

**EXPLORING THE PHENOMENON OF UNDERREPRESENTATION OF WOMEN  
IN EXECUTIVE-LEVEL ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP POSITIONS  
IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS**

Dissertation-in-Practice Manuscript

Submitted to National University

Sanford College of Education

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

by

VIKTORIYA STAVESKY

San Diego, California

December 2025

## **Abstract**

The gender gap in executive-level administrative roles in higher education institutions is a persistent issue. While women have constituted the majority of the student body for decades, they continue to be underrepresented in academic administration, including at the leadership ranks. This study focused on exploring the phenomenon of underrepresentation of women in executive-level academic leadership positions in higher education institutions in the Western United States. The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative inquiry was to explore the lived experiences of women on their path to and holding executive-level academic leadership positions above the dean across private, public, and community colleges in the Western United States and shed light on the challenges and barriers they faced and the tools and techniques they used to overcome them. This research study used the interpretive phenomenological paradigm with a feminist perspective. A qualitative research methodology with a phenomenological design was employed as the most suitable approach for the study's purpose and research questions. The target population was women in executive-level academic positions in HEIs. The sample population consisted of women who held executive-level academic leadership positions (president, vice provost, vice president, associate vice president, and assistant vice president) for at least 1 year. Fifteen participants were recruited via email using the purposeful sampling method. The contact information was identified by searching public records. One semi-structured interview was conducted with each participant in a one-on-one setting via Zoom. The recorded interviews served as the primary data collection instrument. The data were sorted into recurring codes and subcodes using NVivo. Findings revealed six recurring themes: (a) gender-related challenges still exist, (b) lack of organizational support presents a systemic challenge, (c) hiring and promotion are still gendered processes, (d) the role of mentors is critical, (e) support

networks are an effective tool, and (f) qualities important for success. The implications for practice informed by the findings should be concentrated on creating an inclusive organizational culture and providing conscious support and development to women aspiring to and holding executive leadership positions. Higher education institutions should establish women's support groups and implement women-friendly mentorship and succession programs, as well as adopt inclusive policies that prioritize fair hiring practices, equal opportunities, and work-life balance. Aspiring women executive-level administrative leaders should focus on finding mentors, drawing strength from the community, building networks, and actively engaging in self-development as key components to success on this career track.

## **Acknowledgements**

To my mother, Milaniia, for her keen understanding of the importance of education for a woman in a patriarchal world. You always encouraged me to achieve my potential. You were always there for me and supported me with your love and sound advice throughout my college years. To my father, Yevhen, for being a supportive, kind, and loving parent who has always believed in me, and to my sister, Yevheniia, with whom I have an eternal bond.

To my beloved husband, Michael Stavesky, who has been my trusted partner and my rock in this journey, who took over homeschooling our children and running our household to allow me to finish my doctoral dissertation. You stood by my side and always believed in me, even when I was not sure if I could make it to the finish line. Your love and support made all the difference.

To my beautiful daughters, Nicole and Laura, who were very patient and understanding while I spent weekends on the laptop working on my research. Thank you for all your love and support. I am fortunate and grateful to have you as my children.

To all the incredible women I had the privilege to interview, who graciously shared their stories with me. Thank you for your willingness to devote your precious time to this research, candor, and insight! I enjoyed every moment of the interviews. Your contributions to this research study help shed light on the status of women executive leaders in academia and provide practical implications for improvement.

To my chair, Dr. Maggie Broderick, thank you for your consistent availability and expertise. Your guidance and encouragement helped me incredibly through my moments of doubt. To the rest of my committee, Dr. Brandy Kamm and Dr. Melanie Shaw, thank you for your support, timely turnaround, and detailed feedback. I am grateful to have such an excellent team of experts and exceptional women by my side.

To the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center for a wonderful Employee Assistance Program, thank you! Without this financial support, my postgraduate education would not have been possible.

## Table of Contents

List of Tables .....	vii
List of Figures .....	viii
Section 1: Foundation .....	1
Statement of the Problem.....	4
Research Questions.....	6
Conceptual Framework.....	6
Definitions of Key Terms .....	12
Review of the Literature .....	13
Summary .....	39
Ethical Assurances .....	40
Summary .....	42
Section 2: Methodology and Design.....	44
Design and Method.....	45
Population and Sample .....	48
Materials and Instrumentation .....	50
Data Collection and Analysis.....	52
Assumptions.....	54
Limitations .....	55
Delimitations.....	55
Summary .....	56
Section 3: Findings, Implications, and Recommendations.....	58
Findings.....	59
Theme 1: Gender-related Challenges and Barriers Still Exist.....	64
Theme 2: Lack of Organizational Support Presents a Systemic Challenge.....	80
Theme 3: Hiring and Promotion are still Gendered Processes .....	88
Theme 4: Role of Mentors is Critical to Ascension to and Maintaining Executive-Level Academic Positions.....	97
Theme 5: Support Networks are an Effective Tool for Success.....	113
Theme 6: Qualities Important for Success.....	124
Credibility .....	135
Dependability .....	136
Confirmability.....	136
Transferability.....	137
Evaluation of the Outcomes.....	137
Implications and Recommendations for Practice .....	149
Recommendations for Future Research .....	151
Conclusions.....	153
References.....	155
Appendices.....	183
Appendix A Interview Questions.....	184
Appendix B Recruitment Email.....	185
Appendix C Consent Letter .....	186

## List of Tables

Table 1. Demographics of Participants.....	62
Table 2. Themes and Sub-themes.....	64
Table 3. Participants' Education Major Concentrations.....	144

## **List of Figures**

Figure 1. Conceptual Perspectives and Their Correlation.....	11
--	----

## Section 1: Foundation

White males have historically dominated top leadership positions in higher education administration (Chance, 2021; Locke et al., 2021; Machin, 2020). Although the ratios of women to men as professors and instructors are slowly improving in some private and public higher education institutions (Locke et al., 2021; O'Connor, 2024; Spoon et al., 2023), it is not the case, however, when it comes to securing executive-level leadership positions (Fauzi et al., 2024; Ios Foundation, 2023). Today, many HEIs adopt and uphold equal employment opportunities and non-discrimination policies to increase the number of women in management positions (Eddy & Kirby, 2020; O'Connor & Irvine, 2020). Despite this progressive approach, women remain largely underrepresented in executive-level academic leadership positions in higher education (Berg, 2020; Fauzi et al., 2024; White & Burkinshaw, 2019). Women still encounter significant challenges in advancing to executive positions, such as provost, chancellor, vice-president, and president (Dear, 2016).

*The Times Higher Education (THE, 2024)* World University Rankings revealed that women academics lead only 25% of the top 200 universities, highlighting a significant gender gap in positions of power. *The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2025)* Gender Report confirmed that women worldwide are still underrepresented in educational leadership positions at all levels. According to the American Council on Education, only 30 percent of presidential positions in American colleges are held by women, despite the fact that there are more than enough qualified women for such roles (Johnston, 2017). For example, Johnston (2017) reported that women have earned more than 50% of all doctoral degrees since 2006 and more than 50% of all master's degrees since 1987. Although more women are graduating with graduate and post-graduate degrees, statistics show

that females do not hold associate professor and professor positions at the same rate as their male counterparts (Johnston, 2017).

The problem of underrepresentation of women in leadership, both generally and specifically in higher education, is a well-documented issue that persists in the United States despite continuous efforts by organizations to end representation disparities (Locke et al., 2021; Russel et al., 2023; Yahya et al., 2024). Higher education institutions have always posed as microenvironments that foster free thought, democratic participation, and emancipation, inspiring social and individual transformation (Locke et al., 2021). While still maintaining this narrative of liberal thought, academia has not fulfilled its vision. Instead, women still struggle to achieve career growth in higher education, having to face systemic resistance expressed in gendered spaces, compensation gaps, lack of advancement, and cultural barriers, including prejudice, bias, and sexism.

In the contemporary trend of neoliberalism combined with established capitalism in academia, gender equity is consistently compromised by the false notions that the criteria by which individuals are rewarded are objective and fair, and that every individual is responsible for themselves (Brabazon & Schulz, 2020). In this context, research on women's success in advancing to and retaining top leadership positions in academia presents as most relevant in promoting women through shared experiences, networking, and mentorship.

Research on women's leadership in academia is scarce (Merma-Molina et al., 2022), primarily focusing on obstacles that prevent them from obtaining or retaining leadership positions and lacks accounts of lived experiences of women in executive-level leadership positions that might shed light on how this phenomenon can be addressed and overcome. On this note, Yahya et al. (2024) addressed the problem of women's marginalization in academic

leadership, as explored in the existing literature, in their systematic review. The findings revealed that women's leadership as a concept is underrepresented in the reviewed leadership literature. Systemic inequalities, women's undervalued perception of self, and their leadership abilities are three main challenges women in top leadership positions face across all contexts. Kausar et al. (2024) interviewed 12 female academics and found that women are still facing prejudice, discrimination, and bias and suffer from lowered self-esteem due to cultural perceptions. Additionally, women in leadership roles suffer from elevated personal and professional expectations.

Some research exists on women's academic leadership styles. Locke et al. (2021) confirmed the general finding in the existing literature that most women had succeeded in their paths to academic leadership by adapting to the existing ways and policies. Once in these positions, female leaders often replicated those structures and policies, thus perpetuating neoliberal inequalities (Blackmore & Sachs, 2012, as cited in Locke et al., 2021; Da Rocha Grangeiro et al., 2021; O'Connor, 2024). However, research also shows that some women in leadership have created conceptually different ways to overcome the challenges of gender inequality (Locke et al., 2021; Merma-Molina et al., 2022). These women leaders shaped their leadership styles within the framework of sustainable leadership. They found personal and professional satisfaction with their roles in becoming transformative agents and drivers of positive change in their institutions, and finding a balance between the pragmatic and social interests of the organization by engaging in research of their positions in academia and initiating programs for systemic and cultural change in the university landscape.

The barriers to women in senior academic leadership positions, including deans and department chairs/department heads, have been studied (Barkhuizen et al., 2022; Brower et al.,

2019; Peterson, 2016). However, research suggested that more voices of women academic executive administrators sharing their experiences of lived adversity and the skills and techniques they use to overcome the identified barriers on their path to executive-level leadership should be heard to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of female underrepresentation in academia and dismantle systemic oppression in HEI (Abalkhail, 2017; Chance, 2021; CohenMiller & Izenkova, 2022; Pillay, 2025).

### **Statement of the Problem**

The problem addressed in this study was a disproportionately low number of women getting an opportunity for adequate career growth and achieving executive-level academic leadership positions (president, vice provost, vice president, associate vice president, and assistant vice president) across private, public, and community colleges in the Western US. Women face a multitude of barriers on their path to leadership positions that men do not encounter, including sexism, recruitment and performance bias, racism, compensation gap, and lack of support for work-life balance to the point where they give up their aspirations (Coetzee & Moosa, 2020; Manongsong & Ghosh, 2021; Yahya et al., 2024).

Women who manage to break the glass ceiling often find themselves on a glass cliff, that is, intentionally placed in leadership positions at times of adversity and set up for failure due to lack of professional support (O'Connor, 2019; Peterson, 2016) and their tendency to take up on more responsibilities (Judson et al., 2019; Ramohai & Holtzhausen, 2022). In addition, literature reports a lack of work-life balance, cultural bias, sexual harassment, and systemic demand for isolation from lower-rank female leadership, leading to feelings of loneliness, imposter syndrome, and lack of authenticity among the barriers that women in executive-level academic

leadership positions face (Da Rocha Grangeiro et al., 2021; Manongsong & Ghosh, 2021; Yahya et al., 2024).

The existing reported problem affects a large group of employees, namely women, in the higher education workforce. Men continue to outweigh women in management positions and make every effort to maintain their status quo in academia (O'Connor, 2020), which leads to the leaky pipe phenomenon (Manongsong & Ghosh, 2020; Samuelson et al., 2019) and bottleneck hiring situations for women. Such inequity and inequality lead to disillusionment and burnout among women in academia (Spoon et al., 2023), resulting in even fewer women persisting in their aspirations of academic leadership. If the problem continues to exist, women aspiring to become executive academic leaders may continue to be blocked from these opportunities, which may perpetuate the marginalization of women in academia, systemic inequity, gender gap, and power imbalance in academia.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of women in executive-level academic leadership positions across private, public, and community colleges in the Western US, the barriers they faced, and the skills and techniques they used to successfully obtain and maintain their positions. The gender gap in top administrative roles in HEIs is a persistent issue (UNESCO, 2025). While the reasons why women struggle to achieve the same rate of career growth as men are well-documented, there has been little discussion on the factors contributing to women's success in securing and maintaining executive-level administrative leadership positions in HEIs. The target population of the proposed study was 15 women in executive-level academic leadership positions across private, public, and community colleges in the Western United States. Qualifying executive-level

academic administrators were identified primarily through public records and LinkedIn, and a recruitment message was emailed, providing a preamble and instructions for those interested in contacting the researcher via email. Participants were asked to participate in Zoom interviews and answer semi-structured questions. The interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach was used to process the data and identify themes.

## **Research Questions**

### ***RQ1***

What are the lived experiences of women in executive-level academic leadership roles in HEIs as they overcame barriers to successfully obtain and maintain their positions?

### ***RQ2***

What skills and techniques did women in executive-level academic leadership roles in HEIs use to successfully obtain and maintain their positions?

## **Conceptual Framework**

This research study used the interpretive phenomenological paradigm with a feminist perspective. The interpretivist perspective emerged in the 1890s to 1930s from Emmanuel Kant's (1795) premise that knowledge in the world is constructed by the mind. Therefore, social reality exists not in concrete facts but as an idea in people's minds. The interpretivist approach aims to understand subjective human experience by examining an individual's interpretation of the world (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017).

Wilhelm Dilthey (1976) and Max Weber (1968) introduced a new analytical approach, utilizing the concept of *verstehen* (empathetic understanding) as a means of deciphering the subjective meanings of actors' actions and interactions in social contexts through reliving or re-enacting the experiences of others. Drawing from Weber's *Verstehende Soziologie*, Alfred

Schultz (1972) was concerned with the possibility of one individual perceiving other individuals and events through their subjective consciousness. He also established that if specific patterns are followed in social situations, individuals involved will likely have similar typical experiences in similar situations.

In the 1980s, interpretivism was presented in the studies of organizational culture, exploring the meanings of beliefs, symbols, and values in the works of Pacanowsky and O'Donnell-Trujillo (1983) and Smircich (1983), while Deetz (1982) shifted from interpreting the meanings as constructed by individuals to shared meanings socially constructed in cultural contexts. Interpretivists of the 1990s presented the interpretive paradigm as an approach to understanding a particular context as crucial to interpreting the collected data in opposition to positivism, with its understanding based on concrete data (Miller, 2000; Tompkins, 1997). The interpretive approach shifted the image of organizational communication to become a context for social interaction rather than a fixed structure in which messages were transmitted.

The tenets of the interpretive approach were well outlined by Kivunja and Kuyini (2017). The first tenet is the understanding that the social world is not gained from the standpoint of an individual. Instead, realities are multiple due to various contextual factors (times, cultures, and circumstances) and socially constructed by the researcher through first-hand experiences of actors' participation and interpretations of real-life natural settings being investigated. The second tenet is that the interaction between the researcher and research participants is integral to the process. The researcher makes meaning of the data collected from the interactions with participants through cognitive processing and interpretation. Knowledge is created by the findings that need to be made explicit (interpreted). The third tenet is that the researcher assumes the role of a participant observer and uses data collected through interviews, reflective sessions,

text messages, and journals, thereby providing rich insights. And the fourth tenet states that the research findings will reflect the researcher's worldview and values while presenting a balanced report. Researchers, however, must stay as unaffected, external, and objective as possible.

The interpretivist perspective enables the researcher to view the world through participants' eyes, gaining insight and an in-depth understanding of their backgrounds, experiences, and perceptions through empathetic attentiveness (Creswell, 2018). The researcher takes an active role in inquiry by making connections with the participants, studying the context in which they live, and generating in-depth, richly detailed descriptions. Findings are based on processing the collected data through the researcher's own thinking and interpretation.

The social constructivist perspective was introduced by Lev Vygotsky in contrast to Piaget's personal constructivism, which focuses on an individual's internal processes as the primary source of meaning construction. Vygotsky (1978) believed that cognitive growth initially occurs on a social level due to external factors such as cultural, historical, and social interactions, and then develops within the individual. Individuals construct meaning with the help of psychological tools, the most important of which is language. Bakhtin (1986) argued that language is constructed through the joint social practices of humans, and specific modes of communication are based on continuous negotiations and adjustments of meanings through social interactions. Roth (2000) stated that constructing knowledge on a social level allows individuals to make sense of others and relate themselves to social situations. Derry (1999) noted that social constructivism focuses on the role of an individual's personal experience of social situations and processes in understanding them within the context and culture.

Amineh and Asl (2015) summarized the following assumptions that the social constructive perspective rests on, namely, that reality is constructed through human social

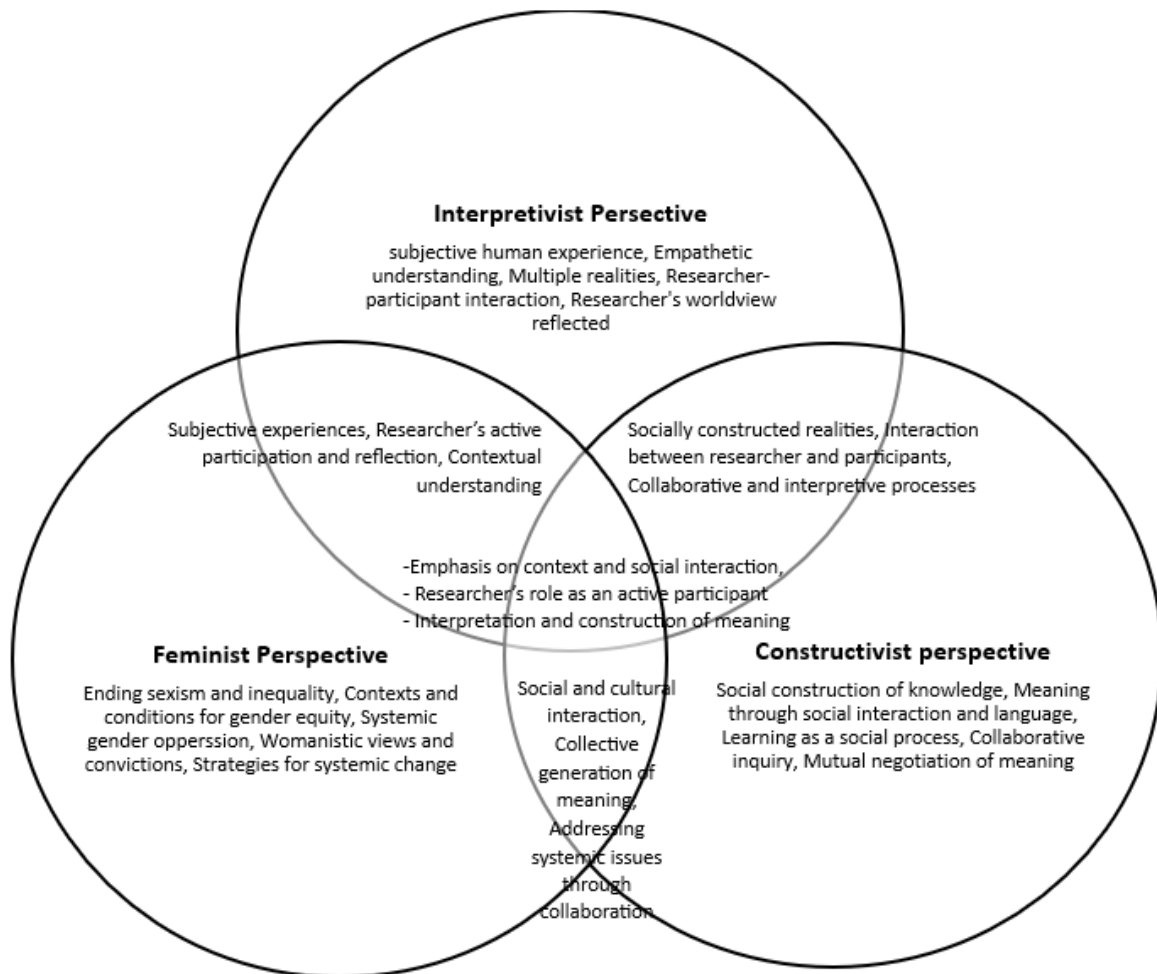
interactions, involving the invention of properties of the world within a society or group (Kukla, 2000). Knowledge is viewed as a product of human social and cultural interaction – humans create meaning through interactions with one another and their environments (Schwandt, 1998). Learning is a social process and does not occur only within an individual or appear passively from outside. Learning occurs when humans are actively engaged in social interaction and collaboration. In this sense, social constructivists support the value of the researcher's active interaction with research participants in establishing collaborative inquiry and constructing meaning through the mutual negotiation of interpretation. Discovering the meaning occurs through the researcher's personal involvement or relationship with the phenomenon in focus, as well as the collective generation of meaning through an empathic and aesthetic relationship between the researcher and participants (Kim, 2014).

Feminist theory was another perspective under consideration for this research study. The feminist perspective is based on the movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and inequality. Feminist researchers focus on contexts, conditions, and relationships to help develop strategies to eliminate oppression in gender equity and access (Arriaga et al., 2020). The problem of historically disproportionately low numbers of women in higher education administration leadership may stem from systemic gender oppression within the rigid institutional system, which was designed to accommodate males only in academia (Coetzee & Moosa, 2020; Manongsong & Ghosh, 2021; Yahya et al., 2024). As a female engaged in the higher education field, I naturally hold womanistic views and convictions that align with the feminist perspective in one way or another, and these will inevitably be reflected in the research study through my active participation. Therefore, the choice was made to build upon introspective theories rather than using feminist theory, as they allow me to examine my own perspective as a woman who

identifies as such and embodies a female perspective. This perspective was a critical eye throughout the data analysis and interpretation. It shed light on the strategies and actions required to accelerate the systemic change in accommodating female leaders.

As seen in Figure 1, the interpretivist, constructivist, and feminist perspectives overlap in many aspects, sharing a focus on context and human interaction, the researcher's role as an active participant, and the interpretation and construction of meaning based on individual experiences. The interpretivist and constructivist perspectives combine organically with the researcher's womanistic standpoint, overlapping and complementing each other to form a synergistic lens focusing on women in executive-level administrative positions in HEIs.

The constructivist and interpretivist perspectives emphasize the significance of the interaction between the researcher and participants, engaging in collaborative and interpretive processes that construct meaning. The interpretivist perspective aligns with the feminist standpoint by allowing womanistic views, convictions, and personal, subjective, and relatable experiences of a female researcher to be represented in the study. The constructivist perspective overlaps with the feminist standpoint in a way that warrants social and cultural interaction between the female researcher and participants, allowing for the addressing of systemic issues, including sexism, gender inequality, and oppression, through collaboration and the collective generation of new ideas and strategies for systemic change. These key tenets supported the research problem and questions, providing scaffolding for the study by focusing on women's lived experiences in executive-level administrative positions to understand the persistent phenomenon of underrepresentation of women in academic leadership, presented from a unique female researcher's viewpoint.

**Figure 1***Conceptual Perspectives and Their Correlation*

The interpretivist perspective aligns with the research problem, purpose, and questions by allowing researchers to address them through an empathetic and involved participation, where a researcher interprets and shares accounts of the lived experiences of women leaders who have experienced the phenomenon of underrepresentation firsthand. The constructivist perspective supports the research study problem, purpose, and questions through its concepts of the social construction of knowledge and narrative, the collaborative process of making meaning involving the researcher and the participants, and language as the primary means of social interaction

(participant responses). The feminist perspective supports this study's problem, purpose, and research questions because I hold womanistic views as both a woman and a researcher. In this study, I examine an issue related to women, involving women participants. In summary, the framework was relevant to the study of the underrepresentation of women in academic leadership because it allowed for sharing the voices of women leaders talking about their journeys, challenges, and successes on their path to executive-level administrative positions in HEIs and shedding light on new, creative ways women overcome obstacles and barriers.

### **Definitions of Key Terms**

#### ***Academic Middle Management Positions***

Academic middle management positions are academic administrative positions of the department chair, the assistant dean, and the dean (Davis-Salazar, 2024; Grajfoner et al., 2022).

#### ***Executive-level Academic Leadership Positions***

Executive-level academic leadership positions are senior academic officers at the vice-chancellor level and higher, to include Vice Chancellor, Chancellor, Vice President, President, Associate Provost, and Provost (McKinney & Cejda, 2000; Ortega et al., 2023). These positions are typically held by former faculty and do not teach.

#### ***Gender Gap***

The gender gap is defined as disparities between men and women in academia as reflected in their social, career, economic, and cultural status and opportunities (Prudy, 2024).

#### ***Glass Ceiling***

The glass ceiling is a term introduced by Mary Loden in 1987 to define an unseen discriminatory barrier that prevents otherwise qualified underrepresented groups of people (such

as women) from rising to leadership positions within an organization (Loden, 1887; Open Education Sociology Dictionary, 2024).

### ***Glass Cliff***

The glass cliff is a phenomenon that refers to unique challenges women face when they get hired for leadership positions, namely being hired in the time of crisis or interim and provided little support, leading to increased risk of failure (Baker & Osanloo, 2022; Coetzee & Moosa, 2020).

### ***Higher Education Institution (HEI)***

A higher education institution (HEI) is a tertiary academic institution, “where a community of scholars engages in research, study, and community services” (Alemu, 2018, p. 212). The focus of this study is accredited public or private four-year academic institutions in the Western United States of America that grant undergraduate and/or graduate degrees.

### **Review of the Literature**

This section is a literature review on the topic of women in executive-level administrative positions in higher education in the Western United States of America. The problem addressed in this study was a disproportionately low number of women getting an opportunity for adequate career growth and achieving executive-level academic leadership positions (president, vice provost, vice president, associate vice president, and assistant vice president) across private, public, and community colleges in the Western US.

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of women in executive-level academic leadership positions across private, public, and community colleges in the Western US, the barriers they faced, and the skills and techniques they used to successfully obtain and maintain their positions. This literature review focused on

both challenges and barriers for women's career advancement and documented actors contributing to women's success in securing executive-level academic leadership positions at HEIs.

Statistics show that only 30% of presidential positions are held by women, despite the fact that there are more than enough qualified women for such roles (American Association of University Women [AAUW], 2018; American Council on Education [ACE], 2017). The report shows that women have earned more than 50% of all doctoral degrees since 2006 and more than 50% of all master's degrees since 1987 (ACE, 2017). Even though more women are graduating with graduate and post-graduate degrees, research shows that females do not hold associate professor and professor positions at the same rate as their male counterparts (AAUW, 2018; Johnston, 2017; Rucks-Ahidiana, 2021; Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015). In his literature review on equity and diversity, Berg (2020) also found numerous reports indicating that women faculty remain underrepresented in the upper ranks of academia and are less likely to hold senior administrative positions, which are typically prerequisites for upper management positions.

This literature review includes articles from peer-reviewed journals, book chapters, and grey literature in the form of reports by government agencies and relevant professional councils and associations (i.e., AAUW, ACE, Ios Foundation, UNESCO), ranging from the most current research that came out in the past 5 years to the relevant studies dating as far back as 40 years. The search for relevant sources was conducted primarily via Roadrunner, Google Scholar, and Base search engines and JSTOR, Sage Journals, EBSCOHOST, Taylor & Francis, Wiley Online Library, and ProQuest Central databases using the following key words, phrases and word combinations: *women, women in leadership, leadership, sexism, gender representation, gender leader, female academic leader, glass ceiling, salary gap, mentoring, mentors, men to women*

*ratios in the workplace, gender, academia, higher education, job satisfaction, administration, academic administration, inclusive leadership, feminist theory, and gender schema theory.* Some examples of searches used are: “wom\*n leadership” OR “female leadership” OR “wom\*n leader\*” OR “female leader\*” OR “gender leadership” OR “gender leader\*” OR “female academic leader\*” OR “leadership of wom\*n” OR “leadership of female academic\*” and “universit\*” OR “higher education\*” OR “higher learning” OR “institution of higher learning” OR “higher learning institution\*” OR “education institution\*” OR “college\*” OR “academic\*” OR “academia.”

### ***Underrepresentation of Women in Executive-level Leadership Positions in HEI***

A substantial body of research exists on the importance of gender balance in the workplace throughout all work fields and specifically in academia for many reasons, including better team performance, improved workplace culture, leveraging talent, innovation, and strengthened organizational reputation (Donovan & Caplan, 2019; Gero & Garrity, 2018; Madsen, 2015; Woolley & Malone, 2011). In her report, Madsen (2015) summarized numerous studies on the value of women in the workforce and presented convincing evidence of organizations benefiting in many ways from promoting women to leadership positions. Research has shown that, among other benefits, the increased representation of women on boards and in executive leadership roles (to 30%) leads to a stronger financial position for HEIs. More women in leadership also resulted in a more balanced and diverse workforce composition, improved team performance, better hiring practices with more women being considered for future leadership roles, and a smaller pay gap, leading to better job satisfaction, reduced turnover, and an enhanced organizational culture.

Despite the irrefutable evidence of the benefits of a balanced representation of women in the workforce in general and in academic leadership in particular, mounting evidence exists that the numbers of women in academic leadership are increasing at a very slow rate (ACE, 2023; Gagliardi et al., 2017; Johnson, 2017; O'Connor, 2018; Yahiya et al., 2024; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2025; Smith, 2025). O'Connor (2018) noted that academic leadership positions continue to be mainly held by men. Although women have outnumbered men on campuses and earned more degrees at all levels, from associate to doctoral, since 2006 (Johnson, 2017), the underrepresentation of women in academic leadership remains a significant issue (ACE, 2023).

Although women continue to increase their numbers within the ranks of HEI presidents, the growth in representation is taking place at a very slow rate. Gagliardi et al. (2017) surveyed college CEOs and Presidents of HEIs in the United States. The findings revealed that women and other racial/ethnic minorities were still underrepresented in the HEI presidency. HEIs continue to skew the pool of candidates towards white men, thus working against the efforts of diversification.

Women only hold 30% of all presidencies across HEIs in the US (Gagliardi et al., 2017). Even though the number has increased since 1986, it still indicates a glacial pace of progress for women in executive-level academic leadership, while highlighting a disproportionate number of qualified female candidates (e.g., women earned over 50% of all doctoral degrees) who are not being promoted at the same rate as their male counterparts. ACE's (2023) The American College President Report also showed a persisting issue of women's underrepresentation in higher ranks of HEI leadership (specifically, among HEI presidents). Women were reported to hold only 32.8% of all presidential positions in HEIs across the United States, with the gap increasing in

the light of higher numbers of female students enrolling in colleges and universities (58% of total undergraduate enrollment in 2021) compared to previous years.

Research clearly shows that the need for organizational change to increase diversity remains (ACE, 2023; Gagliardi et al., 2017). At the Forum of Public Policy Online, Teague (2015) outlined the following urgent action steps to improve gender equality, including commitment from senior leadership, setting clear and attainable goals and objectives, raising awareness and promoting diversity through training, and establishing and enforcing accountability. Cultural transformation is not easy and takes consistency and determination (Landel, 2015). Only with time, patience, and a commitment to the plan can organizations expect to achieve greater diversity and inclusion and enjoy their benefits.

Women who aspire to, apply for, and are appointed to the presidency tend to do so at a later age than men and are more likely to come from academic career pathways (Gagliardi et al., 2017). In contrast, men are more likely to be hired from outside academia. Yahya et al. (2024) found that, in addition to an evident gender imbalance, especially in academic leadership roles, the conceptualization of women's leadership in the literature was weak and insufficient, while the conversation mainly revolved around the barriers women face on their journey to leadership. Furthermore, there is no consensus on a common definition of female leadership in the literature (Ayyildiz & Banoglu, 2024). Morley and Crossouard (2016) argued that the weaker representation and conceptualization of female leadership in literature is a result of negative experiences and challenges women must deal with on their ascension to leadership. Not only are women still struggling to achieve a balanced representation in executive-level academic leadership positions in HEIs, but there is also currently not enough discussion about women's underrepresentation in academic leadership present in scholarly literature. Therefore, the study of

women's lived experiences presented in this research is warranted and adds to the existing discussion.

