the pipeline to the presidency. Some of these obstacles include institutional policies, a lack of resources for family needs, and institutional sexism/bias on search committees. Several participants discussed how policies and workplace norms impact the ability for women to professionally progress (or believe that they can move past them.) Several participants mentioned the disparity in the gender composition of boards of trustees and how it impacts the ability for women to be hired into the presidency.
Monica discussed some of the institutional barriers that may prevent women from considering pursuing senior-level leadership roles. She also mentions the ways in which women may also hold themselves back in the workplace.

And there are clearly structural problems. We don’t have daycare, we don’t have the flexibility in the business world or in many other worlds that genuinely allows women to have…the flexibility that they need to really have a centered life, balanced life. And a lot of that prevents women, again, at middle management. Gee, I don’t see anybody that looks like Ann Marie or Monica, so I guess I’m going to get to see more soccer games because I’m pretty happy where I am, and I make a good salary, and I’ve got a good position, and why not just do more with my kids and my husband and my family. Confidence, the self-esteem issue, the “who me?!”; The pulling back and not leaning in, and consistently leaning in over and over again even when it’s scary and painful.

Jessica talked about the talent pool that currently exists and how the low number of women on boards of trustees often impacts the selection of the president.

I also just think that we continue to have the problem of the pipeline. So I do think that…you really only have to look as far as board composition and that who is ultimately generally making the decision of the appointment of a president. And if the board hasn’t already worked through their own comfort with women in leadership roles, even on board committees or as board members, they’re going to have a more challenging time taking seriously a female candidate for the CEO role.

Sara Beth discussed how having women on the board of trustees does not automatically translate to having more women in senior leadership roles. Sara Beth has had multiple promotions that propelled her to move up throughout the institution, and I asked her if she has seen the impact of the glass ceiling in her career trajectory.

Sure. I mean, that happened to me…when I was a candidate for president here and the women on the board didn’t vote for me.

I asked her why she thought that occurred. Her response supports the existence of structural barriers.
Again, I didn’t fit the profile of what they thought could raise money and do things. Part of it was inexperience, and I think it’s harder for people to put ... I think if you’re a woman or a minority, you have to have much more of a track record.

Monica echoed the challenges Sara Beth raised and added that gender bias may exist on search committees.

Even when search committees are made up that have equal parts women, still very often male voices can be the dominant voices in the discussions. And there are lots of ways to rationalize going with someone who looks more like you do, as the male provost or whatever the male member of the board of trustees, while not saying overly critical things about the female candidate.

Monique noted some women presidents are reaching out to other women in an attempt to combat some of the structural barriers.

Well, we’re encouraging them. Like in [specific organization], but people tell us, “No, I don’t want to do that. I’ve seen what that job looks like, and I don’t want it.” You combine that with men, most of these boards that choose candidates being heavily dominated by men, and those two things result in what you see today.

Structural barriers may impact career advancement at various levels. Several presidents mentioned that women are actively reaching out to educate women about how to navigate those challenges within their institution. The next finding is more of a conceptual challenge than a structural one. According to several presidents, the mirror effect continues to be a challenge to women’s career advancement.

**Mirror effect.** The mirror effect, the notion that people will hire other people who look like them, also contributes to the lack of women in the presidency, according to several of the presidents. Women may be frustrated when they are consistently passed up for promotion and their similarly situated male colleagues are picked to move up. This may lead to a decrease of confidence and willingness to apply for senior-level leadership roles.
Monica shared an example where the mirror effect was prevalent and discussed how women may negatively impact their own career advancement due to a lack of self-confidence.

[Recalling a situation with a former co-worker who was hiring new staff] He said, “For years I’ve been trying to promote women, but I was experiencing a difficult time all along the way because I would call Ann Marie and I would call in Joe and I would ask, tell them I have a big project, “I want you to consider handling this for me.” And the women would say, “You thought of me? Oh my God, I am so honored. Oh, I’m just thrilled that you thought of me, that is so cool, and gosh, I’ve just, you know I will try to live up to this. Now I need to go work out some other work things because I’ve promised projects to two other people, and I’m going to come back and tell you exactly what. You know I don’t want to disappoint others, but I’m going to be able to give you an answer by tomorrow.”

At this point Joe’s already been in, and here’s what Joe’s done. He’s not said a word about three other projects that he’s on deadline for, he said, “I’m your man. I’m perfect for this; I’m the best person you can ever think. God, of course you thought of me, I’m really good in this, this, and this and I will not disappoint you, I’ll be fabulous.” And nine times out of 10 he ended up giving it for the first 10 years to Joe. And he said, “But the projects, they weren’t necessarily done or they weren’t on time. And when I gave it to the women who came in and said, ‘Here’s what I’ve worked out, I can do this, does this schedule work for you?’” He said, “It was an A-plus project.” And he started, he said, “I started saying checking my own ‘look in the mirror’ thing.” He said, “I saw the same bravado in Joe that I always saw in myself. The woman displayed her capabilities entirely differently, and I learned to see that in a very different way and to read the code language, and to read it differently.”

Monica talked about the necessity to have men recognize their own unconscious bias as a way to prevent the mirror effect, and she mentioned how organizations in the corporate sector offer intensive trainings about discrimination that higher education could benefit from, as well.

So, I think that happens in the sectors where you expect the equality to be more pervasive. It’s unconscious, and I think it’s a huge…. The problem is it’s a continuing impediment until we figure out ways to help develop men as much as women. We’ve been so focused on developing women and their leadership capabilities, that we’re forgetting that men need to be brought along in how they see women’s capabilities. And at the major corporations, there are some amazing success stories where they have forced the men to go through very intensive training about subliminal discrimination in all its forms. And frankly, I think there’s a role for it in higher ed, too.
Kim talked about her own experience with the hidden bias of the mirror effect and how it played out in the classroom for her in graduate school.

I mean, I certainly had a sense here about the social forces that are brought to bear, the hidden biases, the discrimination that takes place, both overt and covert discrimination, to see what was going on there, what they were doing and why they were doing it became very clear.

And one of the women came on when I was finishing the program, [specific female] is now the president of the [specific academic discipline association]. She talks a lot about discrimination against women in the profession, and so, my education here really helped me to frame issues in a way that empowered me and stand up against that day-to-day discrimination and bias. I wouldn't have survived otherwise.

Monique talked about how women have intervened on her behalf in order to prevent the mirror effect.

When I think about the situations where I’ve succeeded, there have been women involved in the process who probably were gutsy enough to prevent that [the glass ceiling]. So, I mean, I think it’s a signal or an indicator what’s necessary for the glass ceiling to get shattered, for women to get on these boards and in positions of power and then make sure the playing field is at least level for women. Because otherwise men, they can’t, if these boards are all male, they just replicate themselves.

Kim shared her thoughts about the challenges for women to move up in the academy because of the mirror effect and discussed how men and women are judged differently in the hiring process.

It's difficult in academia for anybody to be promoted from within, so I think we need to take some cues from business in terms of nurturing people and preparing them to move to the next level. The studies from Yale and Princeton about male and female resumes that are identical being submitted and then the man being selected over the woman because he's judged in terms of potential and she's judged in terms of actual performance really highlights the need to focus on the barriers that are still present for women in higher education administration and in all careers.
A consequence of the mirror effect is lowered ambition. Monica discussed the ambition gap that women may feel that may prevent them from daring to apply for opportunities that seem beyond their reach and/or abilities.

It’s that boldness, that as ambitious as we may be, and as sure that we can, that we’re accomplished and that we can do more and can do better, there’s still that sort of little nagging voice that says, “Don’t be too bold. Don’t get too far out there. Don’t get too sure of yourself.” And I think there’s also the feeling that we shouldn’t overestimate and say out loud how good we actually think we may be inside. So I want, I so much want to unlock that, and I think that’s why I ended up as a college president.

Finally, the mirror effect negatively impacts women’s ability to be hired and promoted because when a male is the hiring manager he may opt to hire candidates who remind him of himself. Consequences of the mirror effect may include hesitancy about taking future career risks as well as decreased self-confidence when women are consistently passed up for promotional opportunities.

**Conclusion.** This theme discussed the challenges to advancement, including work/life negotiation, quality of life issues, mid-level career experiences, structural barriers, and the mirror effect. These challenges impact women’s ability to move ahead in the career pipeline. In the next theme, the presidents discuss the actions and characteristics necessary to successfully combat these challenges.

**Theme Two: Necessary Actions and Characteristics**

*We need to* get young women as part of their development track to understand that being risk averse is going to offer more punishment than reward. (Monica)

The presidents discussed three main areas that positively contribute to women’s leadership ability. They include the ability to take professional risks, possessing self-confidence, and being personally and professionally adaptable. This theme of taking risks, having self-
confidence, and being adaptable came up in variety of ways and as a response to several different questions. These specific actions and characteristics include some of the ways that the presidents negotiate the professional challenges that were outlined in theme one. These concepts have been grouped together conceptually since they all pertain to the necessary actions and characteristics of women leaders.

**Risk-taking.** Several of the participants expressed concerns with some women’s lack of comfort with taking professional risks. Monique, Jessica, Monica, and Sara Beth acknowledged that part of this challenge can be the unwillingness to take stretch job assignments and/or calculated career risks because they may require women to take a leap of faith. They also talked about the importance of being geographically mobile in order to take advantage of professional opportunities as they arise. Also risk-taking behaviors like this require self-confidence and belief in one’s abilities. The participants confirmed occasionally feeling this nagging question about their abilities from time to time. The best way to move past this is to be open to new experiences and to say yes to any opportunity to expand their skill set. This demonstrated their adaptability and versatility within their role. It also was a primary reason why they were considered for promotional opportunities.

When Sara Beth was asked what she would tell her 20-year-old self, she immediately responded about risk.

You’ve got to pursue the opportunities that come open to you, and there are times when you have to take a calculated risk.

Monique shared similar thoughts about what young women who aspire to the presidency should know about navigating the work environment. She also discusses how that advice might look slightly different for women of color and advised that they may have to be more creative in
their approach and find ways to demonstrate their transferable skills in order to be considered for advancement.

I think that they need to take risks, to take on challenging assignments, to not be afraid to step up and say you want to be or fight for that leadership opportunity.

I asked, “Do you think that women sometimes shy away from taking risks?” Monique responded:

Yes, but maybe not disproportionately. I mean just the women I know, yeah, they take risk, and maybe it’s just the women I know, right?

Our conversation shifted to consider the intersection of gender and race when I asked Monique about women of color and whether there is a different kind of advice she would give to women of color who aspire to be a president.

I think it’s the same advice, but it may be a little more, you know, sometimes a little more difficult to navigate those systems or steps, and I think that often women of color have to be a little more creative because it generally is just harder, first for women, then women of color, to get some of the traditional routes that presidencies or the leadership positions, so that they have to be a little more creative and do a good job of drawing the parallels between whatever types of experiences they have and the types of experiences that are usually needed for the positions that they want.

Monica shared additional thoughts about risk-taking. The following comment captures the way Monica made meaning of her experience, including how she has had moments where she has lacked confidence even though she knew she was hired because of her talents.

If we can especially get young women as part of their development track to understand that being risk averse is going to offer more punishment than reward, and being open and accepting some things that seem very scary, very scary, and recognizing that almost all of us still have a bit of a confidence gap. You may have found this, I don’t know how openly people have talked to you, but there’s not a week that goes by that I go, “Holy shit, I’m the president of the university, and I’m supposed to….‖ I forgot you’re recording this.

But it’s like, you know, good grief, somebody will wake up very soon and say, “Ooh, a fraud, why didn’t we catch onto this earlier?” And I don’t know any…
I’m in a women’s club…which is part of a national and international network of C-suite level women crossing all sectors, and I just don’t know anybody who hasn’t had along the way and even in their positions today, doesn’t experience that feeling of the gulping hard and not believing you’re completely up to it. And it’s far more recognizable and far more frequent, I still believe, in women even today than it is in men.

Jessica discussed the differences between men and women when considering new job opportunities and how the two genders perceive risk differently. Specifically she shared that women may exhibit self-limiting behavior when considering potential new opportunities. This occurs because of a lack of self-confidence or belief that they will not be fully considered for the role.

I had a group of about 30 young women who are part of a local young professionals network that’s sponsored by the regional business council over at my house. And the CEO of the regional business council joined me and we started talking about this very topic. And she said, well, what she has read is that when a job opens up and it looks like a stretch, a woman will look at the job description and, if she doesn’t have virtually everything in her toolbox that’s in the job description, she’ll say, “Oh no, I couldn’t possibly apply.”

And even if invited to apply or encouraged to apply, she may just reject the opportunity because she’s not perfectly ready. Men will tend to, if they’ve got any part of the job description, be more willing to take the risk. So it’s partly sort of a self, a measure of self against external reality, and it’s also risk-taking behavior, I think.

Another professional risk is moving on to new opportunities. Angela, Margaret, Sunny, and Jessica each affirmed that mobility is a key factor in gaining experience that will prepare women for the presidency and that geographic mobility may be harder for women who may not be willing to take that professional and/or personal risk. Angela stated:

I think we do lose a lot of women along the way because of them feeling that there's a forced choice between raising your kids and going the mommy track. Take on every challenge that you can get in leadership, both in your job responsibility and outside of it. Step forward and say, "Hey, I’d be happy to take on this project for the institution." Just get out there and learn, interact. Regrettably, it does take moving institutions, and that’s also another challenge for
both men and women. You're best situated for this sort of job if you've seen things at other institutions, but when you've got a two-career couple that's hard; those moves are hard. But you can definitely move up within an organization, but you have to…it's distinguishing yourself, but it's also putting yourself in positions to learn through experience.

Margaret echoed the need for frequent relocation, and she also discussed how the tiara syndrome can impact those women who are simply waiting to be promoted from within and what can happen if that does not occur. Margaret said that knowing when to leave an institution can be challenging for risk-averse women professionals.

I think I was always open. I’ve always been interested in living in different places. I also realized pretty early on that, I guess I met a lot of disgruntled people who had refused to move. Who had said, “I applied for that dean position and I didn’t get it and now I’m just mad.” And I realized very early on that, you know, if you don’t get that position that you want on your own campus, you need to look beyond. And you can’t just spend the rest of your, or you shouldn’t, just spend the rest of your career saying, “they didn’t, they didn’t want me.”

Sunny talked about knowing when to leave an institution and being willing to take that risk.

I’m a real pragmatist, so I think I thought I’m going to go somewhere I can effect change. If I can't be helpful here, if I can't maximize the opportunity, if I can't make a difference, if I can't contribute in the way that I think that I can contribute, I need to move on, and they need to find someone who can do the job they want done.

For Jessica, mobility was a common theme throughout her career. Jessica discussed the nature of being an internal versus an external candidate. There are risks embedded in both options. To be an internal candidate can expose all of your vulnerabilities because colleagues are familiar with the candidates’ work. As an external candidate, there is more pressure on the unknown, untested candidate, and she may be competing for the position against an internal candidate. She was asked if she thought that taking a risk and being mobile has helped her to maximize all the career opportunities that she has been offered.
It’s no question, certainly because of the way the academy works. There is almost always a preference for the external candidate. And you know, there’s plenty of literature that talks about why. But I also think that you can’t, if you have to wait on a position to be open at your own institution to move up, even if internal hires were favored, it might not fit your life. So I think that depending on one institution to meet all your career goals, it’s not realistic, and it’s probably not optimal.

And part of the urgency that I always feel about things is because I didn’t come in to higher education world until after I had already been eleven years on a different career in a different world. So I always feel like I don’t have time to waste. I can’t be sitting around waiting for somebody to retire or to move on for a job to be open that I think, from a career point of view, I’m ready to progress into. So that’s partly a personal agenda, but I suspect that many women feel that way because many women have had career interruptions because of family or caring for parents or one thing or another. So I think that women typically are going to feel like they’ve got a shorter time to move through the ranks and do what needs to be done if their goal is to be an administrator and, just remember, mine wasn’t. Now at some point, it became that. When I was an associate dean, I certainly decided I wanted to be a dean. When I was a provost, I ultimately figured out I wanted to be a president. And so that absolutely required being willing to move or give up the goal.

Another area that women may struggle with is accepting their own abilities and recognizing their talents, which can lead to being averse to risk. Monica described her own fear and lack of confidence at the start of her presidency. She described how some faculty members empowered her to think about herself and her leadership in a different way.

Okay, I kind of had a moment like, “Who am I? Why am I here? What have I done with my life?” Sort of my first year was a lot of learning. The second year was… when the whole [economic] meltdown occurred, and I really thought then, “What have I done?” Watched the endowment plummet, saw all the challenges—with crystal clarity—all the challenges that higher ed was truly facing moving forward, even out of a recession. And so I had some moments. I’ve had a number of moments of questioning, but I finally feel like I really understand both. I have a comfort level being president and saying that out loud that I’m president and not sort of being in denial.

I spent my whole first year saying, “Well, I’m really a nontraditional, inexperienced president, really have so much to learn, you guys have to help me, help me.” And I still need all the help in the world, but I had a really wonderful moment six months into my first year when a delegation from the faculty came to see me, including some members of faculty senate who I thought
would probably just as much love to lynch me as invite me in to, and invite them in to be helpful. So this group came to see me and they said, “You know, we’ve heard you say repeatedly that you’re a nontraditional president who has a lot to learn. Well, we think you can drop the nontraditional part because you have a terminal degree.” And I thought that was an ah-ha moment for me. No one with a Juris Doctorate has ever been considered that the same way as people who have a PhD do. But I took that as a sign of acceptance, and even affection.

The consequence of not taking risks has led to there being very few viable candidates in the pipeline who are qualified and eligible for the presidency. Sara Beth discussed how and why that is still prevalent among senior-level women.

Well, partly because there’s a lack of deans and women provosts—it’s a pipeline issue, and partly, you know, again, I think that there’s going to be a struggle to get people to fill these jobs anyway, particularly in public places. They’ve become so consuming. I think there are women around me who don’t want those roles either, I mean, so it’s hard to sort through. As we have more women in various positions, people can make their individual choices. These jobs aren’t exactly great jobs most days. If you think about the challenges of college presidencies, particularly public university presidencies, I mean it’s a 24/7 consuming role.

I followed up on Sara Beth’s comment about women not wanting these types of roles, and I asked her why some women may not pursue the presidency. She shared her rationale and affirmed the necessity of having a full, diverse, professional pipeline:

Part of it is you have other things to do that are interesting. Women have more choices now. We have more women endowed chairs. There are lots more choices, and people will make their choices. That’s why the pipeline has to be fuller so that we can accommodate the range of choices that people make while still working on the inherent biases about what’s the right approach to a particular job or task.

One deterrent from professional advancement may be the need for women to take a personal risk and move out of their current institution in order to move up. A majority of the participants mentioned the necessity of taking risks by being geographical mobile in order to obtain the next position. Dana talked about the pressure to change jobs and/or relocate and how some women may not seek the presidency because of the impact that can have on families. She
stressed the need for women to be adaptable and say yes when professional opportunities arise; however, Dana stated that women tend to think differently about taking the risk to move their family across the country.

I think people had to make personal choices. How you do this job and raise three or four kids, I don't know. And I still think that the majority of family responsibility, whether we like it or not, falls to the women. Whether that then hinders your ability to be mobile, your willingness to take it on…

I definitely don't believe it's as easy for women to move into the presidencies as it appears that it is for men. I also think women are, at least some part of the female population, are more loyal, and that may be about risk. You know, when I think about our early years with my husband—he did all of the family care stuff.

If we had then, let's say a 10-year-old son, would we have picked up and moved? From a school perspective and whatnot, don't know that I would've been willing to do that. So, I think a woman thinks, particularly if there's a family involved, thinks differently about those moves than perhaps women who are single or women who are married but don't have children; or men who just don't… all of those other variables don't matter because somebody else is going to take care of all that stuff and they're going to go forward.

The participants stressed that although women may be hesitant to take professional risks, they are necessary for career advancement. They made meaning of their experience by sharing stories about how they were rewarded during the times when they took risks, and conversely, how they had lost opportunities when they did not. The ability to take risks may also be linked to one's level of self-confidence, and in the next finding, the participants talked about the importance of believing in yourself and your abilities.

