And Still We Rise…An Examination of the Perceptions of African American Women's Lived Experiences Regarding Barriers Faced During Their Journeys to Executive Leadership Positions at Historically Black Colleges and Universities

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BACKGROUND

Andra Day, singer/songwriter's song *Rise Up* encapsulates the energy needed to move forward into a new and hopeful day. The lyrics of her inspirational song fit well with the struggles that African American women face on their journeys to executive leadership positions in academia. A few of the lyrics are as follows.

> You're broken down and tired/Of living life on a merry-go-round/And you can't find the fighter/But I see it in you/So we gonna walk it out/And move mountains/I'll rise up/I'll rise up unafraid/I'll do it a thousand times again/I'll do it in spite of the ache/I'll rise up/All we need is hope (Batie, C.M. & Decilveo, J. Rise Up Lyrics BMG Rights Management, Lyric find.com, 2015).

Despite women being able to excel in the workforce over decades, as research has shown in many reports, there is still disparity and disproportionate roles among African American women in higher education obtaining leadership positions. To discern how and why intersectionality has defeated African American women in higher education, we must look at many different factors. Women must face race, gender, inequality, and intersectionality in academia, administration, tenure, and executive management occupations in the higher education arena. In the context of intersectionality, women continually encounter social and political discrimination that overlaps beyond gender. A study conducted by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) confirmed that conservatives continue to charge that higher education institutions are a force that demonstrates equal opportunity, but that upper administrative positions continue to be idle and dormant with slight change over many years (Pasquerella & Clauss-Ehlers, 2017). Although African American women have successfully entered careers in the academic arena and executive posts in higher education, they must withstand adverse work environments, being segregated from others, and in many cases, demeaned at all levels in higher education institutions (Johnson & Thomas, 2012). To obtain information on how African American women leaders in higher education reach their goals and attain executive-level positions, this research may provide a significant amount of knowledge and personal testimony of guidelines, methods, and involvement of what it may take to reach top-level professions in higher education. The research from the article at AACU will present African American "women's unique social and cultural insights in leadership, increase the visibility of their experiences within in their academic and executive leadership positions, and inform critical educational leaders and practitioners of the persistent barriers African American women encounter" (Johnson & Thomas, 2012, p. 156).

AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN EMPLOYED IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION FIELD

Since the 1860s, women have been a part of the higher education arena (Parker, 2015). Two private colleges, Oberlin, and Antioch began admitting women of all races to provide a liberal arts education. African American women were usually only in domestic positions, including housekeepers, babysitters, cooks, maids, and uneducated. Over the years, African American women have increased their place in society by becoming more educated and thus more eligible for higher education leadership positions. In a study on African American women and Caucasian women in professions, Mosely (1980) determined that highly educated women and their professionalism provides them a sense of freedom and authority as they move to different levels as experts in their fields. Parker (2015) stated that women have more positions in higher education

jobs but still lag compared to men. The data found that women professors and deans move up the ladder much slower than their men counterparts. The women educators were also characterized as less productive, had heavier teaching loads, but continued to have lower salaries and opportunities than African American and Caucasian men (Parker, 2015).

In a study on African American women and Caucasian women in professions, Logan and Dudley (2021) agreed that women have more positions in higher education jobs but are still diminished compared to men. Storman (2022) confirmed that on college campuses, Caucasian men ages 61 and older have often dominated higher education leadership positions since the creation of higher education institutions in the United States. However, in 2015, although women were still belittled and marginalized, they shattered the glass ceiling and represented 52.7% of administrators. Comparatively, only 6% of African American women are identified as being representative in higher education administration roles (American Council on Education, 2017). The data indicated that women professors and deans move up the ladder much slower than their men counterparts. According to Logan and Dudley (2021), "The women educators were also characterized as less productive, had heavier teaching loads, and continued to have lower salaries and opportunities than African American and Caucasian men" (p. 1555). Reviewing information from the past experiences of African American women and focusing on the future of what can be done is possible but still very challenging due to the biases women must face. Mosley (1980) stated that, over 30 years ago, "African American women have been pioneers in education for African American and Caucasian people, even though historical references reflect little about their role," and African American women are a distinct group serving as higher education leaders and are seen as an "endangered species" (p. 295). Tevis et al. (2020) argued that the barriers encountered are minuscule power and reviewed as underpaid and overworked, which continues to be accounted for as a part of history and legacy in the present. African American women continue to be doubly oppressed through race and gender, which causes them to be persecuted and subjected to biases and stereotypes, which impede their movement to higher-level leadership careers.

AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S UNDERREPRESENTATION IN LEADERSHIP POSITIONS

Cañas et al. (2019) concluded that studies verified that while 58.2% of the United States workforce are women, they are still unequally represented in most occupations. McChesney (2018) researched and discovered that women and people of color are disadvantaged when it comes to representation and compensation. Beckwith et al. (2016) confirmed that the percentage of African American women is significantly less in executive-level positions in higher education roles. A new study conducted by McKinsey and Company and LeanIn.Org estimated that "at the rate we're going, it could take about 25 years to reach gender parity in senior vice president roles, and more than 100 years to do so in C-suite jobs" (as cited in Sahadi, 2015, p. 1). For African American women, the overlap of gender and race differs broadly based on their personal experiences and how they have learned to encounter, overcome, and triumph through breaking the glass ceiling. The issue is being a woman and being the minority in a world where African American women are seen at the bottom of the totem pole in most corporate professional and higher education situations (Beckwith et al., 2016). Scholars point to the weak pipelines of graduate-level

scholarship and matriculation/completion, failed recruitment and retention efforts, hostile environments, and the absence of African American administrators are blockades in the upward mobility for African Americans (Blockett et al., 2016; Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Musu-Gillette et al., 2016; Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015). The contribution of women in higher education has regularly elevated internationally around the world; however, the redundant marginalization of African American women leaders' contributions is stifled in higher education (Logan & Dudley, 2021). African American women in the United States constituted the largest group of non-Caucasian women in academia at 236,375 individuals, with the vast majority serving in clerical positions, narrowly followed by faculty, and only 6% serving in upper-level leadership or administrative positions (Townsend, 2020). Women of color often must work extra hard and reach above the norm to have access to higher-level positions in the corporate world but also in higher education settings (Washington & Morgan Roberts, 2019). A lack of support and other women to help them overcome barriers that they endure is an ongoing issue and tends to be given a lack of attention in literature and research studies (Washington & Morgan Roberts, 2019). Moreover, Okoli and Okwuosa (2020) argued that women could reach leadership roles, but only after carefully navigating intricate roads that include childcare issues, racism, sexism, and identity discrimination. In this study, we described the persistence and stamina required of African American women, their experiences and learning processes, and what can be used in unknown environments to their advantage to maneuver and ultimately excel in higher education leadership positions. Fourtané (2021) asserted that African American women leaders have a vast array of practical qualities to share and want to make a positive impact in a higher education setting. Rankin and Caccamise (2017) contended that women leaders desire to be part of an affirmative team and contribute open, honest, and collaborative actions that demonstrate respect for others. Women often value collaboration and harmony while working with others and act as experts at developing positive exchanges which foster strong relationships. Elias (2018) indicated that women leaders naturally inspire others to use their own talents to fulfill and identify their skills and abilities.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

African American women who have the skills, education, and training are still lacking in leadership roles in administration in institutions of higher education. There continue to be increased numbers of women of color scholars but not significant increases in women of color leaders in colleges and universities promoted to executive-level positions. Lewis (2017) proclaimed that current research studies demonstrate diminishing gains in the growth of the number of African Americans who are ascending to upper-level leadership positions at institutions of higher learning. Block and Tietjen-Smith (2016) concurred that the number of women that achieve advanced degrees is outpacing men; however, women are still underrepresented in administrative positions in higher education.

African American women must endure issues of gender and race to excel in their chosen occupations. Lewis (2016) indicated that the problem is that studies on African American women and their distinctive experiences in higher education environments are strongly predicated on the intersectionality of gender and race, which may prohibit them from attaining executive-level administration positions. Gardner et al. (2014) stated that African American women in leadership

positions had been refused promotions at their institutions due to "behavioral bias, lack of career path guidance, insufficient clarity on fundamental requisites, and compensation level" (p. 237).

African American women faculty members frequently deal with a lack of recognition or awards for their academic achievements (O'Meara & Stromquist, 2015). Gardner et al. (2014) reported that although women have adequate documentation of credentials in degrees and necessary training, African American women ultimately encounter roadblocks to higher education leadership positions primarily due to the color of their skin and being a woman. Griffin (2020) contended that African American women experience hardships handling requests to "forego their respective research agendas which are considered outside of established peer-refereed journals when applying for tenure and promotion" (p. 292). Lewis (2016) confirmed that African American women in higher education jobs primarily endure being separated by irregular stereotypes that hold them to distinguishable characteristics when correlated to Caucasian men counterparts in comparable occupations. A hindrance that should be researched is the leadership styles and temperaments that differ between women and men in higher education. The characteristics portrayed by men leaders are seemingly accepted when they demonstrate competitiveness, effectiveness, and strategy, but the same traits are seen as aggressive by women leaders (Carvalho & Diogo, 2018). There has been a negative outcome for African American women due to the color of their skin and because they are women compared to men characteristics and how African American women should perform in the workplace. The issues of gender and race continue to serve as injustices to women in higher education institutions. These injustices promote the loss of expertise and value that can hinder an institution from being better because of not taking advantage of distinct situations that can be assets to the university (Gamble & Turner, 2015).

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

For this case study, we described the perceptions of 11 African American women regarding barriers they have experienced on their journeys to executive leadership positions at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in Virginia. We described the behaviors and practices of these African American women leaders and how they engage at the HBCUs in Virginia to overcome barriers. In this approach, interviewing virtually or in person and describing the perceptions of African American women leaders at universities in the United States in the southeastern region may be beneficial to other women of color in developing a rite of passage or creating a guidebook of procedures on what it takes in the 21st century to become an executive administrator and influential leader in higher education.