### ***Systemic Barriers and Structural Inequalities in Higher Education***

Academia has been historically dominated by white males (Chance, 2021; Locke et al., 2021; Machin, 2020), and women continue to be disproportionately underrepresented in academic leadership in HEIs (ACE, 2023; Brabazon & Schultz, 2017; Maheshwari et al., 2025; Correa et al., 2025; Sims et al., 2022; UNESCO, 2025) due to a host of systemic barriers and structural inequalities within male-normed HEIs limiting women's access to executive-level leadership (Schmidt et al., 2023). Acker (1990), in her seminal work "Hierarchies, jobs, bodies: A theory of gendered organizations," argued that organizational structures and processes are not gender-neutral, as was widely theorized at the time by the male-dominated research community. Moreover, she supported the statement made by Mackinnon (1982) that sexual domination was embedded in the institutional structures and legal systems. Further Mackinnon (1982) maintained that the gendered nature of organizations is reflected in every aspect of organizational structure and processes, from the division of labor, with men being continually in the top positions, doing skilled work, while *unskilled work* being defined as women's work, to the structure of job markets, control of the work processes and environment with resulting wage disparity.

The concept of profound systemic gender imbalance has been described and confirmed in numerous international studies on women in academia (Avolio et al., 2024; Barkhuizen et al., 2022; Burkinshaw et al., 2018; Coetzee & Moosa, 2020; Correa et al., 2025). In recent studies, systemic barriers and structural inequalities have continued to be the focus of discussion regarding women in academic leadership (Avolio et al., 2023; Yahya et al., 2024). Barkhuizen et al. (2022), in their qualitative research study, investigated various factors preventing women

from advancing to senior leadership positions and found that among the factors revealed in the findings were prevailing masculine corporate cultures, unfavorable burdening societal perceptions and stereotypes, inadequate mentorship and support, leadership identity distortions, lack of training, development, and work-life balance. Coetzee and Moosa (2020) studied the challenges women in academia face when ascending to and maintaining their leadership positions in HEIs. They found that the lack of acceptance of women as leaders was closely related to the retention of women. Both studies' recommendations for the organizations were to create work cultures favorable to women and conducive to their professional development and advancement to senior leadership positions to foster equal opportunity, combat discrimination, and make systemic changes by implementing retention measures for women leaders (Avolio et al., 2023; Coetzee & Moosa, 2020).

### ***Genderwashing***

Numerous programs and initiatives introduced at the government and organizational levels have proven to be largely ineffective in helping women advance to top leadership positions (O'Connor & Irvine, 2020). These efforts, however, do not address the structures, policies, and procedures that reinforce and perpetuate gender inequality (Corlett & Marvin, 2014). Gander and Sharafizad (2025) examined a wide variety of articles that identify the main barriers to achieving gender equity in organizations and found that the issue of gender equity is not an agency one, but a systemic one.

The phenomenon of *genderwashing*, coined by Fox-Kirk et al. (2020), is described as an organizational process of creating a false narrative of gender equality on paper that differs from the lived experiences of the marginalized population who continue to report systemic discrimination and structural inequalities through organizational procedures, norms, and policies.

Genderwashing is a form of organizational resistance to make real changes towards acknowledging and accommodating women as they build their careers in the workforce. Moodly (2021) reported that while men in academia expressed similar opinions to women's regarding the gendered nature of the academic contexts and women's experiences in them, men's complacency and lack of agency in changing the organizational structures and their status quo were evident in practice. Javaid et al. (2024) studied the effectiveness of a state policy introduced to battle sexual harassment and enforce equity in the Pakistani HEIs and found that the policy represented a rhetorical form of genderwashing and not a diligent attempt to make systemic change.

Genderwashing was harming women further by reinforcing gender power dynamics and institutional failure to act. O'Connor and Irvine (2020) investigated Ireland's multi-level state interventions to address the problem of gender inequality and found that genderwashing was still perpetuated in HEIs despite efforts and targeted initiatives. The research findings suggested that the most effective way to address the issue of gender inequality is to tackle it on three levels simultaneously: the state, organizational, and situational levels, by gender-competent leaders. To combat genderwashing, agents (managers and supervisors) should undergo quality gender training before implementing efforts and initiatives (O'Connor & Irvine, 2020).

### ***The Old Boys Club Culture in HEIs***

The persistent underrepresentation of women in executive-level academic leadership positions and low retention rates, despite organizational efforts and practices, may point to more subtle and creative forms of discrimination in higher-ranking positions (Fischer & Kinsey, 2014; Sümer, 2006). The boys club culture, exclusive male networks, power dynamics (Fisher & Kinsey, 2013; Morley & Croussouard, 2016), and male-oriented standards and expectations that exist for women leaders in academia (Hakiem, 2022; Leišytė et al., 2022; Morley, 2014; Peng,

2020) contribute to alienation and low retention of women in executive-level positions. Tessens et al. (2011) identified the *gatekeeping phenomenon* of a dominant group (men) in academia as belonging to masculinist networks exclusive of women and characterized by maintaining the allocation of resources focused on male networks and values. Dominant groups gate-keep opportunities, information, and facilities, making it challenging for women to access professional networks, career growth opportunities, and better pay. The gatekeeping intensifies the culture of negative bias against women in academia and limits their professional support and networking opportunities. O'Connor (2019) argued that the domination of men in top academic leadership positions is due to the legitimized institutional chauvinistic standpoint used in procedures, policies, and practices created by men for men. O'Connor (2019) explained that masculinist dominant groups exert their influence through established work hierarchies and micro-political processes, maintaining their status quo by selecting new members from their internal dominant group based on the superficial merit of being "loyal, useful, and a good colleague" (p. 12).

The intentional "inbreeding" practices in HEIs give men access to desirable positions and ensure that men continue to have an advantage in career growth over women (O'Connor, 2019, p.12). Morgan (1981) studied *homosociability* in academia, the phenomenon where men showed a tendency to reproduce alike through hiring and promotion practices, with the rationale of it being easier to socialize with, talk to, and work with those of one's own kind, which allowed organizations to mitigate the uncertain situations in the workplace. The findings showed that men used daily conversations about personal interests, such as cars, sports, or equipment, in the workplace to bond. The closer the circle, the harder it is for outsiders to join it, since they would be incompetent in those conversations. Martin (2001) argued that men exhibit such exclusionist behavior only when in the presence of women and often do not fully realize it. However, women

experience such behaviors as harmful. According to Martin, men exhibit two types of mobilizing behavior: contesting (standing guard to their status quo) or affiliating behavior (bonding at work with the same gender, seemingly superficial but offering support, inclusion, and opportunities).

Hall and Sandler (1982) referred to the masculinist organizational structure, intentionally downplaying women's contributions to academia, as a *chilly climate*. Research shows that women continue to experience unwelcoming work environments in academia (Dixon et al., 2024; Studdard, 2002). When women's role in advancing higher education is not accepted, acknowledged, and systematically devalued, women lose confidence in their work and prospects for future growth, which intensifies the marginalization of women as a minority (Leišytė et al., 2022; Savigny, 2014). This phenomenon is worse in more male-dominated fields such as STEM (Arredondo et al., 2022; Avolio et al., 2020).

Masculinist hierarchical work structures, misogynistic micro-power dynamics in any form, and weaker women's network structures have been shown to discourage women from pursuing top leadership positions in academia (Leišytė et al., 2022). Eslen-Ziya and Yildirim (2022) asked over 200 women academics about their perceptions of work-life, challenges, and prospects. Eslen-Ziya and Yildirim (2022) found that women considered their gender a disadvantage for career growth and were pessimistic about the challenges they were facing and their ability to overcome them now and in the future. Regardless of the reasons and intentions, the exclusivist and discriminatory behaviors that men in academia continue to exhibit perpetuate the problem of chronic underrepresentation of women in leadership in general and in executive-level academic leadership in particular.

### ***Hiring Practices and Institutional Policies for Women Leaders***

Dominant systems of accepted concepts and thinking in academia generated by patriarchal setup dictate discourses and create contexts within which policies are made (Allan et al., 2010). While issues of women in leadership have become increasingly relevant at global and national levels because of women striving for equality and adequate representation in leadership, research shows that HEIs continue to resist the change despite numerous government policies in place (Gander & Sharafizad, 2025; Leišytė et al., 2022; O'Connor, 2010; O'Connor, 2020; Schmidt & Wilkesmann, 2020). Genderwashing, informal power dynamics, micro-politics, and absence of change-committed leadership are evident in organizational processes and phenomena, detrimental effects of which women continue to experience (Burkinshaw et al., 2018; Leišytė et al., 2022; Van den Brink, 2010).

Constructs of excellence, fit, and national relevance are criteria created by men and used in hiring and promotion processes against women because these concepts are socially constructed as masculine and have vague definition thresholds, making them elusive and often impossible for women to attain (O'Connor, 2020). As a result, women are routinely overlooked in hiring processes and underestimated in performance reviews while having to work much harder to be considered for promotion (O'Connor, 2020; Winchester & Browning, 2015). Sheltzer and Smith (2014) studied publicly accessible data on the composition of biological laboratories in leading universities in the United States. They found that male faculty members employed fewer female students and researchers than female faculty. In addition, a hostile environment toward maternity and unspoken tolerance for sexual harassment in the workplace implicitly discouraged female graduate students and researchers from applying for scientific research positions. The research findings showed that male faculty trained more male graduate

students than female, creating a disproportionately large pool of male candidates for associate professor positions and causing a leaky pipeline.

In contrast, female faculty members did not show gender bias in hiring processes. The study recommended including female faculty in the hiring panels and creating a more favorable and accepting work environment for female researchers and graduate students in university research laboratories. Lagesen and Suboticki (2023) studied the concept of excellence in hiring procedures and its relation to gender balance in higher education. The study findings revealed that when the concept of excellence was expanded from the individual (women vs. men) to collective (all are held to the same standards of excellence), in true need of reconciling the top-down diversity policies with the context where there is a need for personnel, it creates avenues for improving diversity and equity along with practicing inclusive standards of excellence for assessing academic quality. Findings of the above studies suggest that improving clarity and expanding the excellence standards to include both men and women practiced with conscious and consistent implementation of diversity policies by academic managers has the potential to improve the underrepresentation of women in academia (Lagesen & Suboticki, 2023; O'Connor, 2020; Sheltzer & Smith, 2014).

### ***Tenure and Promotion***

The lack of understanding of promotion criteria among women and not men impedes career growth in women and indicates a lack of inclusion in organizational culture (Fox, 2015). Kulp et al. (2021) studied associate professors' perceptions of promotion clarity and found that women had less clarity than men at all stages of the associate career. The middle years are the most critical time for a tenure-track career since they inform future career planning and trajectory. Therefore, promotion clarity is essential during this time. The study found that lack of

clarity, together with other factors such as gendered organization of the workplace, lack of family-work balance, sexism, racism, and microaggressions, created feelings of deep job dissatisfaction and unattainable career goals in women. The recommendations included interventions to improve promotion clarity during the first ten years of the associate professor track.

In their research study on tenure and promotion, O'Connor and Drew (2023) interviewed 13 faculty members in an Irish university about their perception of the tenure track model and found that men were less likely to perceive the model as gendered. Women reported a lack of clarity about maternity leave and gender factors when negotiating the starting salary. However, women blamed themselves for not being able to negotiate a better salary. O'Connor and Drew (2023) recommended a cautionary appraisal of the tenure-track model, as it has increasingly been used to extend the faculty probationary period from one to five years. In summary, the patriarchal, gendered, and biased system in academia continues to discriminate against female candidates in hiring and promotion processes, resulting in disproportionately low numbers of women getting hired, achieving promotions, and holding leadership positions, while gender bias and discrimination continue to be challenging to battle due to unspoken rules and criteria women in academia are forced to meet to be selected (O'Connor, 2024; Watson, 2024).

### ***Mothering and Tenure Track***

A significant body of research indicates that the stereotype of women as mothers presents substantial barriers to their career advancement (Campanacho, 2024; Coetzee & Moosa, 2020; Qian & Yavorsky, 2024; Torres et al., 2024). Ginther and Kahn's (2006) Survey of Doctoral Recipients showed that having children affected the career advancement of women doctoral recipients, while men with children were more likely to advance. Watson (2024) explored the

messages of motherhood that 22 STEM women academics received in their workplace and reported that these women academics primarily received disparaging messages conveying the need to sacrifice having children for the sake of their academic careers. These messages were reported to affect the numbers of women on the tenure track and contributed to marginalizing women academics who have or plan to have children. El-Far et al. (2020) studied women's academics in Palestine. The study findings showed that the socially constructed notion of motherhood affected women with children and those without by impeding their promotion prospects.

The notion of implicit motherhood originates from the culturally accepted norm that women are the primary caregivers for their families and bear responsibility for most domestic duties regardless of whether they have children (O'Connor, 2020; Wilton & Ross, 2017). El-Far et al. (2020) reported that in the workplace, women without children were expected to extend their caregiving capacity to tending to administrative tasks, devoting more time to interactions with students, and even picking up work for women with children. Further research was recommended on the impact of family on women's work-life balance (El-Far et al., 2020).

Motherhood and academic leadership have been studied for decades, repeatedly revealing unresolved gender oppression and inequality in academia significantly intensified by COVID-19 (CohenMiller & Izenkova, 2022). Women academics parenting children were challenged with managing workloads, remote work mode, and their children's online learning (Del Boca et al., 2020; Pascale et al., 2022), with this radical change negatively impacting their productivity (Sevilla et al., 2020) and mental health (Fontanesi et al., 2020). Mothering administrators are penalized, and their labor is exploited in patriarchal social contexts while their efforts at caring for home and children remain unseen and unvalued (Henderson et al., 2020). Wilkinson and

Male (2023) found that women leaders experienced higher levels of anxiety and stress due to merging professional and personal lives during the pandemic lockdown, which manifested in longer work hours, the pressure of being in charge of work and family duties at the same time, and personal struggles.

Organizations, including HEIs, hold a concept of an ideal worker whose attention is not divided between work and family (Acker, 1990) and do not provide adequate support for mothering academics to balance work and life better (Cohen Miller et al., 2022). This systemic setup creates another barrier preventing women from applying for top leadership positions. Pal and Jones (2020) interviewed women mid-level student affairs professionals about how the culture and climate of their institutions affected their career aspirations. The study findings revealed that women's aspirations for leadership positions were not supported by their HEI's culture and climate. As a result, women chose to remain in middle-level positions that allowed them to balance work and life better. Perrakis and Martinez (2012) interviewed ten tenured mothering female academic leaders about how family and childbearing influenced their career aspirations. The responses indicated that women did not see the promotion to senior-level leadership positions as feasible due to childcare responsibilities conflicting with the long hours required for the job, suggesting that institutions do not provide avenues to reconcile these two factors, leading women to choose to stay in research and teaching roles.

Many women in academia choose to leave their careers when they are deprived of the opportunity to balance work and family responsibilities (Ngila et al., 2017). Sealy and Harman (2024) investigated the levels of ambition in women's early careers and whether there was a link to the mass career exit of women in their 30s and 40s. The findings suggested that women's definition of ambition goes beyond work domains (to family and children) and should not be

dismissed as a lack of career ambition. Women exited the workforce because the work environment did not allow for work-life balance. Additionally, Sealy and Harman (2024) found that women lacked role models to identify with and felt unsupported and unwelcome in male-dominated organizations. Recommendations included further study of women's definitions of ambition and success to inform organizational changes that better accommodate women as they progress in their careers (Sealy & Harman, 2024). Unsupportive work environment, unrealistic work expectations, and work policies continue to pose a serious barrier for women progressing to or holding academic leadership positions and should be a focus of organizational leaders committed to ending gender inequality.

### ***Leaky Pipeline Phenomenon***

The pipeline theory was first introduced in the 1970s to describe succession, promotion planning, and organizational management (Grusky, 1960; Mahler, 1983). In relation to equality in leadership, the pipeline theory was based on the premise that the underrepresentation of women is due to a lack of educated, qualified female candidates in the hiring pool. Therefore, more female graduates would translate into more women being hired for leadership positions, as more women would take entry-level administrative positions and be promoted to senior-level positions over time (White, 2005). However, the pipeline theory was disproven by the increasing number of qualifying female HEI graduates holding bachelor's, master's, and postgraduate degrees, while the number of women in leadership remained largely unchanged over the past three decades (Gagliardi et al., 2017; Ios Foundation, 2023; Umultirank, 2022). The reasons for the pipeline "leaking women" include the assumptions of white male standards, models of leadership (Alper, 1993; Kellerman & Rhode, 2017), and career aspirations (O'Connor, 2020). Additionally, the pipeline theory falsely presumed equal opportunities for career growth for both

men and women, neglecting numerous barriers and challenges that women face on their paths to leadership (Coetzee & Moosa, 2020; Manongsong & Ghosh, 2021). Ayyildiz and Banoglu (2024) investigated leakages in academic leadership pipelines. The study's findings revealed that systemic and structural barriers intersected with personal and social ones, with the primary trend being the expectation of masculine traits necessary for leadership. The overwhelming number of males in leadership positions perpetuates the masculinist descriptors of a successful leader, such as assertive, autonomous, and ambitious (Arquisola & Rentschler, 2023; Diaz, 2022).

Some studies have pointed to biased hiring practices that favor managerial candidates based on established gender expectations (O'Connor, 2020; Van den Brink & Benschop, 2014). Women often find themselves under pressure to be strong and assertive enough to lead, while simultaneously trying to balance this with societal expectations to be feminine, docile, and more emotional (Kruze, 2022; Yusaf & Schmiede, 2017). This double bind makes it challenging for women to progress to and succeed in executive-level management positions (Gallagher & Morrison, 2019; Moodley, 2021). Van Veelen and Derks (2022) studied the representation of women in academia and found that higher representation of women in lower-level positions did not guarantee higher representation at the top of their field due to male-dominant standards of leadership and success. Moreover, the findings showed that participants from the fields with higher representation perceived a thicker *glass ceiling* standing in the way of achieving leadership positions. The leaky pipeline is still valid for women in almost all fields, including HEI contexts, while systemic, organizational, and cultural barriers continue to prevent women from being promoted to top leadership positions.

### ***Glass Ceiling***

The phenomenon of *the glass ceiling*, first coined by Loden (1978), is described as hard-to-detect and unrecognized barriers preventing women from reaching top positions in their field (Kulik & Rae, 2019; Leišytė et al., 2022). The glass ceiling is unique to women in their upward mobility to leadership positions. Women are only accepted as equals until they gain real or perceived power and make noticeable changes. At this point, the glass ceiling thickens, and women's upward career trajectories are stunted (Stadnyk, 2024), resulting in the vertical segregation of women from leadership positions (Abbas, 2021; Leišytė et al., 2022). Paradoxically, men do not experience the glass barrier. Therefore, it is often unseen and dismissed in masculinist organizational contexts such as academia (Carli & Eagly, 2016).

The glass ceiling effect is achieved by creating barriers that hinder women's advancement to leadership roles, such as unfavorable hiring practices, work conditions, and a lack of support (Gipson et al., 2017; Judson et al., 2019). Women's careers often follow horizontal trajectories and include career breaks due to the multiple barriers women in academia face on their path to leadership (Avolio et al., 2020; Leišytė et al., 2022). An indicator of the presence of a glass ceiling in an organization is a lack of gender and racial equality in career advancement and general career progression (Srivastava & Nalawade, 2023). In his quantitative study of predictors of the glass ceiling effect on women's career advancement in HEIs, Abbas (2021) interviewed 154 faculty members from three public universities. Abbas's (2021) study findings revealed a link between the gender of faculty members and their appointment to executive-level educational leadership positions. Furthermore, the factors of perceived discrimination and male-dominated culture were found to be the most dominant predictors of the glass ceiling effect. The recommendations for the universities were to utilize blind promotion and selection criteria using codes for hiring, promotion, and awarding purposes (Abbas, 2021). The glass ceiling

phenomenon continues to present a serious impediment to women's progression to leadership positions in organizations, including HEIs, despite women campaigning and advocating for equal career and promotion opportunities for decades.

### ***Glass Cliff***

A few women who achieved executive-level leadership positions are thought to have broken the glass ceiling (Carli & Eagly, 2016; Morgenroth et al., 2020). Often, these positions come with conditions. *The glass cliff* phenomenon refers to instances where women are hired for top leadership positions during times of adversity and crisis, when their chances of succeeding in these roles are slim to none (Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010). Additionally, upon their appointment to the office, women leaders are not provided the necessary support to be successful. Such appointments create an impression that women are not suited for the jobs and contribute to a skewed overall perception of women's suitability for leadership positions (O'Connor, 2019; Peterson, 2016). A strand of research suggests that such appointments may be a result of prejudice against women (Morgenroth et al., 2020; Poma & Pistoiesi, 2025; Ryan et al., 2016). Other researchers argue that organizations prefer to appoint women to leadership positions because they view women's stereotypical characteristics, such as being communal, cooperative, and caring, as a better fit in times of crisis than stereotypical masculine traits like ruthlessness and assertiveness (Brown et al., 2011). Peterson (2016) studied the factors contributing to the demographic increase of women in academic leadership in Swedish HEIs in the past 20 years based on qualitative interviews of women in executive-level academic leadership positions. The findings revealed that while the average proportion of women Vice-Chancellors was the highest in the European Union (43 percent), the Swedish system was still marked by the leaky pipeline phenomenon, and women have been granted access to leadership

positions in situations of crisis and problematic circumstances. Moreover, such positions were a liability rather than a promotion because they required more time and effort while offering no status or merit. Morgenroth et al. (2020) examined three meta-analyses of leadership suitability and the glass cliff. The research findings revealed that women were more likely to be appointed to top leadership positions during times of crisis, with the effect being stronger in contexts with more significant gender disparity. The glass cliff effect is problematic because it limits the opportunities of women who managed to break the glass ceiling to precarious leadership positions with questionable merit. Both research studies called for more studies of women's lived experiences in executive-level academic leadership positions to better understand gender relations and their role in senior management (Morgenroth et al., 2020; Peterson, 2016).

### ***Golden Skirt Phenomenon***

Women who have broken through the glass ceiling and progressed to executive-level leadership positions remain a striking minority (Gagliardi et al., 2017). Due to the limited pool of highly qualified women, they are often invited to serve on multiple boards to meet the gender equality quota (Noland et al., 2016). Therefore, women in executive-level leadership positions may be perceived by others as the few well-connected females who utilize their status and connections to advance their careers. This phenomenon is known as *the golden skirt phenomenon*. It perpetuates yet another stereotype for women and attaches a label to it when all professionals, regardless of gender, may use their status and connections to advance their careers, harming women in leadership and undermining their achievements (Coetzee & Moosa, 2020). Grau et al. (2020) analyzed a database of board directors across 38 European countries for the ratios of men and women between 1999 and 2015. The results indicated that the distribution of women on boards has followed a power law, and the gender gap has diminished over the years

due to efforts to reduce board size, limit participation in multiple boards, and increase the number of women in director networks. The study's findings showed a gradual fading of the golden skirt phenomenon over the years, suggesting that appropriate regulatory and legislative measures can help increase the number of women in top leadership positions and eliminate imbalances resulting from their severe underrepresentation.

### ***Impostor Syndrome***

Women who manage to break the glass ceiling and are allowed to assume academic leadership positions face various challenges, including a lack of professional support and networks, as well as psychological challenges that come with being a minority in the job (O'Connor, 2018). Once in a position of power, women are scrutinized and evaluated more closely than men, who historically have been assigned leadership roles in academia. Women often develop a persistent feeling of needing to prove their worth and justify their accomplishments, a phenomenon known as *impostor syndrome* (Manongsong & Ghosh, 2021). The feeling stems from attributing one's achievements exclusively to external factors and fearing being perceived as fraudulent (Avolio et al., 2024).

Women with impostor syndrome feel that their success is never enough and fear that they may never achieve success in the future. The lack of confidence in abilities, skills, and experience leads to the belief that one does not deserve career growth opportunities and prestigious positions, resulting in unrealized potential and stunted career progression (Howe-Walsh & Turnbull, 2016). Schreffler et al. (2023) found that high levels of anxiety and exhaustion in tenure-track and tenured faculty are associated with *impostor syndrome*. Muradoglu et al. (2022) reported that although *impostor syndrome* is common among male and female academics in US universities, women academics experience it more deeply. Furthermore,

*impostor syndrome* has a detrimental effect on leadership behaviors such as effective decision-making, innovative thinking, and collaboration (Aparna, 2020; Tewfik et al., 2025).

### ***Queen Bee Syndrome***

First described by Staines et al. (1974), the paradoxical phenomenon of *queen bee syndrome* is characterized by "antifeminist behavior" towards junior women displayed by women leaders who have broken the glass ceiling and established themselves in leadership positions in masculinist contexts. Women achieved success on their paths to academic leadership by adapting to the existing ways and policies. Once in the positions, the female leaders reproduced those structures and policies, thus perpetuating the existing neoliberal inequalities (Wickström et al., 2021).

By distancing themselves from their female counterparts, queen bees eliminate competition in male-dominated environments that they effectively adapted to and benefited from. The "mean girl" characteristics differ from those stereotypical attributions of a woman as communal, supportive, and collaborative (Avolio et al., 2020, p. 272). Neto et al. (2022) examined the qualities of women in educational leadership in Brazil. The study findings revealed that women who held top leadership positions in academia exhibited queen bee traits such as denying gender discrimination, identifying themselves as members of the prestigious top-of-hierarchy group and above other women, and presenting more masculine characteristics.

Women's career progression can be negatively affected by interactions with queen bees. Locke and Hayes (2020) investigated the dynamics of female relationships in academia, focusing on women's career progression from junior academics to advanced assistant professors. The study findings showed that senior women academics (queen bees) engaged in bullying and uncivil behaviors, depriving junior women academics of mentorship opportunities and support.

Such behaviors were detrimental to junior women academics' career growth while perpetuating patriarchal norms and values. Rude and disrespectful behaviors lead to elevated stress and dissatisfaction in the workplace, attrition, and fewer numbers of women in academia. Junior women academics reportedly developed coping mechanisms and resiliency to resist hostile queen bee behaviors. A malicious consequence of systemic oppression of women progressing to the leadership positions in academia, *the queen bee syndrome* harms not only women who are on the receiving side of its manifestations but also the women displaying it (queen bees) by alienating them from other women and depriving them of networks and the benefits of a likeminded community in the academic top leadership echelon (Mansoor & Bano, 2022). The recommendations for the HEIs were to make systemic changes to battle toxic behaviors perpetuating gender inequality and workplace hostility (Locke & Heyes, 2020).

### ***Women's Perception of Self and Personal Leadership Style in Leadership Positions***

Existing literature confirms that men and women have different leadership styles conditioned and culturally defined by the patriarchal organizational contexts (including academia) and established societal norms (Burkinshaw et al., 2018; Gorondutse et al., 2019; O'Connor, 2020). In these contexts, women in leadership are criticized for a lack of assertiveness and agency when displaying their feminine leadership styles, yet are equally criticized for adopting more masculine attributes to become successful and recognized leaders (Burkinshaw et al., 2018; O'Connor, 2024). Masculine leadership is characterized by a transactional nature, with a predominant reward-and-punishment model that focuses on strategic planning and technical details. In contrast, feminine leadership employs transformational leadership traits, focusing on creative decision-making and problem-solving, in addition to communal traits such as attention to process, cooperation, and collaboration (Bhatti & Ali, 2021; Peterson, 2018).

Under pressure to act more masculine, women reportedly create their own leadership styles by combining masculine leadership attributes with their own style through personal cognizance, breaking gender stereotypes, and conscious individual development (Lashari, 2023). Transformational leadership style challenges the traditional authoritative leadership style and promotes an inclusive environment for more women to enter academic leadership (Peterson, 2018). This suggests that women in academic leadership facilitate a more substantial presence of women in the future.

In their research study, Bhatti and Ali (2021) analyzed women's experiences constructing their identities in academic leadership within masculinist organizational structures in Pakistan. The study findings revealed that women were expected to exhibit masculine leadership traits to be perceived as successful leaders. However, women reported developing their own leadership styles by incorporating masculine traits into their feminine nature and adapting their leadership styles to meet the requirements of the situation. As a result, women practiced flexibility, accommodation, cooperation, and decentralized authority, achieving a productive work environment and collaboration that is not possible in authoritative, masculine discourse. The recommendations were for organizations to implement policies and procedures that recognize the unique positions and needs of women leaders and offer more training and mentorship opportunities to support women progressing to leadership positions in academia. Additionally, further research is needed to gain a deeper understanding of the holistic picture of women in academic leadership, which this study aims to accomplish.

### ***Self-Efficacy***

A lack of *self-efficacy* may pose another significant barrier to women's progress in academic senior leadership positions. *Self-efficacy* was defined by Bandura (1997) as an

individual's level of conviction in their ability to successfully perform a specific task. According to Bandura (1997), self-efficacy is comprised of four components: performance outcomes, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological feedback. Eslen-Ziya & Yildirim (2022) found that women in academia are affected by implicit and explicit judgments, misconceptions, and biases, leading to the subconscious internalization of negative perceptions about them, which in turn affects their self-efficacy and career advancement. Herbst (2020) contended that women leaders should focus on maintaining high levels of self-efficacy to increase their chances of getting senior leadership roles, while Huszczo and Endres (2017) argued that decreased self-perceptions in women lead to less risk-taking and fewer career choices, and leadership development should focus on elevating self-efficacy and self-perception. Beyer (1999) argued that women should practice overestimating themselves as a technique to enhance motivation, confidence, and persistence. Using self-enhancing biases can improve psychological health and resilience (Beyer, 1999).

### ***Mentoring, Leadership Programs, and Initiatives for Women Leaders***

A host of literature indicates the need for mentoring and leadership programs to advance women in academic executive leadership (Alsulami et al., 2024; Bhatti & Ali, 2021; Coetzee & Moosa, 2022; Maheshwari et al., 2023; O'Connor, 2020; Smith, 2025). Mentors play a crucial role in developing middle-level faculty into senior-level educational leaders by providing effective advocacy strategies and empowering women to overcome challenges as they progress to leadership roles (Coker & Rothblum, 2024; Thien, 2025). Historically, there have been few women in senior leadership roles at the top academic echelons (Dear, 2016). Therefore, women senior leaders offering one-on-one mentoring are hard to come by. Yildirim (2022) reports that the lack of women role models is a significant contributing factor in women's

underrepresentation in leadership and is due to the patriarchal nature of society and the education system.

Hill and Wheat (2017) noted that the lack of women in academic leadership serving as mentors and role models may negatively impact women's career advancement in academia. Gaikwad and Pandley (2022) interviewed seven Indian women in leadership roles. The respondents expressed the need for more female mentors who would know gender-specific challenges and could guide and coach their mentees effectively. Dear (2016) found that sixty percent of women interviewed who were mentored by men reported a positive impact of male mentors on their success as leaders. However, when male academic leaders mentor aspiring women leaders, they should be self-aware and careful not to perpetuate masculine values, stereotypes, and bias. Men should use their agency and status to break the stereotypes, challenge homocosiability, and stop the marginalization of women in leadership (Moody, 2021).

The effectiveness of programs and interventions that organizations implement to improve gender equity has been shown to be highly dependent on a number of factors. O'Connor (2020) argued that individual mentoring did not address gendered organizational and cultural contexts and suggested institutional measures to battle gender inequality in senior academic leadership. Some examples of such measures are dedicated gender specialists in hiring panels, ensuring that the number of those promoted is the same as those in the level below, and awarding additional points to the projects submitted by women (O'Connor, 2020). Additionally, mainstreaming government gender equity programs has proven to be an effective measure contingent upon the quality of training and the level of motivation and expertise of the agents executing them in the institutions (Klenk et al., 2022). When comparing government regulative policies regulating gender equity in academic leadership in Germany, Norway, Poland, and Sweden, the study

results showed that the more demand for gender equality in society, the more government regulation will be (Klenk et al., 2022). Nordic countries Sweden and Norway prioritized gender equality with policies and regulations explicitly addressing gender equality in HEIs combined with funding and evaluations (Klenk et al., 2022). Germany had a gender equity law in place. However, the enforcement was relatively weak, with a focus on incentives. Poland had no government policies regulating gender equity in HEIs, reflected in a predominantly male pool of professors. The study results suggested that without a social demand for gender equity and strong agents motivated to enable organizational and cultural change in academia, government regulations would not have the desired effect (Klenk et al., 2022).