**Self-confidence.** Several participants mentioned the importance of self-confidence throughout their careers. It is particularly necessary in the president role, in which their actions and decisions may be consistently questioned and critiqued. Monique shared how her experiences in her younger years built up her self-confidence and prepared her for her future career.
It’s interesting because, as I said to people, I think that everything I did really prepared me to be a president, but I didn’t know I’d be a president, and I could look back on my experiences in Girl Scouts, my experiences as an African-American woman traveling through rural areas of [specific state], being a representative at Girls State as a young African-American woman, and then into my professional career, I was just comfortable in a number of settings that I don’t think I would have been had I not had those early experiences. My dad was an avid civil rights greeter and a pastor, and he always had me involved in his programs, I was always in front speaking to people. I hated it, but those came in very handy later on in my life. So I mean, I think it was both early experiences, a commitment to working with children and families, that really positioned me to move forward in this particular area, even though it wasn’t something I had thought about early on.

Taking public credit for their ideas and their work is a requirement for career advancement, something that Monica believes women still struggle with in the workplace. She also spoke to the ways in which women’s voices are heard—or are not heard. She stressed the importance of self-confidence and self-advocacy in these situations.

I do find that even in higher ed, I can get challenged by male faculty and sometimes by male administrators because more of my methods and my process and the way I say things than what the actual end goal. Sometimes justice in the corporate boardroom—they don’t hear what we’re saying; they literally don’t hear the octave we’re using—something about the words. Again, I’ve been in meetings just as I have in corporate boardrooms where you say something and the guy next to you 10 minutes later says the same thing, and all the male heads nod…

**Ann Marie:** They get credit.

**Monica:** And they all get credit! I’ve kind of learned to live with that, although I more routinely say, “You know I just said that five minutes ago.” What I say is; I make it a joke, “Gosh…” I’ve turned it into a joke. “Golly, didn’t I try….” I say something like, “Golly, didn’t I try to say that? It must have been I just didn’t articulate it well enough apparently.”

Margaret also talked about how women may lack confidence in taking credit and they may highlight their entire team as opposed to claiming sole responsibility for success. By not directly taking credit for the work of the team, women may be positioning themselves lower than
their male counterparts. The following story shares how Margaret made meaning of her experience when she was asked to specifically share her own accomplishments.

I think that, you know, I hear on other campuses people complain that the president takes responsibility for everything, that you know, I got this building built, and you know, I started the new school of social services, and I did this and I did that. I raised $5,000,000,000, and I never say things like that, you know. I say I’m working with the development people, and we’ve had a really successful fundraising year, and I’m thrilled that our legislature approved the theatre building, and you know, I just talk in a “we-team” kind of way. And in fact, for my review last week, when our chancellor said, “You need to present what you have done.” The board wants you to say, “What would have happened, what would have not happened if you hadn’t been in charge.” And I suspect that was more of a stretch for me to actually present it like that than it might have been for the other presidents.

Confidence influences women’s ability to step forward and take risks, especially when they are offered a professional advancement opportunity. Monica describes in detail an experience she had when her confidence and ability to advocate for herself were tested and what she learned about self-advocacy from that experience.

[My former boss]...called me into his office two and a half years into my [previous] job and he said, “[Un-named person] is leaving, and I thought you might have some ideas about who should be appointed.” And I did the classic girl thing; I spent 20 minutes suggesting five other people. I never once mentioned my own name.

I asked Monica if she wanted the position. She responded:

Yeah, of course I did. And [the boss] stopped me and said, “Monica, I actually called you in here because I thought you were the right person. I knew this was perfect for you.” And he said, “But now I’m not sure because you obviously have some personal doubts, you didn’t recommend yourself.” So I spent the next 20 to 30 minutes digging myself out of this incredible hole I dug myself in.

And I decided then and there that there’s a difference between being boastful and that problem many women still have…but confidence that you can, in a diplomatic way, talk about your own experience and your own capabilities in a way that maybe, you know you’re offended by the way some guys do it, but there’s another way to do it. But you shouldn’t be so self-effacing and so much a shrinking violet when it comes to your own personal opportunities. I reminded
myself how often I recommended other women and strongly promoted them, but somehow couldn’t promote myself. So I never made that mistake again. I never again said, “Who me?” You know Sally Field, “you can’t possibly like or want me,” oh my God. But it was a powerful lesson.

Monique believes that her confidence is the very thing that allows her to take calculated risks and be successful in her role. It has been a key decision-making and career progression strategy that has enabled her to make the tough decisions when necessary and to know that there are multiple paths to achieve a goal.

You really can do almost anything that you believe you can do and even some things that even you are questioning. You really just kind of set your mind to it, have a flexible plan and strategy, and kind of stay calm and confident, you’ll get there. You just will get there. I think I used to worry a lot more, but I really don’t do that a lot now. I just kind of say, “Okay, this is how I could get there, but there might be another way to get there.” But something’s going to come out here. I just got to be, I got to get enough sleep and stay in enough shape that my mind is clear.

Because Kim is employed at an all-women’s institution, discussion about instilling confidence is a key component of her institutional mission. She saw how the lessons she learned from her own undergraduate experience have positively impacted her own level of confidence. Kim was asked to share what lessons women’s colleges can teach women students in the twenty-first century, and she discussed the importance of confidence and risk-taking.

Well, that sense of confidence. There's an expectation that you will play a leadership role once you leave [specific institution]. The studies from Princeton and Yale have talked about the fact that her top women students have said, “I didn't take on leadership roles because it wasn't worth the risk,” so what is that risk that women feel? They certainly don't feel it here because the editor of the newspaper, the SGA president, the captain of all the teams, I mean, these are all women, and so, there isn't any sense that you are somehow lesser or you are at risk by playing these roles, by taking on these leadership positions. I think that's the biggest thing that we have to offer. It's a sense of confidence and self-worth about what you do and how you can change the world.
I asked her about life post-graduation as an alumna of an all-women’s college—how did the world look different to her knowing that not every captain, not every president was going to be a woman? I asked if that sense of confidence carried over to the realities she encountered in the academic world. Kim discussed how her confidence affected her professional life.

Well, it certainly helped me. So when I was at [specific graduate institution], my first day in my [specific discipline] course I was the only woman who completed my cohort. A man leaned over to me and said, "Why would a woman ever want to study [specific discipline]? What are you doing here?" And then when I, a few years later when I was chosen as the teaching assistant for the most distinguished professor in the program, I had about half a dozen men come up and say, "You know you got this all, you only got this because you're a woman," And I said, "No. I got this because I'm the best student in the program," and I wouldn't have been able to say that, I think, if I had gone to a co-educational institution.

In this finding, the presidents discussed the importance of self-confidence and the ability to ask for what you want. They shared how having self-confidence allows them to make tough decisions because they trust their own abilities. In the next finding, the participants talk about another key characteristic in their roles—the necessity of adaptability.

Adaptability. Being professionally adaptable requires recognizing the areas that women need to develop to be considered viable candidates and going after those opportunities for skill development. Jessica discusses the areas in which women need to gain additional experience in order to be competitive.

So one of the takeaways here is an advantage that I came into this role with, was I had been provost and chief operating officer, so finance, budget, IT, student affairs, many operational units, as well as the academic units, reported to me, and I had a seat at the table with the president to understand every aspect of the operations of [specific university]. Women need to make sure that they get experiences and accomplishments and successes in finance and operations so that they actually have a shot at these kind of leadership roles.

Margaret encouraged women to not shy away from opportunities to build their skill set. These newly acquired skills increase the ability to be professional, versatile, and adaptable.
Don’t be afraid. And don’t limit your options. Explore, say yes to all sorts of opportunities. When they want you to head up the GE reform, when they want you to take on some initiative to chair a committee, be on the tenure and promotion committee, or whatever, say yes. And I know a lot of people that say no. They’d say, “Well, I really am too busy. I’ve got my teaching and my research, and I really can’t help run that program,” or “I don’t want the release time to do this. I want to continue what I’m doing.” And that’s fine, but that means they’re not going to open their eyes to the larger picture of the university.

Dana shared that her ability to adapt to the changing needs of the institution made her uniquely qualified to meet the evolving needs of her university. Her adaptability and willingness to take calculated risks helped to move her institution forward during a challenging time.

We had two fires the first two years. We had a financial situation that was… you know, we didn't have enough money to pay my first payroll. So if I hadn't been really truly understanding of the crisis mentality sense of urgency, I think if I had come out of the more traditional academic side of the house, I might have thought about it longer. We didn't have any time to think about it. So the agility, and, you know, we didn't have anything to lose at that point. It was either go forward and try it, or close the doors.

Her crisis management and student affairs background undoubtedly helped her to navigate the real challenges that she faced in her first few years as a president. Because she had always taken opportunities when they were offered to her throughout her career, she gained a greater understanding of budget management, which prepared her for her future leadership roles. Her adaptability was an important strength in her role.

Given the nature of the institution and where it was [many] years ago, I'm convinced that if I had not had a student affairs background when I came in and a fairly high understanding of the finance, we wouldn't be open.

As the nature of the presidency continues to evolve, the presidents discussed the necessity of adaptability. They named this as a key strategy to be relevant, collaborative, and forward-thinking in their roles.
**Conclusion.** Within the second theme of necessary actions and characteristics, the findings reveal some of the skills and abilities that women leaders need in order to professionally advance, including taking risks, having increased self-confidence, and being professionally adaptable. While each leader is unique, there were common characteristics that the participants mentioned as *critical* to success in the presidency. Frequently mentioned was the high expectations they have when working with others. Several presidents mentioned that they possessed a very large capacity for getting work done. They revealed that they believed they had the ability to work faster and more efficiently than their peers and that this is something that many of them had felt since childhood.

Many of these characteristics were readily apparent in their demeanor and mannerisms. These presidents modeled confidence, passion for their work, and an optimist’s attitude. Despite often meeting with several presidents late in the day or early evening, they appeared happy and were very welcoming to me. These traits were also apparent based on how people enthusiastically interacted with them on their campus. Often their administrative assistants described them as positive, friendly, and driven.

In addition to these necessary actions and characteristics, the next theme that emerged from the study talks about a specific strategy to combat these challenges and enhance professional skills and opportunities—finding mentors and sponsors in the workplace.

**Theme Three: Mentors and Sponsors**

*So having somebody who really was able to engender in the essence that I deserved a place in the academy was critical to my success.* (Kim)

The third theme is about the reoccurring point of having good mentors and sponsors. Of the 10 participants, nine said that they had a mentor and/or sponsor during their career. They
spoke at length about the ways that these people guided, shaped, and informed their journey. The participants shared how having mentors and sponsors encouraged them to recognize their potential. Several presidents mentioned the importance of being a mentor because they want to repay the support they have received from others during their career. A professional mentor is someone who will advise you and offer support. A sponsor is someone who will use his or her power and influence to advocate for you.

Jessica described the difference between the two in this way:

But I think it basically it comes down to a mentor interacts with you one-on-one, a sponsor interacts on your behalf when you’re not present with them. So sponsors were people that told people, you know, consider interviewing [she used her own name]. If somebody had actually interacted with me and said, “Okay, here’s how you want to actually think about doing this interview,” that’s more of a mentoring role.

This theme reveals the need for mentors and sponsors and how they can positively contribute to women’s career advancement. The participants discuss the powerful ways in which mentors and sponsors have enabled them to recognize their full potential. A repeated sentiment is that mentors and sponsors helped the participants to negotiate difficult professional challenges and navigate new personal roles (i.e., becoming a spouse and/or a mother). Another finding in this theme was about the necessity of paying mentorship/sponsorship forward. Because the participants had benefitted tremendously from the support, guidance, and advocacy of these people, they felt a great sense of obligation to return the favor to others. Mentorship and sponsorship has been a key career progression strategy for most of the participants, and they value the opportunity to serve in that role for other high-performing employees.

**Encourage women to recognize their potential.** Several participants listed both professional mentors and family members as people who have served in various advisory roles to
them throughout their career. These mentoring experiences were empowering because they allowed the participants to see their own skills, abilities, and potential more clearly. Mentors served as a mirror for them to understand their talents and areas of growth. Sponsors advocated for them when they did not even know they were being talked about or considered for a potential professional opportunity.

Four of the 10 participants (Sunny, Dana, Kim, and Sara Beth) personally identified as first-generation college students, and three of them shared how especially important mentorship and sponsorship were in their own career because of their first-generation status. Kim talked about the importance of mentors and what they can provide for women. She shared how they can instill a sense of belonging as well as encouragement throughout your career.

[Mentorship] has been extraordinarily important. From the time I started college, I had a mentor—so that first-generation college experience. It's not the lack of financial resources as much as the lack of social and cultural capital that has such an impact on retention and attrition issues for first-generation academics. So having somebody who really was able to engender in the essence that I deserved a place in the academy was critical to my success, and I found that in the dean of students, who was at the community college. I found it here…mentors like professor [specific professor] and my professors who encouraged me to really apply for positions at Ivy League institutions, and who were lifelong mentors, so it didn't stop once I graduated.

And then when I was at [specific institution] a number of administrators and two female administrators in particular reached out to me and offered support. And I really took advantage of every opportunity to find a mentor, and then always have given back as a mentor. I think it's so important.

Sunny shared another aspect of mentoring. She discussed how her familial and professional experiences with mentoring have influenced her throughout her life. She emphasized how having someone believe in you is an incredibly powerful act.

Well, I've had some pretty significant mentors. I never had an older woman mentor. There weren't many women in my field, very, very few, and so I didn't have that, but I had some fabulous men. [Names two male mentors] were
probably my two most significant, but right after them would be [names another male mentor], the next president, the one for whom I was provost, fabulous mentors, champions, really.

People who really, really believed in me; and, again, [being] first-generation, my parents were proud of what I did. They were happy that I went to college, so they were probably one of the first people who ever, in a sense, believed in me. So they were very, very important. And I probably modeled, if I can use that word, my personality on both of theirs; they're both drivers, they get a lot done, they have an idea a minute, but they're also pragmatic.

So they were very important. I think for my generation of women, the importance of friends and peers, I have a number of extremely close women friends who are my age. One that I made in graduate school, and she and I talk at least once a week if not more, very, very close. She's a faculty member. She did not go into administration, but she's always been a phenomenal counsel to me; and there are a number of women like that. My husband and I have a very close friendship with a faculty member, an administrator from [specific name of a university]. Again, they've both been incredibly helpful to me, so I've had a lot of peer mentors as well as older mentors. I have a somewhat older sister who is a professional. She also was a great mentor to me. She was in HR so that was very helpful to me.

I asked Kim about what it feels like when you know that you have been mentored and what it does for others to know that they have that kind of support. She shared how receiving mentoring empowered her on a personal level when she became a mother. She reflected how her mentor helped her navigate the demands and expectations of being in a tenure-track role.

Well, it helped [me] manage. First and foremost, it was the work-life issues, and so [specific female administrator] had two children. She was interested in administration. She was an excellent teacher, researcher. I had no way of figuring out how to negotiate work-life issues and my career aspirations, and she would do some reality testing for me, and I had colleagues there as well who would say, "Before you say yes to any more committee assignments or any more work," because it's a woman's tendency to say yes, yes, eager to please, "call us and we'll tell you what you should, what's worth your time and what isn't," because I would think anything’s, everything’s worth my time; of course, I'm going to do something like this. And so, that was very helpful in just time management and prioritizing.

And then, after that habituation, you learn to do it yourself, but at the beginning, especially as an untenured faculty member, I just wanted to say yes to everything. And now there's, I think, much more paternalism, and I think that perhaps too much paternalism or parentalism around protecting junior faculty from engaging
in community activities that I think are helpful with respect to mentoring. So some of my best mentors were through the instructional development program. So, as a first-year faculty member I signed-up for these programs and got to meet faculty from across the campus who served as extraordinary mentors. I wouldn't have done that today, perhaps, because chairs are told to not let their junior faculty do anything until they get tenure.

Monica talked about the role of male sponsors early in her career and the same relationship with current women presidents who help her in her present role. These relationships helped her make meaning of her role as president and find solidarity among other similarly situated leaders. It empowered her to feel like she had others she could turn to when she faced professional challenges.

But [specific male mentor] understood sponsorship intuitively too, because he took me from one position and pushed me into another position, recognized in me what you hope what has been done informally for young guys for generations, but only now is being recognized as what women need. Women must have sponsors too.

Oh, you know, one thing that I didn’t mention to you is, that coming here I had another college president who helped me tremendously, and that was [specific female college president]. She was in my women’s club, so I already knew her through that. And I said early on, “Could I come have breakfast with you a couple of times and just pick your brain?” And so I went to her home on campus and I had several conversations, and she said, “You know email me any time, call me anytime.” And it was really unbelievably stress relieving because in my first two years I would say things like, “I’m having an issue with faculty senate.” And she would say, “Who doesn’t have one? Who hasn’t had one?” You’re not alone.

For Angela, mentors and sponsors were the first people to ask her to consider the presidency as a possible career option. Because of their insistence that she widen her scope of career possibilities, she began to see that position as a potential opportunity.

For me, though, what my mentors did more than anything was encourage me to think about being a president, encourage me to think or to see that I had more potential than I had recognized. This, I never in a million years dreamed of being a president of a university, ever.
Angela believes her mentors and sponsors consistently identified and helped her to
develop her skill set at different points in her career. They affirmed her talents and gave her
opportunities to succeed, and they were the first people who encouraged her to consider the
presidency.

I put in a lot of effort to do everything that I did well, but I don't think that's why
they recommended that I be a president. I think it was a way of thinking, a way of
looking at situations from a very large macro perspective rather than a particularly
narrow scope perspective or for my own, what would benefit me or my little unit
most. So when a dean hired me to be a department head, he made some offhand
comment that I'd be a president someday, and I was like, "How in the world did
you come up with that one?"

But it was many years later when a vice president that I was partnering on an
institutional issue around enhancing retention… can you believe it? More than
one institution worries about this. So he had seen me in that larger context and
that's when he said, "You know, you really should think about being president
someday."

Monique talked about the ways a former supervisor continued to mentor her after the
birth of her first child to avoid the dangers of being “mommy-tracked.”

I think that the president at [specific institution] where I was a vice president
really provided me opportunity and I joke even promoted me when I was on
maternity leave, so I had a different type of mommy track.

I asked her what a “different type of mommy track” meant. She explained how her
former supervisor sponsored her by advocating for her advancement. This increased support was
helpful and empowered her.

Well, I was on maternity leave, and when I came back he promoted me. Usually
women get stuck. The mommy track derails their careers, but he didn’t let that
stand in the way and kept me moving.

I asked her if this surprised her. She responded:

Yeah, and probably the world, because at that point I remember somebody saying
to me, “You’re pregnant and you’re out in front of people?”

Ann Marie: Imagine that.
Monique: I say it’s funny now. Women kind of disappeared when they got fully pregnant. There I was, up presiding at meetings, and I think I worked until a week before I had her, and my oldest daughter, the water broke at work, so you know I’m breaking all kinds of rules here... he was a real supporter.

Monique went on to talk about mentoring from a third perspective. Professional organizations can also provide mentorship, especially in regards to taking professional risks and exploring new opportunities. She also shared how her collective mentorship through the members of the organization allowed her to thrive in future leadership roles by giving her advice and support.

And then when I left [specific state] to go to [specific state], it was a woman in one of the ACE network boards who connected me with the headhunter and got me even thinking about moving. I wasn’t even thinking about it, and it opened my mind, it opened that door for me. So I had been, over the years, very involved with American Council on Education and HERS [association providing leadership and management development for women in higher education administration]. In these groups, you’ve got strong women who support you and tell you, you can do anything, and teach you how to do anything. So I’ve been mentored more by organizations I would say than by individual people.

Well, I think that, again the ACE networks, once I became president, they started inviting me to talk about my experiences as a president. I would go not just for my sessions, I’d sit there and listen to everything else they did and I learned a lot from that process, from hearing other women more senior and more experienced than me, talk about their experiences. When they were preparing people for interviews and videoing them and asking them questions, I was just practicing right along or writing draft letters. So when I was writing a letter of application, if I needed somebody to review it, I’d go back to those same people at ACE and ask them to look at my work. Those organizations have the resources to support people. When I looked back, I said I was lucky I didn’t become a statistic in my first presidency because I didn’t have those when I got my first job. I’d got them after I was in my first presidency.