RESEARCH QUESTION

The central research question for this study was: *What are the perceptions of African American women in executive leadership positions at HBCUs in Virginia regarding factors that contribute to barriers African American women leaders experience in higher education institutions?*

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Synergistic Leadership Theory (SLT) was used for this study and described African American women's leadership experiences regarding barriers and supports in attaining executive leadership positions in higher education. SLT describes four factors that contribute to women's leadership theories, which include (a) leadership behavior, (b) organizational structure, (c) external factors, and (d) beliefs, attitudes, and values (Baxter- Naumah, M., 2015; Irby et al., 2002) (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Tetrahedral Model of the Synergistic Leadership Theory

Organizational Structure
Rotates leadership
Uses expertise of members, not rank
Has commercially derived goals
Values members
Rewards professional development
Relies on informal communication
Disperses power
Promotes community
Promotes nurturing and caring
Promotes empowerment
Has many rulers
Has separate tasks and roles
Maintains a tall hierarchy
Initiates few changes

External Forces
Perceptions/expectations
of supervisor/colleagues
Perceptions/expectations of
community
Local, state, and national
regulations
Resources
Location
Culture of community
Socioeconomic status
Language/ethnic groups
Political/special interest groups

Leadership Behavior
Autocratic
Delegator
 Collaborator
Communicator
Task-oriented
Risk-taker
Controller
Stabilizer

Beliefs, Attitudes, Values
Importance of professional growth
Openness as changes verify
Adherence to tradition
Collegial
Importance of character, ethics, integrity
Importance of programs for at-risk/gifted students
Roles of teachers/learners
Purpose of school
Roles of teachers/administrators
Importance of employee well-being

Note. Adapted from "The Synergistic Leadership Theory," by B. J. Irby, G. Brown, J. A. Duffy, and D. Trautman, 2002. *Journal of Educational Administration*, *40*(4), pp. 304–322 (https://doi.org/10.1108/09578230210433409). Copyright 2002 by Emerald Publishing.

The SLT is a comprehensive examination of leadership from men's and women's lenses but developed by women with a woman's vocalization. The theory serves as a generalization of how leadership affects equity in the roles of women and men in the workforce and is gender specific. Irby et al. (2002) confirmed that approaching leadership from this perspective offers a holistic view. Therefore, the direction of this case study was to study the nature, behavior, and attitudes of African American women leaders in higher education and their lived experiences to reach the highest level in their fields. All four factors of the SLT function collectively; therefore,

pressure and imbalance may result if the components of the theory contradict one another (Irby et al. 2002). These factors are depicted as star points on a tetrahedral model. According to Irby et al. (2002), the following are significant assumptions of SLT: (a) leadership is the interaction among leadership behavior, organizational structure, external forces, and values, attitudes, and beliefs; (b) no theory or model exists in current literature that is all-inclusive of women's characteristics or women's perspectives; and (c) women bring a particular set of leadership behaviors to leadership positions (Irby et al., 2002, p. 310). Irby et al. (2002) argued that SLT is unlike any other theory and is distinguished by the following five distinctive characteristics: (a) its development included women leaders; (b) women leaders may be influenced in ways that men leaders are not by external forces, organizational structures, or values, attitudes, and beliefs, and conversely; (c) in contrast to men's leadership behaviors, women's leadership behaviors may interact differently with SLT factors; (d) the factors may have a different effect on leaders in varying positions or levels; and (e) each of the four components are interactive (Irby et al., 2002, p. 306). Considerable research has revealed that African American women have excelled but still face multiple barriers while trying to break the glass ceiling and be equal to their men counterparts in hiring, promotion, salary, and opportunities to become leaders (Hyppolite, 2019; Simms, 2018; Whitehead, 2017). African American women have been classified as difficult to get along with because of the firm demeanor they may take when they reach leadership roles and executive levels in their careers (Roberts et al., 2018). Block and Tietjen-Smith (2016) agreed that women are not tolerant of women leaders who are aggressive, lack empathy, and do not display traits that are expected from society. The research showed that certain behaviors might be necessary to get ahead based on biases, inequity, sexism, and racism that African American women face. Specifically, research by Davis and Maldonado (2015) discussed that although women develop as leaders, they continue to encounter gender and race inequities and adversities that may detrimentally affect their career trajectories and, ultimately, their lifeline to career advancement.

FACTOR 1: ATTITUDES, BELIEFS, AND VALUES

In Factor 1, attitudes, beliefs, and values are portrayed as dichotomous; an individual or group will either adhere to or disavow specific attitudes, beliefs, or values at any given point in time (Irby et al., 2002). Leaders must understand the attitudes, beliefs, and values of the members of their team to properly gauge the buy-in and support of their campus. Irby et al. (2002) also suggested identifying and maturing one's own values is critical for leaders who work with others. Examples of this leadership behavior in Factor 1 include "(a) belief in professional growth for all, (b) openness to change, (c) value in diversity, and (d) value integrity" (Irby et al., 2002, p. 307). Beliefs, attitudes, and values influence individual, societal, and organizational perceptions, and decisions (Ertosun & Adiguzel, 2018). Additionally, Castillo et al. (2018) acknowledged the relationship between the leader's attitudes, values, and beliefs and those of others in the organization.

FACTOR 2: LEADERSHIP BEHAVIOR

In Factor 2, SLT illustrated a spectrum of leadership styles, from autocratic to nurturing (Brown & Irby, 2003). Regarding women in leadership, specific behaviors given to women leaders are "interdependence, cooperation, receptivity, merging, acceptance, and pattern recognition" (Smith et al., 2021, p. 10). Years ago, the same attributes were subscribed to men leaders in addition to self-assertion, separation, independence, control, and competition (Grogan,1998; Gupton, 1996; LeCompte, 1996). However, feminist leaders prioritize personal relationships and engage closely with colleagues to establish a network inside the organization (Brown & Irby, 2003). Creating a culture of connection and support in the workplace can improve productivity. Zenger and Folkman (2019) found a more collaborative and less self-centered leadership style is preferred by women than men. Fassinger and Shullman (2017) found that men tend to gravitate toward authoritarian leadership styles. In contrast, Fassinger and Shullman (2017) discovered women precipitate toward democratic leadership styles that include others and frequently involve them in decision-making.

FACTOR 3: EXTERNAL FORCES

In Factor 3, SLT identified external contributors or leaders who have a connection to the organization and the leader who clearly exemplifies a set of values, attitudes, and beliefs (Brown & Irby, 2003). Effective leaders understand that uncontrolled external influences will affect the system and produce frustration for people within the organization (Norlock, 2019). External influences that can have an impact on educational institutions are numerous and can include the following: (a) Perceptions or expectations of supervisors or colleagues; (b) local, state, and national laws and regulations; (c) technological advances; (d) political climate; (e) economic situations; (f) resources, (g) special interest groups; (h) culture of the community, (i) taxpayers, and (j) location (Irby et al., 1999, p. 170).

FACTOR 4: ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES

In Factor 4, the SLT classified organizational structures among those ranging from feminist to bureaucratic. The SLT organizational structure refers to the organization's vertical and horizontal operations (Brown & Irby, 2003). However, (Koen 1984, as cited in Clegg & Bailey, 2008), Martin (1993), and (Rothschild 1992, as cited in Cliff et al., 2005) defined feminist organizations as decision-making structures that practice sharing leadership, community and collaboration, promotion, and shared decision-making. For example, bureaucratic, participatory, transformational, and feminist are organizational structures within this structure and factor. The organizational structure can influence and form diverse practices inside the organization. The SLT is transparent as it outlines the role feminism plays as a critical component. However, in addition to entailing a feminist perspective, SLT includes the following: (a) Adds a theory reflective of women leadership experiences and voice to existing men biased leadership theories, (b) improves the theory presented in leadership programs, and (c) creates a framework for describing dynamic tensions between leadership behaviors, organizational structures, external forces, and attitudes and

beliefs (Brown & Irby, 2003, p. 106). Historically, leadership theories have excluded women's perspective, have been gender biased, and have been written in a masculine voice and perspective (Brown & Irby, 2003; Goethals & Hoyt, 2017). Most theories are gender-neutral, written in a masculine tone, and validated with men participants (Sczesny et al., 2016). The number of women leaders continues to increase in industries across the globe; therefore, leadership theories should represent these leaders and their perspectives. Another significant feature of the SLT that other leadership theories lack is its framework, which permits analysis and evaluation of specific interactions that may contribute to or explain tension, conflict, or harmonious relationships at certain periods in time or across time (Brown & Irby, 2003). Moreover, the importance of alignment among the four factors strongly suggested that no matter what values, beliefs, attitudes, leadership behaviors, organizational structures, and external forces are, the leader and organization can be perceived as effective if there is an alignment among the four factors (Brown & Irby, 2003).

Overall, SLT has been used to improve understanding of leadership practices and educational organizations since its establishment (Brown & Irby, 2003). As African American women strive for equality and break down barriers in higher education, several theoretical perspectives aid in recognizing and comprehending the experiences of African American women in higher education, which is essential if progress is the aim (Cain, 2015).

BARRIERS FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN TO EXCEL

The climb to success has been paved with many barriers for African American women interested in leadership roles. In fact, there is overwhelming evidence of a significant difference in leadership positions in academia for African American females (Reynolds, 2020). Storman (2022) contended that according to Valverde (2011) "Women of color will not just have to be smarter and stronger to succeed as individuals and groups as they have done in the past but will need to assume the role of change agents, inserting new leadership styles, and redirecting purposes" (p. 51). Therefore, the leadership style women of color possess is recognized as a critical factor when aspiring for leadership positions in higher education. These barriers have presented themselves in many facets. In higher education, a variety of barriers to promotion for African American women into leadership roles have produced an invisible "glass ceiling" that has proven difficult to overcome due to lack of access to mentors, gender and race-based expectations, inequitable wage gaps, and stereotypes and misconceptions (Tanner, 2019). Selzer et al. (2017) discussed ways for women to overcome and bare the structural barriers that are policy-oriented, such as pausing the tenure clock or providing flexible work schedules. While barriers for women have become "more permeable, structural barriers that are discriminatory still impede the advancement of women's career trajectories" (Selzer et al., 2017, p. 3). In short, women can be taught negotiation skills in a women's leadership development program, but if exclusionary policies and practices remain in place, concrete walls will continue to exist.

AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Women of color must face other barriers that researchers have defined as stereotype threat and imposter syndrome while advancing to leadership occupations. Stereotype threat is "subjecting

a person to negative stereotypes of incompetence, and impostor syndrome is defined as an internal experience of intellectual phoniness that appears to be particularly widespread and acute in a chosen sample of high-achieving females" (Washington-Lockett et al., 2018, p. 7). These types of barriers can debilitate a woman's progression in a leadership position and cause them to doubt their ability and skills. The obstacles can also, as researchers stated, cause constant hindrances to effective and productive leadership, and make being confident while leading others very challenging and burdensome. Marginalization, social isolation, limited mentoring, opportunities, and unwelcoming campus communities are all environmental factors that have affected the leadership experiences and potential for African American women to ascend in their careers (Clayborne, 2006; Jones, 2013; Wallace et al., 2014). Research has demonstrated over multiple decades that African American women have come to be more accomplished than other groups in higher education but continue to face obstacles, sexism, and racism that hinder their progress from becoming leaders, although they may qualify (Bates, 2007). For the African American woman leader, haggling through various environments, conventional climates, cultures, and complex political strongholds is necessary to obtain power, career mobility, and maneuver through obstacles that may hinder the path to executive leadership endeavors. As society has demonstrated in history, gender impacts others' perceptions of the ideals of womanhood and leadership. The perpetual manifestation of inequity becomes an informing lens for African American women and women of color to endlessly try to strategize on how to combat the complex architecture of the traditional higher education setting. African American women must operate in a marginalized atmosphere. An African American woman trying to attain leadership status in a higher education operation continuously observes and lives disparate realities and interjects critical survival tactics in their work community to progress upward (Johnson & Thomas, 2012). Allen and Lewis (2016) noted, "African American women are portrayed as overachieving and out of control African American lady, sister to the feminazi, to affirm one of the Caucasian truths of the Caucasian republic- African American bodies are excluded from the "we the people" that established the citizen subject" (p. 6). African American women in leadership positions are seen negatively and are subjected to exclusion, lack of credibility, frequent dismissal, and progressive ideas being attributed to others (Washington & Morgan Roberts, 2019). The perceptions contributed to African American women having to take on additional burdens that will "straighten the shame-producing images of the crooked room" when facing race and gender stereotypes (Allen & Lewis, 2016, p. 6). African American women in higher education are learning that balancing their leadership is imperative but not easy for success when becoming an executive in academe or administrative roles. Chance (2021b) acknowledged that factors that support women's ability to excel in leadership in higher education are resilience, social support, and leadership development. African American women leaders must create their own voice and idea of what a woman should look like in a situation where Caucasian and men norms occur that aspire or strive for more, develop models for other women, and where their behaviors are accepted. Women find their own style to demonstrate and maintain effective leadership roles (Johnson & Thomas, 2012). It is tough for African American women to display a professional image when they are expected to fail due to negative stereotypes, workplace norms, and lower expectations that run counter to the cultural values of African American people and that reward Caucasian men standards of behavior and appearance (Allen & Lewis, 2016). African American women must express their values, shaped

by their perceptions and worldviews, so that they can share their lived experiences with others to cope with rising to leadership roles. Since African American women have unique struggles, much different than African American men, or Caucasian women, it is crucial that their experiences become a part of overcoming barriers and difficulties in becoming leaders in higher education positions. African American women can explain how being oppressed in leadership roles has assisted them in growing, becoming resilient, and resistant to the negative systems that cause inequity and injustice in the workplace. Tran (2014) affirmed that as "more women of color enter the professoriate and serve in leadership roles that they challenge existing epistemologies and resist superficial assimilation while developing innovative practices and supportive networks to overcome these barriers" (p. 302). One reason women have been able to excel in higher education is that there have been more positive examples of mentorship that have given an avenue of the right path to success when reaching for executive-level positions (Tran, 2014).

THE GLASS CEILING

The Federal Glass Ceiling Commission was created to address workplace discrimination that impacted women and created a concealed barrier that prevented this minority group's access to professional opportunities and progress inside organizations and companies (Beckwith et al., 2016). Unfortunately, the number of women college and university presidents is beyond small compared to male college and university presidents. This dismal number of minority women leaders is not due to a lack of qualified leaders, candidates, or interest in the field; unfortunately, the disparity is known as the glass ceiling (Braun, 1995). As a result, the Federal Glass Ceiling Commission was created to combat workplace discrimination that impacted women and constituted the invisible barrier. This invisible barrier continues to exist, as is shown in the literature, and hinders African American women from obtaining the same freedoms, contingencies, and connections to progress in executive-level positions that others may be afforded (Braun, 1995).

The glass ceiling was a term used in the 1980s to describe an invisible barrier that inhibits women and minorities from rising in management positions. As women grew and developed their knowledge and skills in the workplace, the glass ceiling became more evident in different industries (Babic & Hansez, 2021). For example, researchers conducted a study and examined why women managers among 685 employees at a large Midwestern insurance company were underrepresented at the top levels of their organization (Elacqua et al., 2009, as cited in Babic & Hansez, 2021). The authors of the study examined the perception of the glass ceiling through the lens of interpersonal factors, situational factors, environmental factors, and the perception of differential treatment of women. After surveying 320 women in managerial positions in a Belgian organization, (Elacqua et al. 2009, as cited in Babic & Hansez, 2021) reported interpersonal relationships can have an impact on how women and their men counterparts are treated; however, due to "(a) lack of mentoring, (b) lack of access to a network of senior managers, and (c) friendly relationships with company decision-makers, the likelihood of women gaining opportunities in management level positions is a challenge" (Babic & Hansez, 2021, p. 11). The same study also reported that the perceptions of unequal treatment between men and women were positively associated with the perceptions of a glass ceiling in the organization (Elacqua et al., 2009, as cited in Babic & Hansez, 2021). Another study explored the glass ceiling effect in the business industry.

Bertrand (2017) asserted that when women are not promoted to senior roles, talent is lost, and the economy suffers. In this study, Bertrand (2017) found three primary reasons that the glass ceiling keeps women out of high-paying positions in the field of business. The three significant barriers reported in this study were as follows: (a) women with a college education are more likely than men to reject degrees that lead to higher-paying jobs, (b) psychological conflicts between men and women may account for up to 10% of the wage disparity, and (c) the psychological issues women experience are different from men and account for up to 10% of the pay gap (Bertrand, 2017, p. 26). These challenges have slowed down women's progress in gaining careers in leadership positions; however, notable progress has been reported in many areas and continues to develop as researchers identify successful strategies for women in leadership (Selzer et al., 2017).

ACCESS TO MENTORS

A study conducted by Johnson and Thomas (2012) affirmed that African American women might be seen as outsiders in academia and face the barriers of inequity of having to negotiate to reflect their identity and employ strategies to achieve power, identity, and voice. In research gathered by AAUW (2019), the research indicated that women make up most nontenure-track lecturers and instructors across institutions, with only 44% of tenure-track faculty and 36% of full professors (AAUW, 2019). Women of color are especially underrepresented in college faculty and staff, which contributes to a lack of diversity, equity, and inclusion in teaching practices and curriculum, as well as role models and support systems for students (AAUW, 2019). Furthermore, the study conducted by AAUW (2019) confirmed that only 15% of tenure-track engineering faculty are women, only 14% of computer science tenure track faculty are women, and, of those, only 5.2% of tenured faculty are African American. African American women are often not mentored, overlooked, and are shunned from applying for or being considered for department chairs, assistant dean, or not put on track for a tenured professor or dean of a school or college (Parker & Funk, 2017). Shepherd (2017) explained that a recent study presented by the leadership foundation discovered that the women in their management program who applied for executive-level roles were denied and unsuccessful but that the comparable male counterparts were successful and hired in the same or higher-level leadership jobs. Block and Tietjen-Smith (2016) indicated that the influence of other women is important such as sponsoring other women and serving as counselors, coaches, and teachers, which is often taken for granted when trying to climb the ladder of success. This inequity continues to be a concern because the senior leadership imbalance persists with gender disparity for women (Shepherd, 2017). Tran (2014) concluded that although African American women have achieved advanced levels of education, they encounter inequity within social status and have difficulty obtaining high-ranking positions in higher education and continually marginalizes their value. Another study conducted by Cañas et al. (2019) depicted other factors that may affect women advancing to leadership positions, including "work relationships, environment, invisible rules, proactivity, and personal circumstances" (p. 6). Shepherd (2017) focused in her study on how some women may take "the form of a perceived lack of self-confidence or ambition, leading to women to opt-out of applying for senior leadership positions because of no encouragement or endorsement of credentials from others" (p. 84). The thought process is that women think that they should not even attempt to apply for the position

because they can safeguard themselves from being optimistic and aspiring to a position that they have applied for but are told that they may never receive because of the inequity that is prevalent in the higher education arena (Shepherd, 2017).

SOCIETAL EXPECTATIONS BASED ON GENDER OR RACE

Many times, in the professional world, African American women have to mask their natural authentic traits for fear of being viewed as aggressive and masculine. Allen and Lewis (2016) argued that this type of suppression "puts pressure on the institutional suitability of the African American women professional from all sides" (p. 7). African American women in higher education often work from a diminished status in higher education. Many women deal with challenges that are attributed to power struggles that aim to subdue women to lower positions and create spaces for men in senior-level positions (Coetzee & Moosa, 2020). Women deal with barriers that hinder the progression or movement into leadership positions because they often must demonstrate their authority and assert power to be better than or equal to men in their behavior (Johnson & Thomas, 2012). In this instance, African American women must engage in unique leadership strategies to balance their identity and looming academic and administrative culture and politics that they may not be familiar with (Johnson & Thomas, 2012). The obstacles that women must overcome put them in a difficult situation, and they face adversity in all areas of the higher education environment. Chance (2021a) proclaimed that barriers include "underrepresentation due to Caucasian men influence, vertical mobility and the concrete ceiling, racism, sexism, ageism, stereotype threat, isolation and often tokenism" (p. 612). Shepherd (2017) stated that a mix of change interventions may be required that also seek to 'fix' the organization, that is, in terms of systemic and procedural changes. Shepherd (2017) confirmed that, more importantly, perhaps, the micro-politics and cultural assumptions that underpin these practices and procedures; for example, in relation to recruitment and selection, also need to be acknowledged and addressed. Salary and Wage Inequity Research also supported the fact that African American women continue to have inequity in higher education positions regarding salary compared to Caucasian women, Caucasian men, and minority men. For example, in an intersectional study completed by McChesney (2018), the author confirmed that people of color are considered the minority, that there is a limited representation that is different across job positions and has a paucity with the populations identified. Moreover, women of color continue to be challenged and face multiple hardships with pay because of the positions they are denied when trying to reach executive leadership jobs.

Women hold more entry-level and service positions in higher education in comparison to men, with worsened conditions for women of color (Johnson, 2017). In America, men outpace women in earnings at 4-year public institutions, earning $13,874 more than women and earning $18,201 more at private institutions; at 2-year community colleges, women make $32,495 compared to $30,050 for their men peers (Johnson, 2017). It is also evident in the data gathered that African American women have more low paying jobs, thus the lower salaries (Ortiz-Ospina & Roser, 2018). Another factor that contributes to not achieving higher level roles in higher education for African American women is always being biased by gender with African American men and Caucasian men; African American women are oppressed in pay, jobs, opportunities, and hindered advancement (Funk & Parker, 2018). The race and ethnicity challenge repeatedly delays

progress for African American women in higher education administration and distinguished faculty careers that lack esteem and desired levels. African American women also continuously deal with a negative image that has been placed on them because they take charge when it comes to making the decision to excel in a higher education leadership position (Commodore et al., 2020). They have been called names and made to look aggressive and it is hard to attain and reach executive-level jobs that reflect their training and expertise. In a study conducted by Collins (2013) on stereotypes, portrayals are destructive and limiting and do not afford African American women the opportunity of media portrayal in a balanced, emotionally healthy, or progressive fashion and contribute to the public's negative perception of African American women (Commodore et al., 2020). Women of color persistently must deal with suspicion and questions about their competency based not on their accomplishments and potential but rather on their motives as well as how other people perceive their identities, which is identified as a chilly climate that virtually all women in academe experience, and for women of color, it is especially relevant today and becomes even colder at 50 the top (Alcalde & Subramanian, 2020). Tevis et al. (2020) discussed how "the limited and very damaging controlling images ingrained in popular culture, impact how others view African American women both independently and as a group, regardless of their behavior and professional accomplishments" (p. 284). The behavior of African American women has gotten an unfavorable reputation while they try to assert themselves as leaders and make insightful and necessary decisions in difficult situations. African American women are often perceived as argumentative and challenging to authority figures in ways deemed inappropriate by some people (Greene et al., 2010; Kringen & Novich, 2017).