A research study by Wroblewski (2019) examined how the increased presentation of women in executive-level academic management (rectorate positions) in Austria, due to the recent introduction of government quota regulation, contributes to cultural and organizational change in HEIs. The findings revealed that the regulation increased the descriptive, rather than substantive, representation of women in higher education leadership. The increased number of women had a limited effect on cultural and structural change in academia. The steps towards cultural and structural change could be initiated only when women had prior training and awareness on gender equality, and other members of the rectorate shared these views. The research indicates that structural and cultural change can only occur when there is a strong societal demand and qualified, motivated expert agents are prepared to take the necessary steps (Klenk et al., 2022; Wroblewski, 2019).

## **Summary**

The underrepresentation of women in higher education leadership persists today in America and around the globe due to a range of barriers that women face in their careers (Avolio

et al., 2024; O'Connor, 2020; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2025; Yahya et al., 2024). There is an agreement in the reviewed literature that the government's legislative efforts to bring equality are not sufficient, and higher education institutions should make honest efforts to collaborate on developing and implementing an effective plan for systemic and organizational change to accommodate women (Barkhuizen et al., 2022; Coetzee & Moosa, 2020; Klenk et al., 2021; Smith, 2025; Wroblewski, 2019). With the joint effort of the governments, HEIs, and motivated, well-trained, and educated agents on the issues of equity and equality, it is possible to finally start a shift towards a balanced presentation of men and women in all strata of academia.

### **Ethical Assurances**

The study's ethical considerations align with the National University (NU) Institutional Review Board's (IRB) guidelines, including informed consent, autonomy, conflict of interest, and moral judgment (Suter, 2012). I sought NU ARB approval before the data collection phase. I explained the risks associated with disclosing private information about the hiring and promotion of executive-level academic leaders, and potentially exposing the unethical and discriminatory practices of their HEIs. I mitigated the risks by exercising the principles of respect, beneficence, and justice described in the Belmont Report. I protected the participants' identities by adhering to the principles of anonymity, privacy, and confidentiality.

Within the NU IRB guidelines and the *Belmont Report*, I secured informed consent from the participants, allowing them to make informed decisions about participating in any part of this study (Rankin, 2018). I disseminated a carefully tailored informed consent document explaining the researcher's intention to protect participants, the practice of confidentiality and anonymity, and certain disclosures. Unique identifiers, such as names and employers, were replaced with codes; virtual interview sessions were conducted in private. The recordings and notes will be

stored securely on my computer for a period of 3 years to ensure anonymity and protect the information. They will then be appropriately destroyed by shredding and permanently deleting electronic files.

The role of a researcher cannot be underestimated in the qualitative research process. Along with the power to choose the participants, how to conduct the study, and how to analyze the data, a qualitative researcher holds a great deal of responsibility in acknowledging his choices and his positionality and honoring the participants' experiences by accurately representing and analyzing them. While quantitative research uses instruments and tests, qualitative research uses the researcher as the primary instrument. The qualitative researcher performs data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Bloomberg, 2019, [3:30]).

Disclosing the researcher's positionality, maintaining reflexivity throughout the research process, and practicing the 'researcher-as-instrument' concept are integral parts of responsible and ethical research. Positionality is the author's chosen position within a research study (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013, p.71). Positionality encompasses a researcher's role, social position, and identity in regard to the context of the research (Bloomberg, 2019, [8:30]). The researcher's positionality has a direct impact on what the researcher has chosen to research (Grix, 2019), how the research is conducted, and how the data is collected and interpreted (Rowe, 2014). As a responsible researcher, one must acknowledge biases and assumptions, set them aside, treat the data with caution, and hold it for what it is, in the highest regard possible, upholding its integrity and authenticity, without distorting it to fit pre-existing assumptions. Doing so will allow us to face and consciously accept findings that were unexpected and did not fit the researcher's assumptions (Bloomberg, 2019, [14:00]).

As a female engaged in higher education and interested in the phenomenon of the drastically lower number of females in executive-level academic leadership positions compared to males, I recognize my own biases by reflecting on my positionality in my upcoming research. One of the biases is related to the role congruity theory of prejudice toward women. The theory posits that women are perceived less favorably as candidates for leadership roles than men, and the behavior prescribed for leadership roles enacted by women is evaluated less favorably (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Based on my personal experience with gender bias, I disclose and acknowledge this bias in this research and guard the data and participants from its influence. I kept notes with observations, reflections, and ideas for research to identify, track the influence of their positionality, and adjust as needed as an essential part of the research process. The notes allowed me to check myself while serving as the primary agent and instrument in all phases of research – selecting participants, collecting data, organizing data, analyzing and interpreting data, and drawing conclusions. The Researcher-as-instrument approach was an integral part of this qualitative research, allowing for a deep immersion into the research context and participants' experiences. I developed a good rapport with all participants to collect the most detailed accounts of their experiences and present them to the best of their understanding and ability. The participants were invited to review the transcripts from their interviews for clarity and accuracy. This approach, combined with a detailed and thorough description of my positionality through reflexivity, contributed to the transparency, credibility, and ethical integrity of this research.

### **Summary**

The problem addressed in this study is a disproportionately low number of women getting an opportunity for adequate career growth and achieving executive-level academic leadership

positions (president, vice provost, vice president, associate vice president, and assistant vice president) across private, public, and community colleges in the Western US.

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of women in executive-level academic leadership positions across private, public, and community colleges in the Western US, the barriers they faced, and the skills and techniques they employed to successfully obtain and maintain their positions. The literature review was conducted in alignment with the problem, research questions, and the purpose of the study to investigate the issues of sexism, recruitment, performance bias, gender stereotypes, glass ceiling, glass cliff, and lack of support for work-life balance leading to low numbers of women in academic leadership positions as presented in the existing research literature (Coetzee & Moosa, 2020; Manongsong & Ghosh, 2021; Yahya et al., 2024).

The qualitative phenomenological design of the study supported the research questions and overarching conceptual framework, with the literature review revealing persistent structural, cultural, and personal barriers that prevent women from establishing parity in executive-level academic leadership positions (Avolio et al., 2024; O'Connor, 2019; Yahya et al., 2024). The research study contributes to filling the existing dearth of women executive academic leaders' living experiences as they progress to and hold higher education leadership positions, with the data collected seeking gender parity in higher education institutions via sharing advice and tips from successful women in senior leadership positions with aspiring female leaders via the publication of this research. Section 2 of the research study contains method and design, population and sample description, materials and instruments used in the study, assumptions, limitations, and delimitations.

## Section 2: Methodology and Design

Underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in higher education is a well-documented phenomenon that persists in the United States, despite ongoing efforts by organizations to address representation disparities (Locke et al., 2021; Russel et al., 2023; UNESCO, 2025; Yahya et al., 2024). *The Times Higher Education* (2024) reported a significant gender gap in positions of power in academia, with women academics leading only 25% of the top 200 universities. Therefore, research on women's success in reaching and holding executive-level academic leadership roles in academia is particularly relevant as it may offer a deeper insight into the phenomenon of underrepresentation and shed light on the ways women executive leaders persist and succeed.

The obstacles faced by women in senior academic leadership roles, such as deans and department chairs/heads, as a manifestation of the phenomenon of female underrepresentation and systemic oppression in academia, have been researched (Barkhuizen et al., 2022; Brower et al., 2019; Peterson, 2016). However, to develop a deeper understanding, more voices of women executive academic leaders should be heard as they share their experiences of "lived adversity" and the strategies and tactics they employ to overcome the obstacles they encounter on their way to executive-level academic positions (Abalkhail, 2017; Chance, 2021; CohenMiller & Izenkova, 2022). This research study has an important mission of documenting and sharing the lived experiences of women academic leaders in executive-level positions in HEIs through the study findings, thus adding valuable data to the existing body of research.

The problem addressed in this study is a disproportionately low number of women getting an opportunity for adequate career growth and achieving executive-level academic leadership positions (president, vice provost, vice president, associate vice president, and assistant vice

president) across private, public, and community colleges in the Western US. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to explore the lived experiences of women in executive-level academic leadership positions across private, public, and community colleges in the Western US, the barriers they faced, and the skills and techniques they used to successfully obtain and maintain their positions. There were 2 questions guiding this study.

RQ1:

What are the lived experiences of women in executive-level academic leadership roles in HEIs as they overcame barriers to successfully obtain and maintain their positions?

RQ2:

What skills and techniques did women in executive-level academic leadership roles in HEIs use to successfully obtain and maintain their positions?

This section outlines the study's design and methodology, including the selection criteria for study participants, the instruments and materials used, operational definitions of variables, data collection and analysis procedures, assumptions, limitations, and delimitations. The criteria for selecting study participants are aligned with the research problem and purpose. The 2-prong interview questions are designed to elicit rich-in-detail responses that help answer research questions.

## **Design and Method**

The qualitative research methodology was selected as the most fitting for the study's purpose and research questions. Focused on exploration and description, qualitative research promotes a deep, holistic understanding of phenomena, social contexts, and processes through *the eyes*, that is, the lived experiences of the research participants and the researcher's immersion into the world of participants' interpretations of the phenomenon of interest (Bloomberg, 2019).

In contrast, Sofaer (1999) explained that while quantitative research is great at deconstructing phenomena into calculated and manageable elements that fall under a conceptual framework or prescribed plan of analysis, this methodology falls short in helping understand complex phenomena and multidimensional social situations as a whole. Qualitative research, on the other hand, accomplishes this task by providing in-depth descriptions of factors that cannot be quantified but play a significant role in explaining important real-world phenomena and relationships. This study will focus on the lived experiences of the participants and present context-relevant, rich-in-detail findings for readers to determine if these findings can be applied to similar contexts and settings (Bloomberg, 2019).

The design chosen for this research study is phenomenology. First conceptualized by Husserl (1931), phenomenology emerged as an approach to understanding contexts (phenomena) through the participants' lived experiences and making meaning of those experiences. Van Manen (1990) introduced hermeneutical phenomenology as a design focused more on the researcher's interpretations of the accounts of participants' experiences. Moustakas (1994) discussed psychological (also transcendental) phenomenology as a qualitative phenomenological design focusing on describing lived experiences rather than interpreting them and advocated “bracketing” (separating) the researcher's personal experience from the participants' to ensure the objectivity of the narrative and emphasized the importance of reflection as a technique that promotes a logical and systemic assessment and synthesis of the accounts of experience. Giorgi (1994) emphasized the importance of understanding the holistic picture of the research study for phenomenological researchers to accurately interpret the meaning. This research study used Moustakas's (1994) psychological (transcendental) phenomenological design with bracketing through journaling, semi-structured interviews as a data collection, and interpretive

phenomenological analysis (IPA) tradition as essential elements to gain new insights into the lived experiences of women in executive-level educational leadership positions in HEIs.

The analysis tradition of choice for this research study is IPA because it sets the participants in the center and allows me to bond with them and gain the most accurate and intimate insight into their lived experiences of the phenomenon under investigation. Brown and Clarke (2021) noted that IPA draws on the conceptual framework and utilizes well-defined research questions to help participants share their experiences and interviews to collect data that will serve as a sample and an illustration for the conceptual or theoretical framework of the study. Alase (2017) named IPA the best method to explore and investigate the participants' lived experiences, allowing them to tell their stories through the research study's findings. Semi-structured interviews will ensure the collection of rich-in-detail data, presenting the participants with many opportunities to express their thoughts and provide detailed descriptions as they see fit without any limitations, distortions, or repercussions. Using this method in tandem with the research tools and techniques mentioned above will ensure the most accurate and rich descriptions of women's lived experiences in executive-level educational leadership positions, lending further insight into the phenomenon of underrepresentation of women in HEIs. At the same time, IPA will serve as the most appropriate type of analysis to best understand the participants' accounts and reflections of lived experiences.

There are several types of research design within the qualitative research methodology, including case study focused on unique groups of people in specific situations, ethnography with the researcher immersed in the context of the population, action research focused on finding a solution for a particular problem, grounded theory focused on generating a theory to explain a phenomenon and narrative research focused on an individual's life experiences (Bloomberg,

2019). Phenomenological design, however, was most appropriate for this research study due to its focus on participants and the value of “lived” experience. While the case study design could be of consideration because it also examines real-life situations via interviews, document reviews, and observations, it does not offer the depth and breadth of the phenomenon investigation due to its focus on a close group of people immersed in the same unique situation, thus not allowing for seeing different contexts where the phenomenon of interest may manifest.

### **Population and Sample**

The target population for this study was women in executive-level academic positions in HEIs. The sample population consisted of women who held executive-level academic leadership positions (president, vice provost, vice president, associate vice president, and assistant vice president) for at least 1 year across all private, public, and community colleges in the Western US. Creswell (2012) emphasized the importance of homogeneity in the participant pool and similar participant experiences in the phenomenon under investigation. This population was sampled from the public record data of HEIs that met these criteria. The inclusion criterion was only those participants who had held executive-level academic leadership positions for at least 1 year. The exclusion criterion was women who do not hold executive-level academic leadership positions. The population was appropriate because it was directly immersed in the experience of the phenomenon that was the focus of this research study and could provide first-hand accounts of it. The recruitment message included a preamble, a consent form, and instructions on how to contact the researcher for those interested.

For sampling, I selected two LinkedIn groups focused on supporting and empowering women in educational leadership with approximately 4,000 members who are women of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds progressing to or holding academic leadership positions, Women

Thriving in Higher Ed Admin LinkedIn group that focuses exclusively on the demographic of mid-to senior-level women working in higher education administration across the United States, and ACE Women's Network Northern California LinkedIn group that is dedicated to supporting women on their path to leadership positions. It was my reasonable assumption that both groups contained the population of women executive-level academic leaders employed in Western US HEIs required for this research study. Additionally, I researched the public webpages of the public and private HEIs in the Western US and found contact information of 305 potential candidates.

The sampling target was 12 participants. According to Alase (2017), the appropriate sample size in qualitative phenomenology may vary from two to 25. The sampling method employed was purposeful sampling, conducted via social networks (LinkedIn), public records, and emails, with further snowball sampling assisted by the respondents to ensure saturation. The projected sample of 12 participants was appropriate because it allowed for data saturation, providing a more focused medium for gathering rich-in-detail lived experiences that helped me answer the research questions and gain a more in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Additionally, the population sample size was manageable, allowing me to collect and analyze data within the recommended timeframe and produce a successful dissertation within the prescribed timeline.

The participants in this study met the following criteria: (a) they are female, (b) have held executive-level academic leadership positions (president, vice provost, vice president, associate vice president, and assistant vice president) in the Western US for at least one year, and (c) represent diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. Participants meeting these criteria were able to share relevant lived experiences of the phenomenon under investigation and provide more insight

into the problem of the underrepresentation of women in higher education. I hoped to collect rich-in-detail saturated data from the participants' narrations about their lived experiences.

### **Materials and Instrumentation**

Data collection began after approval of the NU IRB. Initial research was done to identify women in executive-level leadership positions (provost, vice-chancellor, chancellor, vice-president, and president) in the HEIs in the Western United States. The participants were recruited via email and the candidate's personal LinkedIn profile. The contact information was identified by searching public records. Emails were sent out to 305 candidates across three states in the Western US. The IRB-approved research study information and consent forms were sent to all qualifying candidates. Eighteen participants responded to the call, and fifteen agreed to participate. I attribute the comparatively low number of candidates responding to the call to the busy season of college and university commencement (July). Executives are very busy during this time and often cannot take on more commitments, such as participating in research studies. The study candidates were given two weeks to confirm their participation, with a reminder sent to confirm and potentially recruit additional participants. Final confirmation of participation was sent to each participant, and a consent form was collected. Those participants who had confirmed participation contacted me via email to schedule an interview.

The interviews were held within 6 weeks via Zoom. One interview was conducted with each participant in a one-on-one setting via Zoom. The interviews lasted anywhere from 1 to 1.5 hours. The interviews were scheduled at two- to five-day intervals to allow time for reviewing transcriptions, coding, and interpreting. The recorded interviews served as the primary data collection instrument.

Additionally, I took handwritten notes during and after the interviews, which served as a secondary data collection method. To ensure accuracy, I reviewed all Zoom AI-generated transcriptions and verified interpretations of the interviews with the participants, resolving all inconsistencies based on provided clarifications. The transcripts were emailed to the participants for review, followed by a discussion and confirmation of the participant's final verification. A software system called NVivo was used to help the textual expressions and data excerpts into the recurring codes and subcodes.

According to Brinkman and Kvale (2018), interviews are an excellent and widely used method of collecting experiential data (i.e., perspectives and perceptions), opinions, and participants' worldviews. Since the social constructivist perspective requires the researcher's personal involvement in the phenomenon and the discovery of meaning through the empathic relationship between the researcher and participants, interviews are considered the most fitting method of data collection (Kim, 2014). Additionally, the role of researcher as instrument was assumed, and triangulation was employed to provide the most accurate accounts of participants' lived experiences, free from my own projections and biases.

The data collection method for this research study was an in-depth semi-structured interview with probing to elicit rich-in-detail responses (see Appendix A). Van Manen (2016) defined the purpose of interviewing in phenomenological inquiry as a means to delve deeper into the nature of the phenomenon while engaging in a meaningful conversation about lived experiences and their interpretations, and encouraged conversational, semi-structured interviewing. Chenail (2011) noted that open-ended questions should be followed by probing (follow-up questions) when necessary, during the interview. This allowed me to collect further

data from thicker, more detailed narrations and achieve the necessary data saturation while lending support and encouragement to the participants (Brooks, 2007).

The interview questions for this hermeneutical phenomenological research study were developed using Patton's (2015) interviewing guide. In addition, some questions were adapted from research papers in a similar field by Fowler (2019), Johnson-Gooden (2021), and Krause (2019). Patton (2015) described good qualitative inquiry questions as clear, neutral, singular, and open-ended. The semi-structured questions developed for this research study gently prompted the participants to share their stories about their academic career progression and experiences in executive-level educational leadership roles. They also talked about related topics and their unique interpretations of experiences organically. The interview questions were grouped into themes/topics: introduction to establish the context and build rapport, view of success to make meaning of the participants' understanding of success, gender, and leadership to gather the participants' accounts of their leadership experiences in executive-level administrative roles in gendered HEI system, support systems and mechanisms to find out about the participants' unique success techniques and mechanisms. I sought feedback from my board members to ensure the questions aligned with the study's problem, purpose, and research questions. All necessary adjustments were made based on the feedback. Additionally, I conducted a field test of the interview questions by asking experts to review them and provide feedback. Based on the feedback from the volunteer testers, I rearranged the interview questions to improve the flow.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Data collection began after approval from the NU IRB. Initial research was done to identify women in executive-level leadership positions (provost, vice-chancellor, chancellor, vice-president, and president) in the HEIs in the Western United States. The participants were

recruited via email. The contact information was identified by searching public records. Emails were sent out to 305 candidates across three states in the Western US. The IRB-approved research study recruitment flyer, study information, and consent forms were sent to all qualifying candidates. Fifteen participants responded to the call and agreed to participate. I attribute the relatively low number of candidates responding to the call to the busy season of college and university commencement (July). Executives are very busy during this time and often cannot take on more commitments, such as participating in research studies. The study candidates were allowed two weeks to confirm participation, with a reminder sent out to confirm and potentially recruit more participants. Final confirmation of participation was sent to each participant, and a consent form was collected. Those participants who confirmed participation contacted me via email to schedule an interview.

After completing the interviews and securing written permission to record them, I organized the field notes and interview scripts. I listened to the recordings, read the data, and separated it into emerging categories, assigning codes based on repeated and similar textual expressions. The process helped me identify recurring thoughts and ideas and group them into trends and themes. I use a software system called NVivo to help me organize data into trends and themes, and visualize the relationships through its mapping tool. Using NVivo, I organized the textual expressions and data excerpts into the recurring codes and subcodes. This process yielded some 80 codes and subcodes. Through thematic analysis, I assigned labels and descriptions to the data excerpts and identified themes based on recurring patterns. Smaller themes were grouped into larger, more specific themes. Next, I developed a coding scheme that focuses on the barriers women executive-level leaders face and the pathways they use to overcome them. Finally, I sorted the labeled excerpts and themes into files that can be easily retrieved for further research.

Van Manen (1990) noted that the main goal of the interpretive phenomenological approach is to turn lived experiences into a textual expression. Information from participants' accounts will be compared and contrasted, the themes and trends will be identified, analyzed, and connected to the research questions "What are the lived experiences of women in executive-level academic leadership roles in HEIs as they overcame barriers to successfully obtain and maintain their positions?" and "What skills and techniques did women in executive-level academic leadership roles in HEIs use to successfully obtain and maintain their positions?" I chose to be reflective and organized all participants' quotes I intended to use in my research study into separate files by participant. Then I emailed the quotes to the respective participants for the second member check and asked them to review the quotes for accuracy and confidentiality. Finally, the findings were organized into themes and presented in the Findings section.

### **Assumptions**

It was my assumption that the sample population selected was as maximally representative of the target population as possible. It was also assumed that the participants would respond with uncoerced integrity and truthfulness. It was assumed that the participants agreed to participate in the study willingly and did not hold personal agendas, but rather had a sincere interest in the topic of this research study, the findings of which may potentially impact them. Another assumption was that establishing a connection and good rapport between the participants and me would allow for a better exchange of information and the collection of richer, more detailed data. It was also assumed that the participants would be truthful and forthcoming.

**Limitations**

It is recognized that the Zoom mode of the interview may pose concerns about the confidentiality of the recordings. The recordings will be stored on a secure, password-protected USB device and destroyed three years after the study is completed. Additionally, participants may choose not to answer all questions that pertain to confidential information about themselves or their HEIs. Lack of answers may make it difficult to report the findings of this study. To mitigate this limitation, I ensured that I reached data saturation in each interview and categorized the data by theme during the analysis. Another limitation was the demands and time constraints of the participants' high-ranking executive-level academic roles, which potentially limited the time they could or were willing to commit to the process. High standards of conduct in qualitative research were maintained by being aware of my biases and preexisting convictions, researcher bracketing, staying transparent and inquisitive, and member checking to mitigate the limitations of potential researcher bias.

**Delimitations**

By establishing the criteria for the study participants, the most appropriate population for this research study was identified. Participants were limited to those who identify as women and hold executive-level academic leadership positions, such as associate provost or higher, and are currently employed at HEIs in California, USA. In particular, the participation is limited to women presidents, vice provosts, vice presidents, associate vice presidents, and assistant vice presidents. Women in executive-level academic leadership roles I sought to include must have served in their roles for at least one year. Another delimitation was the diverse cultural and racial backgrounds of participants. The purposeful selection of the participants according to the criteria above aligned with the study's problem of underrepresentation of women in executive-level

academic positions and helped answer the research questions. I accomplished data collection by capturing participants' stories of lived experiences of barriers and success of defying them in ample detail and color by means of a well-designed data collection tool (a semi-structured interview questionnaire) and a careful selection of the participant group.

### **Summary**

This research study contributes to the body of knowledge about the phenomenon of underrepresentation of women in executive-level academic leadership positions in HEIs in the Western US. The findings can be used by the HEIs and government agencies to address the issue of gender inequality at the state, organizational, and situational levels. In section 2, the methodology of this qualitative research study was further explained as the most appropriate for capturing rich-in-detail descriptions of the participants' lived experiences for a better understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. The phenomenological design was most appropriate for this research study due to its focus on participants and the value of 'lived' experience. The transcendental phenomenological design selected for this research study encompassed bracketing through journaling, semi-structured interviews as a data collection method, and the IPA tradition as essential elements to gain new insights into the lived experiences of women in executive-level educational leadership positions in HEIs.

The target population for this study was women in executive-level academic positions in HEIs. The sample population consisted of women who held executive-level academic leadership positions (chancellor, vice-chancellor, president, provost, vice provost, associate provost, vice president, associate vice president, and assistant vice president) for at least 1 year across all private, public, and community colleges in the Western US. This population was sampled from HEIs that meet these criteria, public record data, and several LinkedIn groups for women in

higher education leadership. The sampling method employed purposeful sampling, using public records and emails, with further snowball sampling assisted by the respondents to ensure saturation.

The data collected from the interviews were used to compose a comprehensive review of the participants' lived experiences in their executive-level academic leadership roles. The data analysis was conducted by reviewing, organizing, and classifying the data from the semi-structured interviews, the researcher's journal, and field notes. A thematic analysis approach was used to identify the common trends and themes in the participants' experiences. I used a software system, NVivo, to help organize the results and aid in the analysis. The assumptions, limitations, and delimitations of the study were discussed to ensure the highest standards of research and credibility were followed.

### **Section 3: Findings, Implications, and Recommendations**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of women in executive-level academic leadership positions across private, public, and community colleges in the Western US, the barriers they faced, and the skills and techniques they used to successfully obtain and maintain their positions. The literature review revealed that the underrepresentation of women in higher education leadership persists today in America and around the globe due to a host of barriers women face in their careers (Avolio et al., 2024; O'Connor, 2020; Yahya et al., 2024). The literature review also revealed that issues of sexism, recruitment, performance bias, gender stereotypes, glass ceiling, glass cliff, and lack of support for work-life balance leading to low numbers of women in academic leadership positions still exist and are well documented in the existing research literature (Coetzee & Moosa, 2020; Manongsong & Ghosh, 2021; Yahya et al., 2024).

I was able to interview 15 women holding executive-level administrative positions in the HEIs across three states of the Western US. The interviews were conducted via Zoom, and semi-structured, open-ended interview questions were used, resulting in vibrant, richly detailed, and anecdotal narratives. The problem addressed in this study is a disproportionately low number of women getting an opportunity for adequate career growth and achieving executive-level academic leadership positions (president, vice provost, vice president, associate vice president, and assistant vice president) across private, public, and community colleges in the Western US. The collected data exposed various systemic biases and confirmed the need to address them by providing conscious, consistent support for women on their path to and those holding executive-level leadership positions.

This section presents the findings of this research study, uncovering the challenges women executive academic leaders employed in the Western United States HEIs still face and presenting the tools and techniques they use to overcome them. The data collected during the interviews were grouped into recurring themes and subthemes and presented by research question. The implications of the study, drawn from the findings, are presented next. The recommendations section contains valuable insight and practical advice for women aspiring to or already holding executive-level academic leadership positions, shared by participants of this study.

I acknowledge the limitations that may influence the interpretation of the results of this study. While it is possible that some of the participants had personal reservations when it came to sharing their experiences on sensitive topics such as sexual harassment or mistreatment at a workplace, they spoke openly. They shared a wealth of relevant information, enough to reach saturation. Another limitation that could have affected the study is the insufficient number of participants, which could have affected data saturation. I started recruiting in June 2025 during the graduation and commencement time at HEIs, when executive academic leaders were especially busy and could have declined participation in this study due to time constraints. However, I was able to recruit 15 participants. Since I used public data records, primarily the university websites, for participant contact information search, limited public record data could pose a limitation. However, I was able to reach out to 305 candidates across three states on the West Coast and recruited enough participants.

## **Findings**

The target population for this study was women in executive-level academic positions in HEIs. The sample population consisted of women who held executive-level academic leadership

positions (president, vice provost, vice president, associate vice president, and assistant vice president) for at least one year across all private, public, and community colleges in the Western US. The sampling target was 12 participants.

The sampling method was purposeful sampling via LinkedIn, public records, and emails, with further snowball sampling assisted by the respondents to ensure saturation. I asked the group leaders of these online forums for permission to recruit in the groups. However, I received a denial from a moderator of the Women Thriving in Higher Ed Admin LinkedIn group, who explained that they do not allow surveys in the group, as members are already very busy in their executive-level academic leadership roles. I never received a response from the moderator of the ACE Women's Network Northern California LinkedIn group. I attribute it to the season I was conducting my recruitment in, which was a high season for commencement in all colleges and universities. During this time, executive-level academic leaders are particularly busy and have limited time for additional commitments. I had to devise a new plan for the recruitment campaign. I went to Wikipedia and searched for lists of colleges and universities in the Western US. Then I searched each HEI's homepage for the offices of the president, provost, or chancellor. I was able to find the contact information of the potential candidates, which was publicly posted on the HEIs' websites, including names, titles, bios, telephone numbers, and email addresses.

I sent recruitment emails to 305 qualifying candidates across three Western United States (Appendix B). I received responses from 18 candidates. After securing their consent, I was able to schedule interviews with 15 (Appendix C). The participants for this study met the following criteria: participants (a) are female, (b) have held executive-level academic leadership positions (president, vice provost, vice president, associate vice president, and assistant vice president) in the Western US for at least 1 year, and (c) are of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Participants meeting these criteria were able to share relevant lived experiences of the phenomenon under investigation and provide more insight into the problem of the underrepresentation of women in higher education.

The interview questions for the semi-structured interview were designed to be open-ended, allowing participants to speak freely, while probing questions enabled me to elicit more detailed and rich data (Appendix A). Table 2 presents the demographic characteristics of the candidates, including gender, years in executive-level roles, level of education, and statistics on candidates who reported factors such as non-white racial/cultural identity and being a first-generation college student as influencing their lived experiences. Of the 15 participants, 13% held the position of vice provost, 13% held the position of president, and 74% held positions such as vice president, associate vice president, or assistant vice president. The education reported was that 13% of the participants held master's degrees, while 87% held a doctoral degree. The positions' longevity ranges as follows: 13% less than 3 years; 33% 3–6 years; 20% 6–10 years; and 33% 10 years or longer. Additionally, 27% of participants reported that their racial/cultural background, other than being white, was a factor in their lived experiences as women executive-level academic leaders. In comparison, 33% of participants reported that being a first-generation college student was relevant to their lived experiences.

**Table 1***Demographics of the Participants*

Characteristics	Number	Percent
Gender		
Female	15	100
Position		
Vice Provost	2	13
Vice President (Associate, Assistant)	12	74
President	2	13
Education		
Master's	2	13
Doctoral	13	87
Years in Executive-Level Positions		
<3	2	13
3-6	5	33
6-10	3	20
>10	5	33
Self-Reported Other Than White Racial/Cultural Identity		
Yes	5	33
No	10	67
Self-Reported First-Generation College Student		
Yes	5	33
No	10	67

This qualitative phenomenological study explored the phenomenon of the underrepresentation of women through the lived experiences of women in executive-level academic positions in the Western US. The study sought to identify the challenges and barriers women executive academic leaders face and the tools and techniques they use to overcome them. The interviews yielded rich, detailed data that was coded and analyzed. Distinctive themes emerged based on the repeating codes and emphasis participants placed in their responses. The open-ended interview questions were carefully designed to answer this study's two research

questions. Interview Questions 2, 3, 4, 6, 10, and 13 helped to answer Research Question 1, and Interview Questions 5, 7, 8, 9, 11, and 12 helped to answer Research Question 2 (Appendix A).

The findings revealed themes that support the conceptual framework of interpretivist and social constructivist theories with a feminist perspective. The constructivist and interpretivist perspectives highlight the importance of the interaction between the researcher and participants engaging in collaborative and interpretive processes of constructing meaning. The interpretivist perspective is aligned with the feminist standpoint by allowing womanistic views and convictions and personal, subjective, and relatable experiences of a female researcher to be represented in the study. The constructivist perspective overlaps with the feminist standpoint in a way that warrants social and cultural interaction between the female researcher and participants and allows addressing systemic issues, including sexism, gender inequality, and oppression, through collaboration and collective generation of new ideas and strategies for systemic change. The following reoccurring themes emerged from the data analysis (Table 2): (a) gender-related challenges still exist, (b) lack of organizational support presents a systemic challenge, (c) hiring and promotion are still gendered processes, (d) role of mentors is critical, (e) support networks are an effective tool, and (f) qualities important for success.