I just didn’t know anything. I remember being really nervous, like one day I’m [specific position] and next day I’m a president. What is that? I remember somebody said, “You got to fake it until it feels right.”

And that’s when I kind of just felt my way through. It wasn’t like I hadn’t been in leadership positions before, but I had never had that kind of responsibility. And so, I could have made a lot of really bad mistakes, but there were people who kind of advised me.
Sara Beth talked about this collective mentoring through having a strong network to advise her rather than one mentor or sponsor. She also discussed why women need sponsors, especially when navigating tough professional challenges. Finally, she describes a key moment when a sponsor prevented her from resigning her position.

I mean, you do use a network of people that you can call up. There’s not really... I think people make a mistake of trying to have a single mentor, and you can learn from everybody and in every type of institution; so I’ve got a pretty broad network of people over the years that I call and ask them their opinion on this or that that aren’t just sort of the [regional] presidents or the whatever because you need different perspectives in order to try to think through complex problems. But part of that is learning, being well read and being curious about lots of topics beyond what your specific task is, so all the things that you tell people to do, and they encouraged that, supported that. And then as you move along, the number of people you learn from sort of grows significantly.

I think that what women need are sponsors because the key thing for me, if you think about a moment in time, in the middle of this audit thing, I made a really bad mistake in how I interacted with the federal investigators. I was just plain ticked. And so, I made a mistake, and so I went up to [named male sponsor], and I said, “I quit. You go figure it out. You talk to them. I’ve had it with them.”

**Ann Marie**: Wow.

**Sara Beth**: Yeah, and he very patiently, sort of gave me the opportunity to fix the mistakes I made. Most of them were inexperience mistakes. I mean, they weren’t technical errors. They were just inexperience in dealing with bureaucracies and bureaucrats and systems that were new to me. But he put me in a position of sponsoring me, which is a little different than mentoring me, sponsoring me, being my patron to go out and risk the institution that I could fix that mistake.

I also asked her what the impact of that kind of sponsorship was like as she was going through that situation. In this exchange, she describes her meaning-making process with sponsorship.

Well, I think you see it in hindsight. You feel the trust and you also feel the enormous responsibility, so you still at that moment have a choice whether you do it or not. It’s not without choice. And you feel a little manipulated so, but some of that’s in hindsight you learn, but it really is what is really critical. Everybody, everybody is going to make mistakes, or you’re going to see a situation one way
and then the world changes around you, so it wasn’t a mistake; it just doesn’t work anymore.

**Ann Marie:** Do you think that women actively look for opportunities to sponsor other women, or is it just inherently how a person is wired?

**Sara Beth:** I think that if you yourself feel threatened, it’s hard to take a risk on somebody else when what they do rebounds so significantly to you.

**Ann Marie:** So it comes back to confidence?

**Sara Beth:** And some risk taking. And if you feel fragile in your own role, then it’s hard to do that.

Angela mentioned how having a network of other women college presidents as mentors have empowered her to lead and has helped her in her current role.

I have friends that are presidents, and I will turn to them and ask them for help and they are more than helpful, but I’m trying to reach out more because I’ve never been that proactive in identifying mentors. It was people that I happened to be with anyway, but now in this job it’s a very lonely job in that sense, or isolating job. So I am getting better and better at being on the phone or going to events in which I can be interacting with other presidents.

Margaret talked about how her mentors and sponsors often came from inside her institution to help her get the next position, but she really needed someone who could do more than simply open the door to new opportunities—she needed guidance once she got the next position.

I’ve had wonderful people who have hired me in these jobs, and I really, I mean, they trusted me. They’ve seen that I could do this, and so the chair of the [specific department] who hired me, the provost who looked down when our dean retired and made me the interim dean even though I’d only been a chair for a year or two. So people saw that potential was there.

What I really missed, and I think, I’m hoping that people are more sensitive to it now, I really missed the guidance. I got the opportunities, but nobody ever sat down with me and said, you know, this is going to be a shift for you from the [specific academic discipline] department to this job, you know. You need to think about this, and you need to talk to so-and-so, and here’s a really good person for you to connect with.
Betty discussed how mentors and sponsors provided her with important advice—especially at the start of her career—regarding how to leverage her current role and how to gain experiences that would help her to move forward.

I'm very goal-oriented, and when I started my doctoral program it became clear to me that I wanted to be at a university teaching. Once I got to [specific institution], which was my first teaching experience and research experience, my first year I went to the only female vice president at [specific institution] at the time, and I asked her, "How did you get to where you are?" And she answered, "Don't do anything administratively without getting your full professorship. That is the most important and you can be on committees, but be on very select committees that add to your resume. If you are thinking about Traffic and Parking Committee, which every university has, if it doesn't lead to your career goal, don't do it." So I took her advice and I was on select committees, but they were key committees for the university.

I asked Jessica if mentors and sponsors had affected her professional opportunities and career progression. She stressed that the feedback she had received from them was invaluable and helped her to build her skill set.

Well, certainly, I’ve got those two tangible examples of people that actually, when I wasn’t in the room, you know, put my name forward and then gave me the encouragement to believe I could do it.

I would think that the mentoring that I received then once I was in those roles from the men who were my supervisors was always focused on go to this workshop, be in this meeting, feedback about something I said in the meeting to say, ah, that was really a good point, or you had a good idea but the way you said it didn’t go over well, here’s how you might do it differently. I mean, all levels of feedback, and even when I was an assistant professor, the leadership of the college was predominantly women, and they would nominate me for an award as sort of a “junior professor on the go” or they would identify a partner for me in a research project around, across campus, so it was a lot of networking and recognition sorts of things. So it’s all over the place from big to little, and it’s creating a culture where we encourage each other, but we encourage each other’s becoming better. And that’s the most important part of mentorship in my opinion, is you help somebody else achieve their goals, but you achieve, you do that by helping them grow and improve.
The only participant who said her career was not impacted by mentorship or sponsorship was Dana; however, she did mention informal networks of people that provided similar support. She spoke about being self-reliant in her career journey. Throughout her story, it appeared that she did have a few people in her life who may have served in a similar role as a mentor or sponsor, but she did not choose to identify them in that way.

I don't have mentors, but that goes with sort of how I don't have a lot of friends. I don't have a lot...I mean, I have a lot of acquaintances, but I lead a pretty tight life, so I don't...do I look at other people and say, "They're doing pretty good things?" There are some times when I look at someone and say, "I wish I could be more like that person," and usually that means I wish I could let things go a little bit more. But I haven't looked at other college presidents and said, "Gee, I want to be like that person," or, I just don't. That's not the way I live.

**Ann Marie:** Or have there been people along the way that you can say, "Without them, I probably wouldn't have taken this opportunity," or has it pretty much been your own self-direction that has gotten you...?

**Dana:** Career-wise I think it's been my own. Those early days of my master's program, I mean, we really got the sense of what it was to be a generalist. Those early friendships out of that program certainly are still the people that I look to. College presidents are not a very friendly group to each other; the men, maybe, but I've not experienced that. I have a couple of women who I went to Harvard within the new president school program that I have stayed close to.

I asked her why she did not have a desire to be connected to others in her role.

I couldn't do it the way that some others did. I couldn't go to a meeting every week. I couldn't go and hang out. I didn't choose to play golf. I wasn't running off to a CIC [Council of Independent Colleges] or an ACE [American Council on Education] or, I mean, I just didn't. I was far more active when I was a vice president because I did everything NASPA [National Association of Student Personnel Administrators] had to do. I didn't do any of that as a president because I couldn't.

I needed to be here running the shop because we were so thinly staffed, and we still are very thinly staffed. So it just wasn't something that I felt I could take off and spend my time. I'm very active in the local [specific community-based group], and I'll do, when anybody invites me or asks me, particularly if it's on the student affairs side of the house, I will make time to do that. But I didn't feel that I could take the time to do some of those things.
Mentors and sponsors encouraged most of these women throughout their career. Several participants commented on the ways that were advised, supported, and advocated for by mentors and sponsors in their professional journey. Many indicated that it was the gentle encouragement from these people who first asked them to consider pursuing the presidency. Because of the positive impact on their own career, many of these presidents opt to repay the personal investment that others made in them.

**Pay it forward.** Many of the women who expressed that mentorship and/or sponsorship were critical to their success also echoed the need to pay it forward to other women coming up in the pipeline. This means sharing advice, helping other women learn from their experiences, dismantling notions of what women’s leadership should look like, and re-creating a new vision for what could be.

Monica recognizes the need to be a mentor and sponsor on her own campus:

> I do see that young women on campus all want to meet me, all want to. You know and it’s a fascinating thing because I recognize that I do need to be an accessible role model, and I want to be, but I want to do it without suggesting that everyone should want to be me. You know it’s a fine line. And so I find this modeling thing, you know you want others to... I now feel an obligation of course to help bring other women along and to sponsor women who I think have huge potential.

I asked Sunny what kind of advice she offers when she is paying it forward. She discussed what she often tells women who are in similar roles.

> I'll tell you what I find myself saying because I'm at the age now where a lot of women and men who I have worked with are now becoming college presidents, so I find myself in the kind of mentor role; and I find myself saying things like, "It's okay to be tough. You don't have to be liked all the time, and respect is always better than popularity."

Paying it forward does not have to be a hierarchical relationship. Mentorship and sponsorship can also occur when women at the same/similar professional level make a
commitment to advocate and support each other in their respective professional goals. A key part of paying it forward is the mutual benefit that each person receives. Betty talked about the strategies she used with a colleague that allowed both of them to pursue new opportunities.

I don't know whether I'm dreaming or whether it's true, and you probably know better than I because you've read the literature, but from the friends I have nationally, they really have tried to help women move along because we need to; we have to, to open up doors for others. And so, I'm always trying to see if we can bring other women forward whether it be through an internship opportunity or recommendations.

I had a great, great colleague, have a great colleague. And we decided that—she was in the world of business and I was in school psych—and so, what she said is, "We can't nominate ourselves for something," so she would nominate me for things I was interested in, and I would nominate her for the things she was interested in and it worked really nicely. So we had a great friendship, but respected one another's qualifications, and we worked together to help one another move forward, and we still do. I mean she'll write to me and say, "I'm looking at this. Can you write a recommendation?" "Absolutely," and we'll do that back and forth. So there are always different ways to keep the mentoring going or the friendship going or the kind of…women need to help women.

Ann Marie: And what a great strategy, too. I think that it takes a lot of bravery and trust between you two to say, "Hey, can you do this for me?" but I think we need to be teaching more women how to do that. That's wonderful.

Betty: Well, and you have to be careful because you need somebody at your level or better. You can't ask, if I'm a full professor, you cannot ask an assistant professor or even an associate to write letters. You have to have somebody at your level. So, if I'm an associate, I would ask an associate or a full professor to have this kind of exchange with me. And it should not be in the same discipline. It's even better if you can get somebody across campus to write that for you, and that's what was helpful with the person that I was working with, and that's what was helpful for the national association because you meet people at the same level, and they're not competing with you. They want different things than you want, but each of us are willing to move ahead. So you get somebody, for example, I have a very good friend at [specific institution], so I'd get her to write a letter of reference for me and I would write one for her, that kind of…it's important. It's important that we work together on those kinds of techniques.

Jessica has always been the recipient of mentorship and sponsorship from both men and women, and up until a few years ago, she said she did not specifically aim to provide women
with any particularly targeted support. She discussed the moment she recognized her opportunity to speak out and advocate for women professionally. This empowered her to do more for women in the workplace.

I’ve been, I think, an effective mentor to young women, but I never wanted to be pigeon-holed as only for women or only about women or just a woman. And in this role, when I first came into the presidency, I just can’t tell you how many media individuals, both external to the campus as well as internal, wanted to ask me, “Well, what’s it like to be a woman president?” And I said, “Not really the right question because I’m a president who has to be a president for everyone on this campus and we don’t ask men, what’s it like to be a male president.” So I really resisted kind of the feminization of style of leadership, you know, those sorts of issues.

But now I am finding now in my year five that I’ve got enough track record and successes built and enough tough-mindedness, you know, to my name that now I’m feeling much more compelled to write and to speak about the ongoing challenges for women in the professions and in universities and higher education because I think now I can speak to that with less concern that my voice will be marginalized.

Margaret mentioned the need to not only mentor others but also to provide the next generation of women the tools that their mentors were not able to previously provide for them.

She reiterated the importance of paying it forward.

So people were opening doors for me which I’m grateful to, but they didn’t know enough to help me think about what it means, you know, how you need to reach out to people and how you need to meet with people and talk with them through these various issues. So I had a lot of steep learning curves with each of these jobs that I took on. And I think that has given me an opportunity to now and, you know, over the last few years, to talk with people as I’m doing to them what others did for me. So I’m trying to do a better job of saying, okay, you’re taking on this initiative, now these are the people you need to talk with and you need to be thinking about this, that, and the other thing. Trying to help people negotiate the very murky waters of moving into these management kinds of jobs.

Monica discussed how important the advice of well-respected mentors can be especially when they admit their own professional challenges and share their own experiences. This is an
important strategy to help other women think through how to navigate their own difficult situations.

She [specific woman college president] repeatedly said to me, and here I was thinking a former [long description of her past professional roles] somebody that I just revered and was doing I thought a fabulous job, everything I identified. And then of course she said, “I’ve walked through those trials of fire too.” And then she would say, “And here’s how I’ve tried to handle it, sometimes successfully, sometimes not.” So, I got great advice from her, but to know you’re not alone, and so I’ve done this with other new women presidents and other women who have come into dean’s roles and other roles at other schools too where I’ve been called on. I’ve said, “Yeah, let’s go have a glass of wine and let me give you my experiences.”

Several presidents felt a strong obligation to continue the chain of mentorship and sponsorship that linked them to other high-performing employees and professional colleagues. They recognized the ways that their own career has been positively impacted by others who have invested in them and their success.

**Conclusion.** In the third theme, mentors and sponsors, the participants shared the ways in which having people believe in, guide, and advocate for them significantly and positively impacted their career. The participants talked about the encouraging nature of those relationships and how their advice fostered a sense of confidence. The participants also reiterated the importance of paying it forward to other people, including the students on their own campuses, colleagues and other high-potential employees, and other women who aspire to the presidency. This is important because it strengthens the professional pipeline for women and prepares them for the challenges of senior leadership. Having mentors and sponsors helps women navigate the consistent critiques of women’s leadership.

A final way that the participants make meaning of their experience is through their understanding of what leadership can look like. The participants explain how they view their
role as a leader, as well as how others may perceive their leadership. The aforementioned challenges, actions and characteristics, and mentors and sponsors all impact how they view their role and ability to lead.

**Theme Four: Presidential Leadership**

*Are people taking advantage of the fact that I’m not a formidable physical presence, that I’m not going to shout back, I’m not going to sort of come out with my fists flying? That I’m going to smile and nod and listen, and so sometimes people take advantage of that....* (Margaret)

The fourth theme is about how women presidents see themselves and how they are perceived by others. Traditional masculine notions of what the presidency should look like continue to impact how women presidents may be viewed by their colleagues and larger campus communities. These perceptions reveal how similar leadership characteristics can be praised in men but not often celebrated in women and how they ultimately impact who is hired for senior roles. This theme will also discuss how traditional notions of leadership position these presidents to be highly scrutinized on their appearance, demeanor, and leadership style.

**Perceptions of women’s leadership.** Monique, Kim, Sunny, Betty, and Monica each discussed how women’s leadership may be viewed and how their specific traits and styles may not fit traditional masculine notions. They discuss the challenges with being scrutinized and analyzed in ways that men may not be.

Monique shared that despite being a president at three different institutions her gender is still viewed as a novelty.

I know when I came here, one of the men said, “Wow, we got us a president, and she’s a woman.” So they were aware of it, and I’ve been the first woman and the first African-American in every presidency that I’ve held. So what’s amazing is it hasn’t changed in 15 years. It’s still the same issues.
Monica referenced how the media can create their own image of who you are and how women are often critiqued in gender-specific ways, particularly if they are the first ones to break through that barrier. She shared how she has been publicly critiqued and how she has made meaning of that experience.

They just did a study that you may have seen in Germany about women in leadership roles about what works and what doesn’t work. And on a spectrum they said being uber-friendly works least well, and being sort of outgoing and positive and that sort of friendly, cheerful cheerleader style, does not work particularly well. I found that fascinating because I’ve been called a cheerleader my whole career; sometimes in a positive way and sometimes not.

There was a columnist in [specific newspaper] who wrote several scathing articles. But she said, “[full name of the president], she’s just a Southern cheerleader.” And three years later she wrote a column, and she said, “Well, I need to correct something.” She said, “Southern cheerleader with pompoms of steel.”

Which I thought, okay. But there is a way to, I’ve learned, to be as feminine as you naturally are and not change that pattern in yourself so that you’re one way at work. I always found it daunting to be different at work than I am in the rest of my life. I find it much easier to not worry about that and just be myself. And so, but what I found is that if ultimately you’re team-oriented and you’re less authoritarian and sort of milder in your approach about how you handle problems and problem people, it may take a little longer, but you can work to the same end, and people look for results. People look for results. I fired a lot of people. Sometimes when I fired them I’ve cried with them when I fired them, but I still fired them because something had to change and it didn’t work out. And it’s part of my role and part of my responsibility.

Despite being comfortable with her own approach, Monica went on to talk about how she has had to defend her manner of speaking when others have criticized her words as not being gender-neutral.

But out of this, when I was talking to the middle management folks at [specific educational institute], one woman said, “Oh this just sort of, you know I understand completely what you’re saying.” Another woman was kind of, she wasn’t staring daggers, but she looked concerned, and she said, and I thought, “Ooh, she’s probably immersed.” When she started speaking I thought “she’s a gender studies professor” because she kind of quizzed me a little bit.
She said, “I find some of even your language to be somewhat gender laden, like you told us how you asked faculty when you first got to [specific university] to let you know when you screwed up.” And you said, “So I told them tell me when my slip is showing.” And I found that [to be troubling], and I sort of said, “Well you know what, you’re probably right. I grew up largely in the South and in the Midwest, and I’ll tell you what, at some moment I decided I didn’t want to run a garden club, I wanted to do something else with my life. But it didn’t make me a different person because I chose to be, yeah, I may speak the language that skews more feminine than gender neutral, but you know what, it’s working when it comes to decision-making, and one of the things I’ve learned is there is no single style of leadership that works. And that’s a comfortable position to be in.

Kim discussed how women have to be especially attentive to not only what they say but also how they say it, including tone and volume, because of the messages it can send to others. She also discussed the challenge women have to consistently be mindful of how to navigate speaking in public, express emotion, and be aware of their appearance in ways that their male counterparts do not.

Well, there are certain challenges to being a woman president. There was an article in the Chronicle of Higher Education a few years ago called “The Snow Women Effect,” talking about—if you've read it, it's an interesting article—talking about how women have to pay attention to the pitch of their voices, what they're wearing, are they too aggressive, are they not aggressive enough; and so men just don't have to think about that and it takes an emotional toll. And that article talks about the fact that from the time I started in administration to now, we haven't made much progress in the number of women who are college presidents. And most of the women who are in leadership roles are single, they've never been married, or they're divorced and they don't have kids. So we shouldn't have to pay that price, and it is a challenge to not only do the day-to-day administrative work because it's a stressful job, but then to have to pay attention to these kinds of social issues of people always feeling like they can comment on what I'm wearing, my weight, my hair, you know, and I think that's not a burden that a male administrators have to deal with.

Well, I think one of the obstacles to women being promoted from within is that if there's a tendency to be an authentic leader, to be committed to the collaboration, cooperation, that that's seen as a weakness. So if you're not authoritarian and autocratic, then you're often viewed as not a very strong leader. So we need to change that perception and talk about the value of the kinds of ethic of care, the leadership skills that women bring and how that really can help move an institution forward.
Perceptions of women’s leadership can influence the ability for women to establish credibility and be respected for their leadership style. They are often critiqued in ways that differ from their male colleagues. This critique may also extend to issues of appearance.

**Looking the part.** Several participants discussed how appearance impacts them in the university president role. Their size (height and weight), tone of voice, and choice of attire open them up to critique because of pre-conceived notions of what leadership should look and sound like. Their appearance seems to influence how people perceive and treat them in their role. Sara Beth, Jessica, Angela, and Dana all shared their personal examples of how they have seen this in their own career.