STEREOTYPES AND MISCONCEPTIONS

The challenge of the negative image causes persistent labeling and misconception of what an African American woman is and how she identifies. Society has created a misnomer that some are threatened by. Commodore et al. (2020) stated that African American women developed weak personalities the more that they had to deal with refusals in promotion experiences in higher education within educational situations that are considered predominately Caucasian. This experience is an extra pressure on an African American woman to try to navigate in an environment that demonstrated bias against any action or acceleration in career advancement that is pursued in higher-level positions. Coetzee and Moosa (2020) stated that women leaders face and experience thoughts and feelings of exclusion, marginalization, voicelessness, and a lack of authority when trying to excel. The negativity also insists that an African American woman prove that she is deserving of an executive-level position, although she may have already made it evident that she has established herself professionally, educationally, and socially. Research revealed a persistent pressure on women to prove their worth in various roles, from students to leaders (Commodore et al., 2020). African American women, in particular, face a unique challenge termed the cloning effect, where they feel compelled to replicate behaviors observed in others (Freeman et al.,2019). The tendency for organizations to select people who are like the leaders they are replacing has been described as a form of cloning and one that perpetuates unequal representation (Shepherd, 2017). Freeman et al. (2019) proposed that because individuals may lack knowledge of underrepresented groups in some instances, then they serve on committees to hire others of similar

backgrounds and characteristics. This tactic makes it difficult to hire diverse faculty and staff and the cloning occurs because the African American women's educational and other credentials are reflected to lack value (Freeman et al., 2019). This cloning effect may also cause the social climate to be in a normal situation of always hiring the Caucasian men in specific positions, which undermines the hiring process to be inclusive (Shepherd, 2017).

Another area that remains a barrier for African American women trying to achieve executive levels in higher education is stereotypical expectations of women versus men. African American women and women of color reported that their networking opportunities are minimal, they often obtain less mentoring than others, and many double standards for upward mobility and career development stifle opportunities that may be obtained by other groups (Freeman et al., 2019). The lack of support and awareness of how to obtain the support makes it difficult for African American women to maneuver through the institutional climate and who to turn to for help to gain a mentor or someone to show them the procedures of written policy but also areas that may not be written down though have expectations. This instance occurs in administration and faculty tenure positions in institutions. The way that many African Americans are treated in higher education is often hidden in subtle hints of discrimination, and other times, women are isolated and are subject to limits of socialization which can, in turn, cause them to deal with the barrier of not wanting to pursue executive roles (Freeman et al., 2019).

TOKENISM

The influence of marginalization and belittling of women of color is prominent in higher education, which causes discrimination and disadvantages when trying to attain leadership positions. In some instances, African American women are occasionally used in a tokenism demeanor (Lewis, 2016). Lewis (2016) stated, "The culture of borders of dominant groups is rigid ensuing ethnic/gender minorities are perceived as the oppositional other. The behavior of skewed groups creates both a tokenized environment and token positions. The tokenism condition was described as associated with three perpetual tendencies: visibility, contract, and assimilation. Tokens have a high degree of visibility and are universal representatives of their master status (race and gender) for work and social activities" (p. 109). The thought of tokenism is seen as hiring African American women in roles just because of their race and gender but also to meet the quota or prove that the organization is practicing affirmative action guidelines (Lewis, 2016). In this context, using the allocation of employment to ensure the practice or policy of favoring individuals belonging to groups known to have been discriminated against previously, in this case, African American women. Sims and Carter (2019) reported that African American women had a unique intersection of identifiers that dealt with harbored feelings of being invisible, voiceless, discriminated against, isolated, undermined, oppressed, challenged, and demoted. African American women trying to break the glass ceiling in higher education leadership roles have realized that gender intertwines with a hierarchical culture, power, and authority, which has been the conventional attitude for men business leaders (Wallace & Wallin, 2015).

SALARY AND WAGE INEQUITY

Research also supported the fact that African American women continue to have inequity in higher education positions regarding salary compared to Caucasian women, Caucasian men, and minority men. For example, in an intersectional study completed by McChesney (2018), the author confirmed that people of color are considered the minority, that there is a limited representation that is different across job positions and has a paucity with the populations identified. Moreover, women of color continue to be challenged and face multiple hardships with pay because of the positions they are denied when trying to reach executive leadership jobs. Women hold more entry-level and service positions in higher education in comparison to men, with worsened conditions for women of color (Johnson, 2017). In America, men outpace women in earnings at 4-year public institutions, earning $13,874 more than women and earning $18,201 more at private institutions; at 2-year community colleges, men make $32,495 compared to $30,050 for their women peers (Johnson, 2017). It is also evident in the data gathered that African American women have more low paying jobs, thus the lower salaries (Ortiz-Ospina & Roser, 2018). Another factor that contributes to not achieving higher level roles in higher education for African American women is always being biased by gender with African American men and Caucasian men; African American women are oppressed in pay, jobs, opportunities, and hindered advancement (Funk & Parker, 2018). The race and ethnicity challenge repeatedly delays progress for African American women in higher education administration and distinguished faculty careers that lack esteem and desired levels. African American women also continuously deal with a negative image that has been placed on them because they take charge when it comes to making the decision to excel in a higher education leadership position (Commodore et al., 2020). They have been called names and made to look aggressive and it is hard to attain and reach executive-level jobs that reflect their training and expertise. In a study conducted by Collins (2013) on stereotypes, he reported that stereotypical portrayals are destructive and limiting. Furthermore, Commodore et al., (2020) noted that stereotypical portrayals do not afford African American women the opportunity of media portrayal in a balanced, emotionally healthy, or progressive fashion and contribute to the public's negative perception of African American women. Women of color persistently must deal with suspicion and questions about their competency based not on their accomplishments and potential but rather on their motives as well as how other people perceive their identities, which is identified as a chilly climate that virtually all women in academe experience, and for women of color, it is especially relevant today and becomes even colder at the top (Alcalde & Subramanian, 2020). Tevis et al. (2020) discussed how "the limited and very damaging controlling images ingrained in popular culture, impact how others view African American women both independently and as a group, regardless of their behavior and professional accomplishments" (p. 284). The behavior of African American women has gotten an unfavorable reputation while they try to assert themselves as leaders and make insightful and necessary decisions in difficult situations. The perception is that African American women are argumentative and challenge others in authority that others feel an African American woman should not (Greene et al., 2010; Kringen & Novich, 2017).

RESEARCH METHOD

For this case study, we described the perceptions of African American women regarding barriers they have experienced on their journeys to executive leadership positions at higher education institutions. The 11 African American women in leadership positions were surveyed in relation to the four factors identified in the SLT: leadership behaviors; organizational structure; external forces; and attitudes, beliefs, and values (Irby et al., 2002). The design of the study is detailed in this chapter, including research methods and data collection used to explore African American women leaders' perceptions of the barriers they experienced.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH DESIGN

Qualitative methodology was utilized for this case study to describe the behaviors and practices of 11 African American women to describe how they they engaged in institutional settings regarding strategies and leadership skills used by the participants to overcome barriers. We used the SLT to identify and analyze leadership behaviors that are seen as positive for African American women leaders. The four SLT factors were examined while defining different levels of leadership to include the interaction of leadership behaviors, organizational structures, external forces, and attitudes, beliefs, and values that intertwine with improving the organization. Delener (2013) declared that excelling in leadership is also characterized by qualities of shared purpose, collaboration, providing a learning environment, commitment, empathy, competence, and demonstrating self-knowledge.

RESEARCH APPROACH: CASE STUDY

The case study approach examines an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the richness and complexity of a bounded social phenomenon (or multiple phenomena), be this a social unit or system, such as a program, event, institution, organization, or community (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). In this instance, descriptions of the experiences of African American women leaders in higher education institutions were explored. The purpose of the case study was to generate understanding and deep insights to inform professional practice, policy development, and community and social action (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). The authors also noted that the case study method provides an intensive description and contextual bounded analysis to ensure the audience understands the data. This research approach described how the participants, as individuals and African American women, interpreted and reflected their own emotions through their experiences, involvement, understanding, and practice. van Manen and van Manen (2021) asserted that giving a "direct description" (p. 1070) of experiences is not just narratively reporting, copying, or telling a story, but rather to describe is to write directly (unravel or uncover) what remained hidden or concealed. Vagle (2018) proclaimed that when gathering the experiences of the phenomenon and the descriptions, the meaning must be communicated through emphasizing interviews and writing and describing the experiences relayed. Groenewald (2004) proposed that researchers can discover the experiences that people have in and around in their daily lifestyles.

Approaching the study in this manner was appropriate because the data gathered was like

taking up the attitude of immediately seeing and practicing an attentive awareness to the things of the world as they are lived rather than as they are conceptualized or theorized. Moreover, Creswell (2014) also addressed the use of case study research as a qualitative strategy to gather human elements and characteristics as described by participants in a particular study on their circumstances and experiences. Creswell (2014) stated that collecting data on a cultural group in their natural setting over a specific period in the virtual or in-person interview and observational settings would serve as a manner of ethnographic research for a case study. SLT researchers investigated women's leadership styles and behaviors and the impact on the organization and the African American women executive explored African American leadership traits in women, both methods examine knowledge and behaviors of the cultural group in their native environments. This data collection exhibits a consensus of mutual thoughts, similar struggles, know how, wisdom, and practical themes. Butina (2015) stated that the styles of inquiry into case study probe multiple interviews to attain data that provide the history of the individual's life based on stories from their journey to become a leader and includes oral histories or written autobiographies and biographies.

Seidman (2019) indicated that in conducting narratives during interviews or case studies, it is essential to request the participants not only to remember but try to reconstruct their memories of what occurred during any incidents that may make the event able to be recalled. The research in this study described the individual experiences that African American women have endured while maneuvering through higher education to pursue leadership paths and roles. The research described how African American women managed their personal experiences. Leavy (2013) conferred that analysis interested in human consciousness is a way to understand social reality or how one thinks about their experiences. This section of the study provides information about individual feelings and how the participants respond to certain situations to reflect their lived actions, environment, culture, and interactions of being an African American woman leader in administration in higher education.