**Table 2***Themes and Sub-themes*

Themes	Sub-themes
Research Question 1	
Gender-related challenges still exist	Not taken seriously Good old boys club Misconceptions Bias and prejudice Chauvinism and ageism The golden skirt phenomenon Impostor syndrome Queen bee syndrome
Lack of organizational support presents a systemic challenge	Leadership training and development Autonomy Organizational culture and work-life balance
Hiring and promotion are still gendered processes	Expectation of excellence and having to prove themselves Expectation of softness and asserting themselves Motherhood
Research Question 2	
The role of mentors is critical	Importance of securing a mentor Men mentors vs women mentors How to secure a mentor
Support networks are an effective tool for success	Community Family
Qualities important for success	Motivation Resilience Being analytical Being relational

**Theme 1: Gender-related Challenges and Barriers Still Exist.**

All 15 participants reported experiencing various gender-related challenges and barriers on their path to or while holding an executive-level academic position. These challenges affected women in various ways. The most frequently repeating and worth mentioning here subthemes

were: (a) not taken seriously, (b) good old boys club, (c) misconceptions, (d) bias and prejudice, (e) chauvinism and ageism, (f) the golden skirt phenomenon, (g) impostor syndrome, and (h) queen bee syndrome.

### *Not Taken Seriously*

The most recurring subtheme that participants reported is that they were not taken seriously in their executive-level leadership role. Participant 7 reported, "I think my biggest challenge has been to gain credibility. I think a couple of things are challenged in my own story, and my credibility is number one." Participant 11 also stated that her male supervisors questioned her credibility:

I think it was, you know, to the point where the President said to my supervisor, "Well, I didn't really think X was, you know, had much to contribute or share, but then, like when she talks, I start to understand that she actually has a lot of critical thinking. And she's actually really sharp." And I'm thinking, "why did you start with the opinion that I didn't have those things?" And I think, just because I'm sort of average looking and female and young, I think people just underestimate me on a pretty regular basis.

Participant 10 indicated that she is not acknowledged while being a key player in the team projects:

There's a person at the university where I work now. And it took 6 months when he would say "we're going to have this presentation today with this big meeting, and it's going to be L. and D." And I was like, "and S.", I mean, like I am in this meeting with a hundred people, and I'm like, "Oh, and I'm on the program, too". I just feel sometimes I'm not seen or taken seriously.

Participant 12 shared that at her institution, she is challenged by what she says, while male VPs' statements are accepted without doubt:

I think men are valued for what they say, and women are challenged by what we say.

I see this play out at my own institution, where the male VP says, I'm doing this, and it's accepted. And I'll say I'm doing this and getting the why. Why are you doing this? Have you thought about this? Have you talked to this, this? All these people? And I'm like, but he just said he was doing this. You didn't say the same thing, right? ... So, I think we're still having to navigate roles differently as leaders than most men.

Participant 15 emphasized that women must try very hard to be taken seriously, while it is never the case for men:

I can't really think of very many women of my age who had the opportunities to be a president, or even a provost, and I think it was because it would take a long time for women to establish themselves professionally and to get that respect in order to have been placed in the kinds of roles... I don't see that challenge for men. I've never seen that challenge for men. There is a sort of default that men are already seen as competent and successful, and therefore they don't have to do some special achieving. So, in my experience, I would see women trying harder to be taken seriously.

### ***Good Old Boys Club***

The good old boys club is the next most recurring sub-theme reported by women in executive-level academic roles. Participant 14 talked about her experience with the good old boy club as the first female president:

Being the first female President here has been a challenge because the Good Old Boys Club is, you know, still alive and well here.

There were people who were strong in the community. They had money, they had positions, and they had power. And in my case, they were all white. They were all Caucasian males. And they were bold and aggressive, and, you know, wanted to patronize me and pat me on the head. My voice was silenced in many, you know, in the beginning, in meetings.

Like I would try to say something, and they would just look at me like, "Is she really talking?" And then they would just skip over me and let the men talk.

Participant 15 shared her experience with the good old boys club affecting women's opportunities for advancement and acknowledgement, by saying,

My boss ... pointed it out to me. We went to a page on the campus website, and it was the distinguished professors on the campus. And he showed me that there were only 10% that were women. And you know, I just... I hadn't even looked at that.

Because it's an all-boys network. And you know the people who get rewarded, who get into the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. And when I look at that list, I say, well, men nominate men, and then men vote for men, and so, you know, it's hard to break in, but once you do break in...

I think it never would occur to these men to nominate these women. It's sort of just the way one views the world.

Participant 8 pointed out,

At times in my life, I have run into "good old boy" networks. That still happens, particularly outside of academia. However, I have encountered it in my current role when engaging with university presidents, most of whom are male. I feel I have to try harder to hold my own because not only am I representing a community college, which suffers

from a biased perception that it is inferior in offerings or quality compared to universities, but I'm also not male. I am cognizant that these perceptions may reinforce each other as I try to maintain an equal footing with these counterparts with whom I'm sharing the region in terms of postsecondary offerings and pathways to careers.

In my career, I was fortunate to have a male mentor (and boss) who supported me and was wonderful in many ways, although unfortunately, at the level above him, this was not the case. All but one female at the vice-presidential level of that institutional system (including me) ended up leaving, because we knew we were never going to advance. We were not part of the network at the top, which was dominated by an insular group that happened to be male.

Participant 9 described good old boys club behaviors she had experienced from her male colleagues. She said,

In some meetings, it's weird. When you feel ... okay, I just said something, and my colleagues completely ignored me. Do I let that go? Or do I say, "Hey, guys, I said something. I asked a question. You ignored me." Because that does happen, and I don't let it go. I say, "Well, guys, before we move on, I just asked you a question. Answer my question." Like, I want an answer. And then you know the guys in the room are looking just like, "What's wrong with you?" You just ignored me like I call those things out.

Those things that we as women are used to happening to us. You'll hear women say, "I said something. I was completely ignored. A guy said it, and it's the best thing ever."

And I think that's been the challenging thing, having people overlook me because I'm a woman, because that does happen even when you're in the room and talking, and people pretend like you didn't say anything at all. It astonishes me.

So then, after that happens so many times, yes, I'm going to be emotional. So, I think that's been the challenging part.

### *Misconceptions*

Misconceptions about women in leadership still prevail in the HEI executive administrator's landscape. Participant 10 shared her experience with misconceptions based on her appearance: "I think they look at me, that they see a cute lady with white hair, who's friendly and kind, and they just don't think I do anything important. I think they just don't acknowledge."

Participant 4 pointed out misconceptions about her professionalism and credibility based on her personality and appearance: "Sometimes people have preconceived notions, I mean, that's so far more distant." "But yeah, I do think that some of that is I present as... I can be bubbly. I'm personable. I'm petite, and I think I present younger than I actually am. So, and I think that yeah, I dress fashionably." "And I think that there were some people that could only see or saw that, and I think it was hard for them to see the more serious part of the work that I was actually doing every day." Participant 6 pointed out misconceptions she had experienced as a woman leader:

The number one is you're a woman. You're emotional. You're crazy. So, I think you know, I've had multiple discussions with multiple colleagues so as not to mistake passion for emotionality. I think it's hard for people just because you're passionate about what you do, and your team, and what you're trying to get to. They mistake that often for emotionality, like your judgment is clouded. I think that's been my biggest frustration as a woman. It probably is because I'm loud and my hands move when I talk. So, you take all of the way I am as a human, and then that translates to people and me being emotional. And in my opinion, my decisions are extremely rational. And my team would argue the same.

Participant 7 shared that her supervisor's assumptions affected her opportunities:

I had a very hard conversation with our President one time, where I was asking for some flexibility to do some extra work. It's written into our contracts that we have to get presidential approval to do any of that, which is fine and fair, and so I asked him if I could do that, and he told me "no", and it was because his perception was that I had more constraints on my time than other vice presidents.

Participant 11 talked about her experience with misconceptions about her skills and abilities as a leader, because she had children:

I think here, just in terms of any assumptions that people have around me, having kids, and what that means for my ability to achieve my work goals and my level of astuteness or intelligence. I think it's just there's an assumption that it's not significant until you know again, until I get in a space and start asking questions. And people are like, "Wow! You respond so quickly. And you think so fast." And I am like, it's just called intelligence. You don't have to couch it into these other things.

Participant 7 added to the discussion that her familial obligations were perceived as taking priority away from work:

The man in front of me was given the contract right away. I don't know a hundred percent why; it's a really good question if there's something systemic about women. I mean, again, my familial obligations are much more visible. I don't think my boss or any of my executive peers see my gender, age, or status as a mom and wife as an asset. So, I think those are things because they are perceived as taking priority away from my job. I think, even though sometimes they should, and don't.

### ***Bias and Prejudice***

Some 30 % of participants reported bias and prejudice based on their cultural and/or racial background. Participant 15 stated, "I was Jewish. I was asked to run a Christmas party. They, you know... All the decisions were made in the locker room when my colleagues played hockey." Participant 3 emphasized getting asked about her cultural background and credentials more often when she moved to the West Coast:

I've been on the East Coast. It's a very diverse population way, way more than the West Coast. And by diverse, I mean, there's a lot of there is truly a melting pot, right. There's black, white, Asian Hispanic, then there's really Asian, there's a great mix of people there. So, I think racially people are like, okay, well, it's already 30% black. So that wasn't as much. Whereas where I am now, it's like 2%. And then on the West Coast, it goes like this even further. You see that more with regard to people just having questions about your background and your experience, and where you're from and what you've done. And it's always about proving first what you can do before people actually believe you. So, I think that has been my experience.

Participant 4 shared that there are spaces at work that made her uncomfortable and conscious of her background and appearance:

But yeah, walking into a space sometimes and feeling, "I look so different. My background is so different, right, like I never..." I mean, some of the things that they talk about. I'm like, "That was never my life." But I had to be comfortable with it, and I had to grow into that comfort level.

Participant 6 shared her experience of bias about her cultural background in the wake of recent political events:

We're in the middle of a Middle East war that has created a huge problem in this country. And I think that has been the second most frustrating thing, and it's a harder one to talk to anybody about because it's identity.

It's really rough when I'm part of a group that fundamentally is my identity. But I've been able to navigate it pretty well and support the campus. I think it's been hard to stand up for what's right in the context of the US environment.

Participant 2 added to the discussion her early career experience with gender misconceptions that affected her career progression: "The men who started at the same time as I were more likely to be given opportunities earlier, like going to court, whereas I would be sent to the library."

When asked what qualities she considered important for success as a woman executive leader, Participant 9 named authenticity, emphasizing that preserving authenticity as a black woman was difficult due to misconceptions and bias, and pointing to the intersectionality of the issue:

Authenticity for me, particularly as a woman of color, because everyone has a template of what me, being a black woman, is or should be. So, there's someone always trying to force me into their version of who I am or who I should be. And I just won't allow it.

Like, I'm not that person. I am not. That's not me.

I think the biggest challenge in my career has been ... being a black woman. And that's how I'm going to show up. And I realized over my career that, at times, that has gotten in my way. It just kept me from maybe faster progress or some other roles. But I don't regret that at all. But I think that's been the biggest challenge, being able to be me in the space and bring my whole self to the role versus being who someone else wanted.

She continued to elaborate that controlling images of women, and particularly, black women, have a negative effect on women leaders: "And what I found in this particular role is the controlling images of women, and especially those controlling images of black women. So, being an angry black woman or a sassy black woman."

Other participants reported experiencing bias based on their appearance. Participant 1 observed that her looks made men around her more inclined to "behave better": "Men would be better well-behaved if they wanted me to like them. And I, you know, was always very professional." She then continued,

I think it's also because you're supposed to look a certain way. So, a few of the Board members I worked with were women. One of them said to me, "Make sure you wear dark colors. Make sure it's a suit, and make sure it's pants and a jacket." That was her advice to me. If you want to be taken seriously, you have to dress the part, and it was to look as masculine as possible. And anyway, so I would. I think appearance is really big in stereotypes.

And there's a bias that somehow, if you're not conforming to the expectations of how you're supposed to look, then you're not going to be taken seriously. So, that has been throughout my experience. All the way up through leadership.

### ***Chauvinism and Ageism***

Participants also reported chauvinism and ageism towards them as part of their executive academic leader experience. Participant 1 stated that her male colleagues made inappropriate comments about her appearance and made her feel like she didn't belong, because she was young and a woman:

There were always one or two who treated you like you were too young. You were a woman. What are you doing here? And they would make comments about what I would wear or how young I looked or just make comments about non-essential characteristics in terms of being a leader. And I just learned over time how to confront it.

And I said, "I don't appreciate your comments about what I'm wearing, you know, my skirt, or whatever. If you want to say I look nice, then you say that to your male colleagues, too. I'm okay with that. But I don't appreciate the comments." He still couldn't help it.

Participant 12 reported that she observed unfair workload distribution between men and women due to men's manipulations and weaponized incompetence despite the same job descriptions:

We had some female faculty in our STEM area say, "Look, our workloads aren't equitable because our men aren't upholding their end of the thing." You know, the division of work, so we end up doing it. Shame on us for always picking up the pieces. However, that led to a broader conversation about equitable workloads for our faculty, not on the tactical or structural side, but really that emotional extra labor, because men can get away with not doing as much as women.

She then shared an example from her personal experience having to pick up work for her male colleague:

The male counterpart shows up, and I appreciate it. But he's not really good at doing the in-between work. I end up doing the in-between work. And it's like, okay, why is that? Is that because you're in a crazy place and I'm not, or is it because you're a male and I'm a female, and so I pick up the work that doesn't get done?

Participant 11 described prejudiced behaviors against her; others were questioning her success within her executive leadership position due to her young age:

So then, when I started, and there was that reaction that felt uncomfortable for me because I just felt like I had to overcome some perceptions around having ... kids, and then also just my age. I've had people, when they find out how old I am, say, you know, "how could you be in the role that you're in? And how could you have had the career that you've had? You know, with like how young you are."

Participant 13 also described her experience of sexist and ageist behaviors towards her as follows:

There was one (dean) that had been here for quite some time and had been hired before I got here, much older. I don't think that he liked being bossed around by a younger woman.

And then I hired a young male dean, who also, I think, thought he could do the job better than me, and we had just constant conflict and struggle because of that.

And Participant 15 reported that she was not taken seriously when she just assumed her role as an assistant professor:

When I was 25, I wasn't taken seriously. I looked very young. I was very young. I came in as an assistant professor without a postdoc. I just I was hired and I was young, and so, I learned at that point that women were not necessarily taken seriously unless they sort of pushed, pushed what they wanted to do...

Participant 3 shared her lived experience facing prejudiced ageist beliefs and behaviors as others doubted her credibility in the executive role: "Because at that point, people feel like "there's no way you've had enough experience or exposure to be able to help me." I think some

of that is just based on what they believe my experience should look like." And Participant 5 experienced sexist gossip being spread about her due to her quick ascension to an academic leadership role:

And the comment was made, "I wonder who she's sleeping with." And you know, when my friend disclosed that to me, I just thought, what a nasty thing to say! As if my skills and abilities couldn't get me into the positions that I am in, and it would be something about my physical body and being female that was my ticket to getting moved up and promoted into positions that you know we're advancing.

It is definitely a sexist comment. I have not heard anything about any male administrators getting to where they are because of sex.

In addition to the most recurring subthemes above, the evidence of the golden skirt phenomenon, impostor syndrome, and queen bee syndrome surfaced during the interviews.

### ***The Golden Skirt Phenomenon***

The golden skirt phenomenon emerged in the accounts of 3 participants (20%) regarding their lived experiences. One participant shared:

And yet rumor is one thing that just astounded me. I had been on the campus for over 20 years, and these old school guys, people who were my peers, were gossiping about how I'd had an affair with this person or with that person, and that's just nonsense. But having to deal with that and knowing the two people who did it. You're trying to undermine my authority by saying I slept with that guy? like. It's high school or maybe even grade school. I have no tolerance for that kind of stuff, but at the same time, you can't stop people from doing it, and you just have to move on.

Another participant had an experience of an employee accusing her of an inappropriate relationship: "He tried to accuse us of having an inappropriate relationship. My vice president and me. What is wrong with you? But see, these are the games they played." She explained the effects of such actions: "They were able to push presidents and vice presidents out [before], which, of course, hurts the stability of a president, and they were really good at it. And I thought, I'm going to beat them at this game." Yet another participant added to the discussion by saying,

I have experienced hearing what other people think of me. Some stories were going around amongst the faculty. I'm very close with a faculty person who was also an administrator at the time, and she told me that someone had said, XYZ is moving quickly in her career and getting advanced and overseeing certain areas pretty quickly. And the comment was made, "I wonder who she's sleeping with." When my friend disclosed that to me, I just thought, what a nasty thing to say! It is as if my skills and abilities couldn't get me into the positions that I am in. It would be something about my physical body and being female that was my ticket to getting moved up and promoted into positions that you know were advancing.

She then described the effects of the golden skirt phenomenon on her:

It was really painful to hear because there has been absolutely nothing inappropriate with any of my supervisors or colleagues. It just felt really upfront to the work and the education and the efforts that I've made. So that was very hard hearing little bits of stories and people making up stuff.

### ***Impostor Syndrome***

Participants discussed the impostor syndrome they experienced or observed during their executive-level administrative leadership careers. The phenomenon was mentioned by 4 participants (27%). Participant 1 indicated:

Women tend to feel like they didn't deserve to get where they got, and maybe they're not really as good as, or maybe they've had to work harder than the other woman or the other man, so there can be some resentment that women also bring to that executive level leadership.

Participant 4 added to the discussion by saying,

I think women tend to doubt themselves a lot more, like when I think about people who have advocated for themselves, whether it's title salary, you know, men just don't always have that, but men generally just have that. That swagger that women, and honestly, the women who have had that, I believe, has been influenced by their spouses.

Participant 7 shared an observation about women leaders being more inclusive and empathetic because they know how it feels to doubt yourself in your leadership role:

If you were to compare most women leaders to white men, I think that at some point, there had to be a leap in their heads where they had to decide that they were a leader and step into it. And I think that makes them more willing to be inclusive and give other people a leg up when they don't necessarily believe in themselves or when they're doubting their own leadership. I find women to be more inclusive of voices and more empathetic to challenges.

Participant 11 talked about her experience with impostor syndrome when people doubt her ability to do good work because she stepped into the role at a younger age, and because she has family obligations, and how she deals with it:

I think I also just internally battle impostor syndrome around my age, my gender, and my status as a mother. All that noise gets in the way of doing good work, and it can get in the way that it's, you know, actually, negatively impacting my mental wellness. It just goes back to how I have to have a high level of personal management, so that I can come to work and do my best work each day.

### ***Queen Bee Syndrome***

Two participants (13%) mentioned queen bee syndrome as part of their lived experience in the executive-level academic leadership career. Participant 1 shared that she saw it in the mixed gender executive teams: "I have worked in executive teams in the past, where there was a mix of gender, and where the women go after each other. And I've had to mediate that. So, I know it doesn't always work." Participant 13 described her lived experience of queen bee syndrome:

I worked for an ABC at XYZ, who was female but frankly, was one of the women I have encountered who felt very intimidated by other women who had strong personalities, strong leadership styles and would use that to play people off of each other, and just make things difficult, and tended to prefer male deans over female deans, which put me in a kind of bad place. So, I learned a lot from her about what not to do.

She then continued,

I've worked with a variety of both male and female bosses. The female bosses I worked with prior to this have always been the most challenging, because whatever those reasons were, that insecurity, whatever it was, just made it harder to be able to feel comfortable and confident in saying, I want to do this extra thing, I want to move forward. Because

they take it as a threat. And I think that is something that just women sometimes struggle with.

All participants holding the position of a president reported *a power struggle* in addition to other gender-related challenges. One participant shared her experience when she first assumed her top-executive role:

And I don't think they [direct reports] respected many people, actually, and it just didn't work out. So that was very difficult. And but I did it, and ironically, maybe not ironically. You know what's happened is that everyone knows that I am capable of letting people go, and that also helps counter any sense that you know I'm weak or I'm incapable of being decisive or strategic, again, something that you might assume given my sort of social self, and the fact that I'm female.

Another participant described her experience with the power struggle as a new president, I was taking back administrative control. So, they were trying to push me out. It was never personal. They did like me as a person, but they wanted that power and control, and they could feel it slipping away as the board continued to back me, no matter what they did or said. I mean, they said some horrible things about me that were not true. Put stuff in the newspaper.

Participants' lived experiences indicate that women in executive-level academic leadership positions face numerous gender-related challenges regardless of their title and level of responsibility.

## **Theme 2: Lack of Organizational Support Presents a Systemic Challenge**

Another theme that emerged from the interviews was the importance of organizational support for women seeking to advance and those holding executive-level academic leadership

positions. Most participants emphasized that their institutions did not provide sufficient organizational support for women. They suggested more ways the organization could support women in their progression to academic leadership. Three most frequently mentioned ways the organization could support women were: (a) leadership training and development, (b) autonomy, and (c) work-life balance.

### ***Leadership Training and Development***

Participants agreed that leadership training and development were important for women leaders. Participant 10 pointed out the need for leadership training and development for women in her organization, saying:

It would be cool if we could do something on our campus, just because some of, you know, leadership institutes that are available for you to attend are so expensive, right?

And it's really cost-prohibitive sometimes to send people to those things.

Participant 12 added to the discussion that her organization could engage more with already existing resources for women, "And we have programs with ACE, we have programs with AA unit, or University Women. We have it with Community college women. We have it with HERS, and that's got to be built into our professional development." She then pointed out that executive leaders needed a different type of training and coaching that was often expensive and not provided by their HEI:

If you just want to do your job better, whether you want to advance into a presidency or Chancellorship, having accountability groups and having time to do that is vital for organizational success as well as understanding that executives are different than operational leaders. The professional development, the support that's needed is different at each level. And I do think we are challenged by funding because executive

professional development tends to cost a lot of money. But it's needed to maintain people's skill sets.

Participant 5 brought up timing and availability issues that her organization's leadership development events had:

I would say, if our administration were intentional about supporting female leaders, then it would be at times of the day that we're not conflicting with our day-to-day business operations, because often it feels like you have to pick between, are you gonna do something for yourself or are you gonna keep working?

Similarly, Participant 3 stated that her organization should have a leadership development program that would be developed with women in mind to give women a chance to participate:

High-potential and high-performing women. You tap them and say, "You should go. Do this. Why can't you do it?" Oh, because it's in the evening, and you've got to go pick your kids up from school. Is there someone else who can help you with that? Should we be offering this in the evening? Should we be offering this at a time that's equally accessible to everybody? Right? So yes, I've seen programs like this and built a program like that for a previous institution, and I'm working on developing something for XYZ.

Participant 13 talked about her vision of an individualized approach to identifying and mentoring women interested in an executive academic leadership career:

Well, I think even in our organization, we probably could do a better job setting up a mentorship system of sorts when we bring on new employees. Part of the onboarding process might just be that of, you know, starting with somebody. What do you want to do someday, or what do you think you might want to do? And maybe here's a person who

could help you. And so, can we set up a few coffee dates basically to have some of those conversations and have it be a little bit more formally structured?

Participant 8 shared her vision about the importance of succession support and her individualized approach to the development of potential women executive leaders:

I encouraged one of my direct reports to get her doctorate, which she is now doing. My ongoing role with her includes helping her build her portfolio to be competitive for her career growth. I believe in recognizing talent and then working to support that actively. I'm not in a position to make the choice regarding the next president of the institution, but I want to leave the college with an excellent internal candidate who's ready. I think that the turnover in leadership can be disruptive to an institution; generally, new presidents come in thinking that building their legacy involves change, and having someone from within can be extremely beneficial to ensuring that the institution is prepared to handle the change.

Some participants discussed loneliness at the top when holding an executive-level leadership role, indicating a lack of connection and organizational support in their position. Participant 14 stated, "But it's lonely, you know. You're just lonely, and other people that are in other positions ... can't understand it because they haven't lived it." Participant 6 emphasized, "It is lonely at the top, because you really have to be careful what you say and to whom you say things." Participant 4 added to the discussion by saying,

I think going through the, you know, as you start to grow into this role. And nobody's certainly born ready for it, so that everybody will have some growing up into it. There will be a lot of isolating moments.

But once you start to move away from being, once you start to move into being people's supervisor, let alone overseeing the department. You step away from those, I think, more interpersonal connections that more naturally happen across colleagues, that can happen.

Participant 4 then argued that the organization should have a mentorship program in place where a woman executive-level leader could be paired up with a mentor for at least a year:

In some ways, I kind of lean back to that, like there really should be an on ramp and not just a mentor is great and critical, and I think everybody should have a mentor when they're going into that role, you know. For a year, they should be paired up with somebody, and that person should be with them, checking in on them and making sure they're doing okay; that's more informal.

Participant 5 added to the discussion about organizational support in the role by saying, I think providing opportunities where, you know, groups of us can come together. And you know, talk about our experience in the field, and being a woman. There used to be kind of affinity groups here that would meet, and maybe they would. They would read a book together and, kind of, comment on the book. And that's dwindled a lot that's really dwindled a lot.

### *Autonomy*

In light of the emerged sub-theme of women executive leaders struggling with being taken seriously, all participants emphasized trust that translates into the autonomy that the organization gives them in their executive academic leadership roles. The importance of autonomy and the ability to make executive decisions is highlighted in the participants' responses. Participant 10 mentioned autonomy as a way for an organization to show trust to women academic executive leaders:

I think autonomy is a big one, you know. It's like you hired me to do the job. I bring a specific set of skills to the job, and recognize that I have those, and let me just use them to do my thing, you know.

I mean, and I don't mean that like I never want to check in or anything like that. But it's like, you know, and definitely tell me if I'm headed down the wrong path. But you know, just not micromanaging or second-guessing.

Participant 14 talked about her board of trustees, finally putting their trust in her expertise in her role: "Yes, they very much let me do my job." Participant 12 pointed out the importance of being able to make decisions, take risks, and have the opportunity for operational and strategic success:

I think one is to be able to take risks, be held accountable but not punished for those risks, having the opportunity to lead and not have the President lead all the time, whether that's within the college, or externally of being, having support of professional aspirations. And if they can't provide the support again, allowing me to find people who can provide that support. To provide that, you know, opportunity for both operational and strategic success. But also, some of the right level of challenge. Because we don't. We don't want to get bored. I'm never bored.

Participant 13 summarized her experience with autonomy in her executive role by saying, I would say organizationally, nobody ever tells me "No." So that helps. I'm not having to fight with people to get new ideas out. When I want to do something innovative, I'm allowed. I'm allowed the space to think crazy things. I am allowed the space to figure out how to resource it. Nobody has ever told me "No." When I want to write a grant, for example, they are very supportive of me building relationships across the state, with other

colleges, and with other organizations. So, for me in particular, that support really is kind of like, get out of my way and let me do my job. And trust me to do my job.

Participant 15 had a similar experience:

And so, it was a position that the provost enticed me by saying, "You've been at this university a long time." "I'm sure there are some things you want to change. And you will have the opportunity to do so." So, basically, anything I want to do, I can do.

### ***Organizational Culture and Work-Life Balance***

The need for and importance of intentionally and consciously building the organizational culture that supports women on their path to and holding executive-level academic leadership positions surfaced repeatedly in the participants' responses. Participant 1 pointed out:

You try to build that culture as best you can, and if that culture is continually improving, I think that is the most welcoming aspect for women or other intersectional, you know, groups to feel like they can come into a leadership position, be taken seriously, and be successful.

In contrast, Participant 2 shared that her organization was "not focusing on supporting women." In her opinion, it was "because I'm not sure that people are thinking that women are downtrodden at the university." She pointed out the importance of support for women in maternity and with young children by saying,

I certainly think that there's always room to get it for organizations to be more flexible with respect to supporting people with young children. And sure, they should support the men, too. But, given that an awful lot of couples default to having the woman as the primary caretaker, that is a way to support women, and women are much more likely to actually have a medical issue that involves pregnancy or childbirth.

Participant 7 emphasized the need to give women more exposure in their executive roles at her organization: "I think we could highlight our women leaders a little bit better, like again, I think our most public-facing leaders are still men." "Whereas women are taking more of the administrative roles – enrollment, HR; our CFO is a woman. So, I think there are some things that could go better." She then added, "Pay, I think, pay. And then highlighting our benefits too, I think, those are big things."

Participant 8 pointed out the importance of work-life balance and the ability for employees to have control over their work hours as part of an inclusive woman-friendly organizational culture:

The biggest issue for women in the workplace may involve their self-determined role in child-rearing and meeting childcare needs. Being an upper-level leader means working a lot of hours, but creating flexibility in that environment, when possible, will give women with children some control over how to meet their various responsibilities.

Participant 5 added to the discussion that there is a need for a change in the culture of working too much in her organization:

I would say that changing the culture working a lot, I think the expectation here is that, if you're an executive of any kind that you know you would take the weekend to work on a project, and or you'd be working at night, or you'd stay at work till 8 or 9 o'clock at night, you know, and I've managed those pretty well, but I think there is an expectation, and there is a tinge when you ask for time off, like, I'm asking too much.

Participant 11 advocated for starting with identifying the organizational values, then communicating them to employees through training and development, and, finally, reinforcing and supporting behaviors that move the organization to the desired organizational culture:

I do think culture work is so important and something that we don't maybe in higher ed, always understand. There's a lot of research around. How do we engage in culture work? But it's really about identifying our values and what culture we want to have and then engaging in behaviors and supporting and rewarding behaviors that move towards that.

She added that training for improved organizational culture should include "professional development workshops on how to be a good supervisor and what it looks like to hold your team accountable in a caring way, and how you show empathy, and how you build trust, and those sorts of things." She then elaborated, "So, we are taking the time to meet with all of our supervisors on campus, just reiterating to them how important this work is. And then, yeah, again, I think it's rewarding and supporting people who are engaging in that challenging work around changing culture."

### **Theme 3: Hiring and Promotion are still Gendered Processes**

The recurring theme of hiring and promotion still being gendered has been evident from the interview responses of the participants. The four most discussed subthemes in this context were: (a) expectation of excellence, (b) expectation of softness, (c) having to prove themselves and earn trust, and (d) motherhood.

#### ***Expectation of Excellence and Having to Prove Themselves***

Participants' responses show that there is an expectation of excellence for women when it comes to hiring and promotion, while such expectations are not true for men. Participant 12 shared her observations about the double standard for women when it comes to hiring and promotion:

I think how people advance is very different in women and men. What I see is that men have more transferability than women. If you're a man, you can step into any role. If

you're a woman, you're expected to have every specific requirement in a job description to get it. And I think it really limits women in how we think about our careers, as well as what is actually still possible within our careers.

She pointed out that, in addition to the expectation of excellent credentials, women have to work more and are judged more when they take risks:

I think when we look at the longevity of women and men in leadership, that's where that plays out, where again, men are given grace. Women are held accountable when something goes wrong. It goes back to that gender bias that still is so prevalent, and I think, being accepted as a credible person on the institutional effectiveness side as a woman.

I have to do more to be seen as an equal, and it is still a huge challenge, especially when we're still trying to raise families and do other stuff.

Participant 10 stated that women in leadership are subjected to extra scrutiny and must be very intentional about how they lead:

Women have to think, "Who am I going to be as a leader?" More because there's still extra scrutiny for women leaders from the people around them and the people who work for them. And I think it just doesn't occur to men leaders.

Participant 12 pointed out that the bias and resulting treatment of women in leadership is a systemic issue that is also evident in politics on the national level:

I think it's just still biased in how we perceive men versus women. I mean, we've seen that play out in national politics as well as in higher education. And I look at people who've been hired just in Washington, of people who don't have the credentials or the experience, and the men get hired and the women get overlooked. The women who are

hired have incredible portfolios and should have been hired a long time ago, and men who don't have any experience get hired into community college presidencies or state leadership positions, and women don't. They have to have the portfolio, and no matter what we try to do around managing bias, it is still so prevalent in our culture as a country. It's, you know, we're still trying to bust through that glass ceiling. Yeah, it's cracked, but it's not eliminated yet.

Participants 1, 2, and 11 discussed the expectation of excellence as women in an executive-level academic leadership position. Participant 1 stated, "I did not want to be hired because I was a woman. I wanted to be hired because I was good, and so I was constantly trying to prove that I was good," while Participant 2 pointed out that "It's still true that you kind of need to be better than everybody else." Participant 10 concurred with Participant 2's statement by saying, "Women feel like you constantly have to prove yourself." Participant 11 also shared her experience of having to prove that she can be both a successful leader at work and a good mother at home: "In the back of so many people's minds is like, how does she even give 40 hours a week to her job? Does she even engage fully in the way that someone without children or with fewer children would?" "So, I feel like sometimes I have to be above and beyond, to be able to prove to people that I can do both well."