Sara Beth talked about the challenges of not emulating the traditional style of women leaders and how that can impact how she is perceived.

> I think it’s harder for women to have different styles, and so you see sort of a stereotypic style of what a woman president should be or do or whatever, and I probably don’t fit that style either; but having a credibility about doing helped enormously in that regard. I’m a kid who grew up playing sports and doing things, and so I can handle sort of the doing of sports not just the cheering of sport; and at the same time, I’m a pretty practical dresser, so you probably are never going to find me in heels, mostly because I have a back injury and my back won’t tolerate it, but it’s not the typical style if you look across women presidents.

She went on to discuss an incident where her more casual style, combined with her gender, resulted in having her credibility questioned.

> We still encounter interesting issues because, for example, something as simple as going to a Bowl game and going down on the field. This happened in one of our Bowl games in [specific state]. I had a [press] pass, and I needed to go do an interview, and this older gentleman kept stopping me because I “couldn’t be the president,” and I think that’s the gender...you know, it’s that little bit of extra stuff that happens. And then when you move outside the institution, it’s the proving yourself factor that you always feel. And the real test will be when women can replace women.

**Ann Marie:** Wow, that’s really powerful. We’re not there yet.
Sara Beth: We’re really not there yet, and it’s an interesting phenomenon for me.

Monique echoed Sara Beth’s concern about the lack of women replacing women and talked about how once an institution has hired a woman president the discussion around advancing women’s leadership is not viewed as important because the institution has already proved itself by having a woman in that role once before.

I think it’s an issue because, at this point, it’s surprising that there’s so many places where [women] are still first, and then the other thing that happens is that they hire a woman, and then it’s like they feel like, “I’ve had my female president.” So often they will not, the next president will not be a woman. So that tells you that that feeling is there in some ways because otherwise people wouldn’t think about that, and it happens a lot, just from my anecdotal knowledge. And every, in my other two presidencies, I was replaced by a man. Women are just even nervous about bringing second-in-command in behind them, which limits the opportunity for women to move up.

Ann Marie: Why do you think that makes them nervous?

Monique: Because people look at it and say…it’s like if all the leadership of the college is Black or all the leadership of the college is women, they expect you to have diversity. And I guess in some ways they’re right, because if you had a male president, you’d expect them to have some females in his cabinet or you’d talk about them like we did Obama. But if the person is the most qualified, they should be, they should have the job. So I don’t feel nervous about that, but a lot of people do.

Jessica, Angela, and Betty each discussed how appearance can dictate how people respond to them in this role and also the pressure to do it all and still look put together all of the time. Jessica talked about how her physical stature has influenced how she is perceived. She has been negatively impacted by her height, demeanor, and fun-loving personality because they appear as traditionally feminine characteristics, and in some instances, she has not been taken seriously because of it.

So I’m a short and a small kind of bodied person, and I like to have fun and laugh a lot. So sometimes people severely underestimate my will and my drive to get things done and will underestimate how serious-minded I really am about the
business at hand. And so it’s not unusual to be treated in my whole life in kind of patronizing ways. I won’t say that people actually pat me on the head, but it certainly wouldn’t be unusual to get, in group photos you look at the group photo afterwards and you notice that older men have put their arm around you in the photo or put their hands on your shoulder. So it’s an interesting dynamic.

Angela talked about the personal upkeep associated with looking professional in this role that differs from her male counterparts.

There’s no question that there are unique things about being a woman. You've got to go run in high heels, worry about your hair. I hate wasting 10 minutes every day putting on makeup, and really I should have nail polish on. You do. Good for you.

When asked if she thought that media outlets are particularly harsh on women or if they are trying to create a caricature of who they are, Betty talked about how women are scrutinized more intensely based on appearance and likeability.

I find it's probably easier [to attack] women. Women are always talked about that your hair isn't this way or your dress isn't this way or see how old or whatever this woman looks. That dress isn't right. I think there's more comments about women than men in the media, and in terms of critiquing and likability, et cetera, so it's really, really important.

Monique reiterated the pressure to look a certain way in her role as president and discussed how she has rejected some of those traditional notions about appearance now that she has been a president at several different institutions. She also talked about the challenge of being unmarried in her role and how she has to be mindful of how she is perceived in ways that her male and/or married colleagues do not.

I think also just how much you represent that institution and so you can’t do crazy things. And I was never that kind of person, but I laugh now about how I’ll paint my fingernails any color I want. That’s because I’m in my third presidency. In my other presidencies, it was always clear [polish] or maybe French manicure, but you’re so worried. You don’t wear dangling earrings. You wear things that are close to your face. You make sure your dress is the right length and that no boobs are showing. It’s like it is a public life, and I don’t think people, people see the glamour, but they don’t understand what it means to live under that scrutiny.
I think that clothing is an issue. I think that’s more of an issue and maybe a generational perspective on that. But I think it is more of an issue for women than it is for men. I think it’s less of an issue now than it was earlier, but I think that there’s just a lot more room for men to be a little more flamboyant and artistic and creative in his attire than there is for a woman.

**Ann Marie:** Why is that?

**Monique:** Because I think somehow I never felt like I wanted people to be looking at me as a woman. I wanted them to be looking at me as a professional and men don’t care.

**Ann Marie:** So is it that women care or is it that women perceive that other people care, so they have to care?

**Monique:** I think women perceive that other people care, and they talk about it. Like I used to say, when I was single… it’s different… like a man could have a different escort for every public event. I couldn’t do that. People would start keeping a list. It’s a different level of scrutiny, and I think for a woman, you just can’t wear certain things. I bought a dress the other day, and I’m trying to decide, is this dress too short? Well, somebody says, “Well, you can put tights under it and wear it.” I was thinking, I don’t think so. Probably not as president. If I were home in [specific state] and went out to dinner with my friends, yeah. But would I go on stage with a dress that I worry about whether or not it was too short and put tights under it and still feel okay? Probably not.

Dana mentioned how attire and image can impact women as they apply for the presidency. She talked about how women may be perceived in the hiring process and how women have to enhance their professional image in order to be taken seriously. She encouraged women to consider how to adjust their professional attire to fit the standards of the role they seek and to fit the image expectations of the board of trustees that they will ultimately serve.

Well, several women who have come to me who want to be college presidents, I said, "You need to go get a makeover. You need to go get a makeover."

One of whom was an internal candidate, and I said to her, "They are always going to see you as what you are today, and when you walk in that room as an interviewee, you need to walk in as somebody they don't know because the likelihood of you getting this job if they see you as who you are today is slim to none." And I do think that that's some of our women's issue around women trying to be promoted from within. That would be another great study is, how many people who go for the presidency from within don't get it?
She also stressed the need for women to also view themselves differently in order to appear ready, relevant, and capable for senior-level leadership. I asked her to expand on the need for women to have a professional makeover. I asked her if a makeover was necessary because hiring committees need to see these women in a different light. Dana responded:

They need to see *themselves* in a different light, so change the hair, change the outfit, pick it up, don't do and say the same thing that you've done and said for the last 20 years. It's not what they're going to want to hear. They want a fresh voice; they want a fresh view. At least that's what they say. Is that what they sometimes need? No. They really need a mixture of both. But, I think that's healthy. I think you get to see yourself differently. I think you have to see yourself differently when you're going into a search process. When you look like you looked for 25 years, which may be great…I mean, one of these women is a St. John's suit and a pearls kind of woman, and I said, "Mmm, think about your board [of trustees]. Think about your current board. Is that what you think they're going to hire in a male, or are they going to hire a 40-year-old who wears a bowtie and a pink shirt? If you're answer is that, then you better spiff it up a little bit."

**Ann Marie**: Right. Do you think men are asked to sort of do the same kind of re-imaging?

**Dana**: No. But I think women, particularly if you've been a woman who's raised a family, you know, they have a certain image of you, and you have to change up the image. You have to.

Dana also discussed the personal pressure she has faced to look a certain way in this role even though it does not always fit how she views herself personally or professionally.

We have a wonderful woman who works in our facilities department, and she'll say to me often, "You need to be more presidential," and I'll say, "What does that mean?" And she'll say, "You need to really step it up a bit more. You need to…where's that suit?"

**Ann Marie**: Oh, she's referring to your casual nature?

**Dana**: Yeah. Because sometimes I can get down and get dirty with the best of them, and every now and then I have to say, "Okay, I'm going to call the question." So every now and then… because I let them do—as much as I am a micromanager, and I am—I let them do what they want to do, but I know what they're doing. And then every now and then I'll go in for the kill.
Ann Marie: Is the down and dirty side of it part of your student affairs background?

Dana: Absolutely. Mm-hmm.

Margaret described the advice she received as it relates to her appearance and attire when she applied for leadership roles throughout her career. She was surprised that she was often advised about her clothing and accessories rather than being given advice on how to highlight her skills and abilities.

[When applying for the presidency] I received off-the-wall advice, like “you need to cut your hair and wear smaller earrings,” that kind of advice.

Ann Marie: Did you do it?

Margaret: No! [Laughter]

Ann Marie: Talk about that. Why not? Why did they say that, and why didn’t you? As I’m often told similar kinds of things.

Margaret: Right. [Laughter] I did start wearing my hair up, but that was in part because when I first started teaching in the [specific academic discipline] school, I wore my hair long, and my students said to me, “You lived in [specific very liberal part of the United States], and you wear your hair like that. We know your politics.” And I thought, okay. I’m going to hide my politics, if they’re so evident, ‘cause I need to be a more neutral presence in the classroom. And so I started putting my hair up, but not cutting it. But yeah, I really did resist this “you need to look a certain way.” You know, I did stop wearing jeans and got myself looking a little more businessy. But I, yeah, I really did resent that somehow my jewelry choices were going to affect my career options.

Ann Marie: Well I think they’re lovely. [Laughter]

She also discussed how traditional notions of what leaders should look like impacts who may be selected for the presidency. She describes in detail how appearance influences how people view the leadership ability and potential of men and women.

Margaret: When I hear people on campuses talking for instance about various candidates who have come to campus for president positions or other leadership jobs, that there will be a comment often—“well he looked really presidential.”
Ann Marie: What does that mean?

Margaret: Yeah, exactly. Right. He, you know, and you realize, all right, he, I even had someone say—you know, and he smokes a pipe. There’s a good, that’s a good qualification.

Ann Marie: So does Santa Claus. [Laughter]

Margaret: So there’s, you know, I think there is a perception that is deeply imbedded that the guy that walks in and he’s tall and he’s got that bearing and that voice and that manner—that’s a leader. And the woman who walks in with her long hair and her earrings and her soft voice, well, we’ll see what she can do. So there’s a much more of a, I mean, I have had people say, “I saw your photograph. I didn’t realize you were so short.” Um, okay? [Laughter]

The presidents shared how they have been critiqued because of appearance, tone, and physical stature. These critiques, in addition to how women’s leadership can be viewed, may also impact their opportunity to professionally advance.

Perceptions in the hiring and evaluation process. Sunny and Monica each shared specific instances in which they have seen how gender impacts the hiring decisions. Sunny shared how she has seen individuals struggle with self-imposed barriers to success as well as individuals who purposefully seek women leaders.

I do think that there are always some people for whom it is difficult to break through their psychological barriers, that they shouldn't have a woman or shouldn't be supervised by a woman, or that women are easier to push around or something like that. In every place, I have experiences. I think early on in my career there was another individual who really could not get comfortable with my intelligence as a woman, but the…the next person recruited me because I think they had a liking of intelligent women more than any other single category.

Monica shared a recent story in which she witnessed a woman candidate being criticized for being considered too aggressive in the interview process. She discussed how she saw firsthand how gender bias can negatively impact a woman’s candidacy.

I’ve watched this happen with our last dean external search. Our [specific position] was an internal candidate, and there were no women who applied, but on
[a different university position search] we got a fabulous guy, and I got to interview three final candidates, and two were women and he was the male. And the candidates came to me with my knowledge that faculty had already decided he was the guy. And I’m very reluctant to… and it was ultimately the provost’s decision, but with my advice and council, and I knew the provost wanted this guy and that he instantly was going to make up for it as he told me by making sure the associate dean positions were filled by promising women. So I think that there is still the thing men do unconsciously, and sometimes consciously, but far less than ever, unconscious bias, and I think there are, again, the things that we do to ourselves. And I thought one of the women was just a superstar, and I was really interested in her. And she actually, in that case you know you can’t win in many cases, she actually was accused by, and I couldn’t believe this in a higher ed discussion, she actually, too many people thought she just came on kind of like gang busters.

Monica went on to discuss the double standard of how men and women are often evaluated differently. She reiterated that certain leadership characteristics that are valued in men are often negatively critiqued in women.

She just sounded a little too strong in a… you know, the weaknesses in the other woman who didn’t assert enough, the reason she should be a dean, versus the woman who knew she should be dean but came across too strong, that was then perceived as, well how will she work in an atmosphere that requires process and collaboration, endless collaboration? Thinking, whoa, the double-standards inherent in what just happened to those two women.

Damned if you do and damned if you don’t. So you know it’s an interesting conundrum because we’re now in that last, that next tough mile where we’ve done a lot to make progress. The next steps are harder, they’re just plain harder. It requires breaking through the thinking, and we do a lot of training on campus to avoid discriminatory practices, and it’s working to get more and more faculty of color, which is tough in [specific state] and in a business school to do, but we’ve gone after it hammer and tong. We’re doing better on the administrative side. And there are so many women in higher ed, women generally in higher ed, in the classrooms and in administrative positions that it’s just not perceived to be the same level of issue.

Monica went on to talk about the importance of getting more women in leadership roles at many different levels of the university. She also shared that when there is a woman president the emphasis on having women leaders in other roles is often not viewed as a priority anymore.
I routinely bring it up, and then the numbers become the numbers. Well, our glaring problem is people of color, and you know just getting faculty of color, so we’ve done better in women of color, we’re doing better with that. But this is a, you know, it’s I’m working very hard with my head of HR, who is a woman in a classic position of importance in power held almost always by women.

And with my chief diversity officer, to see if we can’t start to break through some of this thinking that’s holding us back, I think ironically, in my tenure when it comes to women. But I look around at other schools and it’s the similar story, even where there’s a woman president. In many ways that too holds things back because once you have a woman president, the imperative to fill some of the other ranking positions just doesn’t seem as strong.

**Ann Marie:** It’s like the Obama effect.

**Monica:** It’s the Obama effect, precisely.

Several presidents discussed how they have personally felt that their gender played a role in how they are professionally perceived. Margaret names specific instances where she has felt that her gender has impacted how she is viewed, evaluated, and treated at work.

There are times certainly when I have open forums and large meetings, and I will come away and I’ll think, I don’t know if they would have asked me that if I had been a male, you know. If any one of the former male presidents of [specific university]… if they would have gotten that kind of response, you know? Are people taking advantage of the fact that I’m not a formidable physical presence, that I’m not going to shout back, I’m not going to sort of come out with my fists flying? That I’m going to smile and nod and listen, and so sometimes people take advantage of that, perhaps. But in general, I think this campus in particular is a very civil campus, and I think they like and are used to exchanging communication and so they like it that I’m not coming out blustering or intimidating people.

**Ann Marie:** When you say, you know, they ask you questions maybe that perhaps they wouldn’t have asked a male president, would you say that’s questions of more of a personal nature or questions where you think that they’re just trying to push buttons?

**Margaret:** Yeah, the second. Not the personal ones so much, but you know, just more the, you know, unprofessional, rude kinds of questions that I think they know I’m not going to bite their head off and so they’re taking advantage. It really doesn’t happen that often, but there are times when I come back here and I think, it would have been really interesting if one of the other former male presidents had been leading that meeting. Do you think it might have gone in a
different direction? The other odd part of this is that, after some of those encounters, people clearly feel sorry for me. Now, and that’s an interesting dynamic too, that I suppose I should feel good about, but I also think someone wants to come up afterwards and hug me and sort of make me feel better about how we just had this kind of tense meeting.

Ann Marie: And that wouldn’t happen with a male president?

Margaret: I don’t think so.

By sending women messages about what a leader should look like, male leadership characteristics are reinforced. Monica discussed that the lack of viable women in the senior-level pipeline results in a homogenous workforce, which may be due in part to the mirror effect—men hiring other men because they take comfort that these candidates look like them.

I look around, I go, “You know this is the same thing that happens, again, in other sectors too, where you can get to a certain level,” because everybody knows the numbers need to change and they’re working on it and they’re semi-appalled. But when they look at the reality around them and go, “Holy Toledo, we’ve got to change this.” But there’s still the mirror effect. Men see themselves in other men. They just do. So they hire other men.

Monica continued to talk about how being a woman president has impacted how students view leadership and how she may be viewed differently because of how feminine leadership may be perceived. Her nurturing style, which can be negatively critiqued, is used in positive ways in her role as a leader and with students.

You know because women are few and far between still in this world and the corporate world, I definitely see it. It’s one of the things I’ve come to accept that I can be me, and this is something that I have learned about, I can be myself, which I’ve always tried to be, I’ve never been a floppy bowtie wearing, try to be like the guys. I’m sort of an unusually feminine version of power because I never knew how to be anything else, and I never modeled myself on the guys and I never wanted to, and always hoped that through other routes, power of persuasion and charm, that there might be another route to expressing your ideas.

Here’s a difference being a woman president. There are things that are challenging about it, but there are things that are so fabulous, including being called “Monica”. I think it would be harder for a guy to do that.
At commencement I have 1,000 graduating seniors; I hug every single one of them. I do not shake hands, I hug. And it became a tradition my first year, first graduation, because I knew the class president. And so she was the first one to cross the stage, and I hugged her, and the next child behind her, God love him, came with arms outstretched and I hugged him too.

**Ann Marie:** Look what you started. [Laughter]

**Monica:** So it’s led to some funny experiences. Some football players have several times picked me up and twirled me around in front of 10,000 people, and you know it’s had… there’ve been some funny…. Occasionally I have an international kid who looks mildly uncomfortable crossing the stage, and so I just hold out my hand and let them. But many times I start to hold up my hand and a kid will say, “No, I want the hug.” They just lean in for the hug.

Women may be professionally and personally evaluated differently than their male peers. This may create an unequal playing field that can impact the hiring decisions in higher education. One way to alter these dynamics may be to have more women at the table. Having one woman in the room where important decisions are being made may provide for an alternative voice, but having a critical mass may significantly influence hiring and other important decisions that expand the diversity of thought.

**Critical mass.** Monica discussed how the perception of women’s leadership can shift when a critical mass of women is attained. She discussed strategies she regularly employs to combat negative perceptions of women’s leadership.

And it’s still a men’s club, but you’re exactly right. I don’t know if you’ve seen the studies that show how women’s voices are heard. It’s been largely cited about women on corporate boards. One woman’s voice isn’t heard at all. It takes a yeoman’s effort to get… to speak above the guys and get heard. Two women have to make sure they don’t sit together. On one of the boards I’m on now, there’s one other woman, she’s from [specific city], and we’ve become very close friends, and we always talk between board meetings. But we never sit together, we hang out more with the guys who have all become close friends, and we never go to the ladies room together because the study literally found that men think you’re talking about them and talking about the issues at the table when you go to the ladies room. What the hell are men doing in the men’s room together?
It never crossed my mind that they were, A) talking about me or the other woman, or that they were talking about the matters we were talking about at the table. When [specific name of corporate board] board’s had three women, one of whom happened to be a women of color, that’s when the dynamic starts to really change. It starts to be that critical mass in terms of voices that are heard not only as voices worth listening to, but also distinctively as your individual voice. There’s something very odd about it, how you’re seen as one woman or two women only, but then when it’s three women, you take on your own distinctive personalities and voices. So there’s something about the dynamics that change, and it’s true of people of color too, about how you can really change the way people lean forward and listen to you as opposed to how you routinely listen to others.

Margaret discusses how a subtle shift can occur when more women are added to the room where decisions are being made. She discusses the palpable ways that collaboration increases and all voices are heard when there is gender diversity in the room.