POPULATION

The focus of the study focus was on higher education and African American women in educational administration in positions of provosts, deans, vice presidents, and executive directors in the southeastern area of the United States at HBCUs located in Virginia. The university has approximately 4,000 to 5,000 students, offers on-campus and online programs, and the employee base consists of around 800 to 1,000 employees. The colleges include African American women leaders, but percentages are still minimal compared to the number of administrators at schools in the immediate area. There is a large imbalance of African American women leaders versus the number of African American students that attend the university and the number of Caucasian women and men in top administrator posts (Garrett-Akinsanya & Mack, 2009). Horsford and Tillman (2012) stated, "This degree of analysis is increasingly important in fields of study where maleness, Caucasian's, and ladyhood have dominated theoretical, epistemological, and methodological approaches and perspectives, thus limiting the richness of research informed by a diversity of racial, gendered, and intersectional points of view" (p. 2).

POPULATION SAMPLE

A population sample is derived from a category of people with similar attributes and personalities that may determine the conclusions of a study. The population sample that was used is a purposive sample of 11 African American women in educational administration positions of provosts, deans, vice presidents, and executive directors in the southeastern United States at HBCUs located in Virginia. The criteria that qualified participants for this study included being an African American female in a higher education senior leadership position for over 5 years in the eastern section of Virginia in the United States. Examining females in all executive levels of higher education provides a better perspective of why and how individuals were able to move up the ladder in higher-level positions or if they could not excel in roles as desired. The participants range from ages 35 to 59. The women leaders' years of higher education experience varied from 7 to 35 years. All participants have earned a master's degree, a Doctor of Education degree, or a Doctor of Philosophy degree. Only 5 participants have also worked at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). No other specific identifiers of participants are presented in this paper due to confidentiality, as it may reveal the participants' true identities. Purposive sampling is "a technique widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources" (Patton, 2002, p. 273). This involves identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals that are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). In addition to knowledge and experience, Bernard (2018) and Spradley (1979) noted the importance of availability and willingness to participate and the ability to communicate experiences and opinions in an articulate, expressive, and reflective manner. Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) concurred that some advantages of purposive sampling include being cost-effective and saving time due to the participant group selected and helping the research to gather qualitative questions that provide stronger insights on the subject, providing valuable data. Using purposive sampling may also identify the best-fit participants so the research is relevant and may lower the margin of error in data because the data sources are a close fit with the research context (Palinkas et al., 2015). Etikan et al. (2016) stated that the purposive sampling technique, also called judgment sampling, is the deliberate choice of a participant due to the qualities the participant possesses. It is a nonrandom technique that does not need underlying theories or a set number of participants. Simply put, the researcher decides what needs to be known and sets out to find people who can and are willing to provide the information by virtue of knowledge or experience. It is typically used in qualitative research to identify and select information-rich cases to utilize available resources properly. This involves the identification and selection of individuals or groups of individuals that are proficient and well-informed about a phenomenon of interest. In addition to knowledge and experience and note the importance of availability and willingness to participate and the ability to communicate experiences and opinions in an articulate, expressive, and reflective manner. Vagle (2018) stated that depending on the phenomenon under investigation, a researcher might use interviews, observations, anecdotes, and performances which may be described through written descriptions of experiences. The methods used in this study included primarily interviews with in-depth narratives and surveys that discussed how the participants maneuvered in a higher education

setting to overcome barriers as women leaders. The interviews described the experiences, and the survey discussed leadership styles.

PROFILES OF SAMPLE

The professions and criteria of the African American women participants included executive directors, provosts, or vice provosts, vice presidents, and deans. The inquiry method consisted of virtual, or in-person interviews, surveys, and narratives provided by the participants in response to open-ended questions. Some participants were also interviewed via phone due to technical difficulties with their devices. The participants have 5 years or more in their current leadership positions at a 4-year HBCU. The candidates have earned their doctoral or master's degrees. The case study research design proved useful to attain a small sample size of 10 or fewer participants. We sought to describe how African American women leaders in higher education have experienced their individual journeys while becoming a leader. Using this method contributed to the personal viewpoint and explained how the leaders overcame barriers, although having to face discrimination, disparity, and male dominance while having equal credentials, education, professional skills, and knowledge. The data collected described paths that the women took to become successful on their road to opportunities that helped them to attain leadership positions in higher education.

INSTRUMENT

The research methods included gathering extensive field notes, conducting unstructured in-depth interviews virtually and in person with African American individuals of the sample group, disseminating surveys, and establishing the record of the culture-sharing group of African American women leaders who have excelled in various higher education roles (Creswell, 2015). Additionally, research questions were directed toward obtaining lived experiences and beliefs, feelings, and conclusions regarding the questions. The culture-sharing group of 11 African American women leaders demonstrated shared values, languages, and beliefs that illustrated the larger picture and processes that occurred in this group's life. This type of research provided behaviors, attitudes, and emotions that may prove beneficial to other African American women leaders in higher education while attempting to move up the organizational ladder hierarchy within the administrative arena of higher education. The data collected from the instruments can also conceivably foster relationships for mentorship programs and guidelines for women of color who want to pursue leadership roles and growth in higher education institutions. The qualitative research conducted in this study investigated 11 African American women and their journeys to overcome difficulties and obstacles in obtaining higher education leadership positions. The case study encompassed an in-depth exploration of a bounded system, such as activities, events, and processes that probed into comprehensive understanding by collecting various data forms (Creswell, 2015). The qualitative data highlighted the issues and views that African American women leaders must overcome, which may not be familiar to other races or gender aspects and that only African American women encounter while becoming leaders in higher education surroundings.

The qualitative instrument used to collect data was the organizational and leadership effectiveness inventory (OLEI) (Irby et al., 2002). The OLEI was developed as an instrument to validate the SLT (Brown & Irby, 2003). The OLEI may be used in conjunction with the SLT for administrators to assess the organization's strengths and weaknesses and to assess the leaders within the organization (Holtkamp, 2001). If problems exist within the organization, the OLEI could be administered to determine if leadership behaviors align with the organizational structure and with values, attitudes, and beliefs. Additionally, the OLEI could be used by individuals to determine their "fit" within an organization (Holtkamp, 2001). OLEI aligns with the SLT, and this instrument is appropriate for the collection of data related to African American women in leadership behaviors. OLEI was used to identify specific leadership behaviors that aligned with the four components of the SLT (Irby et al., 2002). The instrument is divided into six sections, including "(a) philosophical beliefs and principles, (b) leadership behaviors, (c) leadership behaviors II, (d) organizational structure I, (e) organizational structure II, and (f) demographics" (Irby et al., 2002, p. 318; Trautman, 2000). The questions included in my research aligned (see Appendix A for the interview questions) with the four factors of the synergistic leadership theory: leadership behaviors; organizational structure; external forces; and attitudes, values, and beliefs (see Appendix B for the common themes chart).

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

African American women leaders in higher education served as the participants in collecting data for this study. Approval to conduct the study was sought and obtained from the institutional review board, chair, and committee assigned to this project. The human subjects form with all the necessary details was submitted to the appropriate sites.

Some of the ethical considerations for this study included concealing the participants' identities and obtaining their permission in a confidential and discreet manner. The consent form was included with the survey so that each participant understood the expectations before responding to the questions. In addition, there were interview questions that addressed the research question: *What are the perceptions of African American women in executive leadership positions at HBCUs in Virginia regarding factors that contribute to barriers African American women leaders experience in higher education institutions?*

INTERVIEWS AND QUESTIONNAIRES

We contacted 11 African American women in leadership positions via email who are employed in higher education settings in the local region and invited them to participate in the study. The email to the participants inviting them to become study candidates was obtained through professional organizations, associations, conferences, networking opportunities, and African American women in higher education leadership roles. Preference was not given to those who have a concentration in their degree in higher education or leadership. Scheduling was conducted at the convenience of the participants for one and a half hours but within the specific timeline to ensure the data was collected and analyzed to complete the study in a timely manner. There needed to be at least a minimum of five participants to collect adequate materials to attain enough data to

provide reliable conclusions regarding the participants' lived experiences. Groenewald (2004) stated that "researchers are cautioned to allow the data to emerge while conducting studies because engaging in this research means capturing rich descriptions of phenomena and their settings" (p. 47).

ANALYSIS OF DATA

The data analysis was collected from interviews and survey questions. Our role was to identify emerging themes, make interpretations, and find meaning in the data as it unfolded throughout the study (Creswell, 2014). Investigating data is the process of gathering, compiling, and organizing the materials that produce meaningful developments and results (Creswell, 2014). This method of data analysis used analytical and logical reasoning to gain information from the data (Creswell, 2014).

The major reason for the data analysis was to discover the relevancy in responses and attain knowledge on the subject to support the participants' decisions to continue to excel in leadership positions. The data collected were transcribed and analyzed to develop overarching themes of the participants' responses to interview and survey questions. The participants' responses varied but were examined to find items in common that African American women encounter during their experiences on the road to discovering leadership occupations in higher education. After the survey and interviews were administered, the topics shared by the participants identified the major themes.

The participants' responses were examined to determine commonalities and how many participants discussed the same themes. The percentages were provided from the OLEI questionnaire to determine their leadership style and commonalities. The common themes among the participants were discussed, and narratives provided significant outcomes that correlated to the research questions and interview questions (see Appendix C). We analyzed the data by reviewing transcripts and responses to the questions to identify similarities or differences and subsequently find themes. The interviews and survey developed the overall arching themes that were discussed in the responses from the participants. During the interview process, there were multiple responses identified that were not common and demonstrated differences during the women's leadership journeys. Identifying themes is a fundamental task when establishing the concepts of qualitative research. Ryan and Bernard (2016) stated that themes are abstract constructs that investigators identify before, during, and after data collection of characteristics of the phenomena being studied.

The themes can be identified via open coding, word repetitions, keywords in the context, comparison and contrast, metaphors and analogies, unmarked texts, and other connections (Ryan & Bernard, 2016). In this study, keywords were the method by which themes were identified. Given (2008) recognized emergent themes as how individuals see and experience the world and may be a process that leads to generalizable theories of human society and provide rich and detailed insight into levels of intersubjective experiences of analysis of data presented by the participant.

Authors proclaim that qualitative approaches are typically used to explore new phenomena and to capture individuals' thoughts, feelings, or interpretations of meaning and process (Given, 2008). In addition to the themes outlined to respond to the research question, the participants shared other information that proved to be helpful or served in their attainment or stagnant progress on their path to leadership transcendence. Additional responses identified included details that

captured the unique essence of their pilgrimage as African American women in becoming successful authorities in higher education.