Participant 12 pointed out that the underrepresentation of women in STEM versus humanities academic leadership due to recruiting practices indicates a persisting bias:

Who can be a dean of STEM versus a dean of humanities? Humanities are still largely female-driven, and STEM is still largely male-driven. The fact that we have women's organizations in higher Ed and not men's, where we have to have special recruiting practices, especially to get women, faculty deans, etc., in STEM just demonstrates that

we still have a huge bias issue, and that there's still pay disparities between women and men presidents, and it filters down in my own college.

Participant 13 added to the discussion by sharing her experience of being a woman in a predominantly STEM environment and repeatedly having to prove herself:

The areas where I struggle sometimes are in the community, more like with the XYZ tech program. There were a number of times when I had to explain to these folks why I was at the table. And I think it's because I am a woman and I'm an academic. And what do I know about anything was kind of the attitude. And so, I approach it with "you're right, I don't know anything about XYZ tech. But I know a lot about developing programs and how to make things happen. And if you really want the college's help, you're going to have to work with me and let me just prove it to you."

Participant 3 talked about the intersectionality of being a woman and her young age in having to prove herself:

At this point, I had my biggest challenges when I was in leadership roles as a young adult. Really, it was always "show and prove". There was never immediate respect given. There'll be signs that the trust is not there yet. The signs will look like someone else being invited to a meeting with you, because they're like, "I don't really feel like you have your arms around this," or copying other people on emails. The signs will be there that trust is not where it should be. I've learned you just let it be to not force something that isn't quite there yet. Just let it play out, and thankfully, in my career, it has always played out where I've had great working relationships with people.

Participant 7 pointed out:

I don't know any woman who hasn't had to, at some point or another, prove themselves capable as a directive, competent leader. Like I had to prove that I knew what I was doing before they were willing to let me have a normal 3-year Vice President contract, and that was not something that happened to the person, the man in front of me.

Participant 8 reported that her excellent credentials were key to landing an academic leadership position and establishing herself in the role:

Fortunately, I have strong academic credentials; at times I've had to show that I have that sort of proven academic depth when a man would likely be less likely to feel pressure to do that to be taken seriously. I have a very significant resume. Most community college presidents don't have the academic background that I do, and I believe my resume has been very helpful to legitimize myself as a president in higher education and as a female leader.

Participant 7 also stated that women were required to be excellent:

I think it is required of women to be excellent in their field, so you have to work and produce excellent results. That's the first thing. You can't just expect to be moved into the role because of anything other than your excellence. So be excellent. Be willing to tell people the good work that you've done. You know, highlight that, like doing excellent work and not letting anybody take credit for it, or not letting it go unseen. That's so tempting, but it's important.

Participant 12 talked about the expectations of women to dress a certain way for the tenure boards to appear credible:

I think interviewing is one of those critical places when you're up for promotion or tenure, even in academic settings. Again, I see women dressed differently from men at

their final tenure interviews, because the perception is that women have to dress a certain way, whether it's at a board meeting or at a state meeting. And I know there's been research around like the Wonder Woman effect and things along those lines, because to some extent, it is true, because the system was created based on white men, not anybody else. And so, we're constantly having to adapt our styles more rapidly.

Participant 12 summarized the experience of women leaders having to reconcile their authenticity with the demands and expectations of the role:

I think there's some I think women have to have more personas that they use than men. So, for example, and I think about this in terms of how we have to dress and that's changed. At least we don't. We can wear pants suits, not just skirt suits right. But there's different appearance expectations that drive how we look, which has an impact on how we lead.

We have less opportunity to be our authentic selves in every role that we have than men. I think we have to do a lot of that gender switching. And why that's important is because it's exhausting.

### *Expectation of Softness and Asserting Themselves*

The recurring subtheme of expectation of softness from women leaders surfaced from the participants' responses, with the emphasis on having to balance being assertive without being perceived as aggressive. Participant 14 talked about the expectations for women: "Women are supposed to be quiet and listen and not talk unless they have something important to say. Where men can just do whatever, they have free rein to do, talk, and be whatever they want to be." She pointed out that in leadership, "As a woman, I think you have to be assertive without being aggressive." She explained:

I don't let people talk down to me. It's not acceptable. It's not okay. And that's certainly been a challenge over time. But you just learn how to navigate it.

You have to walk through it and just continue to be assertive again. If you know that the direction you're headed is correct, and you are serious about making things happen, you just keep pushing it. You just don't stop.

Participant 2 reflected on her experience of balancing her gender with her leadership role: So, you still have to figure out how to walk that line and be true to your own nature. I think women have to read the studies on how women present and how they're perceived, so that you can get into that middle path where you're not unlikable. But you're not so nice that you're perceived as weak or ineffectual. And it's a lot easier for men to deal with that, particularly since they just seem to be, you know, born with a lot more self-confidence. Or, and also, it's kind of this air of people accepting them more for what they say they are.

Participant 6 added to the discussion by saying that in her experience, women are not allowed to be animated and show emotion about an issue:

You have to be quiet and soft and non-reactionary, even though you're saying something stupid sometimes, right when you're doing those things that don't make sense. People take it as something that's really much better than somebody who becomes passionate about the issue. So, I would say, the biggest thing that's frustrated me is trying to learn to handle it differently.

Participant 13 shared that it can be difficult for a woman leader to be assertive without appearing aggressive to others:

I think one thing that is different for female leaders is that I've had to learn where the line is between being assertive and being perceived as aggressive. I think it's perception. I still suspect this would have played out very differently had I been male. And so, trying to figure out where that line is. The other piece that I have struggled with, quite honestly, is getting that voice out, like, where do I insert myself? Where do I not? Where is it appropriate? Where is it not?

### *Motherhood*

The concept of motherhood in the workplace is still seen as undesirable and presents itself as an impediment to a woman's career. Participant 11 shared:

When I first started this role, I was intentional not to share with anyone when I was interviewing for this job that I had children at all. So then, when I started, there was that reaction that felt uncomfortable for me because I just felt like I had to overcome some perceptions around having # kids.

I was on [maternity] leave, but coming back, and instead of selecting me for the lead of a project, they gave it to somebody else because they thought, "Well, surely, you'll have a big adjustment." But it was my, I think, # leave. So, I had done a lot of work to make sure that it wasn't a significant adjustment. And so that was just like an unfair decision, which negatively impacted the project in the long run.

Participant 7 shared that her motherhood was not seen as desirable by her supervisors and peers:

The man in front of me. He was given the contract right away. I don't know a hundred percent why. It's a really good question if there's something systemic about women. I mean, again, my familial obligations are much more visible. I don't think my boss or any

of my executive peers see my gender, age, or status as a mom and wife as an asset. So, I think those are things because they are perceived as taking priority away from my job. I think, even though sometimes they should, and don't.

Participant 5 stated that during the interview, the first question she was asked was if she was going to have children, implying that motherhood was undesirable for this job:

One of my male supervisors in the interview asked me if I was planning on having children anytime soon. And that was a very interesting question to be asked. I think he was looking into how available I am going to be for the work.

Participant 8 pointed out that women often intentionally choose not to apply for executive-level leadership roles because they know that these roles are very demanding and not family-friendly:

Again, higher-level leaders will need to work a lot of hours and sometimes will have little control over our work demands. I know a couple of up-and-coming female managers in community colleges who are going to be outstanding in their next steps, but they're not ready to do it now because of the toll it will take on their families.

Participant 14 reported that she consulted her husband and children before accepting her executive-level academic position:

I consulted with my husband and my children before I decided to apply for this job. I said, "You know, these are 50-60-hour-per-week jobs. I'm not going to be around a lot. What do you think?"

Participant 12 acknowledged that the experience of balancing family and an executive-level role was very challenging for a woman and different from that of a man:

But there's still this expectation to provide family support in terms of picking kids up after school or taking them to school or to their soccer baseball stuff, whatever. But I would say it was challenging because of, you know, working 55-60 hours at that point, and trying to be a parent was hard. So having to work on days off or weekends takes time away. But I think it takes a toll on both men and women. I do think the expectations are different, though. I think women try to do both, and men are kind of either-or, and so I think male executives.

A lack of organizational support and genderwashing was evident in the participants' responses. Participants indicated that they would like to see their organizations engage more with women's organizations and offer greater leadership and training support for aspiring women leaders and women in executive-level positions. A lack of work-life balance also presents a serious organizational challenge for women academic leaders.

#### **Theme 4: Role of Mentors is Critical to Ascension to and Maintaining Executive-Level Academic Positions**

During the interviews, it became apparent that the role of mentors was very important for participants' success on their path to and while in the executive-level administrative roles. Three subthemes emerged from participants' responses: (a) Importance of securing a mentor, (b) Men mentors vs women mentors, and (c) How to secure a mentor.

##### ***Importance of Securing a Mentor***

Participants talked about the importance of mentors in their executive academic leadership experience. Participant 1 stated that "a mentor is also very important. I've kept in touch with mine over the years. You know, you form a really important bond with people who want to see you succeed and people whom you respect." While Participant 6 shared that "having

mentors and having people, you can pick up the phone and ask questions, has been amazing."

Participant 3 added to the discussion:

So, having a work support system like your family support system at home, having a work support system at work has always been very important to me, and so I have mentors from various different parts of my career that I keep in contact with, that I can call tonight and say, "I had a really rough day. I don't know if I made the right choice. What do you think about this?" I think it's important for everybody to have that, whether you're an individual contributor, a middle-level manager, or a senior leader, a C-suite executive, the president, or on the board of trustees, or it doesn't matter who you are. Everybody needs their work village.

Participants named various ways their mentors helped them on their path to executive-level leadership. Participant 4 had a mentor who had been instrumental to her success on her path to executive-level leadership. She shared,

She's been an instrumental person from when she hired me, and throughout my career, when I was hitting very difficult junctures, personally or professionally, she was someone I could go to, who would listen in confidence, and give me the tools. She never did anything for me, but gave me the tools to advocate for myself, and did her best to open doors for me.

Participant 5's mentor developed her leadership skills by strategically sending her to professional development and providing her with the exposure she needed. She stated,

[He] was my supervisor for a long time. He helped develop me professionally by sending me to conferences, sending me to trainings, and putting me out in faculty meetings or faculty, senate, or venues, where I was exposed to the need to think on my feet and to

communicate well. He encouraged me to feel like I had authority to do that, that I had the knowledge, and that he was supportive, and he was there, and he would kind of pick-up questions if I couldn't answer them.

Participant 9 described her mentor as someone who helped her get exposure: "And then he would just start inviting me to meetings. I had absolutely no reason to be in those meetings, but he would invite me." Participant 10 also talked about her mentor as someone who provided opportunities and opened doors:

Because they had the capacity to help fill those gaps, provide the opportunities that I needed to do things that would get me out in front of people or get me budget experience or get me experience with development, so that at some point I'd be able to offer the whole package. I think that is really what was most valuable. It is recognizing the potential and then helping me actualize that potential.

Participants 3, 4, 8, and 9 also discussed the importance of their mentors providing a safe environment for growth and honest feedback. Participant 3 indicated that her mentor is still someone she confides in and who gives her honest feedback:

You know you have to have those places of safety to be able to have a gut check and to be able to have somebody give you some really hard and honest feedback. That woman I talked to you about at the beginning, I can call today and say I need help, or other great leaders I've had [as mentors]. I can call any of them and say, "I'm not sure what to do with this."

Participant 4 pointed out how she saw the role of mentors in her experience:

I think, be there for me like, checking in, and every time they see me, just having that conversation, and being able to share with them and connect with them on a regular basis,

and let them know where I'm at, and when I'm at a fork in the road. It's the safe space, advice, and context I may not have.

Participant 8 added to the discussion by saying, "Personally, he [mentor] was very supportive. He was very encouraging. He was very honest with me; you know, he took me under his wing and taught me all sorts of things. I think he was always a teacher." Participant 9 pointed out, "I had mentors who would speak into my life: 'I see these things about you, but we need to hone this thing.'" Participant 5 acknowledged that her mentor's belief in her was critical for her decisions about education, her development, and growth as an individual and leader:

The mentor that I had in high school was essential for giving me the confidence to kind of move forward into being a young being, a young person whose family, you know, as a first-generation, low-income college student who was trying to figure things out and taking information from all kinds of places.

Participant 7 stated that her mentors believed in her, encouraged her to apply for an executive-level leadership position, and provided advice and honest feedback. She shared,

I had mentors who were like, "You can absolutely do that, and it can absolutely work for your family, and I think you should try." So, I think that's been really key - mentors who challenge my practices and my own self-embeddedness- that I get into stubborn thinking.

P10 reported that her mentors saw strengths she didn't see in herself:

I think, probably, on a big sort of philosophical level, my mentors often saw strengths in me that I didn't necessarily see in myself. So, I think, first of all, just the kind of being identified as someone who had the potential to be in this kind of an executive role. Then, there is the ability to be like, "Here are the gaps you need to fill, to be ready for that."

Participant 12 also indicated that her mentor believed in her and saw areas that needed to be developed:

I think that [she] believed that I could grow as a leader, so she sent me to a women's leadership executive training, and then she helped me become an executive in a women's organization. And so having those people throughout my career who said, "You're not there yet, but I'm going to help you get there" and invest in you, whether it's those kinds of formal, tangible things, or the more informal relational things, have really helped force me to clarify my leadership style and be able to articulate it, but also operationalize it.

Participant 14 shared that her mentor played an important role in her growth and "was the first to say, 'You should be a president. These are the skills and abilities you have. These are the things you need to work on. You need to get your degree done. Get going, get going, get going.'"

Participant 13 had a similar experience. She shared,

The president that I work with now, I think, is extraordinary in her role; she's been doing it for a very long time. She really believes in cultivating other leaders, so she has always been very positive about my pursuing an interest in being a president. Very supportive of me and having these different projects and kind of getting out of my way and letting me do my work. And then, giving me feedback when I've screwed up, she has no problem doing that. I've learned a lot from that and tried to take those lessons into my own work with my direct reports and my faculty.

Participant 10 talked about her mentors seeing her potential and helping her develop it:

My experience with these women leaders was that they took a genuine interest in me and my goals. They took that seriously and tried to help me develop in ways that I needed to

do in order to reach the goals that I had, and sometimes I think they saw things in me that I didn't even see.

Participants also mentioned that they observed their mentors and learned from their mentors' modeling behaviors in the leadership roles. Participant 11 reported that she watched her mentors live by example:

I've had some really great mentors who'd just lived by example. I don't know if all of them spent a lot of time teaching me how to do it, but just watching them was really inspiring, and something I gained a lot of weight from.

Participant 15 talked about her role model, who inspired her on her journey by saying, "There were very few female faculty when I was in college. I never thought about being a professor of psychology. But here was this person who was young and, you know, sort of hip and cool, and she was a psychology professor. Now, wow, that's what I wanted to do."

Participant 3 shared her experience of observing her superiors in leadership roles and learning from them: "Being led by good leaders, being led by bad leaders, and seeing what works really well. And that I wanted to take away and implement in my own teams." And Participant 2 shared a similar experience: "I've been synthesizing over time, watching how people work and getting an idea of what is effective." Participant 5 added to the discussion that she, too, observed people's behaviors in the leadership roles and learned from them by saying,

First of all, I don't ever frame them as my mentors to them. I don't really express it as that, and it's usually for a certain amount of time. And then, once I've learned a certain thing, I pick a different person that I'm paying attention to and see what they're doing.

Participant 8 pointed out:

I've watched a lot of other leaders. That's a great way to learn my trajectory. I've been under a lot of different kinds of leaders. So, you learn things that work, you learn things that are really bad ideas. And you know, I've also learned to play to my strengths.

### *Men Mentors vs Women Mentors*

From the interviews, a curious subtheme emerged: the difference between male mentors and female mentors. Participants reported that women mentors generally embraced them as a person, holistically, and wanted them to succeed not only in their career but also in all areas of their lives, while men were more managerial and goal-oriented, often tending to see some sort of exchange in their mentor-mentee relationship. Participant 10 stated that her mentors, "these women leaders, took genuine interest in me and what my goals were." She then elaborated:

She [mentor] was very much like, "let's see if we could make it happen." But she also cared about me very much as a person. She was empathetic when I was sad about things, she celebrated with me, and she asked me about my family. We had a lot of similarities to how our career paths had rolled out at that point, and you know, she just made me feel really good about myself.

Participant 14 stated that her female mentor really engaged with her and trusted in her abilities and potential:

My first mentor was the female president who came to the college I was at. And she really, she really pushed me forward. And she said, "Your boss is retiring, so I'm making you the dean." I said, "Are you not gonna make me interview?" She goes, "No, I've seen everything I need to see. You're the dean." And then she was the first one to say, "You should be a president."

Participant 14 continued,

My female mentor was younger, and I was younger, with a young family, and she had a young family. She was 10 years older than me, but our children were in the same grade through the school system. She sort of wrapped herself around me and said, "Let me help you. I'm here for you. Let me help you if you have any questions. My door is always open." That was kind of her.

Participant 15 also talked about her female mentor's holistic approach by saying, My advisor was an extraordinary mentor. I used to joke about this, that I would go into her office, and I would leave her office thinking that I was the smartest person in the world, because somehow, she brought it out in me. She was very good at getting you to do your best work, and then, you know, complimenting you and rewarding you when you worked hard, and so I also try to do that for my students as well.

Participant 10 added to the discussion by saying,

There were these role models, and that was when I was entering this more senior leadership time. And both of those people took so seriously the obligation or responsibility to mentor and prepare other women to take on leadership roles, and they were very conscious, even if it wasn't like, you were going to be a provost someday. They were very conscious of what you are good at and how they can help you show your skills to everybody here at the university. You know, just to build your experience and your reputation, and that kind of modeling and mentoring that I'd never had.

Participant 1 talked about her experience with the only female mentor:

I think there just weren't very many women in positions of leadership when I was going through the ranks. The only woman who had an impact on me that way was when I was a graduate student. It was like an amazing experience. She's also passed. But she's the only

one who really kind of took me by the hand and said, "You're going to be a great scholar."

Participant 11 emphasized the importance of empathy and the connection between a mentor and a mentee:

When I think about my mentors, most of them have been women, and I think there's a willingness to teach. There's a lot of support there, continued connection, and making time and space. I think we're all busy. It's mentors who are just willing to carve out some time that they're willing to engage in that work. And the connection. I would not do well with a mentor who didn't have the ability to attune and understand where I was or share that they could have empathy for what I was experiencing. And that's really important.

Participant 12 emphasized the aspect of intentionality and paying it forward when women mentor women:

I have had a combination of both [men and women mentors], but I think the ones who have stayed have been the women. Over time and again, I think a big part of that is giving back to others. So, for me, I still had this leadership circle. But now I have these other circles where I'm their mentor.

Participant 1 shared her experience with a male mentor who was to the point and result-oriented:

At the time, the VP for finance and CFO became my mentor, and he was amazing. We would meet once a week, and he would teach me not just about how the budget worked, but also how he oversaw enrollment, which is where I learned about enrollment. He taught me many things that I was able to apply in school, and I took the school from a structural deficit into the black in 3 years. And so, you know, the results were there.

Participant 2 stated that the motivation of her mentor may have been different if he had sons:

I finally did get a mentor who was one of those backbones of the firm who had three daughters, and I think if he'd had sons, he might not have been the same man, but one of his daughters was a lawyer; she was about my age. We're still in communication. And he did help me. But I never got good at this law firm at developing business, which was the expectation.

Participant 13 shared that her connection with her male mentor did not go beyond formal career support:

The thing that I was missing in the mentorship with them is that you know, they couldn't. Had I come to one of them and said, "I have a situation with my husband where we get this weird reaction," like they can't help me with that.

Participant 7, however, reported a different experience with her male mentor:

I had a great boss for a long time. It was the same guy who hired me, who I felt like created clarity, was empathetic and kind, somebody who was transparent about his own experiences, motivated others, wanted to do hard work, but also cared about me personally. I think that I'm very different than him, just in personality, but I think in approach I'm very similar because of who he was and the way he led, and how I felt motivated to work hard for him, because I felt like he really cared about me.

Participant 13 stated that her experience with the characteristics of male and female mentors was about the same, and both provided the support she needed:

In terms of successful mentorship. I think the characteristics really have been the same for me. I don't know that I could perceive a difference in terms of what I needed from a

mentor versus what my male mentors or my current female mentors have given me, and I think again, all of them have been good about that honest feedback and the part about recognizing me as my own individual leader, human all those things, and not trying to change me. And there has been a major difference between the two in that regard for me, at least.

The difference in mentorship styles between male and female mentors, some participants experienced, could stem from the differences in leadership styles between men and women. Participants reported that women in leadership are more relational, collaborative, and empathic, while men are more goal-oriented, focused on results, and less interpersonal. Participant 10 indicated: "I think the women leaders whom I have worked the best under and who I probably model in my own leadership, were quite collaborative and relational leaders," while Participant 1 stated that "all [female] executive team now leads in a more relational way. In other words, they think about the people around them." Participant 12 also noted,

Women are much more relational leaders than men, who are very tactical, and that creates some conflict. But it should also create some opportunities for holistic leadership. But again, I think, ubiquitously, what women focus on are those relational things, knowing when you have those strong relationships and you have well-trained people, the operations follow. Whereas men see, "we've got to fix all the operational issues from a tactical perspective."

She elaborated to say,

We [women] tend to lead relationally. We excel at building teams because we understand the emotional support. So, for example, supervising is the hardest job. And because we're dealing with human beings who are relational by nature, we spend a lot of time nurturing,

developing, and supporting teams. Whereas a lot of men (not all) spend more time just thinking about the output of the team and being very transactional with their team:

"Here's the problem. Here's how we're going to solve it. And here's what we're going to see. I need you to do these operational things."

Participant 13 reported that men leaders tend to be more direct and goal-oriented, while women leaders tend to see achieving their goals through building relationships first:

I have also worked with male leaders, where I feel like the inclination is to just get things done and not have to worry so much about those relationships, whereas female leaders worry more about those relationships. And sometimes I think that can impede progress, honestly, where it would be easier just to go tell someone to do something. And a male might feel more comfortable doing that in general, whereas a female leader may feel like "I've got to work those relationships. I've got to be a little bit more gentle in my approach to get the same result."

Participant 2 stated that "women are much more likely to be collaborative," while Participant 5 pointed out,

Women tend to be more collective in their thinking. They tend to be thinking about the group and the purpose, generally speaking, maybe more than themselves at that point if they're a leader, almost stepping outside of themselves a bit to make the best decision for the group.

Participant 14 added to the discussion by saying,

We [women] just have a tendency to work together with other people. I think that collaboration comes a little more naturally for us. And it's not to say, you know, that men don't have that because I have met some outstanding male peers and counterparts. But I

just think, in general, women have that piece to them a little bit more. And we're a little bit less aggressive about things, too.

Participant 6 indicated that "that mother instinct, whatever you want to call it, [women] tend to think about other people a little more before they make decisions, and they're less cutthroat about it. There's more compassion in the way they make their decisions." She elaborated, "It's being able to feel for the people around you that is fundamental to good leadership, and I think women just naturally have more of it."

Participant 7 made an observation that in her experience, women who broke the glass ceiling and got into the executive leadership landscape tend to be more inclusive and supportive of other women. She stated,

If you were to compare most women leaders to white men, I think that at some point, there had to be a leap in their heads where they had to decide that they were a leader and step into it. And I think that makes them more willing to be inclusive and maybe give other people a leg up when they don't necessarily believe in themselves or when they're doubting their own leadership. And so, I find women to be more inclusive of voices and more empathetic to challenges.

Participant 8 shared her personal experience of leading with care and empathy:

I think being very sensitive to how others are experiencing things around you is extremely helpful in leadership. You become attuned to other perspectives and the demands that people have in their roles. I think that being female is an advantage in terms of developing this skill, because women are generally socialized from the very beginning, for better or for worse, to think of others first.

I'm always scanning the room. I'm always looking at everyone. If someone looks down and doesn't engage, I'm aware of it and try to find a way to ask them if everything's okay. If everyone contributes to a conversation but one person, I make sure to ask that person's opinion. Body language can be just as important as verbal cues. If someone looks down and doesn't engage, I'm aware of it. I ask them if everything's okay, and I ask them for their opinion. If everyone gives their opinion, but one person, I make sure to ask that person's opinion. If someone is really not participating a lot, then, after the meeting, I'll ask them if they're doing okay. If there was something happening, that sort of thing. So, just pay attention to everyone's body language.

Participant 9 pointed out the difference in men and women leaders executing a task:

When we're having conversations, whether it's policy, budget, student experience, community engagement, whatever it is. We always want to get into the "How will this affect the people? How will this affect the student experience? How will this affect our staff? What will be the ramifications for them?" Whereas the men at the table only think about the policy and its implementation.

### ***How To Secure a Mentor***

All participants recognized the value of having a mentor and highly recommended finding one for women who aspire to become executive-level academic leaders. They shared how they found a mentor and how one could be proactive about securing one. Most participants were able to secure a mentor who was their supervisor.

Participant 10 shared that she asked a person she admired to be her mentor: "I waited a long time before I finally said to somebody, 'Would you mentor me?' Cause I guess I thought people would say 'no'. I don't know why I waited so long." Participant 10 then recommended,

"Don't be afraid to ask somebody to be your mentor. Someone you admire and see as a model for how you want to be a leader." She elaborated,

I think many women wait for the invitation to come from somebody else to them. But I think it's important, when you find someone who you think is a great leader, and you would like to be a leader like them, to just ask.

Participant 11 shared that she had success securing her supervisors as mentors, I've had success with supervisors because there's a natural connection, and you meet with that person regularly. I've also had success with colleagues who were working on a project together. There has to be some reason you're creating that foundational relationship.

She also recommended that women ask those they consider strong leaders to mentor them:

If it is someone you just perceive as a strong leader, and you want them to be served as a mentor because you don't have some of those more natural connections. I would suggest that they look for someone who's willing to meet with them regularly. Because if you're not doing this work regularly, it's just not going to be built. I mean, that's how relationships are built.

She elaborated that the potential mentor must also be willing and ready to enter into the mentor-mentee relationship for the best success:

So, I do think it's important that the person is willing. Honestly, I think, even potentially, a counselor. Right like that. Personal work is first. So if it's not something, you know, if there isn't an opportunity for it to be like a life coach type counselor could be an option if

that's within their finances as well, because you really want it to be someone who's good at pouring into people, and not everyone has that skill.

Participant 3 stated that her advice was "having a mentor of some kind and as things are changing, be open to some of the changes." She advocated for finding a mentor who inspires you:

I would say that you pick somebody who has demonstrated decisions that either you would view as very hard to make, and they ended up making a good decision, or they handled a situation really well, that you would aspire to handle something that way. Or you see something about the individual that you admire and want to be more like. I think it is primary.

Participants 8, 13, and 14 also argued that securing a mentor was the most important piece of advice for aspiring women leaders. Participant 8 shared that aspiring women leaders should be proactive and reach out to potential mentors. She believed this approach has a high chance of success with women mentors because women in leadership are conscious about paying it forward and helping other women to succeed. She explained,

I think having a mentor is important as an aspiring female leader. How do you find a mentor? I mean, that is a question. I make it a point to make myself available for such things, even "looking" for potential mentees. I think that's part of paying it forward as one climbs the ladder; I'd like to think other people in my role are doing the same. And I think, for those women, maybe just call around, kind of like "I got your email."

Participant 13 pointed out,

Moving forward, seek out those mentors, whether they are male or female, who really and truly will be supporters and who will let you be you, but also provide support for

whatever it is that you might want to do next. I think that's probably the most important piece.

Participant 14 stated, "Well, I really believe in mentors, so I would say, find a good mentor, usually a female, but find a good mentor." She explained,

You find someone that you're like. Oh, this is somebody that I feel like I can relate to, or somebody that would be open to being a mentor to me. And you ask them. Be assertive, and ask them for their help, and just say, "I'm looking for a mentor. I think this might be a good fit. Can we sit down and talk about this?" And what would this look like? Because a mentor means something different to everyone.

Participant 15 talked about her experience mentoring other women and her recommendation: "Befriend other women. So, I think, the fact that I have 5 or 6 women who have asked me to serve as their mentor. I meet with them once a month." "If one wants to do this [find a mentor], befriend a senior woman leader."

Participants placed a high importance on securing a mentor for women aspiring to executive-level academic leadership. They saw great value in having both male and female mentors for the full benefit of a mentorship experience and recommended being proactive and reaching out to potential mentors directly.

### **Theme 5: Support Networks are an Effective Tool for Success**

The interviews revealed that, in addition to mentors, support networks were valued as an effective tool for success by women in executive-level academic leadership roles. Two subthemes emerged from participants' responses: (a) community, and (b) family.

#### ***Community***

Community (at workplace or outside of it) emerged in participants' responses as the most recurring subtheme for support networks. Participant 3 pointed out the importance of networking for women leaders and how the organization may help connect to a professional community:

Your network is going to be critically important. And sometimes that network is, you know, people at the institution you're already at, and sometimes they're not. Sometimes you need to get out. Go to those conferences, go to those. Whatever the opportunity is, whatever area they're in. There will be 3-4 conferences every year from which they can choose. Maybe you can't go to all of them but find the ones that are accessible to you that your organization will pay for you to go to and find your people.

Participant 9 added to the discussion by saying,

I would say support systems are important. They [women] absolutely need support and varying types of support. My support is very good. It looks different. And they need, like their own what I call personal cabinet. And my personal cabinet, or my one or two mentors that I lean into, and one or two friends who are also in executive leadership, who can understand the struggles I'm facing. And then my group of girlfriends, because I need some people to help make me laugh and just self-care and forget about what's going on. So, the community and that support I feel like have to be there because you can't, especially as a woman, no one can, do leadership in isolation. It just doesn't work. You need those people who you can lean on, prop you up, support you, affirm you, and tell you when you should have handled that a little differently. So definitely, the support system and community that also know who you are.

Participant 1 shared her experience with the support she received from her work community: "My own department was against me becoming a dean, but I had a very good

relationship with faculty in other departments. And so, they were very supportive and wanted me to succeed.” She then talked of the time when she got into her leadership role and the support she received:

I just learned everything on the job from other people, essentially. The faculty was overall supportive. I think I've been very fortunate that way. I've gone into these roles with a lot of support and stayed in them because of the support.

Participant 13 added to the discussion that she built her support network at her organization:

There's the internal support system, for sure. With my team members. There's the support I get from my direct reports, my faculty, at that level. Some of it has been intentionality on my part.

Participant 14 also reported that she built a strong team overtime that provides good support:

It truly is a good team. It takes time to build it. It takes time to get there. But now I can take one person out and put another person in. And it's still a team, because there's enough of a core group that we just pull the others along and show them, “this is how it is,” we can correct.

Participant 12 pointed out the importance of networking outside the organization and the impact it made on her as a leader:

I was building this, I think, incredible network predominantly of women across the country, through organizations, through the States that I've worked at to help me survive at times as well as thrive at times, and sometimes both, which seems impossible. But I think, as women, we figured out how to both survive and thrive concurrently. And their

input, their feedback, their questioning back at me, and my being able to question them has helped me to have this leadership approach that isn't authoritarian. And I'm really grateful for those communities.

She also saw great value in the professional community at her organization: "It's that community piece; having some strong colleagues at my institution is really important, as well as trusted sources. Whether it's faculty, staff, or other executives, so that I can know what's actually going on, and not just conjecture about it."

Participant 4 stated that she was also supported by her community in different ways throughout her career, from her college years to her leadership position. She said,

It's [community support] really a body of the profession broadly over time, people nominating me for stuff, people telling me, "you're really good at this," like whether it was in grad school by professors, working in the professional sphere, or now at a higher level with other colleagues.

Participant 8 reported that her professional community provided opportunities for her to observe other professionals in her field and learn from them:

They were role models in the XYZ community college presidential sphere. And I got in just when I was a campus president. I was part of that community, and I was able to see them, hear them, watch them! There were a couple of really outstanding individuals, and I was able to absorb what they did well, see them in action, and learn.

Participant 6 added to the discussion about supportive communities:

I have a group of other VPRs that I talk to regularly, a group of women, where we kind of debrief about our institution and what has happened. They give me good advice, but I

would say my friends on this campus, whom I've known for the longest time, probably give me the most advice.