Well, I will say, it was certainly daunting coming here and realizing that there weren’t any other female presidents in the state system and the chancellor was a male and when we had our meetings with, that were just the [all of the male presidents] and the chancellor and…

**Ann Marie:** It was you.

**Margaret:** It was me. It was me. And a wonderful group of people, but it was like any time I, we had those meetings, it was all about football, you know. And so there is just a difference. You could just sort of feel the conversation would have been different if there were mostly women in the room and one male president walked in. I did my time in East Texas, so I can talk football, but it’s not my, you know, it’s not what I would just choose as the main conversation. And that’s, I mean, I’m exaggerating, but that’s, there’s kind of that tendency when you look around and there’s these men, even though they’re these highly educated professionals, guys, they still want to talk about the Super Bowl. And so that, you sort of extrapolate that, that there is a different communication system.

I asked Margaret how that different kind of communication system impacted her work. She shared how the focus and tenor of the conversations shifted dramatically as a result of having another woman in the room as well as a woman leading the state-system presidents meetings.
You know, I hate to talk in clichés, but I will say right now we have an interim female chancellor. The dynamic is completely different in the presidents’ meetings now. Instead of it being sort of all about numbers and all about, you know, here are your performance standards, you know, and you’re at 7% and you need to be at 8%. She’s talking about students and talking about learning outcomes.

**Ann Marie**: Imagine that.

**Margaret**: I know. It’s really a shift. And I can see that, that the staff, her staff are also pivoting. And that’s not necessarily changing from male to female. It’s partly just changing from a chancellor who was very numbers oriented to a chancellor who has more of a campus focus and more of a student focus. Nonetheless, having a female chancellor in the room has really changed, I think, the dynamic. And I think, for myself, it’s much more of a qualitative feel and more of a student-oriented feel.

Dana agreed that attaining a critical mass of women can change the dynamics in positive ways but wondered if some institutions are simply trying to hire a woman without being mindful of the other key characteristics for leadership. For the few women who make it to the presidency, Dana wonders if these women are truly professionally ready for the role or if they are being selected solely as a token hire because of gender. If so, their success (or lack of it) can have long-lasting implications for the future of women in this position.

I do think that when I look around now and look at the four finalists for something in whatnot, is it more likely three men and woman, and sometimes do I find myself thinking, did that person get the job because they’re a woman? Was that really... oh my God, this poor person. Is she going to make it? Those tend to be the calls that I’ll make and say, "You need any help, let me know," because I'm thinking Holy God, and now they're going to chew them up and spit them out, which isn't fair either.

The participants shared how they made meaning of their gender in spaces where their leadership was viewed differently than perhaps that of their male counterparts. Specifically obtaining a critical mass of women was mentioned as an important strategy to combating
negative stereotypes about women’s leadership. The participants also reflected on how they view their role and their leadership.

**Self-perceptions.** In addition to how they may be viewed by others, the participants had a lot to say about how they perceive themselves and the challenges of their position. They discussed their personal skills and strategies that contribute to their own success, including tenacity, stamina, embracing confrontation, a willingness to constantly learn new skills, and adaptability. The participants talked about how they operationalize their role on a daily basis, how they manage the multiple competing priorities of their home and work lives, and how they navigate the very public nature of their role. Some common themes included the challenges of women’s leadership, a lack of privacy, and the need for media training to navigate some of challenges in their roles.

I asked Dana what personal skills or characteristics help her with the day-to-day tasks in her role. Her response was “confrontation.” She went on to discuss how she believes it is an important part of leadership, even though some people may struggle with seeing the benefits of confrontation.

People's perception of confrontation is that it's always negative. I am adamant about the fact that you need to throw it out now, discuss it now, be done with it now. People hold on to too much baggage, and it's because they always think, well I don't want to be confrontational. Well, if we'd spend five minutes here now being in your term, not mine, confrontational, we all get our opinion, we make a decision, we move on. People have a really hard time with the moving on. And I don't care. I'm done. Okay, fine. Are we going to lunch now? That drives people nuts because it takes them some time to decompress. They have to walk away from it. Whatever, I'm done because that's not to me about who you are as a person, that's about the issue that we're discussing. Some people, it really takes them time to do that.
I asked Dana if her style of leadership may be perceived differently because she is a woman. She said that her style may be surprising to some people because of her gender. She also talked about the necessity of making progress, which often requires confrontation before coming to a final resolution.

I think a lot of people don't expect it. They would expect that of a male; they would not expect that of a female. But, I mean, that's been my MO [mode of operation] since I was a student life officer. I mean, you want to get into it with her, go for it, but know that there's a point at which I'm going to call the question and then say, "We're doing it this way or we're doing it this way, but that's the decision. Everybody on board? Okay, we're done." And I don't want to renegotiate it again.

And it may be my way that we came out with, or it may have been somebody else's way that we came out with, but we're done and now we're moving on. We don't have time to contemplate around here. We have to keep moving.

Sara Beth talked about the importance of being a life-long learner, owning your decisions, and not letting your circumstances limit your dreams. She talked about the responsibilities of being a leader and the necessity of working on continuous self-improvement.

I think that I’m a pretty good systems thinker. At the same time, I can manage crisis relatively well. So it really is having a capacity to... what I use here is trifocals, that you can really think about things long range, medium range, short-term and do that relatively simultaneously. I think you have to have a lot of passion for the values of the place and what you’re trying to accomplish, which I’ve got tenacity. I think you’ve got to have a continued commitment to learn, learn about things organizationally, learn about things that are the external factors. And I think you have to keep yourself grounded.

If you believe that the only person who could take away your dreams are you no matter how unfair things are, then you probably have some tenacity to continue to beat your head against the wall, or try to work around situations that were potentially the glass ceiling, whatever labels you want to put on things; but you also have to recognize that you have a responsibility to be better, and you can’t let those circumstances being an excuse for not being better.

**Ann Marie:** That’s spoken like a first-generation kid.

**Sara Beth:** It is, and it’s just, you know... so I see people who use the circumstances as a way not to continue for themselves to be better.
Several of the presidents talked about how they view their role as one where they are constantly in the spotlight. I asked Kim about how she experienced her professional role in public. She discusses the challenges of living a transparent life especially because she lives with her family on campus.

We are in a fishbowl, and my children, who are now adults, cannot go out and get a sandwich without somebody saying, "Oh, could you tell your mother this or why are we paying so many taxes for...the college has all this money," and so, everybody knows what we're doing and when we're doing it and so that can, that's a lot of pressure.

Dana discussed how online communication media have increased access to personal information and can contribute to public perception of her and her role.

I am more concerned today about social media and its implications around what I say and what I do than I've ever been before, only because I think people take snippets now and do horrible things with them. Paula Deen is a perfect example of that, you know, 25 years ago in the South. Could I fault her? Maybe. I don't know. Don't know the particulars of the case, but boy, I bet there were a whole lot of people doing and saying what she was saying.

Sara Beth discussed the changes that occurred when she became president at her same institution and specifically talked about how she experiences being in a very public role.

And the biggest shock for me was, you know, for me it was just sort of [states her first name] here, and when you become president, it’s President [last name] for people I’ve known for 40 years. And it’s also the publicness of the role. I can’t tell you how many dinners get interrupted by, “I don’t mean to bother you but ....”

So, I mean, those are things that you just have to be able to sort of roll with because there is a major shift in being president. And so there’s all of that stuff that happens. And every once in a while you just like to have dinner without being interrupted.

Monique also shared her thoughts about the lack of privacy in the role and admitted that she was not fully prepared for the very public nature of the role.

I think less so in this job because this is a smaller town where I’m, I don’t know why [specific city] is different, but most states it was just like you lived so much
in the spotlight that you had no sense of privacy, and that was a problem. I don’t think I was ready for that. I laugh about having your head in the shampoo bowl, and you’re getting color put in, and they’re saying, “Oh, there’s the president.” So no sense of privacy.

Margaret echoed similar thoughts about always being in the public eye. Even everyday situations like family vacations or having car trouble can be newsworthy simply because she is the president.

I’m always the president. And so there’s a strain to that, you know. It’s kind of fun, but it’s a strain, and I can imagine, I mean, I’ve certainly had a number of women on this campus say, “I couldn’t do that.” You know. I just, you know, when my family and I go up on [specific mountain], we want to be my family up on [specific mountain], not the president up on [specific mountain]. And that is, it’s tough. You begin thinking in headlines all the time, you know.

Ann Marie: Sound bites on the news.

Margaret: Exactly, you know. President’s car breaks down on [specific highway]. It’s not just “car breaks down on [specific highway].”

Because of the lack of privacy and increased scrutiny via social media, additional training can help presidents navigate these challenges. Betty discussed the need for women to get media training to manage how they handle television interviews, newspaper reporters, and their online presence. Betty said it can be helpful in navigating the role of president and understanding how to deflate certain serious situations as they arise.

You have to learn and get media training and manage how to manage the media. It is the most surprising element that I’ve had since becoming president, was managing the media.

I asked Betty how media training would help women in her role specifically. She discussed the importance of being aware of how you are representing yourself and your institution. She talked about how easy it can be for inaccurate information or altered pictures to derail a career because of the ease and quickness of online news outlets. Finally Betty shared the
specific state laws that she has to navigate that allow open access to the press and what that means for a lack of privacy in her role. The power of the media can affect your reputation at best, and at its worst, can result in termination from the presidency.

I've had media training, and I still ask for it and rehearse before I'm interviewed or taped or whatever. And I don't view this as media, what we're doing right now. I can tell you when a newspaper, or now it's all online, you have to be enormously careful in the way you're presenting yourself and the way you can be altered. Pictures can be altered that are, could be very detrimental to your career. I do not, and I think people have to, women particularly, have to be very careful with all the social media that's out there and how they're portraying themselves through the social media, because if it's not controlled properly, it will kill you.

And most people don't have the [specific name of a law] that [specific state] has, but let me just give you an example that media can sit at my desk and open my mail. Every day they read [my] emails. Every day they know my calendar. Every day they know exactly what I'm doing.

Every day. If you're a state employee, you are open to [specific law]; they’re just always asking for a release of records, which includes your texts on your cell phone, your voicemails. If I left you a voicemail, you could turn it back over to the media, and it could be in the paper tomorrow. So ultimately really, really is important to have media training before every…it's very, very, very serious what can be done to you in the media. They can, you can definitely, definitely lose your job if you're not handling the media properly.

Monica discussed how she experiences her role as a woman in a position of power in an institution of higher education. She talks about having passion for the job, using her emotional intelligence at work, and being able to connect people.

Yeah, you know, for me it started as beginning to come to grips and to grasp what it means being a woman who others perceived has power in the worlds that I was in, government first and then the private sector, and now ultimately higher ed. So it was experiencing that first because I’m the first one, and I know this isn’t novel to sort of look, they’re talking about me? You got to be kidding!

But it’s, I find it a little out of bodyish still to this day because I think that so much of it is wanting to just get up every day and do the best job you possibly can, and combining that with a passion. I’ve never not had a passion for what I do, and when I haven’t had the passion, I’ve literally changed careers, as you’ve seen multiple times. And so, I feel like it’s something that so many others can replicate. There’s nothing special or extraordinary about me, other than the fact
that I’m bright enough to do these things, and I do think I have EQ that exceeds IQ. I do think I’m the person that’s routinely characterized as a connector. I connect readily with people of all descriptions, and I hold that near and dear and always want to be better at it. The reward has made my career just part of living in something that makes me just a happy person is that I get to meet so many people.

Monica went on to describe how she views the difference between how men and women view power and how this impacts how she perceives herself and her leadership. She discusses the uncertainty that some women may feel about owning and using their power.

But I find this thing about power, something Maria Shriver said, gosh, seven or eight years ago I’ve hung onto and I’ve repeatedly referred to in my own brain and sometimes talk about it. She said that men routinely see power in terms of something that they’re acquiring almost for themselves as part of a career imperative. Women see power as wielding influence and trying more often than not to influence it for good in whatever venue they’re in. So, that was an ah-ha moment for me when I read that because I’ve always been trying to describe what is it that I feel, and why is it different than how I hear people describe power? And learning to see it as influence, and influence for hopefully the betterment of whatever institution and community you’re operating in and project or program you’re working with makes me relax more about being in a powerful position. Because it doesn’t feel like a crown, it feels like something that I can use more broadly than for me and my husband. So, it’s just I think a different way of looking at it, and I think many women probably feel that, they may not necessarily express it quite the same way. But I think as long as you’re looking at power in a traditional way, it’s an uneasy suit of clothes for women to assume. We feel uneasy about it.

Betty shared her thoughts on how she views her own leadership and how she navigates her role. She talked about her people skills and how they impact her ability to be successful in her role. She also discussed the role-modeling aspect of her position and how she sets the tone for her campus community. Finally she mentions her leadership strategy of working the system as opposed to fighting it.

I just think about myself as a leader. And you have to conduct yourself in that manner and just know that people are always looking at you and looking for your reaction, and they take their cues and their lead from you. And so the way you
present yourself is the way that the campus is going to... it'll affect the culture on the campus.

Well, I've been very fortunate in higher ed, where I am one that I work the system. I don't try to go against the culture or the system. I'm a very people, very much a people person, so I like to work with people and gain their trust and their respect and position myself in such a way that my credentials stand as tall as anybody else's credentials. And given that type of comparison, then it allows me to take advantage of, all right, here I am. You know, try to tell me or others that I don't stand just as tall as anybody else, and that's been a very, very helpful strategy in my mind, that you have to have your credentials, and it doesn't manner whether it's a full professorship then moving forward to the kinds of experiences that you've had to your national level, your national level positions, and you just need to, like I said, just keep your focus.

Several participants discussed the skills and strategies they possess and employ that prepared them for the presidency. I asked Kim to talk about what made her a serious contender for the presidency. She discussed her leadership abilities and values as well as some of the techniques she regularly uses to manage the competing priorities of the presidency.

Well, I described to the board my commitment to authentic leadership, to transparency, collaboration, cooperation, shared governance, first and foremost, to make sure that in making decisions that when inevitably someone's going to be unhappy about the decision being made, at least that person or that constituency will understand how the decision was made and why it was made. I think the skills of [her specific academic discipline] are important in being able to listen critically and to propose, construct, and evaluate arguments in ways that resonate with a broad group of individuals.

She also talked about not taking things personally as a key strategy for success both personally and within the role. She knows that the nature of her role is one that is going to be consistently critiqued, and she stressed the importance of listening to feedback seriously, making changes if necessary, and then moving on. Kim said this can be difficult for women.

I have learned a bit about how not to take things personally; that it really is about the institution, and it's not about me. You hear a lot about great leaders or core leaders, and you think it... that it's something they're doing. In fact, it often has much more to do with the institutional structures then it does about individuals. So what I've learned is don't take praise too seriously because those accolades
won't last long, and don't take criticism too seriously. Understand it, embrace it, act on it if there are things that you can do to improve the situation, but no matter what, somebody's going to criticize. I mean, I get criticized about everything. The fact that we don't serve French mustard at picnics, you know, just like crazy things. And so no matter what I do, there's going to be somebody who's going to think this is an outrage. So what I've learned is to take seriously the comments of people, but don't rest on your laurels and then don't beat yourself up over things that you really have no control over to some extent.

**Ann Marie:** Do you think that's a challenge for women in general?

**Kim:** Yes, absolutely.

Sunny shared her perspective on what skills and experiences have shaped how she views herself and her role. She talked about the importance of being adaptable and being willing to learn new skills in order to be relevant and effective in this role.

What I will say is I've learned that I am very good at reinventing myself, or better said, that I don't mind learning new skill sets.

I asked Sunny how reinvention has aided in her own success. She talked about the evolving nature of senior-level roles and how the changing political landscape, combined with frequent changes in state and federal laws, demand adaptability, flexibility, and a willingness to work with complex issues daily.

Well, because I think when you're an administrator, and certainly when you're president, the job you get is never the job you think you're going into. It's always different, and so you may go in and realize, oops the great recession has just hit, or, wow, there's huge problems in X, Y, Z. You name it, academics, athletics, whatever. Or, my God, the regulation agencies, the regulatory agencies have just announced 8,000 new regulations. We've all got to become lawyers.

So I think in order to lead an institution, you really, you have to become an expert. You have to be willing to dive in. I think the days of presidents just being good fundraisers, good people who slap people on the back and have faculty over for dinner and go to football games is over. I think these issues are incredibly complex. Higher education is going to phenomenally change in time, so I think one has to be able to learn how to address new challenges on an incredibly regular basis.
Betty described her skills and strategies that have resulted in her being a president. She mentioned having professional focus, consistently working hard, making the most of every moment, and tenacity as key strategies to her career success.

I went up for my assistant to associate degree early in five years, and I went up from associate to full in five years; both of those were a year early, and I was the youngest female full professor at [specific university], so I don't waste time. I work very hard in a focused manner, and it's been really, really very, very helpful to me.

Many of the participants talked about the changing nature of the college presidency. Each participant shared her opinion on the skills and traits needed to be successful in this evolving role. Sunny talked about the necessity of giving 100% of your time and attention to the role and having the stamina to manage the long, challenging days. She mentioned the importance of fitness as a key strategy to increasing stamina.

I think you have to enjoy the kind of action-adventure approach to life, and you have to be willing to give everything in order to have this enormous satisfaction of being connected with these people. I think what I would say, and this may get back to what I what I've learned, I think the number one criteria for being a president besides having your feet really on the ground is immense stamina, physical stamina. And I've probably worked hard, very hard, to develop that. I am an avid exerciser, and many of the women presidents I know are.

Betty talked about the importance of exhibiting strength in the role. She believes it is an important strategy to employ strength in all that she does because it impacts the people who work for and with her. It also impacts how she is perceived in the role.

As the lead of an organization, it's very important, no matter what the conditions are, to show strength. No matter how precarious or frightening a situation is, people are looking at you and getting their clues from you, and you really need to show strength.

Ann Marie: There's a lot of research out there right now about vulnerability and practicing that. How do you think that does or does not connect with what you're saying?
Betty: When you are practicing vulnerability it is with a clear path; and if that's the path that you choose to take, there is no strength behind it. For example, if I made a mistake that was not good, not good, and I say, "I've made a mistake. I apologize for it. Here's what I plan to do to change and make a difference in the future." In other words, you have to have that strength to the vulnerability. You can't just wave your hands in the air and say, "Woe is me, woe is me, woe is me, I don't know what to do." It seems to me that there has to be some kind of a path that you're taking because, again, with an organization as large as ours, people from—whether they're the maintenance workers to the faculty to the researchers—they're looking to you for your strength and your answers.

Ann Marie: Do you think that a lot of the executive level women you've seen do this well, showing this kind of strength sort of at all times when necessary?

Betty: The successful women, yes. I can see that in corporations who are top leaders and, yes, I can see that. I can see that. I'm thinking of some of the women colleagues that I have nationally. I know most of the presidents nationally, and they're strong. They're strong.

Dana talked about her personal characteristics that have been critical throughout her career. She discussed her work ethic, stamina, and decision-making abilities as being some of the ways she views herself and the requirements of the role.

My work ethic [got me to the presidency], certainly. I mean, that's probably a good and a bad because I work a lot of hours. I listen, but people don't think I do. I'm quick to make decisions. Some people think I'm too quick, but as I've often said to folks, I don't shoot from my hip. I think very fast, which can be a good thing and a bad thing. It takes people some time to get used to working with me because I will jump from thought to thought within a sentence, and you have to really get used to... my husband's still not used to that. You have to get used to that. If you lie to me, you're done. If you don't pick up a piece of paper on the ground just like everybody else... there's no special status [here].

Kim talked about how she views her skills and strategies to be successful in the role. She talked about how to manage the large volume of work and the importance to working swiftly and respond promptly. She also discussed the importance of hiring good people to complement her style of leadership.

Well, I respond to things immediately. So I, whenever I get an email, I respond as soon as I get it if at all possible, unless I'm in an airplane somewhere. So get
things done quickly. I mean, so if there's a task that comes up as a result of a meeting, to delegate somebody to work on it, or I work on it myself so not to…it's really the inbox exercise of how do you prioritize and move quickly. Don't let things build up.

Picking people who are really good as team members [is important], so I've been fortunate to have good officers, good senior staff, so surrounding myself with people who don't necessarily think the same way that I do, but have integrity and to share the mission of the institution and are ready to embark on a common endeavor around our shared objectives.