The emergent themes identified as barriers to securing leadership positions were depression, devalued leadership ability, oppressive hierarchy, tokenism, and invisibility. Schatzman and Strauss (1973) stated, "Qualitative data analysis primarily entails classifying things, persons, events and the properties, which characterizes them" (p. 109). The findings should be indexed or coded according to their similarities (Creswell, 2014). The information identified during the research had patterns and themes that correlated or connected to each other. It was critical for us as the researchers to skillfully probe the participants to describe what areas and variables may be unknown to others but identified through this research. The data collected provided the personal perspectives of the participants and ensured no bias was demonstrated by us as the researchers.

TRUSTWORTHINESS AND RELIABILITY

Connelly (2016) stated that "trustworthiness or rigor of a study refers to the degree of confidence in data, interpretation, and methods used to ensure the quality of a study" (p. 435). It is critical that the information gathered and then reported on is of the utmost integrity and the data collected is reliable and sincere. We followed strict protocols to ensure that the data collection was transparent and ethical and did not produce any inequity or misinformation. We were responsible for providing specific directions to the participants and being credible and unbiased in my own experiences and background. The dissertation chair and committee preapproved all questions provided to the participants before moving forward in the actual study. All questions and responses were thoroughly reviewed and inspected to ensure there was clarity in the process. The interpretation of data was dependable for the study to be successful.

ASSUMPTIONS

It was assumed while the research was conducted, and data gathered that participants were honest, open, truthful, and forthright with their lived experiences while sharing information with me. It was also assumed that we were not biased and did not make any type of internal characterizations of personal experiences relayed by the participants. It was assumed that the participants understood their current positions in higher education and the expectations and responsibilities of those roles.

LIMITATIONS

The limitations of the study were those characteristics of design or methodology that impacted or influenced the application or interpretation of the results. They were the constraints on the generalizability and utility of findings that were the result of how we chose to design the study, or the method used to establish internal and external validity (Ross & Bibler Zaidi, 2019). Limitations represent weaknesses within the study that may influence the outcomes and

conclusions of the research. The goal of presenting limitations is to provide meaningful information to the reader (Ross & Bibler Zaidi, 2019).

The participants were selected from a single state; therefore, their experiences cannot be assumed to be reflective of all African American women in leadership positions at institutions of higher education in the state of Virginia. At this time, there is not a significant amount of research on how specifically African American women leaders in higher education are able to overcome obstacles and barriers and continue to obtain executive-level positions (Townsend, 2021).

DELIMITATIONS

Delimitations are, in essence, the limitations consciously set by the authors themselves. They are concerned with the definitions that the researchers decided to set as the boundaries or limits of their work so that the study's aims and objectives do not become impossible to achieve. Delimitations are "not positive or negative but rather a detailed account of reasoning which enlightens the scope of the study's core interest as it relates to the research design and underpinning philosophical framework" (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018, p. 157). All leaders in this study are African American women leaders currently serving in higher education roles in the southeastern area of the United States at HBCUs located in Virginia. Because the SLT specifically includes the female's voice, this study was focused specifically on African American women in leadership positions in higher education. All participants selected to participate in this study are in their current positions for a minimum of five years.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The major areas of ethical consideration for this study were ensuring trust with participants and that we did not show bias as data was collected. In addition, we ensured that there was an elevated level of confidentiality and security of the information collected. Considering the data collected from people and about people, we established a high level of confidence with the participants (Creswell, 2014). It was our role to protect information collected during the study to be sure that information was secure and only accessed by us. The identities of all participants are held in strict confidence and given alias or pseudonyms to preserve the individual's integrity and life experiences. All files, digital or recorded, were only accessed by us with secure passwords. The responses will be kept for seven years after the completion of this research project and will remain confidential. The participants were provided with an informed consent form, which explained the study and their acknowledgment of an agreement to the terms. All participants were interviewed via tape recording, digital platform, virtually, or in person, and data will be kept in a secure location during and after the study was conducted. All participants were given the same questions to respond to for one hour and a half and treated in a fair and equitable manner.

Importance of the Study

Although African American women leaders have learned to overcome barriers and take action to deal with discrimination, intersectionality, and inequities, there continues to be a limited knowledge base when investigating leadership positions for women in higher education and how they are able to advance (Roberts et al., 2018). Recent research commissioned by the leadership foundation found that women alumni of its top management program who subsequently applied for a more senior management role were more than twice as likely as their male counterparts to have been unsuccessful: 21.6% compared to only 8.5% for men (Manfredi et al., 2014). This is a real concern from an equity perspective because unless women account for a high proportion of new appointments, the overall gender imbalance at senior leadership levels will fail to improve (Shepherd, 2017). The case study identified skills or knowledge that can provide efficient ways to understand various methods to handle stumbling blocks or hindrances to transcend into executive-level leadership positions. Washington-Lockett et al. (2018) verified that women with unique experiences are torchbearers imparting knowledge and inspiration to other women of color who have not yet arrived at a certain point in their careers. They have an obligation to other women to ensure that their voices will be heard, and opportunities secured. Another critical reason for the study includes allowing other potential African American women leaders to have mentors, guidelines, and real-life experiences that they may encounter while trying to navigate the higher education environment and climate predominately governed by Caucasian males (Roberts et al., 2018).

Mentorship of African American women in educational leadership allows them to increase knowledge, make connections, and learn how to successfully maneuver within educational leadership arenas (Townsend, 2021). African American women must be given opportunities for incremental leadership experiences, starting early in their careers (Townsend, 2019). Strategies to assist with upward mobility should include enhancing expertise, going beyond the scope of the duty to learn the roles, being cognizant of the regulations and guidelines of others in the organization, attaining advanced degrees, cultivating leadership potential (in self and others), and being abreast of literature and best practices in the field (Townsend, 2019).

At the organizational level, women develop their own cultivation of leadership and flourish when there is a changed culture that has a diversified pipeline of leadership (Townsend, 2020). These changes have required organizations to embrace diversity and not just highlight gender and race (Townsend, 2020). More specifically, African American women leaders who can have a positive, social, and economic impact in higher education surroundings for other African American women leaders to navigate difficult situations and influence change. Any leader's role should include providing direction, serving as a role model, building teams, and offering inspiration to others.

LIMITED RESEARCH

There is limited research on how African American women have been able to overcome barriers and succeed in academics, presidencies, or executive roles in higher education contexts. Sanchez-Hucles and Davis (2010) supported that there have been various studies conducted on

leadership on men, but few performed on women and especially African American women and women of color, to define a mechanism that women share with others to improve the path to executive level positions. In a study conducted by Beckwith et al. (2016), the scholars found that "Although in 2014, women in general made up less than 16% of executive leaders in U.S. corporations; only 5.3% of executive leaders in U.S. corporations were African American women" (p. 116).

According to Warner (2014), clearly, for women of color, the gap is wider. Obviously, women of color encompass women of various races. Women of color make up 11.9% of managerial and professional positions, but African American women make up a mere 5.3%. Women outnumber men on college campuses and have earned a third of law degrees since 1980; a third of them have entered medical school since 1990, and since 2002, they have outnumbered men in earning undergraduate business degrees. (Warner, 2014, p. 116)

Researchers contend that the gap for women continues in high-level C-Suite positions. Women have attained some executive-level occupations, but numbers are very low compared to others, and it will continue if there is no intentional pathway to guide others. For African American women leaders, power in organizations must be understood within the context of racism, sexism, and classism because of the long-standing history of oppression and discrimination toward women (Banks et al., 2018). A few studies (Crews, 2016; Townsend, 2019) have been conducted on how women are affected and excel in higher education settings when pursuing administrative and leadership positions. The current U.S. laws and the U.S. constitution treat women and men as equals, yet women's career equality efforts have slowed or stalled in the United States (Kossek & Buzzanell, 2018).

Although women have been studied, African American women and the methods used to "break the glass ceiling" are limited. Hyppolite (2019) discovered in a study that participants affirmed five major themes that impacted their journey to executive leadership. These themes included: (a) Glass ceilings and sticky floors, which were inclusive of marginalization, barriers, stereotypes, and mentoring relationships; (b) characteristic of African American women leaders; (c) resiliency of women leaders; (d) social networking; and (e) the role of faith and family, which help with the journey to executive leadership and sustaining the role once in the leadership position (Hyppolite, 2019, p. 98).

Over the last decade, there has been additional research, but not to the extent of significantly impacting other African American women's actions and the route that they may have taken to excel in leadership positions. However, when unpacking research and theories around the gaps between Caucasian women and African American women in leadership positions, the barriers become even more difficult to explain. There is little research that explicitly describes the success strategies employed by African American women working in higher education (Crews, 2016). As professed in many peer-reviewed journals and the Chronicle of Higher Education, most studies note that there are no significant studies on research on African American women attaining and cultivating leadership roles in executive-level higher education professionals (Crews, 2016). African American women experience double jeopardy or simultaneous oppression as they navigate the world and workplace as being both a woman and racially African American (Alexander-Floyd, 2010; Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015). There are multiple experiences faced by women leaders that are unfair and lead to missed opportunities and access to gainful employment for African American

women to secure positions of scholarly leadership (Banks et al., 2018). Researchers have also discovered that there is a lack of papers that examine how mentoring affects women leaders' development in higher education (Tran, 2014).

FINDINGS FOR RESEARCH QUESTION

Strategies employed by African American women executives who have succeeded in executive-level positions in their fields in academia are detailed and described in this qualitative case study (Iheduru-Anderson et al., 2022). Despite decades of evidence showing women's increasing success in the workforce, several studies find that African American women in academia still face obstacles in their pursuit of professional leadership roles (Hill et al., 2020). By exploring this qualitative case study, we collected qualitative data via interviews and surveys from 11 African American women working in administrative roles at an HBCU in the southeastern United States in Virginia who are provosts, deans, vice presidents, and executive directors. This study also described the perceptions of African American women executives at HBCUs and provided insight into the skills required in the 21st century to become an executive administrator and prominent higher education leader. We used pseudonyms as the participants' names to protect their confidentiality and privacy. The participants ranged in age from 35 to 59. The women leaders' years of higher education experience varied from 7 to 35 years. All participants earned a master's degree, a Doctor of Education degree, or a Doctor of Philosophy degree. Only five of the participants also worked at PWIs in addition to HBCUs.

An analysis of participants' responses to the research question, *What are the perceptions of African American women in executive leadership positions at HBCUs in Virginia regarding factors that contribute to barriers African American women leaders experience in higher education institutions?* resulted in the following emergent themes: lack of respect, sexism, racism, dismissiveness and disregard for opportunities, self-doubt and imposter syndrome, colleague and peer doubt, and lack of mentorship (see Table 1).