Participant 7 also indicated that her community of like-minded professionals has been very beneficial to her:

I think I have really good peer relationships. So, at this point, that hasn't always been true. But in this moment, I have excellent relationships with my fellow vice presidents, who are good sounding boards, who are good encouragers, who see me clearly, who have the same challenges with our boss that, you know, I have at times. I think what's been a really helpful thing is that sense of camaraderie. And then I think a sense of inter-directedness, purpose, meaning, and desire to do well.

Participant 8 acknowledged the importance of a supportive community of professionals who have had similar experiences:

It has been very beneficial to know colleagues in my position at other institutions – in other words, having a peer network –because being a president is often an isolating experience and is fraught with challenges. I think you get blamed for everything. If something goes well, you're very careful to ensure that others get the credit for it. Those are the right things to do, but it just means you get kind of beat up a lot. And so having others in the role with whom you are friends, who you trust, who you can commiserate with, and, you know, run things by, is more than helpful. It can be a lifeline. There is only one of you at the college, so having these relationships outside the institution provides perspective and support.

She then shared that she sought out other women who hold similar leadership positions and with whom she could build professional relationships. She shared,

All those inner national events have other female community college presidents on them. You end up sort of picking up friends and colleagues in these various experiences, and then you can see them at these national gatherings. And it's something that builds the framework or the groundwork for a professional, or even more personal, friendship.

Participants 12, 14, and 5 discussed how they drew their power and inspiration from the community they served. Participant 12 stated,

I love our mission. It is unique. It's also incredibly challenging because we're not resourced at the same level as colleges and universities, but who we serve is the population that keeps this country together and running. And I love that we have that direct community connection.

Participant 14 added to the discussion: "I had to call on some key faculty to help, and some key staff, and people were willing to step up and help out," while Participant 5 shared about her connection to the community she served:

One of the things I do actually is stop what I'm doing in front of the computer and go talk to people and go talk to especially my direct reports, and I physically walk around campus and visit them, say hello, and just check on them and listen to their stories, or talk about how their weekend was. And when I do that, I really start to feel like this is what my job really is: to work with people and build relationships. And the rest is gonna be what it's gonna be. And that helps to focus me.

### ***Family***

Family is another support system that participants talked about during the interviews. Participants emphasized the key role of their spouse or life partner in their success in

administrative leadership careers. P1 stated that the support from her partner made it possible for her to pursue her career in academic leadership:

Family is a big one. You know we have two children, and if my partner did not want me to spend the long hours that are necessary, if he didn't see the reason for doing it, then I wouldn't have done it.

I wanted his support, and he believed in what I was doing. He knew why I was doing it, and that made it possible. Because, you know. I'm barely getting two weeks off a year, you know, it's very demanding. And without his support and love, I couldn't have done it.

Participant 10 shared that her husband not only supported her at home as a partner but also was a great listener:

For me, having that person who knew all the players and with whom I would share on a daily basis was invaluable. So, it was like, "Oh, you won't believe what happened today," and he knew what happened yesterday, the day before, and the day before. It was nice to have that; he was an exceptional listener.

Participant 11 shared that she received full support from her husband when pursuing her career goals and applying for out-of-state positions. She said,

My partner is very supportive, but he also has a full-time role. He's, you know, a supervisor, manager. But like, in the example of this most recent move, I was like, I'm ready to job search. I'm looking for something different. And he worked in person at a company, and he was like, well, let's just figure it out, apply, see what happens, and then we can talk about our options. And then, in the middle of that job search process, he was recruited for and accepted a fully remote position. So now he works from 5 to 3, so he can get the kids off the bus, and I'm in charge of the mornings.

Participant 13 talked of her husband's support as critical to her success:

He obviously is very supportive of my career. Otherwise, I wouldn't be here. Part of his role is helping me do the job. That I do is incredibly stressful. It is all these things. And so, he's there at home, making sure that the pets are fed and the house is clean. It's kind of those traditional wife duties to support me to be able to do this. And so, it works really well for us. I feel like I have the support. But it's just comical sometimes how other people respond to that.

Participant 15 also emphasized the importance of having a supportive partner:

My husband has cut back on most of his work. He's not exactly retired, but he certainly acts like it, and the coffee on my desk was made by him. He gets me coffee every day. He makes my car and fills it with gas, helps me thrive and do all the things I can do. So, you know, we haven't discussed how one does this as a female. I think you absolutely have to have a supportive partner.

Participant 3 pointed out the importance of having the family on board when it comes to career progression and having to relocate:

Sometimes you have to be willing to relocate for job opportunities. If you really want that VP role, if you really want that chief, whatever role, sometimes you've got to move, and that is a major decision that impacts your entire family, your partner, your children, your pets, your parents if you're a caregiver to your parents, your relationships with your friends, and it's a big deal. When it was time to move, those were the things I had to consult with my husband about and talk to the children about. I think the biggest piece about growing in your career in Higher Ed is that there are limited institutions in each

city, and you have to be willing to relocate. That has a huge impact on your family, and 100% requires family support.

Participant 4 shared that she had full support from her partner and her parents on her career journey:

I have an extraordinary partner. He's definitely instilled that confidence in me.

And [my family] knows me best. So, they reinforce what they know in me and what they see in me by being honest. If I need that more critical feedback, they actually have the ability to do that. It's the fact that it's the safest space I could find. So, knowing that I can just be myself, I can complain, and there's not going to be any judgment.

Participant 6 reported that her husband's hands-on support and true partnership have been instrumental to her success in the executive-level academic leadership role:

The reason I've been able to do it is that I have the best husband ever in the world, like super supportive. It's a very true partnership in doing stuff. Sometimes he takes more, like he does all the drop-offs and most of the pickups. It's a partnership in what we do, and my expectation is that it is. And when things become too much, we have a conversation, and we figure out how to reassess and reset if we need to reset. But it's an understanding that this job is 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, including travel, and so on. Good partnership.

Participant 7 also named her husband's support as critical to her success:

First and foremost, the support that I experience from my partner. My husband lives a different kind of life than a lot of his executive friends or men in his role. Because he has a partner who not only works but also works at a high level. We have to do a lot of things teamwork driven. And you know, we also get to be sounding boards for each other. So,

we both get to talk about the challenges we're facing and have an empathetic, knowledgeable partner in our home to talk about those things. So, I think that's really good.

Participant 5 added to the discussion that the connection and support from her family have been an important factor in her success. She shared,

I have a good relationship with my mom and my stepdad. And I have two sisters with whom I have a good relationship. And they check in with me, and they ask how work is going very frequently. They know it's a big part of my life, and so they do support me for sure in that, and they encourage me to have a little fun, to be a little more balanced, not to take it so seriously, to take some time off, to say 'no' to things getting added to me. From that perspective, I have a supportive family network and extended family who are proud of me. I am the most educated in both sides of my family. And that is a point of pride for some of them, and my grandparents, in particular, are very proud.

Participant 14 shared that, as a first-generation college student, received a lot of support from her family and is very happy to see all her grandkids follow her footsteps and get an education. She said,

I think number one for me was my husband. I had to have his support because, you know, he's my life partner, and if he's not happy, I'm not going to be happy. And so, we really had to work that out. And then, my parents supported me emotionally. They helped me financially to pay for my doctoral degree. And my husband's parents were always there for me.

And my sons, you know they're so proud of me and my daughters-in-law. And now, all my grandkids are going to either college or trade school.

Participant 8 stated that she was very lucky to have her husband's support and shared that she observed other women who were not able to progress in their careers because their partners could not or did not relocate with them. She emphasized,

I couldn't have had my career without [my husband's support], especially considering the time and effort involved in raising our child. I knew other aspiring female leaders in XYZ who wanted to do what I did – move elsewhere to pursue a career opportunity – but they were unable to because their spouses couldn't or wouldn't move. While such spouses could be unable to relocate due to career restrictions and circumstances out of their control, I also sense that it takes a pretty confident man (if the spouse is male) to say, "Her career is perhaps more important than mine right now." That certainly was my sense of things back then. So, my situation was unusual. And I think I am very fortunate.

Participant 9 described how growing up, her family always emphasized the importance of education and inspired her to be a leader:

I grew up supported by men in my life. And all the men in my life, like my dad, grandfather, uncles, and great uncles. They never used words like 'princess' and 'cutie pie' and those kinds of things. To me, it was always, "Here comes the President of the United States, here comes the chair of the board" as a little girl. They used those types of words with me: "You're gonna do this, here comes our little leader, here comes the VP of the family." My parents have pushed education, supported us in education and extracurricular activities, and the entire family shows up for events. I was a 1st generation college student. And every job I've gotten - the Supervisor, Director, Associate Provost, and now VP, they celebrate. My family has always been encouraging and supportive.

Some participants, however, reported a different experience of receiving little to no support from their families. Despite a lack of family support, they persevered and achieved the success they were striving for. Participant 12 stated,

I think there was, especially over time, more resentment than support. Some of it is not understanding the support conceptually. You know, progressing and getting an additional salary was definitely seen as beneficial, better benefits, those kinds of things. But I think the understanding and the emotional support were just lacking.

Participant 2 indicated,

I don't know if I could say I had family support, but I had arranged my life so that I would not need that much of it. There was love, there were visits, and so forth. But could I lean on them if I had to leave town or something? And I almost never could. I tried not to have out-of-town cases.

Participants indicated that they drew their power from connecting to their communities, networking, and family support. Interestingly, when they lacked a support network or community for their specific needs, they built one by reaching out to like-minded women in their field.

### **Theme 6: Qualities Important for Success**

The theme of personal growth and qualities for success as a woman in an executive-level leadership role emerged during the interviews. Participants' responses revealed four subthemes:

(a) Motivation, (b) Resilience, (c) Being analytical, and (d) Being relational.

#### ***Motivation***

Participants spoke about the importance of having the right motivation when pursuing executive-level academic leadership roles. P15 stated that the right reasons were important:

I've often joked that the people who really want those jobs probably aren't the ones that you want to have in those jobs. If it's for power, I don't think that that's the right goal. If it's for money, I certainly think there are many easier ways to earn money. Yes, people in leadership roles make more money than I ever thought that I would get as an academic. But that's not a reason to pursue it. I think [you should be] doing it for the right reasons, doing it because either you want to improve the institution, or you think that you can do something that will make a difference.

Participant 4 pointed out,

Reflect on what you want and why you want it, and if you are resolute in knowing what it is that you want to achieve and that it is deeper than just a title or a salary, or recognition, and that you truly do know that this is linking into your passion, your purpose, whatever that is, however you define it, it is going to be critical in your persistence and your resilience through it, because it will be worth it.

So, I would say, spend your time evaluating what you really like, and what you really don't, and don't be afraid of what you don't like necessarily, because it can be taught in many cases.

Participant 9 talked about her motivation as a woman to be in executive-level academic leadership and represent the female population of her HEI when it comes to executive decision-making:

Why executive leadership? What does it mean for you to be there? Why do you feel you need it or want it? Why do you deserve a seat at a table? Is it the culmination of just your career, your work? And that's what you were striving for? Or is it because you understand? For me, it is important to have diverse voices at the table. I see that so

clearly now that I'm at the table, like, wow! If you take [the few women there are] away from this table, we have a room full of white men making decisions for all of these people, and they are only thinking through their lens.

And what's important for me is the representation. It is absolutely important. Having a voice is absolutely important, and making change is important. I'm a change agent. So, I am here to make those changes and be a voice for my community. Know why you're at the table. It helps.

Participant 5 added that staying disciplined and motivated helped her in her career growth:

I was in college for 10 years straight, and I was able to do it in part because of how focused I can be and how goal oriented I can be. It's knowing the structure of the academic year and knowing exactly what you have to do and when you have to do it. I operate really well in that kind of containment.

Participant 1 talked about what motivates her in her job: "Leadership within the university setting is more about service than personal gain. If I can't achieve better things for the students and the staff and the faculty, I'm going to stop doing it," while Participant 10 reported:

I feel a deep obligation to care for the people who enter into my sphere of influence, whether it is students, staff, or junior faculty who need development and mentoring. And that has made me a really good leader, because I think people have learned to trust me. They trust the decisions I make.

Participant 12 described what motivated her to be an adaptive leader in her executive-leadership role and how HEIs could and should invest in people:

We've lost the human point of adaptive leadership. And that is how I have framed my leadership as adaptive humanity. It takes this idea of "We have to be nimble and flexible." If we don't have the adaptability in our human beings, we'll never solve those problems. And we have to remember they're human beings first.

How do we invest in our human beings? Because that's our biggest asset and resource as colleges, not our technical processes. And a lot of our leadership work has been around performance and performance management. And so that's what's driven leadership work. And again, I think we miss the human element in this, especially in education, because we don't produce things. We produce people, and our role, especially in community colleges, is to expand the middle class by having better workforce-ready programs. To ensure that democracy works for all the people, not just some of the people.

Participant 2 added to the discussion by saying that she had been motivated to help her people grow holistically and saw value in a collaborative approach to it:

That kind of collaboration and the concern about those people, not just the roles. You know you're sitting in that chair today and need to do this. But you're also a person who might want to go elsewhere someday, and I can help you build up so you can get there.

Participant 5 also indicated that she was motivated and committed to serving and developing her people:

And I want people to know that I encourage them to find growth, whether with XYZ or in my unit. But I'm always supportive of them as an individual, first and foremost, even if it really is rough on me.

### ***Resilience***

Participants named resilience a personal quality necessary for success as a woman in the executive-level academic leadership role. Participant 4 indicated: "Knowing that there's always going to be this tension between some winners and losers in every decision I make. Just a lot of reflection for me, maybe resilience. For me, it means the courage to be reflective." Participant 14 reported,

What's been hard is that you can't just get angry when people treat you poorly or disagree. You have to listen. I would say listening is really important, trying to understand where they're coming from and how you can match that up with where you're headed. And sometimes you have to simply ask them, "Okay, I'm hearing what you're saying. But tell me more about what direction your feet are pointed. I mean, what do you really want to accomplish? And how does that align or not align with the direction the college is headed?" And I've had some very frank conversations. People appreciate it.

I'm not as emotional as most of the women I have or currently work with. You have to get tougher because if you don't, then they win. And you don't get mad because then they've got you.

Participant 4 noted that it is important for women in academic leadership to have "thick skin, for a better word, resilience, a lot of resilience," and shared that her resilience helped her immensely to succeed in her executive-level academic leadership role:

I have found over time that I am incredibly thick-skinned. I think things that would wipe people out or potentially have completely pushed them so far back that I'm not sure they would have been able to come back from what I have been able to. It might knock me down for 6 hours, but I'm back, and I'm stronger, and so I feel like that's not a female thing.

I'm interpersonal. I do my best to understand, engage with people, know people, and learn as much as possible about them because it helps me navigate more difficult and choppy waters.

Participant 11 also emphasized resilience as an important quality for her success in leadership roles:

The resilience component is huge. There are just so many things that come up that you have to navigate. And I think again more because I'm a woman. I think I have a different experience in the roles I had because of that. And I can be bowled over by the challenges, or I can come at them with a growth mindset and an opportunity for learning, connection, and positive experiences. I would say that resilience is really key.

I mean, in essence, if I were to get down to the nitty-gritty, it's like the ability to get back up after you were knocked down. I get knocked down a lot. I get people who are like, "Just come in here and say this and do this." And I have to navigate those responses and sit with those emotions it brings up for me and then be willing to try again and be willing to respond quickly and with thoughtfulness and recognize the impact that I could have if I can navigate the challenges.

### ***Being Analytical***

Participants also discussed the importance of being analytical in executive academic leadership, particularly as a woman. Participant 1 stated, "What has made me effective in the roles that I've played is that I'm very analytical; being able to analyze a problem, try to get the problem stated and restated, and understanding that complexity has served me well in the roles that I've played." Participant 10 discussed how her ability to see the big picture and understand complex processes had been important in her experience. She stated,

That is a characteristic that I have, and I don't know if it's just inherent in me or something that I learned over time, but just being able to see the big picture. I see how we make decisions in academic affairs. But that has an impact on students and faculty. And it impacts our colleagues and student affairs. It might be able to see and understand that and how complex the organizations that we work in are. I think it is really important.

Participant 11 talked about how she had to do analytical work and self-reflection in raising her emotional intelligence and navigating various environments: "I've had to do my own work around emotional intelligence and navigating how to be a part of a team, noticing when I'm experiencing dysfunction in a team, I'm on, including executive teams or whatever room I'm in." Participant 3 noted the key role of the ability to understand the stakeholders: "It's understanding what's critically important to each partner that you're working with, and it's going to be different for every person." And Participant 6 emphasized the effect of analytical approach and direct communication on the work politics: "The combo of being really honest and collaborative but also understanding what the political ramifications or the political words that you should use to make your ideas come forward is really fundamental."

Participant 8 noted that "having a high degree of emotional intelligence and being someone who can understand all sorts of dynamics and interpersonal relationships was very, very important":

Having a good sense of strategic direction is critical, and I find that trait astonishingly lacking among some individuals who are otherwise gifted as leaders. It's understanding the role of data, understanding how to manage change over the long term, and understanding how critical culture is to the operation of an institution that makes a good leader, which means that you need to be thinking about all of that all the time.

Participant 12 pointed out,

To be successful, having a more tactical approach is incredibly important, as well as being able to talk about data effectively and say, "You know, here's the data point. Here's why we have the data point. Here's what the data point is telling us. And here's what we're going to do about it." And being able to talk about things again tactically and succinctly.

### ***Being Relational***

The interviews also revealed the importance of being *relational* as a personal quality essential for success for women academic leaders. Participant 12 described her relational approach to connecting with people at work:

My approach is that we collaborate on the path forward. And I do it with faculty governance. We do interest-based bargaining at my college, and it's problem-solving oriented. I spend time with my faculty, governance, and my Union leader as human beings. And it makes it easier to deal with difficult things. Just building in time, like I stop in and sit down and talk with our front office folks. It's investing in that again. Making those human connections makes it easier to focus on tactical work.

Participant 12 then continued:

It translates into spending time with people and spending time in dialogue. What's important? What do they need to know? How do we not overwhelm them with information? We should have those conversations with leaders so that they can provide the outcome that we need and do it in a safe space.

Participant 13 stated,

I really am trying to build relationships and guide people along the way. Part of it, too, is that my approach is because I was a teacher, and as faculty, I mean, my commitment was not to research. As a teacher, it was being in the classroom and teaching. My leadership perspective is much more from that teaching lens, and I come in from that perspective to work with people to help them get better and, again, help them do their jobs well so that we can support our students.

Participant 14 pointed out that she was very involved with the community and built strong relationships:

I work very closely with the community. I'm active on several boards, including the Chamber of Commerce, the ABC Association, the DEF Council, and the XYZ Women's Council. You just have to stay connected and stay active. I know many people because I've been around for a long time, and it's important to know those partnerships and what you can and sometimes can't do.

Participant 15 pointed out that she paid attention to the "emotional tone" of the people she worked with:

We spend the first 10 minutes talking about life, their relationships, how they're doing with their parents, and what you know. "Oh, you got a new interesting haircut and your eyebrows are darker." We have a very personal experience and interaction. That's always been how I do it.

I am very inclusive. There are people who are working with me whom I very much care about. I pay attention to the emotional tone of the office and my unit. That's extremely important to me, and I'm successful because of that. I care about people and who they are as people first and as employees second, and I think that paying attention to the emotional

tone is probably, I don't want to say uniquely female, but certainly a more feminine way of leading.

Participant 3 added to the discussion that she put a lot of importance on a relational approach when building resilience in her team:

I'm super relational. I have time at the top of every team meeting to talk about gratitude and open the floor for gratitude to extend beyond executive leadership to everyone else. We have a dedicated time for team building each quarter. There are a lot of celebrations, birthdays, and anniversaries on the team. And we do an end-of-year retreat. We also do a beginning-of-the-year retreat. And all these things are essential in terms of bringing people together and helping them have a shared goal. So, I am on the high end of being relational.

Participant 5 talked about how she always tried to treat each of her reports like a mentee: I try hard to be observant and remember little details about someone I can bring up later and ask about. I work hard to be supportive of them in their professional and personal life. And I always say that I'll always be here to ask questions, too. And I want people to know that I encourage them to find growth, and maybe it won't be with ABC or my unit. But I'm always supportive of them as an individual first and foremost, even if it really is rough on me.

Participants 6 and 10 shared that their leadership styles focused on team building and fostering a positive work culture. Participant 6 stated,

My leadership style is about team building. I want to work in an environment that's collaborative and lovely. So, we lead by 'everybody is one team, everybody is about the goal we're going towards,' and we all work together.

Participant 10 added,

I want to build a really strong group of people who love coming to work every day, and then they can do great work for the students we are ultimately working for and with.

They know that I will ask for their input, and I will take that into account, even if I don't always make the decision that they would have chosen for me to make.

Participant 7 emphasized that it is important for a woman leader "to be relational, to develop coalitions, to get to know fellow executives and the rest of the President's Cabinet, other faculty members and faculty leadership, and then develop strong relationships with my team."

She then indicated:

I am a relational leader, somebody who really cares for people. I want to celebrate at the end by throwing a good party, high-fiving, acknowledging others, and giving people wins. But that doesn't mean that there are no high expectations. When people care about their manager, the people above them, and the people beside them, they actually work harder and feel motivated to give more. And I want to be a leader who inspires that. And I think my teams would say that that's how they experience me. You know, both high expectations, but also high empathy, and high emotional intelligence.

Participant 9 also emphasized the importance of being relational for building connections and receiving feedback:

I am very communal and relational, and I want to understand and know how this will affect our people. I don't want to wait and find out. I want different voices at the table. It's important for us to hear from those voices and how this thing will affect them. We may end up making the same decision. And I'm okay with that. However, I still want to hear from others. If we're leaders, then we are leading a community of people, and I think it's

important that we hear from those people. I also make myself available, have conversations, just pass by, stop and say "Hi!" and introduce myself, and then build relationships. And then it gets to where the students are stopping by because they haven't seen me walking around campus.

Participants indicated that they prioritized being motivated, resilient, analytical, and relational, among other qualities, as key to their success in executive-level academic leadership roles. They saw value in serving people and being the change in the organization they worked for by embodying those qualities.

### **Credibility**

Credibility is achieved through congruency between the findings and reality (Stahl & King, 2020, p. 26). The participants' approval and the readers' belief in the qualitative study are necessary for it to meet the credibility criteria (Bloomberg, 2019, [10:57]). Johnson et al. (2020) report credibility as a quality marker demonstrated through the honest and transparent account of the process of identifying and addressing biases, ethical and other preconceptions, the researcher's previous training and experiences, access to the funding sources, and the target population by the researcher during the research process. The credibility of this study was achieved through extended involvement with the research by rereading and relistening to the interviews each time, with the focus on a different code/theme, building a good rapport with the participants, acquiring extensive, rich, and in-depth insights, observations, subjectivity checks, and triangulation. Triangulation was achieved through processing data collected in the interviews, field notes, and observations. I ensured the accuracy of the collected data by asking participants to review the transcripts twice – the first time in full, shortly after the interviews, and the second time after I isolated the quotes I intended to use in my research study.

## **Dependability**

Dependability is a criterion of trustworthiness that represents the depth and clarity levels of the information and procedure descriptions provided in a study, making it possible to be replicated in similar conditions, although possibly with varying findings (Stenfors et al., 2020). Toye *et al.* (2013) advocated the use of "conceptual clarity" and "interpretative rigor" as guidelines that researchers should follow when assessing the quality of their qualitative research. Dependability is achieved through consistency and alignment of the qualitative research process and its presentation in the paper (Bloomberg, 2019, [22:59]). The dependability of this study was achieved with detailed descriptions of each step of the research process, approaches and techniques for data collection, and procedures for data analysis. All notes were documented and stored on my computer along with the codebook, participant interview recordings, and transcripts for potential audit.

## **Confirmability**

Confirmability is acknowledging that the subjectivity of any research is relative and that the researcher's biases and preconceptions cannot be entirely removed. With this understanding, researchers should try to reach the highest possible objectivity in the research study. Johnson et al. (2020) noted that reflexivity (self-reflection) is based on understanding and acknowledging that a researcher inevitably holds biases, ethical considerations, and preconceptions influencing their decisions during the research process (p. 3). The confirmability of this study was achieved by carefully considering my personal biases and underlying beliefs and being conscious and aware of them during the interview process and data analysis. The findings of this study were aligned with the previously published research and other researchers' findings to continue the discussion as another method of ensuring confirmability (Bloomberg, 2019, [36:26]).

Additionally, I allowed the participants to opt out of a question or withdraw from the interview at any time, allowing them to speak freely and share their lived experiences in a safe environment.

### **Transferability**

Transferability is described as the perceived ability of the research process to generate similar results in similar settings. Therefore, the true nature of transferability in qualitative research is in its consistency (Carcary, 2015; Grossoehme, 2014). The methodology and mechanics of the research process may vary as long as they produce similar results within similar settings. The detailed, thick narrative (Geertz, 1973, as cited in Bloomberg, 2023) and purposeful sampling used in the qualitative study must provide sufficient context for the reader to be able to determine if the described processes could be recreated (Bloomberg, 2023). This makes the reader the one who decides whether the study is transferable. The researcher's role is to extend transferability by ensuring the reader gets as much detail about the participants and the process as possible, thus creating vicarious experiences. The transferability of this study was established through an intentional, detailed descriptive approach to allow other researchers to evaluate if the study can be replicated in a similar setting. The semi-structured interview questions were carefully designed to elicit similar core data with ample probing for more details and anecdotes from the participants' lived experiences.

### **Evaluation of the Outcomes**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of women in executive-level academic leadership positions across private, public, and community colleges in the Western US, the barriers they faced, and the skills and techniques they used to successfully obtain and maintain their positions. Six themes relevant to the research

questions of this study emerged from the data collected in the interviews with the participants (three per each research question).

The interpretivist and social constructivist conceptual framework with a feminist perspective was used to guide the research questions and emerging themes. The qualitative phenomenological design served as an approach to understanding and interpreting the findings. The existing research on women's leadership in academia is scarce (Merma-Molina et al., 2022) and primarily focuses on obstacles preventing them from getting or retaining leadership positions, lacking accounts of lived experiences of women in executive-level leadership positions that might shed light on how this phenomenon may be addressed and overcome. While barriers for women in senior academic leadership positions of deans and department chairs/department heads have been studied (Barkhuizen et al., 2022; Brower et al., 2019; Peterson, 2016), research suggested that more voices of women academic executive administrators sharing their experiences of *lived adversity* and the skills and techniques they use to overcome the identified barriers on their path to executive-level academic positions and successfully maintaining those positions should be heard to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of female underrepresentation in academia and dismantle systemic oppression in HEI (Abalkhail, 2017; Chance, 2021; CohenMiller & Izenkova, 2022; Pillay, 2025). The findings align with the study's problem and purpose and contribute to the existing literature by sharing rich-in-detail accounts of women's lived experiences in executive-level academic leadership positions.

All six themes: (a) gender-related challenges still exist, (b) lack of organizational support presents a systemic challenge, (c) hiring and promotion are still gendered processes, (d) role of mentors is critical, (e) support networks are an effective tool, and (f) qualities important for success, were isolated by looking at how women in executive-level academic leadership

positions described their experience with gender-related challenges and how they reacted to these challenges. As Redmond et al (2017) pointed out, there are similarities in the experiences of women in senior management positions as they face and overcome challenges and barriers in their roles.

### ***Research Question 1***

For the Research Question 1 “What are the lived experiences of women in executive-level academic leadership roles in HEIs as they overcame barriers to successfully obtain and maintain their positions?” three reoccurring themes emerged from the data analysis: (a) gender-related challenges still exist, (b) lack of organizational support presents a systemic challenge, (c) hiring and promotion are still gendered processes. The first theme, Gender-related challenges still exist, yielded five subthemes that are congruent with the existing literature presented in the literature review section of this study: (a) not taken seriously, (b) good old boys club, (c) misconceptions, (d) bias and prejudice, (e) chauvinism and ageism, (f) power struggle, (g) the golden skirt phenomenon, (h) impostor syndrome, and (i) queen bee syndrome. Although participants' lived experiences with gender-related challenges in their executive-level academic leadership differed, their responses indicated that these challenges persist and continue to have a negative effect on women's career progression and promotion opportunities.

A surprising finding was a prevailing subtheme of Not taken seriously. However, it could be explained by the existing minority of women in executive academic leadership roles compared to men, and the number of women increasing at a very slow rate due to an unchanged systemic support for white men and not women (Gagliardi et al., 2017; O'Connor, 2018; Schmidt et al., 2023; Smith, 2025). These findings are also consistent with Coetzee and Moosa's (2023)

research findings that the lack of acceptance of women as leaders is among the criteria closely related to the retention of women.

The good old boys club and its deleterious effects, evident in the participants' responses, are consistent with the findings reported by Fischer & Kinsey (2014), Sümer (2006), and Morley & Croussouard (2016) that the boys club culture, exclusive male networks, and power dynamics contribute to alienation and low retention of women in executive-level positions. Interestingly, some participants reported effective ways to counteract the effects of the good old boys club by establishing connections with each of the men outside of the setting and developing separate working relationships with them. For example, P14 reported,

I tried to build relationships individually with the men in the group outside of the meetings and figure out ways to collaborate and share. I had to build relationships with each and every one of them to get in the group. They had their dynamic, and it wasn't going to happen because they didn't want to look weak to the other guys. And so once one of them started speaking up for me in the meetings and said, "Hey, you know, I talked to XYZ about this and I think it's a really good idea," then people were like, "Oh, a man spoke. Somebody's vouching for her." Once they started vouching for me and seeing that I was doing good things, it got better.

Misconceptions, bias, prejudice, chauvinism, and ageism emerged as challenges experienced by participants at some point in their careers, as revealed in the interview responses. O'Connor (2019) argued that the domination of men in top academic leadership positions is due to the legitimized institutional chauvinistic standpoint used in procedures, policies, and practices created by men for men, while Coetze and Moosa (2020) found the lack of acceptance of women as leaders among the criteria closely related to the retention of women.

The golden skirt phenomenon, impostor syndrome, and queen bee syndrome accounts, though recurring less frequently, surfaced during the interviews and were reported by the participants to have various negative effects on them, ranging from their job security to their mental health. The golden skirt phenomenon is defined as negative perceptions of women who were able to break the glass ceiling and ascend to executive-level leadership roles. Others may perceive them as using their status and connections to advance their careers. The finding is consistent with Coetzee & Moosa (2020), who found that such perceptions harm women in leadership and undermine their achievements. The impostor syndrome finding confirms Manongsong & Ghosh's (2021) findings that women in executive-level academic leadership often develop a persistent feeling of needing to prove their worth and justify their appointments due to various reasons, including lack of support in the role, psychological stress from being a minority in the job, excessive scrutiny, and expectations. According to Aparna (2020) and Tewfik et al. (2025), impostor syndrome has a detrimental effect on women's ability to make effective decisions, think innovatively, and collaborate. The queen bee syndrome is defined as an "antifeminist behavior" towards junior women displayed by women leaders who were able to break the glass ceiling and establish themselves in leadership positions in masculinist contexts, often by adapting to the existing ways and policies. Once in the positions, the female leaders (queen bees) reproduced those structures and policies to eliminate competition in male-dominated environments, thus perpetuating the existing neoliberal inequalities (Wickström et al., 2021). My findings confirm that this phenomenon still persists in environments where gender inequality and inequity exist.

The subtheme of power struggle reported by top executive leaders is divergent from my literature review. From my research, it is evident that, on top of all gender-related challenges,

women in executive leadership face the common power struggle they have to overcome to establish themselves as strong leaders.

The second theme, Lack of organizational support presents a systemic challenge, yielding three subthemes: (a) leadership training and development, (b) autonomy, and (c) organizational culture and work-life balance. The findings indicate that the HEIs lack adequate support in leadership training and development for women aspiring leaders and those holding executive-leadership positions, despite policies and initiatives at the government and organizational levels aligning with Gander and Sharafizad's (2025) findings that the issue of gender equity is systemic in nature. In that regard, the phenomenon of genderwashing by their organizations was also evident from the lived experiences of some participants. Genderwashing, coined by Fox-Kirk et al. (2020), is described as an organizational process of creating a false narrative of gender equality on paper that differs from the lived experiences of the marginalized population. Organizational resistance to making real changes towards acknowledging and accommodating women as they build their careers in the workforce was evident.