Kim also talked about specific strategies she employs in her role and emphasized the importance of maintaining stamina. She discussed how she manages to balance the competing priorities of the role along with her family and social obligations. She talked about the isolating nature of the role and the importance of staying grounded by maintaining contact with friends outside of the university.

Every administrator I know who's successful doesn't need a lot of sleep, so I don't know how you could do it if you need to get a lot of sleep. And the other strategy that my husband and I employ is that we stay in touch with our friends. It's very, very isolating in this role because people tell you what they think you want to hear, and so they heap the praise upon you because they want to get close to you, and then say something quite different if they want to get close to some other constituency. And so it's being able to recognize that, again, not to take that too personally, but understand that that's the nature of human beings to a large extent.

It's so difficult to have friends in this position because you don't know whether it's a true friendship; and I'm not paranoid about this, but I understand the reality of it, so can't really say too much about what's going on in my job and that's part of what you do with friends. So we have been able to maintain our friends from where we were living in [specific state], and I still have friends from high school, and [husband] has close friends that he sees regularly. He's in a couple of men's groups where he gets together with men and so. So that's been very important to us, and that's, I think, a particularly important strategy because if you don't maintain those friendships then you really end up feeling isolated, and I can imagine depressed if you don't have somebody to reach out to.

Jessica talked about her natural tendencies to be social and maintain a high level of energy and stamina as important strategies in her role.
Well, I do genuinely like people, and I like talking to people. I like personal relationships, and I am rather social, I think. I grew up in a family that loved a good story and loved just riotous laughter, so no matter how bad things get, I usually can find something funny about the circumstance, so it just sort of keeps you mentally healthy. And I have, and thank goodness, sort of never-ending energy. I bounce back even from international travel very quickly, and I just have a lot of energy and drive and ambition.

I asked Jessica how she maintains that never-ending energy. She discussed some of her wellness strategies, which may contribute to this, but also said that she has always possessed a high level of energy.

I do take a lot of vitamins, and my family and I, this summer, have been very faithful about walking every single evening. So eating right and getting enough exercise, getting enough sleep, I really do need seven hours, and if I shortchange that, then I’ll start to notice it. I don’t know any other formula to it than that, and I just am naturally kind of wired in that way.

Monica shared some of her strategies for success that are both emblematic of how she views herself and are indicative of her leadership style in her role. She mentioned having a positive attitude as a key factor in her success. She also discusses her own moral compass and how it impacts her leadership style.

First, it’s being unusually positive. I’m for sure a glass-is-half-full person and the sort of maybe almost too Pollyanna-ish for someone my age, but so for sure I’m a, you know, silver lining in everything. As challenging as this is, we’re going to get something good out of it.

[Also] the power of personal conviction. I never ever lose sight of trying to do the right thing, and I think I’m very brave about it when it comes to admitting error and making mistakes. I admit it early, I get a solution, and I move forward. But also if I think something is right, I stick to my guns and I follow it through. It could be the farmers with pitchforks amassing in the center quad. But if I believe we’re doing something that’s right, I stand with conviction.

She also describes her commitment to personal wellness and the importance of carving out a little time for herself as critical strategies for her own success.
I work out every morning, I have equipment in the house, and so I do that. I try, even if it’s, I have a speech that takes me out ‘til 10 o’clock, I’ll come home and put my foot up and do something totally mindless. I’ll go on a shopping site on my iPad; I’ll watch some inane TV show that I probably wouldn’t want to admit to anybody that I do like, like *The Voice*.

**Ann Marie:** Your secret is safe with me. [Laughter]

Margaret specifically discussed her wellness strategies to combat the long days and heavy workload in this role. She talked about how she is conscious that every decision she makes regarding personal wellness can impact her professional performance and stamina. She mentions that her commitment to wellness also humanizes the role of presidency and shows that she is trying, just like any other person, to lead a healthy life.

I run, you know. I run for an hour every morning. And that’s just… from 6 to 7 or 5:30 to 6:30. I run in the dark. I run in the rain. Wherever I get up and I do that and it’s really important. It’s an hour alone. It’s an hour that’s just really… it just helps my physical and mental abilities tremendously. But that’s just super important… and I think just eating right. You know, I’m really careful. I’m not going to have a donut. I’m not, you know, I just don’t even, it doesn’t even interest me to have a donut ‘cause I know…

**Ann Marie:** That’s one hour of running.

**Margaret:** That’s right. Exactly. And I’m not going to feel well, you know. And so, you know, and that’s 20 years of knowing that diet and exercise make me feel better and keep me alert and keep me wanting to get up at 5 in the morning, and that I have a lot of energy, and so, it works for me. It certainly helps with stamina. Helps to insure that I eat right and sleep right, because I can tell if I’m running that many minutes in the morning that if I got to bed late or if I did not eat a healthy dinner, I don’t feel the strength. And actually, it’s an interesting piece ‘cause it does help to, I think, humanize the president.

**Ann Marie:** Seeing you sweating it out there.

**Margaret:** They see me, you know. I mean, the people are out getting their newspaper in their bathrobe or walking their dog at 6 in the morning, and I’m out there with no make-up and just slogging away.

**Ann Marie:** So the earrings or no?
Margaret: No earrings.

Ann Marie: Just wanted to check. [Laughter]

Angela talked about her daily routine, including the importance of having a positive attitude and working out. She mentioned how both of these strategies help to mitigate the long days and challenging schedule. She also talked about the necessity of having a day just for herself in order to re-charge.

You know, forget all the ability to analyze and spreadsheets and people skills and... if you don't have the fortitude to be able to take on the relentless schedule, it's very hard. So I'm blessed with good health, and I have always been very optimistic and exceptional energy. And I can thank my grandfather for that, but luckily my husband's that way as well.

So for my sanity, given that context, I get up miserably at, the alarm goes off at 5:20. Some people are morning people. I still struggle out. And [husbands name] and I go for a run. It's a three-mile slog. Often we're just half asleep, but it's the way I have to start my day, and I just am so lucky to be able to start it with [husbands name]. But if I were single, if [husbands name] were... dear God, I hope not, but if he were to die, I would still start my day exercising. Then I try to pace myself in my days, but sometimes I have afternoons like this that are insanely scheduled, and then I've got my crazy evenings. I make sure I have one day each weekend that I don't have something scheduled. I try to get a good night's sleep.

She discussed how her energy and optimism are key components of who she is and what this role often requires. She talked about how she has learned to prioritize and delegate in order to manage the workload. She also stressed the importance of knowing when something can be delegated as well as knowing that there are times when there is no substitute for her presence or involvement.

I do think it is a prerequisite for this job to have a lot of energy and a lot of optimism. Well, one is a physical trait, and the other's a character. I think it would be hard to learn them, though I really do believe that one can control one's view on life, but I could be wrong. I think the other thing that I do all the time almost compulsively is I prioritize what I do and how I'm going to have my day scheduled. And that is definitely something that people can learn, you know, the
whole idea of time management. The reason I say compulsively is because it can own you to have your prioritized task list, and sometimes you're so busy prioritizing you don't think about, do I even have to do this or can I send that off to somebody else? So that's the skill I've been… that's a big growth for me over the last four years is I've started to see myself more as, what's the description, because I'm nonathletic. I mean, I run, but that doesn't mean I understand sports. There's some position in basketball that just people pass the ball to and his job is, or her job is, to pass it to somebody else and someone else will make the basket.

**Ann Marie:** The assist?

**Angela:** Yes, I'm starting to see when things hit my desk… I just send it off somewhere. But there are sometimes where as president you're the only one who can interact with board members, who can interact with major donors, who can send that personal thank-you note or sympathy note to an important member of the [name of institution] family. So I've tried very hard to prioritize on just what is essential for a president to do. But even when you do that, there's more than one, what a single person can do.

When the participants were asked what they would tell other women who aspire to be in their chair someday, their answers had many overlapping themes, including being open to new opportunities, having a passion for the job, being resilient and focused, and having a thick skin.

Betty talked about maintaining enthusiasm and having a positive attitude. She discussed the importance of moving on after making mistakes and being resilient. She reflected on the heavy amount of responsibility that comes with this role and the importance of pacing oneself.

Have a lot of energy, be optimistic. Love your institution. Love what you're doing, and surround yourself with strong people around you who you can trust. And I would say when something has gone wrong, move on. You know, you can say you're sorry. You can kind of review it, but don't wallow in it. Many women wallow in, "Why did I do that," kind of beat yourself up while men have moved on; and it's very hard for women not to beat themselves up, and I believe we've got to learn that, that you have to be willing to take risks. Sometimes they work and sometimes they don't. When they don't, you need to move on. You can't just wallow, "Why did I do that? I shouldn't have done that. I'm really sorry. Da, da, da, da, da." You do need to pick yourself up and move forward.

Well, you have to pace yourself, but I'm not good at saying that because I don't do a good job of pacing myself. Again, I would say I enjoy a lot of what I do, most of what I do, so it's not as much of a hardship to go to events and to go to eight
graduations and shake everybody's hand. I really, I do enjoy those things, so that makes a big difference. And I don't need a lot of sleep; I never have; that helps a lot. People that need 8 to 10 hours of sleep a night, I don't know how they could be a president.

Dana shared her perspective about the necessity of not taking things personally in all duties of the job.

Make sure you have a thick skin. Make sure you can fight the fight, because if you can't fight the fight, don't get in. And that's the simple thing to the color of paint versus the faculty member who wants to be tenured and you don't think the credentials are good enough.

Angela reiterated the need to say yes to new opportunities as much as possible while acknowledging the challenges embedded in taking on more responsibility and moving around the country to take new opportunities.

Take on every challenge that you can get in leadership, both in your job responsibility and outside of it. Step forward and say, "Hey, I'd be happy to take on this project for the institution." Just get out there and learn, interact.

Regrettably, it does take moving institutions, and that's also another challenge for both men and women. You're best situated for this sort of job if you've seen things at other institutions, but when you've got a two-career couple, that's hard; those moves are hard. But you can definitely move up within an organization, but you have to… it's distinguishing yourself, but it's also putting yourself in positions to learn through experience.

Margaret talked about the commitment required in this position. She talked about how we should be sharing these stories of how to navigate the presidency with women leaders so they can fully understand the nature of the job and know that they can and should pursue these roles.

Finally, she talks about the tremendous fulfillment she receives from being in this role.

While higher education, public higher education is in so much upheaval and peril right now, I think they need leaders who are really committed and that we just don’t have a system right now that would say the president can come in and work 50 hours a week and go home. It’s just not the way it’s going to work. So I don’t see a change like that.
I do see that we should all be letting women know that you can do this. And there’s certain things that I think people should, if they have any, any interest in administration, I think we all should be talking to women and helping them think that these are not impossible jobs. I mean, they’re time-consuming jobs, but they have a lot of fun in them, too. You know, there’s a lot.

There’s never a dull moment. And working on a campus is still, I mean, it’s just one of the best things that you could ever do. It’s fantastic having students around you, you know. It’s fantastic to be, in the case of public education, really turning whole families and communities around. I mean, where else do you get an opportunity to really transform people? And have fun doing it.

**Conclusion.** In this theme, the presidents discussed how they are perceived as women leaders. There may be an emphasis on critiquing women’s stature, attire, and appearance, which can impact how women are viewed in this role. Some women may also be critiqued differently than their male peers in the hiring and evaluation processes, which may also impact the number of women who attain the presidency. Finally, they discussed their specific strategies to navigate the long days and intense pressures of the job.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, four emergent themes were discussed: challenges to advancement, necessary actions and characteristics, mentors and sponsors, and presidential leadership. Table 4 outlines the themes with common examples from the interviews. The participants provided real-life examples that illustrated how they are engaged in their work and how they experience their roles as university presidents. Theme one, *challenges to advancement*, discussed the challenges that prevent women from assuming leadership roles in higher education. Several common areas were discussed: work/life negotiation, quality of life issues, mid-level career experiences, structural barriers, and the mirror effect. In the second theme, *necessary actions and characteristics*, three common areas were discussed: risk-taking, confidence, and adaptability.
This theme discussed the skills and strategies that can positively impact women’s career trajectories from the perspective of the 10 participants.

The third theme, mentors and sponsors, discussed how these people encouraged the participants to recognize their potential. Many felt a strong obligation to continue providing mentorship and sponsorship to the next generation of leaders, or “pay it forward.” In the fourth theme, presidential leadership, the participants shared how others perceive them and how they personally experience and make meaning of their role. Five areas that supported this theme are perceptions of women’s leadership, looking the part, perceptions in the hiring and evaluation process, critical mass, and self-perceptions. Table 5 outlines the themes as discussed in this chapter.

Table 5  
Themes

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<th>Theme One</th>
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<td>Challenges to Advancement</td>
<td>Necessary Actions and Characteristics</td>
<td>Mentors and Sponsors</td>
<td>Presidential Leadership</td>
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<tr>
<td>Work/Life negotiation</td>
<td>Risk-taking</td>
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<td>Quality of life issues</td>
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<td>Mid-level career experiences</td>
<td>Adaptability</td>
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<td>Structural barriers</td>
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<td>Mirror Effect</td>
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Chapter four has provided insight into these women’s lived experiences, as described in their personal narratives, and the strategies and opportunities that enabled their career
advancement. All four themes reveal an overall story about the lived experience of these women presidents. They share their common challenges and the strategies for combating them in powerful ways. In chapter five, these stories will connect and deepen the meaning found in the literature and discuss the future implications of this study. Chapter five will also discuss the two analytical concepts that have flowed from the data: stepping forward and gender matters. Both concepts will connect with the themes that were presented in chapter four.
CHAPTER FIVE: Discussion

Introduction

The lessons shared from the participants’ powerful stories can hopefully inspire and propel women forward in higher education. These narratives allow us to understand their meaning-making process along their career paths and inform the reader about how their experiences affected their ability to become university presidents. Although these are distinct stories told by 10 different people in a specific time and place, there are several common threads that can inform our understanding of women’s leadership, their professional opportunities and challenges, and the way that institutional structures can impact professional advancement. Their struggles—both individually and collectively—may echo the experiences of women in the academy and may provide a successful blueprint for other women to develop and achieve their own professional aspirations. I begin by discussing the two analytical concepts that have flowed from the data, stepping forward and gender matters, and then connect these concepts with the broader literature.

Stepping Forward

The reluctance to step forward is one of the two analytical themes in this research study. The large gains that women are making in degree attainment are not translating to senior-level roles for women in the workforce on the path to the presidency. This disconnect between highly educated women and acquiring the top leadership role is occurring because women are stepping back when they should be stepping forward, as noted by nearly all of the presidents in this study. Nine of the 10 participants cited variations of the inability to step forward as a reason why women are not selected for senior-level leadership opportunities. Similarly, stepping forward
was named as a personal career progression strategy for several of the women in the study. Within this analytical theme, I will discuss the ways that stepping forward has been a part of the participants’ meaning-making process throughout their careers.

**Themes connected to stepping forward.** The concept of stepping forward connects to every theme presented in chapter four. I will describe each briefly with an increased focus on the theme that most tightly connects to stepping forward, which is mentors and sponsors.

**Challenges to advancement.** In the challenges to advancement theme, the necessity of obtaining full credentials was discussed by several presidents. To gain them, women must step forward. Also, as the presidents indicated, it is very easy to become content at mid-career, but stepping forward is required to be considered for further opportunities for advancement. They also affirmed the need for women to recognize and then combat structural barriers in the workplace. This requires stepping forward, even when the institutional structures and policies may not support the move.

**Necessary actions and characteristics.** The theme of necessary actions and characteristics reveals what women may need in order to successfully step forward, including risk-taking, self-confidence, and adaptability in the workplace. The presidents discuss in detail how these characteristics have guided their actions, which has resulted in career advancement. Risk-taking—and having the confidence to do this—is a central component of stepping forward.

**Mentors and sponsors.** This theme was the most tightly connected to the overarching analytical concept of stepping forward. Many presidents named mentors and sponsors as the people who encouraged them to step forward and discussed specific ways in which their guidance, support, and advocacy empowered them to make this move. They also mentioned how
they continue the chain of mentorship by giving back and serving in this role to others. As mentors and sponsors themselves, they encourage other women to step forward in order to achieve their career aspirations. Being surrounded by people who will advocate for you when you are not in the room is a powerful strategy and a critical component to women’s career advancement (Barsh & Cranston, 2011; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Fochtman, 2011; Sandberg, 2013). Nine of the 10 participants shared anecdotes from their own professional journeys about the ways other people mentored and sponsored them. They not only discussed how they benefitted from this professional and emotional support but also shared how it instilled in them a sense of obligation to pay it forward to future generations of women coming through the pipeline. Stepping forward to help others on their professional journey is a reciprocal career strategy that benefits both the mentor and the mentee (Barsh & Cranston, 2011; Eagly & Carli, 2007).

Several examples in the presidential narratives captured how mentors and sponsors helped the participants step forward. Kim talked about how mentorship helped to even the playing field for her as a first-generation college student. She spoke about how mentors and sponsors helped her acquire the college knowledge she needed to be successful (i.e., the basic understanding of how to navigate an institution of higher education) while she was a student. Later, when she was a professional, mentorship would to keep Kim on the path to success by helping her understand the rules of the game in the academy. Kim’s mentor would advise Kim to call her before committing to additional duties, since women tend to say yes because they are eager to please, even though not everything is worthy of their time. Kim said this was very valuable guidance because early in her career she had a tendency to think everything was worth her time, which often differed from her male counterparts’ careful consideration of what
opportunities to take and the fact that they would pass on ones that would not lead to advancement (Barsh & Cranston, 2011).

This kind of valuable advice and insight helps women to understand where they should be spending their time in order to be considered for the next level of leadership and allows them to confidently step forward while having an increased understanding of institutional politics. Without this kind of guidance, women can get stuck and not know why they continue to watch their male peers advance at faster rates (Barsh & Cranston, 2011; Sandberg, 2013). Angela spoke to how mentors opened her eyes to wider career possibilities. She said that what her mentors did more than anything was encourage her to think about being a president and to open her eyes to see that she had more potential than she had recognized. Angela said she never dreamed of being the president of a university, but when her mentors saw that potential in her, they identified it, shared it with her, and helped her cultivate her skills along the way. This better prepared her for the role.

In order for women to obtain more mentors and sponsors, we must understand why they would not do so. In other words, why are some women not stepping forward to be a mentor or sponsor for other women? One reason may be that the tiara syndrome that decreases women’s ability to actively ask for what they want at work also impacts their ability to attract and acquire mentors and sponsors (Barsh & Cranston, 2011). The first step to having more women attain these roles is to have mentors and sponsors instill in women a sense of their own potential. This is an important piece in understanding the power that mentors and sponsors can have in the lives of professional women. Mentors and sponsors can guide and advocate for women to consider the possibility of becoming a president and position them for the experiences necessary to
become viable candidates for future leadership roles. Sponsorship is also a reciprocal process in which both the sponsor and the person being sponsored help each other. There is a strong feeling of obligation to pay it forward, which only helps to further encourage women’s professional opportunities. In short, mentors and sponsors open up the pipeline for women.

Mentors and sponsors are critically important people who can advance women’s professional opportunities by instilling confidence, recognizing high potential, and opening doors for them along their professional journey (Fochtman, 2011). They can provide insight into institutional culture, help women navigate the campus climate, and devise strategies to move past professional roadblocks. They can also help women make meaning of the challenges they may face by simply being a woman in a position of power. Until women’s leadership is normalized at the highest levels, this will continue to be a challenge for women (Pierce, 2011; Wolverton et al., 2009). While certain behaviors can be praised in male leaders, they may often result in backlash for women (Wolverton et al., 2009). This can be a particular area where male sponsors can speak from a space of legitimacy and advocate for women—both when they are in and away from the room—in order to support the leadership styles and decisions of women leaders. Sponsors can also be good sources of feedback in terms of negotiating difficult situations and relationships while utilizing prior institutional knowledge to leverage future decision-making (Barsh & Cranston, 2011).

*Presidential leadership.* Finally, in the *presidential leadership* theme, the participants discuss how they may be viewed by others. This theme most closely connects to stepping forward because it unveils the barriers that can block women from stepping forward and shares the strategies that the presidents have employed to overcome them. They largely include
rejecting the notion that they have to fit into a stereotypical model of leadership, despite the pressure to do so. They opt to not change their leadership style even when they are heavily critiqued. They embrace each opportunity for advancement because they have a strong sense of self, which allows them to know that they will be successful.