Table 1

Barriers to Attainment

Themes	Frequencies of Participants' Responses	%
Lack of respect and devalued leadership ability	3 out of 11	27
Oppressive hierarchy	5 out of 11	45
Stereotype threat	3 out of 11	27
Tokenism, isolation, and invisibility	2 out of 11	18
Voiceless/self-doubt/imposter syndrome	5 out of 11	45
Not enough role models to emulate that of others	7 out of 11	64

LACK OF RESPECT AND DEVALUED LEADERSHIP ABILITY

Several participants revealed experiencing a lack of respect and feeling devalued in their leadership position in higher education. Seven out of 11 (64%) shared their perceptions when asked about the challenges that African American (AA) women in higher education face that 84 may be different from others pursuing leadership. Scarlett stated:

I would go back to the lack of respect factor—as women as a whole. We all know the history of higher education. When you look at the history of higher education, it started out being Caucasian men. Then, it went to African American men. And then it went to Caucasian women. Then you have to go through all those hurdles. Depending on what generation you're in, it can impact the effects. It can affect how people view you. So, someone that was, you know, prior to a baby boomer, they didn't see women in leadership roles. So, they might not have the same level of respect.

Another participant, Flo, shared, "Inherently, there is an immediate devaluing of her intelligence based on only on her skin color" when AA women are in leadership positions in higher education.

Resin agreed and shared that "Sometimes, in leadership, people do not listen to us, even though they know we might know the answer." Though all the participants were highly qualified and skilled for their leadership position, some participants mentioned that "lack of respect" at times was demonstrated in subtle ways through human resources.

For example, Penny reported:

The challenges are really getting in leadership positions where we feel valued means that I don't want to be in a position just because you're feeling that it's time because you're missing a Black woman. It should be because of my value, you know, right? I want to feel

that you did not use the word "needed." But you welcome my knowledge. That's why you want me here instead of because you are a Black woman.

Snow agreed and stated, "That's very hard because, in a leadership role, I always want to feel like I'm being supportive, or whatever is asked of me, whether that's me helping or doing whatever is needed." Several participants shared similar encounters.

One of the participants, Midori, compared the challenges she experienced in their leadership role at a PWI and HBCU. Midori indicated that women leaders must change their mindset to overcome the feeling of being devalued.

OPPRESSIVE HIERARCHY

Three out of 11 participants (27%) indicated sexism in the male-dominated work environment is still a challenge and becomes difficult to progress in leadership roles in higher education. Fiona shared:

> I have faced sexism, and I have faced racism. At one institution, I was the second-ranking woman at the institution, and I was African, and I am African American. I have been locked out of rooms. I have literally been standing on the other side of doors while the Caucasian males were in the meeting, waving at me and reminding me that I was not included in decision-making. Hope indicated that in higher education, you always have to work within the good ole boy network. Many times, a challenge of sexism is not knowing if you are given a position just because you are a woman or meeting the affirmative action quota. Unfortunately, these hiring practices potentially lead to hostile work environments.

For example, Snow stated:

> I've been in situations where I've been in a room and it's been myself and other men, and the conversation is about something that I know, but it's not directed toward me. It's directed toward the person that doesn't even know the detail, but if I felt like why is he asking him, I'm the one that knows exactly the answer to that.

STEREOTYPE THREAT

Participants shared how misconceptions and judgments become barriers to attaining leadership positions in higher education. Five out of 11 participants (45%) reported negative misconceptions and judgments about African American women are sometimes barriers to promotions and leadership roles. One participant mentioned the expectation and judgment that sometimes accompanies women working in leadership.

Sidi shared:

> Here, there is a profile you have to fit in if you want to move up that ladder. If I came to work, not fitting a certain profile, it wasn't good. So, I used to keep a suit in my office just in case I got called to the president's office or an interview. I felt like I needed to be prepared and wear normal suits because I'm working with men.

Hope indicated:

> The culture of the company or higher education institution largely influences what you wore, where, and how, and that includes hairstyles, make-up, and wearing dresses or pants

to certain meetings. There is a certain model that is required in corporate, but it also depends on age and can be a stereotype and misconception of what is acceptable or not. Now it is different due to diversity, equity, and inclusion, but people still look. Some Caucasian women will try to touch your hair or ask strange questions because they just don't get the hair, but we have to tell them it is not okay and be upfront. They need to judge us on our expertise, not our hair or clothes, but that is our culture, and African Americans do the same to each other.

Rosa revealed:

I think that, you know, people are not really willing to embrace the culture, the difference is in African American women. So then, you know, and sometimes we could get a little bit of that in our own culture. See, we seem to forget that although we're African American women [who] work with African American women, you know, you get some women that look at other women, then they view them differently. An African American born in America is different from an African woman born in Africa, of course, and so she comes with a certain kind of strength that we don't have. Because we haven't grown up in the, in that culture. So, you would have those differences. So how do you know? How can this be overcome? A lot of it is just acceptance. I think it's just basic human nature and understanding what makes us unique and different, even as a team, is our differences. And so yes, I am of African descent, but I am educated, reared in, and exposed in a different way from my sister, who may have grown up in the rural part of South Carolina, there is a difference, you know. And so, it's just about accepting our differences.

Belle shared thoughts and experiences about how being Afrocentric is often misread. Belle revealed:

Culture and afro-centricity impacts African American leaders, especially in the area of [the] style of clothes and make-up and hair. The best way to describe it is it impacts the day-to-day decisions of how the African American woman leader will display herself. These questions she mentally decides daily. Will she wear lipstick that will bring emphasis to her lips, or will she be more subtle? Will she wear a t-shirt in her leisure that promotes "Black women or girls," or "African influences," or "African American images," or "women empowerment," or "an inspirational shirt," or a plain shirt? What message am I conveying? It impacts in other ways, self-view, how we define self-care, how we practice self-care, how we measure our success. The best way to overcome this obstacle is to have friends and mentors both in the field and outside of the field. It really helps to process this feeling with others and share it. Some of the stereotypes and misconceptions shared were overt, and others were subtle. Several participants noted the different misconceptions and labels such as "angry Black woman, loud, aggressive, etc." impacts the work environment.

Penny reflected and stated:

I think when we get dressed, we think whether we have to go to meetings. I know sometimes, I'm real cautious of my suit. I think, I'm gonna wear makeup, I'm gonna wear my hair. Does it mean to be Black? Right? Because for the longest time, I mean, when I said I was going to go natural, I was like, Oh, heck no, no, right? Because I didn't want it said I was trying to be a European otherwise. I just wanted to stay, you know, with the slinky hair as possible ... your clothing, how it fits on you? And if you had the big backside

naturally? No. Are they going to look at that? Or is it, you know, or is it the guy sitting closer to me on purpose? How did I actually get to the table? Right? Why do I have to go through all these changes just to come to work or to a meeting or wherever I may go, whether it's PWI. They nonchalantly use some negative names, and we don't say anything because we don't want to be known as the angry woman.

TOKENISM, ISOLATION, AND INVISIBILITY

Two out of 11 participants (18%) reported often feeling dismissed and overlooked for opportunities as a leader in higher education. Gender bias, isolation, and devaluation of women in leadership positions have been noted as barriers to climbing the ladder of success in a greater capacity. Midori indicated, "I have seen these as obstacles and faced these. I do think that we still work in an environment where some men think women are inferior and are incapable of holding leadership positions." One of the participants mentioned how the barriers influenced some of the professional decisions regarding upcoming opportunities in the field of education. Resin shared, "Sometimes, the barriers can deter you from applying for leadership roles." Snow agreed and revealed an experience that happened during her pregnancy.
The participant revealed:

> There was a time I felt like I was being dismissed. It was during my pregnancy when this male I was talking to made me feel like I wasn't being heard. Every time I said something, he would reply to the other men that were in the room and ignored me. It was rude and dismissive.

VOICELESS/SELF-DOUBT/IMPOSTER SYNDROME

Three out of 11 participants (27%) shared that they often felt voiceless and experienced moments of self-doubt as African American women leaders in higher education. Some participants shared how the intersectionality of gender and race in their leadership position can also be a barrier at times. For instance, Snow suggested:

> Just being an African American woman. However, I think having the confidence to be able to know that you can do it right. And, you can do it, and you don't necessarily need anyone else to, you know, to say that to you. You have to just have that confidence that you can, you can go, you know, go for it. Stop doubting yourself.

Rosa shared:

> A lot of times, African American women stifle themselves sometimes, you know, a lot of them suffer from insecurities about themselves and their abilities. Yes, and maybe so do I. Sometimes, I wonder if I actually belong in this seat. The imposter syndrome and expectations placed on mothers in the past have accompanied guilt and impacted women in leadership in various ways. One of the ways noted in this study is self doubt, no self-confidence, and imposter syndrome.

Fiona disclosed an experience and said:

> One of my mentors told me I was, I was kind of beating myself up when you are starting off and you're trying to climb the ladder and you are wife and a mother, right? The whole mother guilt is a real thing for women leaders—it's hard.

MICROAGGRESSIONS

Microaggressions can be subtle and overt in the workplace. Additionally, microaggressions are, at times, unintentional due to the infancy of the concept in the workplace. For example, discrimination against women or members of a marginalized group, such as a racial or ethnic minority, is a microaggression. Five out of 11 participants (45%) shared how different forms of microaggressions can be barriers to attaining leadership positions in higher education.

Sidi recounted an experience and stated:

> It's about having work ethics and going above and beyond and be willing to take a chance when others would not support you. We say that we do well in a work environment, but you will have so many people who will support you until you start moving up. There are really some who are nice and your supporters. They will congratulate you. Oh, it's wonderful. You deserved it. But they're the same individuals that will ask, "Why they picked her instead of them?

Hope agreed that African American women are often undermined as leaders and professionals. Hope revealed:

> There was an experience when I was going to a conference where I was taking students, three males and three females. Other men came up from the conference and spoke to the male students and not me or the female students. It appears that they assumed the males were in higher positions and in charge, and I was the director of the group, and they were my students, so it was like I was not there. At that school, that type of behavior was discouraging, and I did not pursue positions there because of that.

Flo shared an experience she encountered while considering pursuing an executive position. Flo revealed:

> My colleagues said, "How did you get here? Weren't you a secretary or something at the center?" … I was arranging the meetings and advances, you know, turning the computer on and fixing things in the previous position was all they thought I could do. But they had no idea that I even had a degree and [was] now in an executive role.

Fiona and Snow also agreed microaggressions vary in the workplace when African American women are in leadership roles; however, barriers can be ignored and overcome.

LACK OF ROLE MODELS AND MENTORS

Seven out of 11 participants (64%) mentioned that the lack of role models and mentorships is a barrier to their growth and progression as professionals. The majority of the participants reported that a lack of role models and mentors influences the work environment and success to a higher level. Scarlett stated:

> I'm gonna think that one of the things that I have missed during the course of my career is actually having a mentor. I think that mentorship is very important. Someone that is going to have an unbiased position, someone that you're going to say that, you know, what, you could have handled that differently. And you'd be able to, but you also have to be receptive of the information that's being shared with you. This reciprocal is not just a mentor, you know, telling you that, okay, these take these steps to help you along the way [sic].