Participants indicated that one of the most effective ways the organization could support them is by demonstrating trust in their expertise and experience, and allowing them the autonomy to make decisions and perform their work. Findings also show that most participants were able to achieve sufficient autonomy in their roles. The importance of work-life balance for women in leadership surfaced repeatedly from the participants' narratives as another way the organization could support women in their leadership roles. The findings show that HEIs lack a work-life balance, fail to recognize its value, and often fail to provide the flexibility for women executive-level academic leaders to balance their work and family obligations, resulting in many women choosing not to pursue academic leadership careers. The findings are consistent with

research by Ngila et al. (2017), who found that many women in academia choose to leave their careers when they are denied the opportunity to balance work and family responsibilities. Sealy and Harman (2024) also found that women in their 30s and 40s exited the workforce because the work environment did not allow for work-life balance. Interestingly, some participants leveraged their executive-level power and authority to advocate for establishing a work-life balance and flexibility within their organizations, which they extended to their subordinates. However, those participants reported that their advocacy for work-life balance did not add value to them as employees in the eyes of their supervisors.

The third theme, Hiring and promotion are still gendered processes, yielded three subthemes: (a) expectation of excellence and having to prove themselves, (b) expectation of softness and asserting themselves, and (c) motherhood. The findings reveal that the most recurring subtheme, expectation of excellence and the need to prove oneself, is consistent with the literature review. Participants reported feeling extra pressure to check all the marks and prove themselves when it comes to hiring and promotion, whereas they observed no such requirement for men. In addition to the expectation of excellent credentials, women are expected to work harder and are judged more harshly for taking risks. In this context, it is worth noting that most participants have specialized education, which has contributed to their success in executive-level academic leadership roles. Some hold double majors. The following table (Table 3) illustrates the participants' educational degrees, majors, and concentrations.

**Table 3***Participants' Education Major Concentrations*

Major Concentration	Number of Participants
Psychology/Counseling/Behavioral Science/ Philosophy	5
Educational Administration/HEI Leadership and Policy/Higher and Post-Secondary Ed	7
Performance Studies and Music Theory	1
Business Marketing and Advertising/Business Administration/Business Economics	3
English	1
Employment Law (Labor and Employee Rights)	1

Expectation of softness and asserting themselves is another subtheme that surfaced from the interviews. Participants reported that they had to develop creative ways of asserting themselves and pointed out that their assertiveness would not have been perceived as aggressive if they had been male. These findings are consistent with studies by Kruze (2022) and Yusaf & Schmiede (2017), who found that women find themselves under pressure to be strong and assertive enough to lead while trying to balance it with society's expectation to be feminine, docile, and more emotional. This double bind makes it challenging for women to progress to and succeed in executive-level management positions (Gallagher & Morrison, 2019; Moodley, 2021). Women in leadership are criticized for a lack of assertiveness and agency when displaying their feminine leadership styles, yet are equally criticized for adopting more masculine attributes to become successful and recognized leaders (Burkinshaw et al., 2018; O'Connor, 2024).

Motherhood in the context of hiring and promotion was also brought up by the participants. Participants reported a lack of accommodation by HEIs for mothering academic leaders. In addition, motherhood in the workplace is still viewed as undesirable and perceived as an impediment to a woman's career, particularly in the executive-level academic leadership landscape. This finding is consistent with the findings of the literature review. Henderson et al. (2020) found that mothering administrators are penalized, and their labor is exploited in patriarchal social contexts, while their efforts at caring for home and children remain unseen and unvalued. Avolio et al. (2020) and Leišytė et al. (2022) found that women's careers often take horizontal trajectories and include career breaks due to the multiple barriers women in academia face on their path to leadership.

### ***Research Question 2***

Three themes that emerged for the Research Question 2 “What skills and techniques did women in executive-level academic leadership roles in HEIs use to successfully obtain and maintain their positions?” were: (d) role of mentors is critical, (e) support networks are an effective tool, and (f) qualities important for success. All participants emphasized the Crucial role of mentors in their ascension to the executive-level academic leadership. This theme has yielded three subthemes: (a) importance of securing a mentor, (b) men mentors vs women mentors, and (c) how to secure a mentor. This finding is consistent with the findings of the literature review. Dear (2016) reported that historically, there have been few women in senior leadership positions in the top academic echelons; therefore, women offering one-on-one mentoring are scarce. Coker and Rothblum (2024) and Thien (2025) agree that mentors play an important role in developing middle-level faculty into senior-level educational leaders by

providing effective advocacy strategies and empowering women to overcome challenges as they progress to leadership.

From participants' responses, it became evident that while the mentorship style of men and women leaders may differ, securing both is important for the full benefit of mentor-mentee relationships. Another interesting finding is that, despite the scarcity of women mentors in executive-level academic leadership, they are more conscious about helping other women and are willing to give back by mentoring them. Additionally, the findings indicate that the most common mentors were supervisors or leaders whose qualities participants admired and aspired to possess. Participants reported that the most effective approach to securing a mentor was through being intentional and proactive, i.e., approaching/contacting them directly and asking.

Participants named Support networks an important tool for success in executive-level leadership roles. Two subthemes emerged from the participants' responses: (1) community and (2) family. Findings indicate that participants saw great value in relying on support from various communities to which they belonged, including work, professional, and women's groups with similar interests and goals, among others. Interestingly, some participants indicated that if they didn't have a support community for their specific needs, they created one. For example, P12 shared,

Building this incredible network predominantly of women across the country through organizations, through the States that I've worked at to help me survive at times as well as thrive at times, and sometimes both, which seems impossible. But I think, as women, we figured out how to both survive and thrive concurrently. And their input, their feedback, their questioning back of me, and my being able to question them has helped me.

The family emerged as an important support network from participants' responses. Participants place a great deal of emphasis on family support as a factor in their success in executive-level academic leadership careers. However, some participants were able to be successful without family support that they did not have for various reasons. For example, P12 shared that in her case "over time, there was more resentment than support. And some of it from not understanding support conceptually, but the emotional support was just lacking," while P2 indicated that "I don't know that I would say I had exactly family support, but I had arranged my life not to need that much of it." And P5 reported that she made a conscious choice not to have a family in order to be able to build her executive-leadership career: "I don't have children. I don't have a family. I'm single, and I have really made my career a priority. And it costs something. It definitely costs something."

The third theme that emerged for the Research Question 2 was the Qualities important for success. Four recurring subthemes were: (a) motivation, (b) resilience, (c) being analytical, and (d) being relational. Motivation was the most recurring subtheme that surfaced from the participants' responses. Participants emphasized that having the right motivation when pursuing executive-level academic leadership positions was crucial for success. Given the complexity and difficulty of the role, it is critical to link motivation to one's passion and purpose. The reasons cited were making meaningful, positive changes to the system one step at a time, improving the HEI processes, and serving the community. Motivation was named critical for persistence and resilience in the role.

Resilience, as a personal quality necessary for success in executive-level leadership careers, was another subtheme discussed in the interviews. Participants reported that resilience meant having thick skin to be able to take criticism, "courage to be reflective", "the ability to get

back after you get knocked down,” and “recognize the impact that I could have if I can navigate the challenges.” Participants reported that they drew power from being connected to the community to maintain their resilience and motivation. These findings are consistent with those of Bhatti & Ali (2021) and Peterson (2018), who found that feminine leadership utilizes transformational leadership traits, with creative decision-making and problem-solving at the forefront, in addition to communal traits such as attention to process, cooperation, and collaboration.

Being analytical was also discussed as a quality for success in the interviews. Findings show that, for participants, being analytical meant having a keen understanding and insight into the problem at hand, “the ability to see the big picture and having an understanding of complex processes.” This quality helped the participants to see what was important to each stakeholder: “be able to talk about data effectively” and “navigate the political ramifications of the words used to make ideas come forward”. Being analytical also helped the participants “to understand all sorts of dynamics and interpersonal relationships,” which they considered utmost important in the context of prioritizing work relationships, cooperation, and collaboration. Findings also indicate that being relational was seen as an important quality for success in executive academic leadership by the participants. It helped participants to connect with their community, establish important relationships, and empower them to lead with empathy. The findings are consistent with the research by Brown et al. (2011), who argued that organizations prefer women in leadership positions during times of crisis due to stereotypical women’s characteristics, such as being communal, cooperative, and caring, as a better fit than stereotypical masculine traits, including ruthlessness and assertiveness.

Two participants (13%) mentioned that they experienced and observed the glass ceiling phenomenon, while none reported experiencing the glass cliff phenomenon. However, the glass cliff effect was evident in a few participants' responses when they discussed the hardships they experienced upon being hired into the role and not receiving adequate guidance, training, and support.

### **Implications and Recommendations for Practice**

The implications and recommendations for practice are based on the research findings and related to the conceptual framework of interpretivist and social constructivist paradigms with a feminist perspective. The research findings reveal implications for practice and policies within the higher education system that are concentrated around fostering institutional work culture supportive of women at all institutional levels and creating awareness of the phenomenon of underrepresentation of women and ways to address it with an ultimate goal of eliminating gender-related challenges and barriers for women on the path to or/and holding executive-level academic leadership positions.

### ***Recommendations for Organizations***

Findings reveal that HEIs are still gendered organizations where bias, misconceptions, and marginalization of women executive-level academic leaders persist. Organizations must be more intentional in creating pathways for women aspiring to leadership (Avolio et al., 2023; Coetze & Moosa, 2020). The recommendation is that HEIs create policies regulating gender balance on the hiring and promotion boards and enforce gender balance during the hiring process (Gander & Sharafizad, 2025; O'Connor & Irvine, 2020). HEIs should actively collaborate with networks such as HERS, AAWCC, and ACE, establish formal leadership training for women aspiring to executive-level administrators, and make it accessible to women by scheduling

training during times convenient for them and providing women with breaks from their routine daily duties to engage in the training. In alignment with the existing literature, this study's findings also show that organizations lack adequate support systems for women, including women in executive-level academic leadership tracks (Alsulami et al., 2024; Bhatti & Ali, 2021; Coetzee & Moosa, 2022; Maheshwari et al., 2023; O'Connor, 2020; Smith, 2025; Wrobevski, 2019).

The recommendation for the organizations is to establish mentorship programs for aspiring women leaders to ensure a gender-balanced succession in the executive-level academic leadership roles. A separate mentorship and support program should be established for women in executive-level academic leadership roles to provide adequate support, mentorship, and coaching, particularly during the first year of their roles. Women's support groups accessible to all female faculty and administrative populations should be organized in all HEIs that have an underrepresentation of women at any level. In such groups, women can share experiences, network, provide support, discuss issues, and work on solutions.

### ***Recommendations for Supervisors***

The recommendation for supervisors is to be conscious of supporting and developing women aspiring to executive-level academic leadership by offering mentorship, coaching, and individualized development opportunities. Organizational leaders should provide training opportunities to all supervisors on DEI policies and gender underrepresentation to promote women leaders, practice inclusive leadership, and battle adverse attitudes towards women (Cislaghi & Heise, 2019; Gbobaniyi, 2024). The findings show that organizations do not see value in work-life balance for women in executive-level academic leadership roles. Supervisors must provide a work-life balance to enable women in leadership to better balance their work and

family obligations. Women in executive-level academic leadership positions should utilize their authority to advocate for gender equality in hiring and promotion, and be intentional and conscious about mentoring and coaching aspiring female leaders (Block & Tietjen-Smith, 2016).

### ***Recommendations for Women Aspiring to and Holding Executive-Level Academic Leadership Positions***

Women aspiring executive academic leaders can use the findings of this research study to inform their preparations for promotion. Research indicates that women aspiring to executive academic leadership greatly benefit from mentorship (Coker & Rothblum, 2024; Thien, 2025). Participants of the study highly recommend being proactive when it comes to securing a mentor for executive-level academic leadership advancement. The recommendation is to actively seek out a mentor who holds a position they aspire to, and/or possesses qualities or skills they hold in high regard and wish to develop. Women should not hesitate to contact potential mentors or ask directly. Findings show that most often, mentors are direct supervisors or leaders holding positions that women aspiring to executive-level academic leadership positions desire. External executive coaching is another recommended option to receive support. Research findings show that it is more beneficial to have a few mentors, both men and women, who could help them achieve their success. It is essential to attend leadership events (forums, conferences, etc.) and join women's academic leaders' networks, such as HERS, AAWCC, and ACE, to gain exposure to executive academic leadership and receive support, development, and training.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The topic of underrepresentation of women in executive-level academic leadership positions has implications for future research. One area for further research is exploring whether the Christian higher education contexts look different from secular ones in terms of women's

underrepresentation. Some participants employed at Christian HEIs reported severe underrepresentation of women and the extreme effects of it. It would be interesting to investigate how these contexts differ from secular HEIs in more detail. Similarly, it would be logical to study the underrepresentation of women in executive-level leadership positions in rural vs urban HEIs.

Another area for further research appears to be the differences between men's and women's mentorship styles. All participants indicated that both men and women mentors helped them on their path to success, while some described different styles of mentorship that may be gender-related. It is recommended to investigate the strengths that men and women mentors have in mentorship. This information will help inform aspiring women academic leaders about their choices of mentors.

Another recommendation for future research is interviewing men and women using the same instrument (semi-structured interview questions) to see the differences in their responses about the underrepresentation of women in leadership, specifically about the challenges women in executive-level academic leadership positions face to find out the differences in men's vs. women's perception of the phenomenon itself, the leading causes of it, and solutions.

Some participants mentioned that, although the job descriptions for men and women were formally the same, they often found themselves taking on work that their male counterparts had been assigned. While such a dynamic has been researched in the contexts of lower ranks (Steinþórsdóttir et al., 2021), there remains a gap in the executive-level academic leadership landscape. The recommendation for further research is to investigate the equitable distribution of workloads among male and female executive leaders in HEI contexts.

Another area for further research that arose from the participants' accounts of lived experiences is the differences in the mentality of Generation Z and Generation X women in executive-level academic leadership and how it affects their careers and executive leadership experiences. The next logical step for this study is to be replicated in different geographical areas of the US. To mitigate this study's limitations, researchers should collect more information about the participants' demographics, including their cultural and racial backgrounds and marital status, to gain a deeper understanding of the intersectionality of race and gender and the role of family in the career success of executive-level academic women leaders.

## **Conclusions**

The problem addressed in this study was a disproportionately low number of women getting an opportunity for adequate career growth and achieving executive-level academic leadership positions (president, vice provost, vice president, associate vice president, and assistant vice president) across private, public, and community colleges in the Western US. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of women in executive-level academic leadership positions across private, public, and community colleges in the Western US, the barriers they faced, and the skills and techniques they used to successfully obtain and maintain their positions.

The findings of this research study add to the existing body of literature on the underrepresentation of women in executive-level academic leadership positions in HEIs by sharing women executive academic leaders' accounts of their lived experiences. Furthermore, the research study's findings highlight participants' similar experiences, confirming the existing research literature's consensus that gender-related challenges persist and contribute to the underrepresentation of women in executive-level academic leadership positions. The findings

confirmed that successful women executive-level academic leaders were aware of the challenges, motivated to lead and be the change, and resilient. They placed a strong emphasis on self-development and education, championing change by building their networks, mentoring other aspiring women leaders, and enhancing their work environments.

The conclusions drawn from the evaluation and implications of the findings call for practice and policies within the higher education system that are concentrated around fostering institutional work culture supportive of women at all institutional levels, creating awareness of the phenomenon of underrepresentation of women, and ways to address it with an ultimate goal of eliminating gender-related barriers for women on the path to or/and holding executive-level academic leadership positions. The most important takeaway from this research study for aspiring women executive-level administrative leaders is that finding mentors, drawing strength from community, building networks, having the right motivation for the role, and actively engaging in self-development are the key components to success on this career track.

## References

- Abalkhail, J. M. (2017). Women and leadership: Challenges and opportunities in Saudi higher education. *Career Development International*, 22(2), 165–183.  
<https://doi.org/10.1108/CDI-03-2016-0029>
- Abbas, F., Abbas, N., & Ashiq, U. (2021). Glass ceiling effect and women career: Determining factors in higher education institutions. *Sir Syed Journal of Education & Social Research*, 4(1), 1–8. [https://doi.org/10.36902/sjesr-vol4-iss1-2021\(1-8\)](https://doi.org/10.36902/sjesr-vol4-iss1-2021(1-8))
- Acker, J. (1990). Hierarchies, jobs, bodies: A theory of gendered organizations. *Gender & Society*, 4(2), 139–158. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/189609>
- Alemu, S.K. (2018). Meaning, idea and history of university/higher education: Brief literature review. *FIRE: Forum for International research in education*, 4(3), 210–227.  
<http://doi.org/10.32865/fire20184312>
- Allan, E. J., Iverson, S. V., & Roper-Huilman, R. (2010). *Reconstructing policy in higher education: Feminist poststructural perspectives*. Taylor & Francis Limited.
- Alper, J. (1993). The pipeline is leaking women all the way along. *Science*, 260(5106), 409–411.  
<https://doi.org/10.1126/science.260.5106.409>
- Alsulami, S. A., Ro, K. A., & Sherwood, G. (2024). Leadership qualities faculty desire in academic leaders: An international Delphi study. *Nurse Education Today*, 141, 106331.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2024.106331>
- American Association of University Women (2018, May). *Broken ladders: Barriers to women's Representation in nonprofit leadership*.  
<https://www.aauw.org/app/uploads/2020/03/women-in-leadership.pdf>

- American Council on Education. (2023). *The American college president: 2023 edition*.  
<https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/American-College-President-IX-2023.pdf>
- Amineh, R. J., & Asl, H. D. (2015). Review of constructivism and social constructivism. *Journal of Social Sciences, Literature and Languages*, 1(1), 9–16. [https://www.blue-ap.com/J/List/4/iss/volume%2001%20\(2015\)/issue%2001/2.pdf](https://www.blue-ap.com/J/List/4/iss/volume%2001%20(2015)/issue%2001/2.pdf)
- Aparna, K.H., & Menon, P. (2022). Impostor syndrome: An integrative framework of its antecedents, consequences, and moderating factors on sustainable leader behaviors. *European Journal of Training and Development*, 46(9), 847–860.  
<http://doi.org/10.1108/EJTD-07-2019-0138>
- Arquisola, M. J. & Rentschler, R. (2023). Gendered in-role behaviours of Indonesian university leaders: Experiences and voices. *Cogent Education*, 10(1), article 2170106.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2023.2170106>
- Arredondo, P., Miville, M. L., Capodilupo, C. M., Miville, M. L., & Vera, T. (2022). Organizational culture and climate: Historic systemic barriers for women. *Women and the Challenge of STEM Professions: Thriving in a Chilly Climate*, 41–61.  
[https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-62201-5\\_3](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-62201-5_3)
- Arriaga, T. T., Stanley, S. L., & Lindsey, D. B. (2020). *Leading while female: A culturally proficient response for gender equity*. Corwin.
- Avolio, B. E., Chávez, J., & Vilchez, C. (2020). Factors that contribute to the underrepresentation of women in science careers worldwide: A literature review. *Social Psychology of Education*, 23(2), 773–794. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-020-09558-y>
- Avolio, B., Pardo, E., & Prados-Peña, M. B. (2024). Factors that contribute to the underrepresentation of women academics worldwide: A literature review. *Social*

*Psychology of Education*, 27(1), 261-281.

<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11218-023-09838-3>

Ayyildiz, P., & Banoglu, K. (2024). The leaky pipeline: where ‘exactly’ are these leakages for women leaders in higher education? *School Leadership & Management*, 44(2), 120–139.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2024.2323731>

Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. W.H. Freeman.

Barkhuizen, E. N., Masakane, G., & Van der Sluis, L. (2022). In search of factors that hinder the career advancement of women to senior leadership positions. *SA Journal of*

*Industrial Psychology*, 48(0), e1–e15. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajip.v48i0.1986>

Berg, G. A. (2020). Equity and diversity in the 21st century university: A literature review. In G. Berg, & L. Venis (Eds.), *Accessibility and Diversity in the 21st Century University*, 1–19.

IGI Global. <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-7998-2783-2.ch001>

Berklee.edu. (2024). *Higher education administrator*.

<https://www.berklee.edu/careers/roles/higher-education-administrator>

Beyer, S. (1999). Gender differences in the accuracy of self-evaluation of performance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 59(5), 960–970. [https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-](https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.59.5.960)

3514.59.5.960

Block, B. A., & Tietjen-Smith, T. (2016). The case for women mentoring women. *Quest*, 68(3), 306–315. <http://doi.org/10.1080/00336297.2016.1190285>

Bloomberg, L. D. (2023). *Completing your qualitative dissertation: A road map from beginning to end* (5th ed). Sage.

Bloomberg, L. D. (2019). *Completing your qualitative dissertation: A road map from beginning to end*.

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=edsbvb&AN=edsbvb.BV045680458&site=eds-live&scope=site>

Bloomberg, L. D. (2019). *Role & responsibilities of the qualitative researcher* [Webinar].

Northcentral University/Center for Teaching and Learning.

Bloomberg, L. (2019). *Trustworthiness in qualitative research* [Webinar]. Northcentral

University/Center for Teaching and Learning.

Bloomberg, L. D., & Volpe, M. (2019). *Completing your qualitative dissertation: A road map from beginning to end* (4th ed.). Sage.

Brabazon, T., & Schulz, S. (2020). Braving the Bull: Women, Mentoring and Leadership in Higher Education. *Gender and Education*, 32(7), 873–890.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2018.1544362>

Brinkmann, S. & Kvale, S. (2018). *Introduction to interview research*. SAGE Publications.

<https://doi.org/10.4135/9781529716665>

Brower, R. L., Schwartz, R. A., & Bertrand Jones, T. (2019). ‘Is it because I’m a woman?’

Gender-based attributional ambiguity in higher education administration. *Gender and Education*, 31(1), 117–135. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2017.1324131>

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). Can I use TA? Should I use TA? Should I not use TA?

comparing reflexive thematic analysis and other pattern-based qualitative analytic approaches. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, 21(1), 37- 47.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/capr.12360>

Brooks, A. (2007). Feminist standpoint epistemology: Building knowledge and empowerment

through women's lived experience. (Eds.) Hesse-Biber, S. N., and Leavy, P. L. *Feminist Research Practice: A Primer*. Sage Publications.

- Brown, E. R., Diekman, A. B., & Schneider, M. C. (2011). A change will do us good: Threats diminish typical preferences for male leaders. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 37, 930–941. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0146167211403322>
- Bruckmüller, S., & Branscombe, N. R. (2010). The glass cliff: When and why women are selected as leaders in crisis contexts. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 49(3), 433–451. <http://doi.org/10.1348/014466609X466594>
- Burkinshaw, P., Cahill, J., & Ford, J. (2018). Empirical evidence illuminating gendered regimes in UK higher education: Developing a new conceptual framework. *Education Sciences*, 8(81). <https://www.mdpi.com/2227-7102/8/2/81/pdf>
- Campanacho, V. (2024). On professional ethics: An insight into the marginalization of academic mothers post-lockdown. *Coming of Age: Ethics and Biological Anthropology in the 21st Century*, 216. <https://books.google.com/books?id=DX4fEQAAQBAJ&lpg=PA216&ots=DXmjin8OuxF&dq=motherhood%20in%20top%20academic%20leadership%20positions%202024&lr&pg=PA216#v=onepage&q&f=false>
- Carcary, M. (2015). The research audit trail – Enhancing trustworthiness in qualitative inquiry. *Electronic Journal Business Research Methods*, 11–24. <http://www.ejbrm.com>.
- Carli, L. L., & Eagly, A. H. (2016). Women face a labyrinth: An examination of metaphors for women leaders. *Gender in Management: An International Journal*, 31(8), 514–527. <https://doi.org/10.1108/GM-02-2015-0007>
- Chance, N. L. (2021). A phenomenological inquiry into the influence of crucible experiences on the leadership development of Black women in higher education senior leadership. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 49(4), 601–623.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/17411432211019417>

Chenail, R. J. (2011). Interviewing the investigator: Strategies for addressing instrumentation and researcher bias concerns in qualitative research. *Qualitative Report, 16*(1), 255-262.

Cislaghi, B., & Heise, L. (2019). Using social norms theory for health promotion in low-income countries. *Health Promotion International, 34*(3), 616–623.

<http://doi.org/10.1093/heapro/day017>

CohenMiller, A., Demers, D., Schnackenberg, H., & Izenkova, Z. (2022). “You are seen; you matter:” Applying the theory of Gendered organizations to equity and inclusion for mother scholars in higher education. *Journal of Women and Gender in Higher Education, 15*(1), 87–109. <https://doi.org/10.1080/26379112.2022.2025816>

CohenMiller, A., & Izenkova, Z. (2022). Motherhood in academia during the COVID-19 pandemic: An international online photovoice study addressing issues of equity and inclusion in higher education. *Innovative Higher Education, 47*(5), 813–835

Coetzee, M., & Moosa, M. (2020). Leadership contingencies in the retention of women in higher education. *SA Journal of Human Resource Management/SA Tydskrif vir Menslikehulpbronbestuur, 18*(0), a1326. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajhrm.v18i0.1326>

Coker, A. D., & Rothblum, E. D. (2025). Mentoring mid-career women faculty: Expanding roles and changing priorities. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 49*(1), 137–142. <https://doi.org/10.1177/03616843241266257>

Correa, A., Glas, M. G., & Opara, J. (2025, January). Females in higher education and leadership: insights from a multi-method approach. In *Frontiers in Education, 9*(0), 1485395. Frontiers Media SA. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2024.1485395>

- Corlett, S. & Mavin, S. (2014). Intersectionality, identity and identity work: shared tenets and future research agendas for gender and identity studies, *Gender in Management: An International Journal*, 29(5), 258–276. <https://doi.org/10.1108/GM-12-2013-0138>
- Creswell, J. W. (Ed.). (2003). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. (2nd ed.). Sage.
- Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (4th Ed.). Pearson.
- Da Rocha Grangeiro, R., Bastos Gomes Neto, M. & Esnard, C. (2022). Women in leadership positions in universities: Are they really queen bees? *Management Research Review*, 46(5), 739–754. <https://doi.org/10.1108/MRR-03-2021-0239>
- Dear, R. W. (2016). Surviving at the top: A critical case study of female administrators in higher education. *Electronic Theses and Dissertations. 1488. Georgia State University Digital Commons*. <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/etd/1488>
- Deetz, S. (1996). Describing differences in approaches to organization science: Rethinking Burrell and Morgan and their legacy. *Organization Science*, 7(2), 191–207. <https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.7.2.191>
- Del Boca, D., Oggero, N., Profeta, P., & Rossi, M. (2020). Women's and men's work, housework and childcare, before and during COVID-19. *Review of Economics of the Household*, 18(4), 1001–1017. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11150-020-09502-1>.
- Derry, S. J. (1999). A fish called peer learning: Searching for common themes. *Cognitive Perspectives on Peer Learning*, 197-211.
- Diaz, E. R. (2022). Female leadership values in Mexican graduate students. *School Leadership Review*, 16(2), article 1. <https://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/slr/vol16/iss2/1/>

Dilthey, W. (1976). *Selected writings* (H. P. Rickman, Trans.). Cambridge University Press.

Dixon, S., Psych, R., & Batta, M. (2024). Cultivating brave spaces for diverse academic women in higher education leadership. *15th Women's Leadership and Empowerment Conference, 1st - 3rd of March 2024 - Bangkok, Thailand WLEC Proceedings 2024.*

[https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Sandra-Dixon-](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Sandra-Dixon-2/publication/380030459_Cultivating_Brave_Spaces_for_Diverse_Academic_Women_in_Higher_Education_Leadership/links/66282a78f7d3fc287479fcab/Cultivating-Brave-Spaces-for-Diverse-Academic-Women-in-Higher-Education-Leadership.pdf)

[2/publication/380030459\\_Cultivating\\_Brave\\_Spaces\\_for\\_Diverse\\_Academic\\_Women\\_in\\_Higher\\_Education\\_Leadership/links/66282a78f7d3fc287479fcab/Cultivating-Brave-Spaces-for-Diverse-Academic-Women-in-Higher-Education-Leadership.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Sandra-Dixon-2/publication/380030459_Cultivating_Brave_Spaces_for_Diverse_Academic_Women_in_Higher_Education_Leadership/links/66282a78f7d3fc287479fcab/Cultivating-Brave-Spaces-for-Diverse-Academic-Women-in-Higher-Education-Leadership.pdf)

Donovan, M., & Caplan, M. (2019). *The inclusion dividend: Why investing in diversity and inclusion pays off*. DG Press

Eddy, P. L., & Kirby, E. (2020). *Leading for tomorrow: A primer for succeeding in higher education leadership*. Rutgers University Press

<https://eds.p.ebscohost.com/eds/detail/detail?vid=1&sid=bc66d688-0250-45a7-9b10-327dc3bea997%40redis&bdata=JkF1dGhUeXBIPXNzbyZzaXRIPWVkcylsaXZlJnNjb3BIPXNpdGU%3d#AN=edsfac.2514722&db=edsfac>

Eagly, A. H. & Karau, S. J. (2002). Role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders. *Psychological Review, 109*(3), pp. 573–598.

Eslen-Ziya, H., Yildirim, T. M. (2022). Perceptions of gendered challenges in academia: How women academics see gender hierarchies as barriers to achievement. *Gender, Work & Organization, 29*(1), 301–308.

Fontanesi, L., Marchetti, D., Mazza, C., Di Giandomenico, S., Roma, P., & Verrocchio, M. C. (2020). The effect of the COVID-19 lockdown on parents: A call to adopt urgent measures. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy, 12*(S1), S79.

Fauzi, M. A., Tan, C. N.-L., Muhamad Tamyez, P. F., Abd Aziz, N. A., & Wider, W. (2024).

Women leadership in higher education: past, present and future trends. *Asian Education & Development Studies*, 13(2), 117–133. <https://doi.org/10.1108/AEDS-11-2023-0168>

Fotaki, M., & Pullen, A. (2024). Feminist theories and activist practices in organization studies.

*Organization Studies*, 45(4), 593–616. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01708406231209861>

Fowler, C. A. (2019). *Nevertheless, she persists: Women leadership in higher education*. Ohio

University Data Base.