In addition to the connections to the themes, the presidents stressed the importance of stepping forward for the next generation of women. They talked about how stepping forward propelled their career in powerful ways.

**Stepping Forward in Action**

Stepping forward will hugely impact the next generation of leaders. Millennial women are less likely than their male counterparts to agree with the statement “I aspire to a leadership role in whatever field I ultimately work” (Sandberg, 2013, pg. 16). These women were also less likely to label themselves as leaders, visionaries, self-confident, and willing to take risks (Sandberg, 2013). The participants echoed the need for women to take professional risks. They provided examples that spoke to the need for women to aspire to powerful and influential roles and to not shy away from a challenge. When jobs and their respective duties are described as challenging, they tend to be less appealing to women than their male counterparts (Eagly & Carly, 2007; Sandberg, 2013).

These participating presidents saw themselves as successful due to their ability to take ownership of the new opportunities that came their way regardless of the risks. They used their voice to advocate for themselves and others, and they were able to face any of their own fears in the process and did not use fear as a reason to shy away from opportunity, both of which are key to women’s advancement in the academy (Barsh & Cranston, 2011).
The presidents provided several examples of why women may be stepping back and not stepping forward. They shared stories about women leaders who struggled with a lack of self-confidence and consistently questioned if they were competent enough to complete a task/pursue an opportunity. They also mentioned that women can be lured into professional complacency due to a lack of women role models, particularly in senior-level positions. Monica talked about pulling back and feeling reluctant to step forward because of fear. She said that many women remain or drop out at middle management because they become satisfied with the status quo and complacent about the road ahead. She believes this is because they do not see themselves reflected in the leadership of the institution. Therefore, some women may talk themselves into not stepping forward because they do not see any real possibility of advancement (Pierce, 2011).

A few of the presidents shared that this culture of self-limiting behavior can be perpetuated by women at all professional levels. When women do not recognize the necessity of stepping forward, they are limiting their future career options (Barsh & Cranston, 2011; Sandberg, 2013). Monique shared that women seem to consistently say no to opportunities that could lead to advancement, which is shrinking the pool of viable women candidates. She advised women “…to take risks, to take on challenging assignments, to not be afraid to step up and say you want to be or fight for that leadership opportunity.” Monique mentioned that this could be daunting for women. After being traditionally socialized to be collaborative, community-focused, and team-oriented, women may find it challenging to step forward on their own. They may be moving into what is, for them, uncharted territory (Eagly & Karau, 2002).
As mentioned earlier, the literature indicates that men are promoted based on their future potential and women are promoted based on their current skills (Barsh & Cranston, 2011; Sandberg, 2013). This has resulted in a self-fulfilling prophecy in which women are viewing themselves in the same way, thus limiting their own aspirations and ability to take professional risks. Several presidents mentioned that women are shying away from stepping forward, largely due to their own hesitancy and lack of confidence. They confirmed the need to change the narrative around what being ready for the next professional opportunity looks like and that women should be empowered to apply for opportunities even when they might not meet every requirement. In other words, women need to judge themselves based on their future potential, not their current skill set, just as the men typically do (Barsh & Cranston, 2011; Sandberg, 2013).

The participants shared strategies to combat the reluctance to step forward. They encouraged women to step forward even when they are hesitant or when they seem overwhelmed. Betty advised women to take on any leadership opportunity available within the duties of the current job and areas outside of the scope of the role. Angela said women must become more comfortable with saying "Hey, I'd be happy to take on this project for the institution."

Margaret expressed similar sentiments around stepping forward and urged women to be brave in pursuing new opportunities to expand their skill set. She spoke at length about how stepping forward opens doors. She believes that once women get into the habit of advocating for themselves, they are offered more opportunities without having to ask as much. Once people know your capabilities and willingness to take on challenging assignments, good professional
development and skill-building opportunities may come more easily because people can vouch for your skills and your ability to contribute in multiple areas.

One of the most literal appearances of the stepping forward analytical concept was in response to the question “Why do you think there is a lack of women college presidents?” I asked this question of every participant and found data that pertain to stepping forward in nine of the 10 interviews. Below are the four most pertinent strategies of stepping forward in action that I have synthesized from the participants, which will be fully explained: (1) say yes to new opportunities, (2) portfolio-building, (3) develop supportive communities, and (4) commit to wellness.

Strategy one: Say yes to new opportunities. Stepping forward requires consistently saying yes. The most commonly cited career strategy among the participants is the willingness to say yes to new opportunities—to step forward, embrace risk as a part of the job, be geographically mobile when new jobs present themselves, and volunteer for opportunities that may seem out of one’s scope or experience. The same level of engagement, participation, and hard work escalating women to the top of their class in school slowly diminishes over time (Sandberg, 2013). The women who were once the first to raise their hand in the classroom may be the same women who avert their eyes when asked who wants it for a new professional assignment in the workforce (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Sandberg, 2013). The participants noted that saying yes is not always a consequence-free notion for women. Often this agreement to move forward results in having to contend with people who did not believe that they were capable of certain opportunities, possibly due to their gender. They encouraged young women to get into
the practice of saying yes early in their career and to use their professional support network (i.e., mentors and sponsors) to help them navigate these kinds of campus climate challenges.

**Strategy two: Portfolio-building.** Seven of the 10 participants explicitly stated they never had aspirations of the presidency, rather that they continued to look for opportunities for skill building, which resulted in developing a stronger portfolio of experiences that well positioned them for senior leadership. While many had a strong history of leadership and involvement early in life—many cited Girl Scouts, student council, and other important formative experiences—four of the 10 expressed that they believed (early in their career) that they would remain a professor within their respective academic area with no additional administrative responsibilities.

Some of their career paths required linear moves and shifts based on their familial responsibilities. Eagly and Carli (2007) refer to this as the *labyrinth* that personifies the careers of many women in leadership roles because of its complexity and lack of a straight path. Several participants spoke of these career moves as common experiences that allow women to make lateral moves and secure professional opportunities in different ways. This allowed them to simultaneously raise a family and build their portfolio, which allowed them to fulfill their career aspirations. Building their portfolio was a strategy that allowed them to step forward throughout their career. Some of these portfolio-building experiences include working at a diversity of institutions, serving on key high-profile committees, being involved in professional associations, and consistently looking for opportunities to develop new skills.

**Strategy three: Developing supportive communities.** In order to step forward, it is critical to have support from others (Sandberg, 2013). Another meaning-making function of
their experience was through the help, guidance, and advocacy of mentors and sponsors. Nine of the 10 participants credited personal and professional mentors advocating for them throughout their career. Many participants spoke about how these people assisted them at critical junctures within their career, such as encouraging them to apply for a new job or advocating for them to be considered for additional opportunities within their own department. Several mentioned that women in particular can benefit from mentors and sponsors that help to push them through some of the challenging stopgaps in the career pipeline. For many of the participants, it was a mentor or sponsor who initially posed the idea of being a college president.

Due to their experience with mentoring, several participants feel an obligation and desire to pay this forward to others which propagates the positive impact for women leaders (Fochtman, 2011). The generational leadership literature addresses the importance of building personal networks of support (Twenge, 2007). A strong professional community is especially important for experienced leaders, as they may feel more isolated as they move up through the professional ranks (Madsen, 2007; Sandberg, 2013; Scanlon, 1997). By stepping forward to be a mentor or sponsor for someone else, they supported and advocated for other employees during their professional journey. These relationships created a strong base of collegial support, which often resulted in enhanced career opportunities because of their positive reputation.

While the opportunity to serve as president of an institution of higher education is undoubtedly a major accomplishment, the participants reflected they had to also make some concessions (Caplan, 1994). Many cited a loss of privacy for them and their families. They shared the challenges associated with being constantly critiqued from campus governing bodies and in local media outlets. They mentioned having a smaller circle of friends because of their
hectic schedules and because there are limits to the people they can confide in. The participants spoke to increased feelings of isolation and the loneliness that comes from being in the public eye all of the time, yet being close to very few people (Fitzgerald, 2014). Support helps them to navigate these challenges.

Finally, these presidents often expressed a loss in identity. They were no longer Monica, Sunny, or Kim. They were simply viewed as the president, which took away some of their individuality and their ability to express their authentic selves (Wolverton et al., 2009). For many of them, their family was the central source of support, although some mentioned their church community and/or friends who live out of state and therefore are not as connected to institutional politics.

**Strategy four: Commit to wellness.** Stepping forward requires the energy and resiliency to continue assuming additional professional duties. Seven of the 10 presidents explicitly discussed the role of healthy eating, consistent exercise, and other wellness-related tactics. They credited their active lifestyles as a primary strategy to maintaining stamina to manage their long days and hectic schedules. Wellness allowed these presidents to expand their personal and professional capacity, which in turn allowed them to say yes to increasingly progressive duties throughout their career. This daily commitment to wellness as a prime example of the consistency and discipline these roles require. The changing nature of the presidency requires intense stamina to manage hectic schedules, the complexity of the work, and frequent social engagements (Pierce, 2011; Wolverton et al., 2009). Many participants said that wellness was a key strategy for thriving in this role, and it is a tactic that has allowed them to seamlessly add responsibilities to their portfolio without compromising the quality of their work.
Stepping forward is one way the participants have experienced and made meaning of their professional journeys. They include strategies for career progression, personal habits and other people’s roles in shaping their careers. These stories are representative of the meaning-making process at several stages of the participants’ professional journeys, and they show how these strategies have informed their work in their current role as president. Stepping forward—as a concept—is within the context of negotiating leadership as a woman in a position of power. In the next analytical theme, gender is examined in context of the presidency.

Gender Matters

The importance of gender in the experience of the university presidents is the second analytical theme in the study. Interestingly, the question “What did no one tell you, that you wish you had known, about what it means to be a woman in higher education?” elicited several personal stories about how the participants made meaning of their career and their ability to advance. Their stories revealed deep emotion about some of the challenges for women’s career advancement that had not been articulated earlier in the interview. While the question was broad and could be answered generically, nearly all of the participants responded with thoughtful, personal answers that shed light on their own gender-related challenges in the workplace. They reflected on experiences where their gender played a role in how they are perceived at work and/or had been passed over for professional opportunities (Eagly & Karau, 2002). They spoke about the need to recognize when gendered decisions are being made in the workplace (Fitzgerald, 2014). Several women spoke to the literature that indicates that men are often evaluated on their professional potential while women are evaluated based on their current skills,
which creates an unequal playing field where men are given more opportunities (Barsh & Cranston, 2011; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Sandberg, 2013).

In short, this is a gender matter, and gender matters, because there are several ways that gender informed the experience of the presidents. They spoke at length about three common areas that connected strongly to two themes, namely theme one, challenges to advancement, and theme four, presidential leadership. Within the scope of presidential leadership, they candidly shared how they may be viewed through a gendered lens. They also shared how their leadership style may be negatively viewed, and they revealed how women are differently critiqued in the role of the president. Monica’s story about how she was critiqued in the newspaper as a “cheerleader” is one example of how gender still influences how women are viewed and evaluated. Kim’s reflection about how she was told that she was only chosen for a specific role because she was a woman is another way that gender is still relevant when discussing challenges in leadership. Women leaders are perceived in a less positive manner when compared to male leaders, and this prejudice is more prevalent when there is a greater disparity between traditional gender roles/values and the particular leadership position (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Fitzgerald, 2014). In other words, the higher the leadership role, the more difficult it will be for women to be promoted, professionally supported, and perceived as effective.

Themes connected to gender matters. Two themes from chapter four support the analytical theme of gender matters: necessary actions and characteristics and presidential leadership.

Necessary actions and characteristics. The presidents discussed some of the necessary actions and characteristics they have employed during their professional journey. They talked
about how being a woman has shaped how they experience, make meaning and negotiate those challenges. Women may be forced to negotiate a structural system where they cannot win (Fitgerald, 2014). This double bind requires women to be both nurturer and strong leader. These women not only have to present themselves as competent, capable, and talented, but they also have to walk a careful balance between being decisive and likeable. Women need to combine niceness with insistence, a style that University of Michigan President Mary Sue Coleman calls "relentlessly pleasant" (Sandberg, 2013). One interesting aspect to note is that it did seem that the longer a president had been in office, the more comfortable she seemed with not being liked. This may be due to increased self-confidence and/or comfort in the role.

Gender does inform the experience of women because the campus climate requires them to use specific tactics and strategies to compensate for whatever structural and societal barriers attempt to prevent them from career progression. One of the ways they experience this is through personal experiences that may not impact their male counterparts in the same way. They discussed that it is challenging for women leaders to have their voices heard, especially in spaces where they are one of a few women or the only woman in the room. They also spoke about the double standards of behavior in the workplace. For example, being confident, direct and forthright in their leadership approach may be praised in men, yet women who utilize the same approach may be considered demanding, unfriendly, and unapproachable. Finally, they shared how women may be critiqued more heavily than their male counterparts if they are not viewed as nurturing, collaborative, and easy going.

*Presidential leadership.* How people view what a traditional president should look like impacts women who are currently in this role. Professional ambition is expected of men, but is
optional—or even perceived as negative—for women (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Sandberg, 2013). Sara Beth’s story about how a male alumnus came up to her at a football game and was bewildered when she told him that she was the president of this very large research university is one example of this. His disbelief that a woman could possibly be in this kind of position would not have happened if he had been talking to a male, Sara Beth believes. I found this part of Sara Beth’s narrative to be a fascinating capture of presidential perceptions.

What a president looks like can also extend to underrepresented people. In 1986, 8% of university presidents identified as a racial minority, and that number has only slowly increased to 14%. When you omit the number of historically minority-serving institutions, the number drops to 10% (Pierce, 2011). When you layer this with gender and race/nationality factors, it creates additional challenges for women both in obtaining the position and in being considered a credible leader. Monique spoke to this and said the intersectionality of identities can pose challenges for diverse leaders to emerge in the academy.

Monica’s story recalls how she was labeled as a cheerleader during her entire career (sometimes in a positive way and sometimes not), and this is one example of how she has been continually critiqued through a gendered lens. Later on, when the same media outlet said it wanted to change its original label for her to a “cheerleader but with pompoms of steel,” it was attempting to indicate that Monica possessed great strength. However, the statement is still an inherently sexist critique in that it positions her gender as central to the narrative of her identity as a leader.

In addition to appearance, demeanor can impact how women may be critiqued. A confident woman leader can also be off-putting to some people (Eagly & Carli, 2007). In turn,
women may internalize that and act in response to their discomfort. Women may feel uneasy when they are praised for their abilities and accomplishments or when they have to make tough decisions. Sunny said that she often has to tell herself, “It's okay to be tough. You don't have to be liked all the time, and respect is always better than popularity.” She said that this is a good reminder of her priorities and obligations in this role. She indicated that it is challenging to be viewed as both credible and kind, even though she is the one who is ultimately charged with making the final decisions for the institution.

The frequency with which the participants speak to issues concerning presidential leadership perceptions is an indication of how widespread this is in higher education. These women spoke of the ways in which they are conscious of their gender and their appearance and affect in meetings, public forums, media interviews, and even when they are running errands in their community. When Sara Beth discusses that true progress will occur when women replace women in the role of the presidency, this will hopefully be one way that this theme will not be as prevalent in future years to come. Normalizing women’s leadership will go a long way in changing how women are viewed in these roles.

**Gender Matters in Action**

Because gender matters in higher education, women should consider ways to manage some of the challenges that come with being a woman leader. The following three strategies including (1) find balance, (2) move past the middle, and (3) reframe what presidential leadership looks like, may assist women in navigating the institutional demands of leadership and all of the opportunities and limitations that their gender may incur.
Strategy one: Find balance. Many participants shared that they took fewer professional risks when they first started a family. Nationally only 63% of women presidents are married, but 89% of male presidents are married (Pierce, 2011). In this study, all but one of the presidents is currently married. Because familial responsibilities can impact the ability of women to move up in the academy, these numbers seem to indicate that some women may make the conscious decision to not start a family. Three of the 10 presidents in this study did not have children. Nearly every participant discussed the challenges faced by women who work three shifts a day in managing the responsibilities of home plus work-related tasks.

They also shared stories related to the impact of family on their career choices. Angela talked about how her husband eventually left his job in order to care for their children full-time while she worked. Sunny shared how she made the conscious choice not to seek professional advancement until her son was older because she knew that the demands on her time (as an administrator) would not allow her to spend time with her son. She discussed how she knows many other women make the same decision because of the professional realities (including long hours, some travel, and frequent weekend commitments) of upper-level administration. Jessica echoed similar sentiments and stated she was unsure of her ability to be a president if her children were still at home. She relied heavily on her husband for support with the house and children, which allowed her to pursue her career ambitions. Additionally, Kim identified that while males could bring their children to work and be praised for their exceptional parenting, that same work strategy—when employed by mothers—made women employees appear weak and not serious about their work. Finally, Margaret said she believed many women do not pursue the
presidency because they choose not to uproot their families and because of the lack of privacy for presidents and their families.

These women had options, choices, and resources that allowed them to lessen their home responsibilities in order to devote more time to their careers; however, not all women have a spouse/partner or the monetary flexibility to pursue the same path that these women have chosen. Gender informed their experience with familial obligations because of the societal pressure and expectations about motherhood and a mother’s role within the family. Because these participants either defied these norms or found a partner who was willing to sacrifice career progression for their wives’ advancement, they were able to progress quicker than their women peers.

**Strategy two: Move past the middle.** While there are plenty of women at entry and mid-level roles, there are significantly fewer women in senior-level positions (Barsh & Cranston, 2011; Pierce, 2011). Several reasons were shared by the participants. One reason is the lack of women obtaining full credentials, which can mean acquiring a terminal degree and/or achieving tenure in their department (Fitzgerald, 2014). The participants mentioned that women may focus more on institutional service and giving back rather than research and scholarship, which limits their ability to be considered for future opportunities. Betty said that obtaining full credentials—researching, publishing, etc.—was a solo endeavor that often turned some women off because they would rather be involved in collaborative work. Monique said that some women may not be offered opportunities for skill development and/or may not be able to get a seat on important committees, which could enhance their professional portfolio. She also said that this lack of professional advocacy may keep women in mid-level roles because they may not have had anyone telling them that they could aspire to higher positions.
Several presidents said that they believed that women can get stuck in the middle when they fail to achieve tenure and promotion. This may have an effect on the number of women who believe that they can reasonably achieve this goal, especially if there are so few who have succeeded in obtaining tenure and/or full academic credentials. The mirror effect also provides men with an opportunity to be professionally noticed and considered for promotion in unequal ways (Barsh & Cranston, 2011). The mirror effect is also a campus climate issue. A chilly climate can also affect a woman’s decision to switch institutions, thus prolonging the opportunity to obtain tenure (Caplan, 1994; Fitzgerald, 2014). In a study of exit interviews with faculty members leaving a major university, the survey results indicated that a disproportionate number of women faculty were choosing to leave based on an uncomfortable and unwelcoming campus climate. Women of color reported greater dissatisfaction with the inhospitable environment (Caplan, 1994).

Another challenge to moving past mid-level is knowing the next steps to take in professional advancement. The professional career path for women is less well marked (Wolverton et al., 2009), which often results in staying too long in any one position or making lateral moves in the absence of professional guidance. In institutions where male leadership is the norm, more men in mid-level roles will be mentored and sponsored by other men and ultimately promoted into senior-level roles. Monica and Kim both echoed the sentiment that men are often promoted based on potential, whereas women are evaluated based on performance. This differing criteria for promotion based on gender is also mentioned in the literature as reason for a lack of advancement past the mid-level (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Sandberg, 2013).
**Strategy three: Reframe what presidential leadership looks like.** In addition to having all of the requisite credentials, women face particular challenges combating traditional notions of what leadership looks like (Barsh & Cranston, 2011; Eagly & Carli, 2007). As women leaders, the participants obviously appear physically different from their male counterparts. This aesthetic difference, combined with alternative leadership and decision-making styles, has also produced a barrier for women who seek promotion to the highest levels of university leadership due to traditionally accepted notions of what leadership has or should look like (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Several participants discussed how their physical stature, clothing, accessories, and demeanor have been critiqued simply because those attributes made their identity as a woman readily visible, and therefore, they could be discredited more easily.