Resin shared:

> I believe that leadership roles, African American women are moving up on the ladder for leadership roles in the current college situation; however, it is more on the Historically Black College and University side of the landscape, not PWI. So, that has affected my thinking of pursuing a road to a leadership role, and also the women that I was influenced by. As I went through my college career, it has influenced me to pursue a leadership role in higher education because of what I saw.

Three out of 11 participants (27%) reported a sense of progression is being made; however, colleges and universities have quite a way to go. For example, Sidi stated, "I think there's still a ceiling that we have to break. We can get the job done, but it's different. But sometimes, I believe it's still a man's world."

Recommendations for Future Research

The purpose of this case study was to describe the perceptions of 11 African American women regarding barriers they experienced on their journeys to executive leadership positions at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in Virginia. We described the behaviors and practices of these African American women leaders and how they engage at the HBCUs in Virginia to overcome barriers. All of them faced many barriers and shared the challenges and obstacles that included microaggressions, gender and racial bias, tokenism, pay disparity, underrepresentation, self-doubt, lack of mentorship, working twice as hard, and many other difficulties. The women leaders also shared scenarios and examples of how they have learned to become flexible, adaptable, and adept at handling the various struggles and sometimes demoralizing feelings that intrude upon their attainment of success. Other areas of study that could be examined to combat hindrances for African American women trying to become successful executive women leaders in university settings include the following:

• Examine how African American women are represented in senior leadership positions in higher education and look at one step above and below positions to look at career paths and development programs;
• Research how African American women can be included in decision-making opportunities and allowed to be a voice at the table and their process for career aspirations;
• Examine diversity programs to include African American women and the effect it may have on an institution's hierarchy and internal systems;
• Investigate the labor of women leaders that is different from other races and gender and how it can recognize and compensate for its worth. This would include identifying job skills and capabilities needed to advance to the next level that is indicated by a gap when women are not the same as their male counterparts;

• Discover mechanisms can be put into practice to ensure fair and equitable pay for all races and genders based on labor statistic reports and norms developed by the Title IX regulations;
• Identify how African American women are supported through the hierarchy with resources to develop a systemic change in the organization; and
• Create a method or women's program for strategic mentorship opportunities and relationships to develop other women and the positive effects on the individual and the organization.

SUMMARY

Although African American women in higher education have made some progress over the years in attaining executive leadership positions, there is still a disparity in finding a clear path that demonstrates how success is attained. In the data shared by participants of the study, many women indicated that they do not want to confront conflict and try to avoid dealing with those specific issues. Although they encounter racial and gender discrimination, devaluation, and confrontation, the participants indicate that they have learned to use their traits, behaviors, and leadership style to annihilate or eliminate negative situations or disputes in the work environments. Parker and ogilvie (1996) verified that Caucasian men's leadership styles do not apply to all demographic groups, especially those of African American women leaders.

African American women leaders in the case study articulated that gender does not operate the same way based on cultural traditions and situational leadership styles are a significant component to strategizing to attain leadership positions. African American women also lead others by manifesting their unique leadership abilities to transform the organization or specific group that they manage to perform in a specific manner. The findings of this study suggested for African American female leaders to overcome barriers, they must be consistent, work hard, be confident, and have mentor support.

The study confirms that African American women employ specialized traits such as self-confidence, independence, and strong influence strategies in their daily leadership skills (Sims & Carter, 2019). The leadership decisions used are comparable to Caucasian men and women and are often used as a confrontation and avoidance strategy when approaching race issues. When African American women encounter and deal with Caucasian women from the case study, they exhibit characteristics of conventional traits of democratic and transformational styles that are nurturing, participative, and autonomous (Sims & Carter, 2019). The analysis of African American women leaders in this study verifies that the intersectionality of race and gender is a fundamental element of how women leaders are informed by their lived experiences to handle the current leadership demographics in higher education when negative race and gender issues arise.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. Does the representation of African American women in higher education in leadership roles represent the current college demographics, and how has it affected your decision to pursue a leadership position?

2. What scenarios can you share as an African American woman to become successful in the pursuit of leadership positions in higher education?

3. What are the challenges that African American women in higher education face that may be different from others pursuing leadership positions?

4. Does culture and Afro centricity affect women African American leaders, and if so, how can this obstacle be overcome?

5. What steps or courses would you share with other African American women to start on a leadership path?

6. Did you have mentors to assist you in pursuing executive-level positions, and if so, what advice was given to you?

7. What skills, knowledge, and characteristics are required to excel in male-dominated leadership positions in higher education?

8. Is there a correlation between pay discrimination and African American women being paid lower wages for performing the same job as a Caucasian male or female or African American man? What can be done to manage this race parity?

9. How can a female leader in higher education demonstrate that they are knowledgeable and ready to accept a leadership role?

10. As an African American woman leader, what mechanisms have you put into place to deal with obstacles such as gender bias, isolation, and devaluation of your leadership ability?

11. What are the attributes that African American women leaders in higher education require to perform and excel in executive-level roles?

12. Were your family, siblings, or family values a major contribution and factor in seeking a leadership post, and if so, what was the major influence?

13. How does a support system affect the path to leadership positions for African American women in higher education, and is there a negative and positive aspect?

14. How does your spirituality affect your response to dealing with racial and gender inequity?

15. How does being an African American woman influence you to make ethical decisions?

16. What actions have you taken to overcome obstacles and excel when pursuing leadership positions?

17. How do you manage microaggressions in the workplace as an African American woman?

18. As an African American woman leader, what methods do you use to avoid or handle conflict and confrontation in the higher education setting?

19. What is your leadership style? As you pursue executive-level positions, is it difficult to exhibit your unique leadership style, such as authentic, servant, democratic, coaching, etc.?

20. How does the intersectionality of gender and race affect your leadership behaviors and pursuit of executive-level positions? Please provide any additional details you think are pertinent to your leadership style and information on overcoming challenges as an African American women leader.

Appendix B: Common Themes

Central Research Question: *What are the perceptions of African American women in executive leadership positions at HBCUs in Virginia regarding factors that contribute to barriers African American women leaders experience at higher education institutions.*

Themes:

Lack of respect and feelings of being devalued

Stereotype threat

Voiceless/self-doubt/imposter syndrome

Lack of role models

Oppressive hierarchy

Tokenism, isolation, and invisibility

Microaggressions

Appendix C: Research Question and Interview Question Matrix

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS	RESEARCH QUESTION
Question 3: What are the challenges that African American women in higher education face that may be different from others pursuing leadership positions?	RQ1
Question 4: Culture and Afro-centricity affect women African American leaders, and if so, how can this obstacle be overcome?	RQ1
Question 8: Is there a correlation between pay discrimination and African American women being paid lower wages for performing the same job as a Caucasian male or female or African American man? What can be done to manage this race parity?	RQ1
Question 10: As an African American woman leader, what mechanisms have you put into place to deal with obstacles such as gender bias, isolation, and devaluation of your leadership ability?	RQ1
Question 16: What actions have you taken to overcome obstacles and excel when pursuing leadership positions?	RQ1
Question 17: How do you manage microaggressions in the workplace as an African American woman?	RQ1

Appendix D: Organizational and Leadership Effectiveness Inventory

Scoring Key:			
SD= Strongly Disagree	D= Disagree	A= Agree	SA= Strongly Agree

Management Behaviors	SD	D	A SA
1. Leads by example			
2. Ability to "juggle"			
3. Communicator			
4. Lifelong learner			
5. High expectations of self and others			
6. Strong academic self-concept			
7. Motivational			
8. Communicates vision			
9. "Can do" philosophy (resourceful)			
10. Persistent			
11. Shares Power			
12. Dependable			
13. Efficient			
14. Assertive			
15. Delegates			
16. Utilizes participatory management			
17. Decision maker			
18. Risk taker			
19. Task Oriented			
20. Change Agent			
21. Influencer			
22. Analyzes situations			
23. High energy			
24. Achievement oriented			
25. Emotionally stable			
26. Self sufficient			
27. Effective time manager			
28. Organized			
29. Persuasive			
30. Effective			

Interpersonal Behavior	SD	D	A	SA
1. Cooperative				
2. Empathetic				
3. People oriented				
4. Compassionate				
5. Collegial				
6. Team player				
7. Strong interpersonal skills				
8. Consensus builder				
9. Empowers others				
10. Networker				
11. Transformational				
12. Combines social talk with administrative talk				
13. Uses affiliate language, such as "we," or "our'"				
14. Participates				
15. Inclusive				
16. Nurturing				
17. Democratic				
18. Intuitive				

Interpersonal Behavior (cont)	SD	D	A	SA
19. Flexible/adaptable				
20. Emotionally expressive				
21. Receptive to new ideas/change				
22. Alter to social environment				
23. Responsive to needs of faculty/staff				
24. Reflective				
Organizational Structure	SD	D	A	SA
1. Utilizes system of rotating leadership				
2. Recognizes ability or expertise				
3. Arrives at goals through consensual process				
4. Values/faculty staff as individual human beings				
5. Commitment to employee growth				
6. Power sharing				
7. Promotes community and cooperation				
8. Promotes nurturing and caring				
9. Promotes subordinate empowerment				
10. Has clear norms and values				
11. Encourages professional training				
12. Has well-defined goals				
Values, Attitudes and Beliefs	SD	D	A	SA
1. Emphasis on professional growth for self/staff/faculty.				
2. Openness to change				
3. Emphasis on collegiality				
4. Emphasis on character, ethics, and integrity				
5. Emphasis on programs for special students				
6. Emphasis on innovation				
7. Emphasis on reflective practice				
8. Openness to diversity				
9. Emphasis on professional growth for self/staff/faculty				
10. Emphasis on innovation				
11. Importance on reflective practice				
12. Openness to change				
13. Openness to diversity				
External Forces	SD	D	A	SA
1. Emphasis on collegiality				
2. Views staff as leaders				
3. Emphasis on reflective practice				
4. Participative decision making				
5. Utilizes system of rotating leadership				
6. Recognizes ability or expertise				
7. Arrives at goals through				

	SD	D	A	SA
consensual process				
External Forces (cont.)	**SD**	**D**	**A**	**SA**
8. Values faculty/staff as individual human beings				
9. Commitment to employee growth				
10. Power-sharing				
11. Promotes community and cooperation				
12. Promotes nurturing and caring				
13. Promotes subordinate empowerment				
14. Supports director's philosophy				
15. Director's leadership is affected by the expectations of the community				
16. The socio-economic levels in the community affect director's leadership				
17. Language groups in the community Impact director's leadership				

Demographics

Gender that applies to you: Male   Female

Years of Experience in present position: 5-7   8-10   11-13   14-16   17-19   20 or more

Please provide additional comments regarding organizational structure, external forces, leadership behaviors, and attitudes, beliefs and values that you feel impact your leadership style.