[https://etd.ohiolink.edu/apexprod/rws\\_etd/send\\_file/send?accession=ohiou1554119734528149&disposition=inline](https://etd.ohiolink.edu/apexprod/rws_etd/send_file/send?accession=ohiou1554119734528149&disposition=inline)

Fox, M. F. (2014). Gender and clarity of evaluation among academic scientists in research

universities. *Science, Technology and Human Values* 40(4), 487–515.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0162243914564074>

Fox-Kirk, W., Gardiner, R. A., Finn, H., & Chisholm, J. (2020). Genderwashing: The myth of

equality. *Human Resource Development International*, 23(5), 586–597.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13678868.2020.1801065>

Gagliardi, J. S., Espinosa, L. S., Turk, J. M., & Taylor, M. (2017). The American college

president study: 2017. *American Council on Education, Center for Policy Research and*

*Strategy; TIAA Institute*. <https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/American-College-President-VIII-2017.pdf>

Gander, M., & Sharafizad, F. (2025). Progressing gender equity in senior leadership: a

systematic literature review. *Gender in Management: An International Journal*, 40(2),

352-369. <https://doi.org/10.1108/GM-03-2024-0149>

- Ginther, D. K., Kahn, S. (2006). Does science promote women? Evidence from academia 1973–2001. *National Bureau of Economic Research*. <https://doi.org/10.3386/w12691>.
- Gero, M., & Garrity, E. (2018). When women lead: Cultivating diversity from the top. In L. E. Devnew, M. J. Le Ber, M. Torchia, & R. J. Burke (Eds.). *More women on boards: An international perspective*, 225–240.
- Gipson, A. N., Pfaff, D. L., Mendelsohn, D. B., Catenacci, L. T., & Burke, W. W. (2017). Women and leadership. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 53(1), 32–65. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021886316687247>
- Giorgi, A. (1994). A phenomenological perspective on certain qualitative research methods. *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*, 25(2), 190–220.
- Gbobaniyi, O. (2024). The increasing need for inclusive leadership for academic loyalty in higher education institutions. *Innovation and Evolution in Higher Education*, 443. <https://doi.org/10.5772/intechopen.1005298>
- Gorondutse, A. H., Hilman, H., Salimon, M. G., Alajmi, R., Al Shdaifat, F. H. & Kumaran, V. V. (2019). Establishing the effect of government support on the relationship between gender egalitarian and women leadership effectiveness among public universities in KSA. *Gender in Management*, 34(4), 306–325. <https://doi.org/10.1108/GM-06-2018-0067>
- Grajfoner, D., Rojon, C., & Eshraghian, F. (2022). Academic leaders: In-role perceptions and developmental approaches. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/17411432221095957>

- Grau, P., de Cabo, R.M., Gimeno, R., Olmedo, E., Gabaldon, P. (2020). Networks of boards of directors: Is the 'Golden Skirts' only an illusion? *Nonlinear Dynamics, Psychology, and Life Sciences*, 24(2), 215-231. PMID: 32248888
- Grix, J. (2019). *The Foundations of Research*. Macmillan International.
- Grossoehme, D. H. (2014). Overview of qualitative research. *Journal of Health Care Chaplain*, 20(3), pp. 109–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08854726.2014.925660>.
- Grusky, O. (1960). Administrative succession in formal organizations. *Social Forces*, 39(2), 105–115. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2574148>
- Guba, E.G. & Lincoln. Y.S. (1989). What is this constructivist paradigm anyway? In *Fourth Generation Evaluation*, 79-90. Sage Publications
- Hakiem, R. A. D. (2022). Advancement and subordination of women academics in Saudi Arabia's higher education. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 41(5), 1528–1541. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2021.1933394>
- Henderson, L., Black, A. L., & Garvis, S. (2020). *(Re)birthing the feminine in Academe: Creating spaces of motherhood in patriarchal contexts*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Herbst, T. H. (2020). Gender differences in self-perception accuracy: The confidence gap and women leaders' underrepresentation in academia. *SA Journal of Industrial Psychology*, 46(1), 1–8. <https://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC-1f3d5b9f20>
- Hideg, I., & Shen, W. (2019). Why still so few? A theoretical model of the role of benevolent sexism and career support in the continued underrepresentation of women in leadership positions. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, 26(3), 287–303. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1548051819849006>

- Hill, L. H., & Wheat, C. A. (2017). The influence of mentorship and role models on university women leaders' career paths to university presidency. *The Qualitative Report*, 22(8), 2090-2111. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2017.2437>
- Howe-Walsh, L., & Turnbull, S. (2016). Barriers to women leaders in Academia: Tales from science and technology. *Studies in Higher Education*, 41(3), 415–428. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2014.929102>
- Huszczo, G., & Endres, M. L. (2017). Gender differences in the importance of personality traits in predicting leadership self-efficacy. *International Journal of Training and Development*, 21(4), 304-317. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijtd.12113>
- Husserl, E. (1931). *Ideas: General introduction to pure phenomenology* (D. Carr, Trans.). Northwestern University Press.
- Ibarra, H., Ely, R. J., & Kolb, D. M. (2013). Women rising: The unseen barriers. *Harvard Business Review*, 91(9), 60–66. <https://hbr.org/2013/09/women-rising-the-unseen-barriers>
- Ios Foundation. (2023). *Women's power gap at top research universities*. <https://womenspowergap.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/WPG-R1-Progress-Report-2023.pdf>
- Javaid, S.T., Gardiner, R.A. and Egan, K. (2024). Genderwashing in Pakistani higher educational institutions. In: Gardiner, R.A., Fox-Kirk, W., Elliott, C.J. and Stead, V. (Ed.) *Genderwashing in Leadership (Transformative Women Leaders)*, Emerald Publishing, 117–133. <https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-83753-988-820241009>
- Johnson, H. L. (2017). Pipelines, pathways, and institutional leadership: An update on the status of women in higher education. *American Council on Education*.

<https://www.acenet.edu/Research-Insights/Pages/Diversity-Inclusion/Womens-Leadership.aspx>

Johnson, J. L., Adkins, D., Chauvin, S. (2020). A review of the quality indicators of rigor in qualitative research. *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education*, 84(1), 7120.

<https://doi.org/10.5688/ajpe7120>.

Johnson-Gooden, S. R. (2021). *Phenomenology study on the lived experiences of women's barriers to advancement as leaders in higher education institutions*. Northcentral University. ProQuest.

<https://www.proquest.com/openview/73138ba81830f149c0f1fe5d8df463c8/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y>

Judson, E., Ross, L., & Glassmeyer, K. (2019). How research, teaching, and leadership roles are recommended to male and female engineering faculty differently. *Research in Higher Education*, 60(7), 1025–1047. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-018-09542-8>

Kant, I. (1929). *The critique of pure reason* (N. K. Smith, Trans.). Macmillan.

Kausar, S. K., Hafeez, F. A., & Anwar, S. (2024). Potential obstacles hindering the progression of women into leadership roles within the field of education. *Contemporary Trends and Issues in Education*, 3(2). <https://doi.org/10.55628/jctie.v3i2.107>

Kim, M. S. (2014). Doing social constructivist research means making empathic and aesthetic connections with participants. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 22(4), 538–553. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2014.947835>

Kivunja, C., & Kuyini, A. B. (2017). Understanding and applying research paradigms in educational contexts. *International Journal of Higher Education*, 6(5), 26–41.

- Klenk, T., Antonowicz, D., Geschwind, L., Pinheiro, R., & Pokorska, A. (2022). Taking women on boards: A comparative analysis of public policies in higher education. *Policy Reviews in Higher Education*, 6(2), 128–152. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322969.2022.2066014>.
- Krause, S. F. (2017). *Leadership: Underrepresentation of women in higher education*. Northcentral University. ProQuest.  
[https://www.une.edu/sites/default/files/leadership\\_underrepresentation\\_of\\_women\\_in\\_higher\\_education.pdf](https://www.une.edu/sites/default/files/leadership_underrepresentation_of_women_in_higher_education.pdf)
- Kruse, S. (2022). “I am the chair”: Women and department leadership in the academy. *Frontiers in Education*, 7, Article 814581. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2022.814581>.  
<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/>.
- Kulik, C. T., & Rae, B. (2019). “The glass ceiling in organizations.” In: *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Business and Management*. Oxford University Press
- Kulp, A. M., Pascale, A. B., & Wolf-Wendel, L. (2022). Clear as mud: Promotion clarity by gender and BIPOC status across the associate professor lifespan. *Innovative Higher Education*, 47(1), 73–94. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-021-09565-7>
- Lagesen, V. A. S., & Suboticki, I. (2023). Performing excellence and gender balance in higher education. *Higher Education*, 88, 683–701. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-023-01138-1>
- Landel, M. (2015). Gender balance and the link to performance. *McKinsey Quarterly*, 1–3.  
<https://www.mckinsey.com/~/media/McKinsey/Featured%20Insights/Leading%20in%20the%2021st%20Century/Gender%20balance%20and%20the%20link%20to%20performance/Gender%20balance%20and%20the%20link%20to%20performance.pdf>

- Lennon, T., Spotts, D., & Mitchell, M. (2013). *Benchmarking women's leadership in the United States*. Colorado Women's College at the University of Denver.  
<http://womenscollege.du.edu/benchmarking-womens-leadership/>
- Leišytė, L., Pekşen, S., & Tønnes, L. (2022). The influence of university's HRM practices on female academics' progression to management positions. *Journal of East European Management Studies*, 27(4), 662–685. <https://doi.org/10.5771/0949-6181-2022-4-662>
- Loden, M. (1987). Recognizing women's potential: No longer business as usual. *Management Review*, 76(12), 44.  
<https://go.openathens.net/redirector/nu.edu?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/recognizing-womens-potential-no-longer-business/docview/206684517/se-2>
- Locke, K., Lund, R. W. B., & Wright, S. (2021). Rethinking gender equity in the contaminated university: A methodology for listening for music in the ruins. In Wickström, A., Lund, R. W. B., Meriläinen, S., Sørensen, S. Ø., Vachhani, S. J., Pullen, A. (Ed.) *Gender, Work and Organization*, 28(3), 1079. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12632>
- Madsen, S. R. (2015, July 9). *Why do we need more women leaders in higher education?* (HERS Research Brief No. 1).  
[https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1156&context=marketing\\_facpub](https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1156&context=marketing_facpub)
- Machin, D. (2020). White males dominate educational leadership. *EDDi: Educational Digest*.  
<https://medium.com/eddi-educational-digest/white-males-dominate-educational-leadership-5215ba3af1ab>
- MacKinnon, C. A. (1982). Feminism, Marxism, method, and the state: An agenda for theory. *Signs: Journal of women in culture and society*, 7(3), 515-544.

- Maheshwari, G., Nayak, R., & Ngyyen, T. (2021). Review of research for two decades for women leadership in higher education around the world and in Vietnam: a comparative analysis. *Gender in Management: An International Journal*, 36(5), 640-658.  
<https://doi.org/10.1108/gm-04-2020-0137>
- Maheshwari, G., Gonzalez-Tamayo, L. A., & Olarewaju, A. D. (2025). An exploratory study on barriers and enablers for women leaders in higher education institutions in Mexico. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 53(1), 141–157.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/17411432231153295>
- Mahler, W. & Graines, F. (1983). *Succession planning in leading companies*. Mahler Publishing.
- Manongsong, A. M., & Ghosh, R. (2021). Developing the positive identity of minoritized women leaders in higher education: How can multiple and diverse developers help with overcoming the impostor phenomenon? *Human Resource Development Review*, 20(4), 436–485. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15344843211040732>
- Mansoor, A., & Bano, M. (2022). Women academics in Pakistani higher education institutions: Who really is the Big Bad Wolf? *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 1–19.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2022.2077456>.
- Martin, P. Y. (2001). Mobilizing masculinities: women's experiences of men at work. *Organization*, 8(4), 587–618. <https://doi.org/10.1177/135050840184003>
- McKenney, C. B., & Cejda, B. D. (2000). Profiling chief academic officers in public community colleges. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 24(9), 745–758.
- Merma-Molina, G., Urrea-Solano, M., Baena-Morales, S., Gavilán-Martín, D. (2022). The satisfactions, contributions, and opportunities of women academics in the framework of

- sustainable leadership: A case study. *Sustainability*, 14(14), p. 8937.  
<https://doi.org/10.3390/su14148937>
- Miller, K. I. (2000). Common ground from the post-positivist perspective: From “straw person” argument to collaborative coexistence. In S. R. Corman & M. S. Poole (Eds.), *Perspectives on Organizational Communication: Finding Common Ground*, 46–67. Guilford
- Moodly, A. L. (2021). Divergence of perspectives on women and higher education leadership? In conversation with men in leadership. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 35(5), 184–203. <https://doi.org/10.20853/35-5-3866>
- Morgan, David. (1981). Men, masculinity and the process of sociological enquiry. In H. Roberts (Ed.), *Doing Feminist Research*, 83–113. Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Morgenroth, T., Kirby, T. A., Ryan, M. K., & Sudkämper, A. (2020). The who, when, and why of the glass cliff phenomenon: A meta-analysis of appointments to precarious leadership positions. *Psychological Bulletin*, 146(9), 797. <https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000234>
- Morley, L. (2014). Lost leaders: Women in the global academy. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 33(1), 114–128. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2013.864611>
- Morley, L. & Crossouard, B. (2016). Gender in the neoliberalised global academy: The affective economy of women and leadership in South Asia. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 37(1), 149-168. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2015.1100529>
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Sage Publications
- Muradoglu, M., Horne, Z., Hammond, M. D., Leslie, S. J., & Cimpian, A. (2022). Women—particularly underrepresented minority women—and early-career academics feel like

- impostors in fields that value brilliance. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *114*(5), 1086.
- Ngila, D., Boshoff, N., Henry, F., Diab, R., Malcom, S., & Thomson, J. (2017). Women's representation in national science academies: An unsettling narrative. *South African Journal of Science*, *113*(7/8), 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.17159/sajs.2017/20170050>
- Nguyen, N. N. A., & Nguyen, N. (2025). Opportunities and barriers for lecturers' career progression: A systematic review of the scientific labour market. *Italian Sociological Review*, *15*(2), 369–369. <https://doi.org/10.13136/isr.v15i2.891>
- O'Connor, P.; Drew, E. (2023). The tenure track model: Its acceptance and perceived gendered character. *Trends in Higher Education*, *2*, 62–76. <https://doi.org/10.3390/higheredu2010005>
- O'Connor P., & Irvine G. (2020). Multi-level state interventions and gender equality in higher education institutions: The Irish case. *Administrative Sciences*, *10*(4), 98. <https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci10040098>
- O'Connor, P. (2010). Is senior management in Irish universities male-dominated? What are the implications? *Irish Journal of Sociology*, *18*(1), 1–21.
- O'Connor, P. (2018). Editorial: Introduction to special issue on gender and leadership and a future research agenda. *Education Sciences* *8*(93). <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci8030093>
- O'Connor P. (2020). Why is it so difficult to reduce gender inequality in male-dominated higher educational organizations? A feminist institutional perspective. *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews*, *45*(2), 207–228. doi:10.1080/03080188.2020.1737903

- O'Connor, P. (2024). Irish Academia: Nirvana for gender equality and female leadership? *Intellectual Leadership, Higher Education and Precarious Times*, 101.
- Offermann, L. R., Thomas, K. R., Lanzo, L. A., & Smith, L. N. (2020). Achieving leadership and success: A 28-year follow-up of college women leaders. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 31(4). <https://doi-org.proxy1.ncu.edu/10.1016/j.leaqua.2019.101345>
- Open Education Sociology Dictionary. (2024). *Glass ceiling*. <https://sociologydictionary.org/glass-ceiling/>
- Pacanowsky, M. E. & O'Donnell-Trujillo, N. (1983). Organizational communication as cultural performances. *Communication Monographs*, 50, 126–147.  
doi:10.1080/03637758309390158
- Pal, R. P., & Jones, S. J. (2020). Effects of the culture and climate of doctoral-granting institutions on the career aspirations of women midlevel student affairs professionals. *Journal of Women and Gender in Higher Education*, 13(1), 16–36.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/26379112.2020.1730193>
- Pascale, A. B., Ehrlich, S., & Hicks-Roof, K. (2022). The impact of COVID-19 pandemic on Mother Scholars: A comparative case study of united states and Australian higher education women faculty role strain. *Journal of Comparative and International Higher Education*, 14, 53–68. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jcihe.v14i3a.3783>
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (4th ed.). Sage.
- Peng, J. E. (2020). Ecological pushes and pulls on women academics' pursuit of research in China. *Frontiers of Education in China*, 15(2), 222–249. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11516-020-0011-y>

- Perrakis, A., & Martinez, C. (2012). In pursuit of sustainable leadership: How female academic department chairs with children negotiate personal and professional roles. *Advances in Developing Human Resources, 14*(2), 205–220.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1523422312436417>
- Peterson, H. (2016). Is managing academics “women’s work”? Exploring the glass cliff in higher education management. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 44*(1), 112–127. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143214563897>
- Pillay, P. (2025). Women's leadership in South African higher education: a systematic review. *International Journal of Contemporary Educational Research, 12*(1), 56–70.  
<https://doi.org/10.52380/ijcer.2025.12.1.736>
- Poma, E., & Pistoresi, B. (2025). Women at the top: Leadership stereotypes, sexism, and self-efficacy. *DEMB Working Paper Series*.  
<https://iris.unimore.it/bitstream/11380/1382888/1/0262.pdf>
- Purdy, M. (2024). Closing the gap: A literature review of gender disparities in higher education. *Pepperdine Journal of Communication Research, 12*(1), 5.
- Qian, Y., & Yavorsky, J. E. (2021). The under-utilization of women’s talent: Academic achievement and future leadership positions. *Social Forces, 100*(2), 564–598.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/soaa126>
- Ramohai, N. J., & Holtzhausen, S. (2022). Academic women departmental heads’ coping mechanisms during COVID-19: A capabilities approach perspective. *Perspectives in Education, 40*(4), 89– 103. <https://doi.org/10.38140/pie.v40i4.6190>

- Ramsay, K., & Letherby, G. (2006). The experience of academic non-mothers in the gendered university. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 13(1), 25–44. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0432.2006.00294.x>
- Rankin, J. G. (Academic). (2018). *Research ethics in education* [Video]. Sage Knowledge. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526444073>
- Redmond, P., Gutke, H., Galligan, L., Howard, A., & Newman, T. (2017). Becoming a female leader in higher education: investigations from a regional university. *Gender & Education*, 29(3), 332–351. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2016.1156063>
- Roth, W. M. (2000). Authentic school science: Intellectual traditions. In R. McCormick, and C. Paechter. (eds), *Learning & Knowledge*. 6–20. Paul Chapman Publishing.
- Rowe, W. E. (2014). Positionality. In D. Coghlan and M. Brydon-Miller (Ed.), *The Sage Encyclopedia of Action Research*. Sage.
- Rucks-Ahidiana, Z. (July 16, 2021). *The systemic scarcity of tenured black women. Inside Higher Ed*. <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2021/07/16/black-women-face-many-obstacles-their-efforts-win-tenure-opinion>
- Russell, M., Stewart, B., & Brooks, L. (2023). Advancing gender equity and women’s leadership capacity: Mentoring, networking, training. *Advancing Women in Leadership*, 42(1), 88–97. <https://eds.p.ebscohost.com/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=2&sid=f083234b-a109-43ce-b573-a3d2e7ae2eeb%40redis>
- Ryan, M. K., Haslam, S. A., Hersby, M. D., & Bongiorno, R. (2011). Think crisis-think female: The glass cliff and contextual variation in the think manager-think male stereotype. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 96, 470–484. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0022133>

- Ryan, M. K., Haslam, S. A., Morgenroth, T., Rink, F., Stoker, J., & Peters, K. (2016). Getting on top of the glass cliff: Reviewing a decade of evidence, explanations, and impact. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 27, 446–455. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2015.10.008>
- Samuelson, H. L., Levine, B. R., Barth, S. E., Wessel, J. L., & Grand, J. A. (2019). Exploring women's leadership labyrinth: Effects of hiring and developmental opportunities on gender stratification. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 30(6), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2019.101314>
- Savigny, H. (2014). Women, know your limits: Cultural sexism in academia. *Gender and Education*, 26(7), 794–809
- Savin-Baden, M. & Major, C. M. (2013). *Qualitative research: The essential guide to theory and practice*. Routledge.
- Schmidt, E. M., Décieux, F., Zartler, U., & Schnor, C. (2023). What makes a good mother? Two decades of research reflecting social norms of motherhood. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 15(1), 57–77. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jftr.12488>
- Schmitt, M. & Wilkesmann, U. (2020). Women in management in STEM: Which factors influence the achievement of leadership positions? *International Journal of Gender, Science and Technology*, 12(3), 329–352.
- Schutz, A. (1972). *The phenomenology of the social world*. (G. Walsh & F. Lehnert, Trans.). Northwestern University Press.
- Shreffler, M. B., Murfree, J. R., Huecker, M. R., & Shreffler, J. R. (2023). The impostor phenomenon and work–family conflict: An assessment of higher education. *Management in Education*, 37(1), 5–12. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0892020620959745>
- Simon, M. (2011). *Assumptions, limitations, and delimitations*.

- Sims, C. M., Carter, A. D., Frady, K. K., Moore De Peralta, A., Hofrova, A., & Brown, S. (2022). Furthering women faculty in leadership roles: A human performance improvement case study. *Performance Improvement Quarterly*, 34(4), 395–426. <https://doi.org/10.1002/piq.21353>
- Smircich, L. (1983). Concepts of culture and organizational analysis. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 28(3), 339–358. doi:10.2307/2392246
- Smith, H. K. (2025). Cultural and societal barriers to women's leadership and strategies to overcome them. <https://doi.org/10.13136/isr.v15i2.891>
- Sofaer, S. (1999). Qualitative methods: What are they and why use them? *Health Services Research*, 34(5 Pt 2), 1101. [http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A58451867/HWRC?u=nu\\_main&sid=bookmark-HWRC&xid=fa44ee3f](http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A58451867/HWRC?u=nu_main&sid=bookmark-HWRC&xid=fa44ee3f)
- Spoon, K., LaBerge, N., Hunter Wapman, K., Zhang S., Morgan, A.C., Galesic, M., Fosdick, B. K., & Clauset, A. (2023). Gender and retention patterns among U.S. faculty. *Science Advances*, 9, 1–12. doi:10.1126/sciadv.adi2205
- Schmidt, A. R. (2023). Underrepresentation of women. In: Duarte, M., Losleben, K., & Fjørtoft, K. (Eds.). *Gender Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Academia: A Conceptual Framework for Sustainable Transformation* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003363590>
- Schwandt, T. A. (1998). Constructivist, interpretivist approaches to human inquiry. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (eds.), *The Landscape of Qualitative Research: Theories and Issues*, 221–259. Sage Publications. [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Thomas-Schwandt/publication/232477264\\_Constructivist\\_Interpretivist\\_Approaches\\_to\\_Human\\_](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Thomas-Schwandt/publication/232477264_Constructivist_Interpretivist_Approaches_to_Human)

Inquiry/links/557048d908aeab777228bfef/Constructivist-Interpretivist-Approaches-to-Human-Inquiry.pdf

Sevilla, A., Phimister, A., Krutikova, S., Kraftman, L., Farquharson, C., Dias, M. C., Cattan, S., & Andrew, A. (2020). *How are mothers and fathers balancing work and family under lockdown?* (IFS Briefing Note; No. 290). <https://doi.org/10.1920/BN.IFS.2020.BN0290>.

Sheltzer, J. M., & Smith, J. C. (2014). Elite male faculty in the life sciences employ fewer women. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, *111*(28), 10107–10112. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.14033341>

Steinþórsdóttir, F. S., Carmichael, F., & Taylor, S. (2021). Gendered workload allocation in universities: A feminist analysis of practices and possibilities in a European University. *Gender, Work & Organization*, *28*(5), 1859–1875. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12709>

Stadnyk, T. A. (2024). Overstaying our welcome: On the rise of women's seniority in the academy. *Hydrological Processes*, *38*(5), e15166. <https://doi.org/10.1002/hyp.15166>

Stahl, A.N., King, J. R. (2020). Expanding approaches for research: Understanding and using trustworthiness in qualitative research. *Journal of Developmental Education*, *44*(1), p. 26-28. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1320570.pdf>.

Stenfors, T., Kajamaa, A., Bennett, D. (2020). *How to... assess the quality of qualitative research*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/tct.13242>.

Suter, W. N. (2012). Educators as critical thinkers: The value of educators as reflective practitioners. In: *Introduction to Educational Research: A Critical Thinking Approach*, 3–30. Sage

- Teague, L. J. (2015). Higher education plays critical role in society: More women leaders can make a difference. *Forum on Public Policy Online*, 2015(2), 1–20.  
<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1091521.pdf>
- Tessens, L., White, K., & Web, C. (2011). Senior women in higher education institutions: perceived development needs and support. *Journal of Higher Education Policy & Management*, 33(6), 653–665. <https://doi-org.unh.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/1360080X.2011.621191>
- Tewfik, B. A., Yip, J. A., & Martin, S. R. (2025). Workplace impostor thoughts, impostor feelings, and impostorism: An integrative, multidisciplinary review of research on the impostor phenomenon. *Academy of Management Annals*, 19(1), 38–73.  
<https://doi.org/10.5465/annals.2023.0100>
- THE (Times Higher Education) (2024). International Women’s Day: Top universities led by women. *Times Higher Education*. <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/student/best-universities/top-10-universities-led-women>
- Thien, L. M., Lim, H. L., Ahmad Shabudin, A. F., Che Aman, R., Ismail, A., Zuharah, W. F., & Muftahu, M. (2025). Women leadership in higher education: Exploring enablers and challenges from middle-level academics’ perspective. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 12(1), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-024-04278-6>
- Thomas S. (2020). Women in higher education administration leadership and the role of institutional support. In G. Berg & L. Venis (Eds.), *Accessibility and Diversity in the 21st Century*. IGI Global. <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-7998-8592-4.ch016>

- Tompkins, P. K. (1997). How to think and talk about organizational communication. In P. Y. Byers (Ed.), *Organizational Communication: Theory and Behavior*, 361–373. Allyn & Bacon.
- Torres, A. J. C., Barbosa-Silva, L., Oliveira-Silva, L. C., Miziara, O. P. P., Guahy, U. C. R., Fisher, A. N., & Ryan, M. K. (2024). The impact of motherhood on women’s career progression: A scoping review of evidence-based interventions. *Behavioral Sciences*, *14*(4), 275. <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs14040275>
- Toye, F., Seers, K., Allcock, N., Briggs, M., Carr, E., Andrews, J., & Barker, K. (2013). ‘Trying to pin down jelly’ – exploring intuitive processes in quality assessment for meta-ethnography. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, *13*(1), 46. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2288-13-46>
- Tuffour, I. (2017). A critical overview of interpretative phenomenological analysis: A contemporary qualitative research approach. *Journal of Healthcare Communications*, *2*(4), 52.
- UNESCO. (2025). Barriers remain to women’s equal representation in education leadership positions. In: *Gender Report: Women lead for learning*, 27–50. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep70574.6>
- Van den Brink, M., Holgersson, C., Linghag, S., & Leé, S. (2016). Inflating and downplaying strengths and weaknesses—Practicing gender in the evaluation of potential managers and partners. *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, *32*(1), 20–32. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scaman.2015.11.001>
- van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. Albany State University of New York Press.

- van Manen, M. (2016). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. Routledge.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society*. Harvard University Press.
- Watson, S. W. (2024). Women in the academy: Challenges, barriers, promising practices, and policies. In *A Cross-Cultural Examination of Women in Higher Education and the Workplace*, 113–136. IGI Global. <https://doi.org/10.4018/979-8-3693-0102-9.ch006>
- Weber, M. (1968). *Economy and society*. Bedminster.
- Wickström, A., Lund, R. W. B., Meriläinen, S., Sørensen, S. Ø., Vachhani, S. J., Pullen, A., Locke, K., Lund, R. W. B., & Wright, S. (2021). Rethinking gender equity in the contaminated university: A methodology for listening for music in the ruins. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 28(3), 1079. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12632>
- Wilton, S., & Ross, L. (2017). Flexibility, sacrifice, and insecurity: a Canadian study assessing the challenges of balancing work and family in academia. *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy*, 29(1-2), 66–87. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08952833.2016.1272663>
- Winchester, H.P.M. & Browning, L. (2015). Gender equality in academia: a critical reflection. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 37(3), 269–281. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2015.1034427>
- Wolfe, B. L., & Dilworth, P. P. (2015). Transitioning normalcy: Organizational culture, African American administrators, and diversity leadership in higher education. *Review of Educational Research*, 85(4), 667–697.
- Woolley, A., & Malone, T. W. (2011, June). What makes a team smarter? More women. *Harvard Business Review*, 89(6), 32–33.

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=bth&AN=60780756&site=ehost-live>

Yahya, U., Huma Anwar, R., & Zaki, S. (2024). Women leaders in higher education: A systematic review offering insights for nations with wider gender gaps. *Issues in Educational Research*, 34(1), 378–399. <http://www.iier.org.au/iier34/yahya.pdf>

Youssef-Morgan, M. C. M., & Luthans, F. (2014). Psychological capital and well-being. *Stress and Health of the International Society for the Investigation of Stress*, 31(3), 180–188. <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=s3h&AN=108756595&site=eds-live&scope=site>

Yousaf, R., & Schmiede, R. (2017). Barriers to women's representation in academic excellence and positions of power. *Asian Journal of German and European Studies*, 2(2), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40856-017-0013-6>

## Appendices

## Appendix A

### Interview Questions

The purpose of this interview is to gather self-reported data regarding your personal experience in executive-level academic administrative positions. This research is intended to explore the lived experiences of women in executive-level academic leadership positions across all private, public, and community colleges in the Western US, the barriers they faced and the skills and techniques they used to successfully obtain and maintain their positions. Please answer each question honestly.

1. Please tell me about the career trajectory that led you to an executive-level academic leadership position, your current position and responsibilities.
2. What qualities do you consider important for success as a woman in your leadership role?
3. What do you find most rewarding in your day-to-day work?
4. From your perspective, is there a difference in the way women lead compared to men? If so, how would you describe it?
5. How do you perceive your own leadership style in that connection?
6. Who or what helped you develop your leadership style in your role?
7. Describe the biggest challenges in your career as a woman and how you overcome them.
8. Talk about your experience of bias, discrimination, and stereotyping on your path to leadership and/or in your current executive-level leadership role, if any, and its significance to you.
9. What helps you move through challenging times in your role?
10. What do you consider support from family, mentors, and organization?
11. How do you build and maintain your support systems?
12. In your opinion, how can your organization entice and support more women to take on leadership roles?
13. What practical advice would you give other women navigating the HEI landscape to executive-level academic leadership roles?

## Appendix B

### Recruitment Email

Hello,

My name is Viktoriya Stavesky, and I am a doctoral candidate at Northcentral University. I am conducting a research study the phenomenon of underrepresentation of women in academic executive-level positions in higher education. The name of this research is “Exploring the Phenomenon of Underrepresentation of Women in Executive-Level Academic Leadership Positions in Higher Education Institutions.”

I am recruiting individuals who meet all of these criteria:

1. You identify as a woman
2. You are currently serving or have served as a chancellor, vice-chancellor, president, provost, vice provost, associate provost, vice president, associate vice president, and assistant vice president
3. You are serving or have served in the above role/s at an accredited public or private four-year academic institution in the Western United States of America that grant undergraduate and/or graduate degrees.

I hope to include 12 people in this research.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following activities:

1. Participate in a 1:1 online interview via Zoom for 60 minutes
2. Review interview summary via email for 10-15 minutes

During these activities, you will be asked questions about:

- Your career trajectory
- Your opinion on the challenges women in executive-level leadership roles face in higher education
- Your support systems and mechanisms in your executive-level academic leadership role
- Your lived experiences in your executive-level academic leadership role

If you have questions, please contact me at XXXXXXXX@o365.ncu.edu or XXX-XXX-XXXX.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a subject in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) via email at [irb@nu.edu](mailto:irb@nu.edu)

Thank you for your time,

Viktoriya Stavesky

Doctoral Candidate,  
National University  
Program: EDD - Doctor of Education  
Leadership in Higher Education

## Appendix C

### Consent Letter

My name is Viktoriya Stavesky, and I am a doctoral student at National University (NU).

I'm asking you to take part in a research study about the phenomenon of underrepresentation of women in academic executive-level positions in higher education. The name of this research is "Exploring the Phenomenon of Underrepresentation of Women in Executive-Level Academic Leadership Positions in Higher Education Institutions."

You may participate in this research if you meet all of the following criteria:

1. You identify as a woman
2. You are currently serving or have served as a chancellor, vice-chancellor, president, provost, vice provost, associate provost, vice president, associate vice president, and assistant vice president
3. You are serving or have served in the above role/s at an accredited public or private four-year academic institution in the Western United States of America that grants undergraduate and/or graduate degrees.

I hope to include 12 people in this research.

Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to take part in the study.

**What you will be asked to do:** If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following activities:

1. Participate in a 1:1 online interview via Zoom for 60 minutes
2. Review interview summary via email for 10-15 minutes

During these activities, you will be asked questions about:

- Your career trajectory
- Your opinion on the challenges women in executive-level leadership roles face in higher education
- Your support systems and mechanisms in your executive-level academic leadership role
- Your lived experiences in your executive-level academic leadership role

**Risks:** There are minimal foreseeable risks or discomforts associated with this research. You can still skip any question you do not wish to answer, skip any activity, or stop participation at any time.

**Benefits:** If you participate, there are no direct benefits to you. This research may increase the body of knowledge in the subject area of this research.

**Recording:** I would like to video record your responses with Zoom during the interview. You can disable the video function of the online meeting platform at any time.

**Confidentiality:** I will keep the records of this study private and take reasonable measures to protect the security of all your personal information. In any report I make public, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. I will securely store your data for 3 years. Then, I will delete electronic data and destroy paper data.

**Taking part is voluntary:** Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may quit at any time.

**If you have questions:** Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me at XXXXXXXX@o365.ncu.edu or at XXX-XXX-XXXX.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a subject in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) via email at [irb@nu.edu](mailto:irb@nu.edu)