Several of the presidents mentioned that they consciously try to keep their voice even and steady as a way to ensure that they will actually be heard. Monica’s story is one example of how something as simple as tone of voice can cause women to struggle to have their message heard. “They don’t hear what we’re saying; they literally don’t hear the octave we’re using—something about the words,” said Monica.

One way to dismantle this barrier is to normalize women’s leadership by empowering women to both take leadership opportunities and encourage other women to do so. When women are well represented on committees (i.e., not the lone voice), diverse speaking tones, opinions, and leadership styles are legitimized (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Sandberg, 2013). The presidents’ stories confirmed that the challenges associated with women’s leadership were diminished when a critical mass of women were around the table.
Finally, gender matters because it impacts the experience of women college presidents in route to the presidency and while serving in the role. The participants shared many instances in which they felt their gender impacted their ability to lead, advance, and/or be taken seriously. They shared how their familial obligations as a spouse and/or a mother influenced their career choices in ways that may differ from their male counterparts (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Sandberg, 2013). These familial decisions may also impact their ability to obtain full credentials and advance within higher education at the same pace as men. They also shared how the very nature of being a woman, including their appearance, tone of voice, and leadership style, can be critiqued simply because women’s leadership is not yet normalized at the highest levels of higher education. All of these factors lead to increased challenges for women to be effective and viewed credibly in the presidency.

Analytical Concepts Connected to the Research Findings

Figure 4 is a visual representation of the two overarching analytical concepts that emanated from the study. The first analytical concept of stepping forward connects to all four themes. Within stepping forward, the challenges to advancement theme outlines the barriers that prevent women from stepping forward. The necessary actions and characteristics theme discusses the ways in which women can step forward. The third theme shares some of the ways mentors and sponsors can help women to step forward. Finally, the presidential leadership theme discusses the challenges and opportunities related to stepping forward as a woman president.
The second analytical concept of gender matters connects to two themes. The second theme of necessary actions and characteristics discusses how gender impacts the ways in which some women lead and how they may be socialized to navigate the workplace. The fourth theme of presidential leadership reveals how women leaders may be critiqued through a gendered lens in the position of university president.

As I examine both of these analytical themes together, we can see how these ideas are complementary and provide a blueprint that details how individuals can build an environment that positively impacts the collective. It demonstrates that stepping forward is required because leadership is a gender matter and gender *still* matters in higher education.
Conclusion

Two analytical concepts were discussed in this chapter: stepping forward and gender matters. Stepping forward is an individual action that women must take. Paying it forward is an important strategy that individuals can employ to help support others. It recognizes that women should not have to lead like men to advance in the workplace and functions as a tool that leverages collective action and a shared understanding of how individual support can positively impact career advancement to propel women forward in the career pipeline. Finally, challenging the dominant ideology of what leadership should look like is the ultimate goal, so that stepping forward and paying it forward no longer need to be required strategies for creating an equal playing field in the workplace. These themes speak to a broader narrative about women’s leadership in higher education and support the current literature regarding how gender impacts women’s leadership, specifically at the presidency (Wolverton et al., 2009). Based on the narratives from this study, I surmise that because gender still matters, stepping forward (and all that this entails) is a necessary strategy for career advancement for women. In the final chapter, I will briefly review the research questions, discuss areas for future research, and share implications for future practice.
CHAPTER SIX: Conclusion

Introduction

This project originated from both my personal interest in the meaning-making process for women’s professional journey as well as my own leadership aspirations within higher education. The stories of these 10 presidents validated my sense of inequity for women on campus, particularly as I reflect back on my academic experience obtaining a master’s degree in women and gender studies and my professional work in university women’s centers. This study was born out of a sense of internal obligation to uncover more about the lived experiences of women leaders in higher education. Within their narratives, I uncovered themes and experiences that connected back to the literature and may inform future generation of women who aspire to seek the presidency.

Over the last 15 years, I have witnessed brilliant, talented women in higher education who seemed to get stuck, limited by their own self-imposed vision of what their career should look like or stunted because of a structure that did not reward their specific style and leadership abilities. Meanwhile, I saw equally brilliant men seemingly move upward in the pipeline with ease and quickly surpass their women peers. Despite men and women starting in higher education at the same time (either as professors or practitioners), the pace of career progression for men appeared to move much quicker after the first five years of employment (Pierce, 2011). I began this study as a way to understand the lived experience of a group of presidents to add to my own knowledge and contribute to the literature. Most importantly, I conducted this study to provide insight for future women leaders, managers, and university presidents.
In the last few years, we have seen instances where women have come close to attaining the top roles in politics (e.g., Sarah Palin for vice president in 2012 and Hillary Clinton for president in 2008), and we have also seen women secure the top positions in the corporate sector (e.g., Marissa Mayer, CEO of Yahoo, and Sheryl Sandberg, COO of Facebook). Their success has been chronicled mostly because there are so few examples of women leading large entities, be it in politics or the corporate sector. The same seems to be the case in higher education, and in the 21st century, we still have not made major shifts in diversifying the presidency in terms of gender (Pierce, 2011; Wolverton et al., 2009). The only type of institution that has had success in obtaining a larger percentage of women presidents is at the community college level. At research universities and highly selective liberal arts schools, the numbers remain extremely low (Pierce, 2011; Wolverton et al., 2009).

In this chapter, I will briefly discuss the research questions and suggest recommendations for future research. Next, I will discuss practical implications for women in the workplace—and those who supervise them—based on the knowledge gleaned from this study. This will be offered in the spirit of sharing implications and bringing some concreteness to the overall project.

Returning to the Research Questions

Two central research questions were crafted to examine the role that gender, leadership, and meaning-making played throughout these women’s careers. Here I respond briefly to each.

**Question 1:** How do women college presidents experience and make meaning of their professional trajectory?
The first research question relates to the participants’ experience in the workplace throughout their careers. From the themes, I identified six main strategies that speak to the way these presidents have experienced and made meaning of their professional path. These strategies were mentioned or supported within the themes and their respective stories throughout the interviews.

**Question 2**: How does gender inform the personal and professional experience of women college presidents? What shapes that experience and meaning-making?

The second research question is about how gender has impacted their experience in their current role. A few of the participants initially seemed ambivalent about how being a woman has impacted their professional journey. They appeared almost conflicted, because although they had attained the highest position at the university, their journeys contained moments in which their gender affected their new opportunities, their credibility, and their ability to progress in their career. Perhaps addressing it directly was a realization for them and their meaning-making process. Further probing into how they have experienced their career as a whole unveiled individual stories that reflected the way that the glass ceiling or labyrinth, women’s leadership styles, mentors, and familial obligations influenced their experiences as women in higher education.

**Areas for Future Research**

While the literature discusses multiple barriers for women to obtain the presidency (Bornstein, 2005; Heilman, 2001; Jablonski, 2000; Madsen, 2007), the stories of these participants give us an incredible firsthand account of their lived experience as women leaders. It provides a raw, honest look at the challenges these women have to—and continue to—face as
women in higher education. Their career choices, professional missteps, successes, and advice give us a road map to navigate some of the gender-related obstacles and provide best practices for us to consider as we undertake the journey. While their stories share the experiences of these 10 presidents, there are other areas of future research to consider, particularly as a younger generation begins to obtain senior-level leadership roles within higher education. This study contributes to the literature on women in higher education by discussing how structural challenges, traditional notions of leadership and self-imposed challenges may limit advancement opportunities for women.

Much has been written on the millennial generation (those born from 1980-2000) and how their leadership style tends to differ from previous generations (Twenge, 2007; Zemke et al., 2013). As the oldest millennials approach their mid-30s, they are currently about 20 years away from the average age (typically mid-50s) of these college presidents. How will their styles (largely focused on collaboration, teamwork, and less regard for hierarchy, authority, and institutional structures) impact the gender disparity that currently exists in the academy? Future studies on the career trajectory for women for senior-level roles (provosts, vice presidents, and deans) are needed as each new generation of leaders emerges.

Additional research can and should be conducted on women in senior-level roles that are one professional step below the president (i.e., provost, executive vice president) and who do not, cannot, or chose not to become presidents. This study could examine the reasons why some women opt to not seek the presidency and/or could look at women who have tried to assume the role and have not been able to secure a presidency. The participants shared stories of women
who had tried and failed many times in their quest for the presidency and either stayed in their current senior-level role or opted to retire.

An area that may lack a number of viable participants but could make for an interesting study is the experiences of presidents who identify as gay, lesbian, bi-sexual or transgender (GLBT). The number of openly GLBT university presidents is very low, and there has been little research conducted on this topic. This lens could provide a different opportunity to view how their leadership is perceived, understand their meaning-making, and provide insight into how the intersection of gender and sexuality shape their experience on campus.

**Implications for Future Practice**

This research sheds new light on the meaning-making of current women presidents, as well as the professional trajectory for future women in higher education leadership. Similar to Pierce (2011) who writes that despite the good intentions of many institutions, higher education has not successfully diversified the presidency so that it accurately represents America and the students we serve. Increasing the number of women college presidents sends a powerful message to our campus communities and to other women who aspire to leadership roles. Through the participants’ stories and often-shared experiences, common themes about how they were able to move up through the academy have implications for future practice in university governance. From the stories of the 10 women presidents, I suggest the following eight practices. These actions can be taken by women and men as well as subordinates and supervisors in order to encourage a climate of equity and equal opportunity.

1. **Take regular skill inventories.** The participants spoke at length about the need to diversify your skill set, to volunteer for stretch assignments, and to look for ways to
continually have skill building be part of a yearly professional development plan. These women were considered viable candidates for the presidency because they had well-rounded professional portfolios that not only showed a depth but also a breadth of experiences. Women who tend to stay as specialists may lack the experiences necessary to be a competitive candidate for senior positions.

2. **Secure mentors and sponsors.** Sponsors can advocate for women to be considered for the aforementioned opportunities, and mentors can guide women through the process of learning a new skill or task. Women should look for mentors and sponsors within their own departments, divisions, or universities and within the field of higher education. Women should also look for people with whom they can connect and who are well-networked and have influence. Women should be sure to identify early on how they can be an asset to them in order to maintain and preserve a reciprocal relationship.

Professionals who have sponsors are more likely to ask for new and challenging assignments and advocate for salary increases than their peers of the same gender without sponsors. Men, however, often have an easier time acquiring and maintaining these relationships. Continuing to pay forward the circle of sponsorship is critical to pushing more women through the professional pipeline.

3. **Develop professional search committees who are committed to hiring diverse candidates.** Search committees should set up processes to check for inherent bias. Many institutions have adopted a search advocate role on hiring committees, which empowers one person to ensure that the recruitment of candidates reaches a wide and diverse audience and that the hiring process does not disadvantage people based on gender, race,
culture, religion, sexual orientation, or ability. Institutions must make sure that the decisions of the hiring committee are not simply a result of the mirror effect.

4. **Create professional opportunities that defy stereotypical gender norms.** The advising, public relations, and human resource functions of positions in higher education are often delegated to women, while areas of technology, budgeting, construction of new facilities, and campus master planning are often tasks given to men. Supervisors and department chairs should consider how these tasks are distributed and not simply consider previous experience as the sole predictor of aptitude. Instead, they should consider the potential for new skill development.

5. **Demand for more women to be at the table.** From search committees to faculty governance, powerful groups that have decision-making authority should be represented by a diverse group of stakeholders. Professionals should encourage, advocate for, and nominate women to serve in these roles. Women are more likely to accept an opportunity when invited by someone they know.

6. **Advocate for yearly institutional climate surveys.** These surveys are typically distributed to students, staff, and faculty and can shed light on how people on the campus experience the university community. Campus climate specifically refers to the current perceptions, attitudes, and expectations that impact how members of the university community are valued (or perceive themselves to be valued). A chilly climate can describe the pervasiveness of inhospitable or unfriendly environments for women both in the classroom and on other areas of campus. Sharing the results of this survey widely...
indicates the transparency of the leadership of the campus, and using these results to create institutional change indicates a commitment to true assessment and implementation of strategies that can improve the quality of life for underrepresented populations on campus, addressing institutional and/or structural barriers that prevent the administration from mirroring the same diversity as the students who enroll.

7. **Advocate for women and parent-friendly policies.** Familial obligations was a factor often discussed by the participants as a primary reason why women personally questioned if they could/should attain a senior-level leadership role. Several presidents spoke about the need for a more flexible working environment that allowed women to both be parents (if they so choose) and have higher career aspirations. On-site daycare, close access to nursing rooms, flexible work schedules, temporary job-sharing, and telecommuting are all ways that institutions can indicate a commitment to women.

8. **Share stories.** Talking about what the top levels of leadership really look like can encourage high-potential women to consider the presidency as a viable future option. Stories like the ones shared from the participants are honest, eye-opening, real accounts of what they have encountered on their professional journey. Freely sharing the challenges (along with the victories) along the way helps to prepare other women for the realities of senior-level leadership. These stories show the humanity and personal experiences of women in that role and can be inspirational for other women who seek to attain similar positions.
While some of these suggestions are not new (Barsh & Cranston, 2011; Fitzgerald, 2014; Sandberg, 2013; Wolverton et al., 2009), they collectively can point to strategies for career advancement, specifically for women in higher education leadership. They are important because they create best practices for women and supervisors of women to consider in order to support and encourage a diversity of people in leadership roles.

Conclusion

As a researcher who is also a woman practitioner currently working in higher education, I believe the 10 participants in this study felt a connection to me and an investment in this study. This speculation is based on their willingness to accept the interview appointment despite their busy schedules and their positive, supportive communication with me in the months following the interviews. I felt like the participants trusted me to preserve the authenticity of their stories and I take that responsibility seriously. The most authentic way to learn about the professional and personal journey of these women leaders is to ask them to share their stories in their own words. At the conclusion of the tenth interview, I recognized that through working together the 11 of us could add to the existing body of knowledge about women in leadership. Many of the participants contacted me after their interview, saying that they felt a renewed commitment to shedding light on the experiences of women in their specific roles. Their stories offer a powerful glimpse into women’s leadership in higher education.

The lessons shared from the participants’ powerful stories can hopefully inspire and propel women forward in higher education. These individual narratives allow us to understand their meaning-making process along the way and inform the reader about how their experiences impacted their ability to become a university president. Although these are distinct stories told
by 10 different people in a specific time and place, there are several common threads that can inform our understanding of women’s leadership, professional opportunities and challenges, and the way that institutional structures can impact professional advancement. Their struggles—both individually and collectively—may echo the experiences of women in the academy and may provide a successful blueprint for other women to develop and achieve their own professional aspirations.

This research is useful because it provides insight about the lived experience of the women presidents at four-year institutions, a minority position. Nationally only 13% of the presidents at these institutions are women (Pierce, 2011). Because of the small number of women in these positions, there is not a lot of research about how women have experienced their professional path. This study provides several important examples of strategies for women who aspire to lead an institution of higher education. This study indicates that the pipeline to the presidency will continue to widen and diversify if we advocate for women at all levels of their career. This includes encouraging women to gain additional educational and professional credentials, critically analyze and negotiate or dismantle institutional structures that do not allow for family and work life to blend, stress the importance of finding mentors and sponsors, and encourage women to take professional risks.

We know several things from this study. First, women’s voices, appearance, stature, and/or leadership style continue to be critiqued more heavily than those of their male counterparts. This needs to be recognized and understood as a barrier to advancement. Institutions committed to gender equity must insist on intervention strategies and working on campus climate issues to combat this. Second, the single biggest thing women can do for their
career advancement is to step forward. Say yes. Take on increasing responsibility and diversify their professional portfolios. Third, women need to find support in mentors and sponsors, receive critical feedback, and turn these characteristics into either non-issues or even professional assets. Finally, above all else women must continue to pay forward the advice, mentorship, sponsorship, and coaching they have received to other women. This will help to ensure that someday there will be a critical mass of diverse women presidents who have obtained the position both on their own merit and with the support of an entire professional community of women advocates behind them. For women who possess other underrepresented identities, such as ethnic, sexual orientation or religious minorities, the challenges are compounded and strategies to combat not only gender bias but other biases as well must be enacted.

As a final point, this study indicates that gender remains a contributing factor in career advancement. Gender still matters. Despite small, incremental gains in the number of women leaders in the public and private sectors, there remains much work to do in dismantling the structural and self-imposed barriers that women face on the road to the college presidency. Dr. Drew Gilpin Faust recently spoke at the World Economic Forum meeting in Davos, Switzerland, and she emphatically stated “I’m not the woman president of Harvard, I’m the president of Harvard.” Her statement speaks volumes about the work that still remains to be done if even the president of a premier Ivy League institution still feels the need to emphasize this point about gender and role. Let us hope that Dr. Gilpin’s statement seems antiquated in the years to come. The greatest hope of this occurring is if—in Sara Beth’s words—women do indeed replace women. Let these women’s stories provide inspiration, strategies, and hope for future generations of women who aspire to sit in their chairs one day.
APPENDICES
APPENDIX A: Interview Protocol Questions

1) Describe the professional journey that has led you to the presidency.

2) Talk about the experience of being a woman in a position of power in education.

3) What does being a woman in a position of power look like on a daily basis?

4) How does it feel to be a woman in a position of power in higher education?

5) How do you define the glass ceiling? What does that mean to you?

6) Are there ways in which you have seen examples of the glass ceiling in your own journey?

7) Have mentors affected your professionally opportunities and career progression?

8) What role have mentors had in helping you to make sense of what it means to be a woman leader in higher education?

9) What have you learned about balancing your professional aspirations and personal goals?

10) What is the biggest lesson you have learned about yourself on your professional journey?

11) What did no one tell you, that you wish you had known, about what it means to be a woman in higher education?

12) Why do you believe that there is a lack of women college presidents?
APPENDIX B: IRB Approval

Research Involving Human Subjects
NOTICE OF INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD ACTION

To: Ann Marie Klotz, M.A., Graduate Student, College of Education

Date: May 21, 2013

Re: Research Protocol # AK050913EDU
“The Journey to the Top: Analyzing the Professional Journey Women Encounter on the Path to the Position of University President”

Please review the following important information about the review of your proposed research activity.

Review Details
This submission is an initial submission.

Your research project meets the criteria for Exempt review under 45 CFR 46.101 under the following category:

(2) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior, unless:
(i) information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; and (ii) any disclosure of the human subjects’ responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects’ financial standing, employability, or reputation.

Approval Details
Your research was originally reviewed on May 13, 2013 and revisions were requested. The revisions you submitted on May 14, 2013 were reviewed and approved on May 21, 2013.

Number of approved participants: 6 Total
You should not exceed this total number of subjects without prospectively submitting an amendment to the IRB requesting an increase in subject number.

Funding Source: 1) None

Approved Performance sites: 1) DePaul University

Reminders
- Under DePaul’s current institutional policy governing human research, research projects that meet the criteria for an exemption determination may receive administrative review by the Office of Research
Services Research Protections staff. Once projects are determined to be exempt, the researcher is free to begin the work and is not required to submit an annual update (continuing review). As your project has been determined to be exempt, your primary obligation moving forward is to resubmit your research materials for review and classification/approval when making changes to the research, but before the changes are implemented in the research. **All changes to the research must be reviewed and approved by the IRB or Office of Research Services staff.** Changes requiring approval include, but are not limited to, changes in the design or focus of the research project, revisions to the information sheet for participants, addition of new measures or instruments, increasing the subject number, and any change to the research that might alter the exemption status (either add additional exemption categories or make the research no longer eligible for an exemption determination).

- **Once the project is complete, you should submit a final closure report to the IRB.**

The Office of Research Services would like to thank you for your efforts and cooperation and wishes you the best of luck on your research. If you have any questions, please contact me by telephone at (312) 362-6168 or by email at avanderl@depaul.edu.

For the Board,

Adam R. Vanderloo, JD  
Research Protections Coordinator  
Office of Research Services

Cc: Rich Whitney, Ph.D., Faculty Sponsor, College of Education  
Alexandra Novakovic, Ph.D., LRB Co-Chair, College of Education  
Barbara Rieckhoff, Ph.D., LRB Co-Chair, College of Education
REFERENCES


