

BEHIND THE VEIL: EXPERIENCES AND PERSISTENCE STRATEGIES OF  
BLACK WOMEN IN ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP AT PREDOMINATELY AND  
HISTORICALLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract: Despite literature emphasizing the importance of their leadership on college campuses, African American women serving in senior-level academic leadership on both predominately and historically white campuses are severely underrepresented in these roles in higher education. The chief academic officer role is charged with the development, implementation, oversight, and assessment of all academic programs and policies at the college and advises the president on all academic matters. The chief academic officer plays a critical, primary role in institutional planning and operations. As campus student demographics grow more diverse, the demographics of executive leadership positions are not diversifying anywhere near the same rate. Yet African-American women's lived experiences and leadership approaches have much to offer in serving diverse campuses. This narrative inquiry study explored the lived experiences of African American women serving in senior-level academic leadership positions at predominately and historically white community colleges and the persistence strategies they employ to find success and joy in their work. This study highlights some of their key experiences and ways of leading in these powerful roles. I chose a qualitative methodology, specifically, narrative inquiry and Black feminist theory, to collect and analyze data from this small population. Their narrative stories revealed the women's realities, challenges, strengths, and resilience, as they self-defined how they persisted and found success in their intellectual leadership roles.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

*“When you get these jobs that you have been so brilliantly trained for, just remember that your real job is that if you are free, you need to free somebody else. If you have some power, then our job is to empower somebody else.” – Toni Morrison (2003)*

One cannot deny that the face of America is changing. As one author described, “In the United States, the White share of the population is declining as Hispanic, Asian, and Black populations grow. The shift to a more diverse nation is happening more quickly in some places than in the others” (Krogstad, 2019, p. 1). Yet, the make-up of leadership in higher education across the country continues to reflect a strikingly different demographic than the emerging majority student body many institutions serve. Clearly, U.S. higher education has “a history of racial exclusion” (Razzante, 2018, p. 339). Although progress with access and representation in higher education is notable over the years and across the country, people of color continue to struggle with inclusion. Less than 17 percent of campus chief executives are racially diverse, according to data from the American College President Study, launched by the American Council on Education (2017). The same report found significantly fewer chief executives who look like me, Black and female.

Notably, less than three percent of Black women who serve in the senior academic leadership positions on which this study focuses (ACE, 2013), and less than five percent of college presidents, identified as Black women. The literature focusing on the experiences of the less than four percent of Black women serving as chief academic officers or in similar positions is few and far between. Many institutions now champion the importance of attracting a diverse, qualified pool of dynamic candidates to their leadership positions (Leske & Pendleton, 2020). In this view, institutions must prioritize racial equity in their senior leadership hiring to ensure that “diverse viewpoints are taught, represented, defended, and considered within university decisions” (Nair, 2019, n.p.). Colleges can experience countless benefits in diversifying their executive leadership team.

Diversifying leadership and working towards racial equity in hiring practices in the academy answers to demographic, economic, and justice imperatives. The demographic imperative rests on the predictions of demographers that the United States will turn into “a majority-minority citizenry as each generation of Americans becomes more racially and ethnically diverse than the one before” (Center for Urban Education, 2020, p. 6). Representation in leadership is one aspect of moving the needle on student success; however, preparing institutions to serve the many students of color enrolling and attending college also requires the lived experiences, perspectives, and presence of faculty, staff, and administrators of color empowered to contribute actively to designing equitable institutional policies and practices.

The economic imperative for racial equity is defined as “closing gaps in postsecondary educational access and completion, which is necessary for the economic

future of the country, states, communities and individuals” (Center for Urban Education, 2020, p. 8). A more diverse racial-ethnic makeup of leaders in higher education supports the economic imperative by intentionally empowering demographic groups most impacted by systemic disparities to be a part of the problem-solving and solution-making. Including their ideas at the highest leadership levels can achieve this vision, making them partners in “placing equity and excellence at the center of all work to improve postsecondary attainment” (Center for Urban Education, 2020, p. 9). Such initiatives go beyond simply touting representation of leaders of color as the primary benefit of racial diversity and makes the unique perspectives, lived experiences, ideas and thus problem-solving approaches of the marginalized groups distinctive qualifiers in the quest to create a more welcoming, inclusive, and equitable postsecondary educational experience.

Diversifying the highest level of leadership in institutions of higher learning is also an act of justice. “For all people of color, racial inequity was born from policies and practices that were designed to benefit the dominant population of Whites and to directly and/or indirectly exclude, marginalize, and oppress people of color” (Center for Urban Education, 2020, p. 10). This makes measures of merit hard to disentangle in a system championed as democratic, yet full of inequitable advantages and privileges. This study explicitly pays attention to the narratives of leaders of color, particularly Black women in academic leadership roles, and how they view, story, and illuminate their nuanced experiences with structural inequality and institutionalized racism. These women have the credentials and experience to fit the narrative that each prevailed in a competitive meritocracy, earning their success through their talent and hard work. Yet each shared that for them, as Black women, it took more than just being qualified and able to do the



job. They each acknowledged that beyond their qualifications, their hiring and success required networks of support and a college or university president committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Diversity in senior administrative level positions helps universities move forward with an evolving populace, curriculum, and world. Senior-level positions hold the power to write institutional policies, govern the practices, and foster the conditions that shape the institutional culture (Nair, 2019). Moreover, the diverse make-up of senior leadership positions should serve as examples of success for a diverse student body. For all stakeholders throughout and across the institution to see maximum benefits, the leadership team must reflect the diversity of the audiences it hopes to serve. Racial diversity at the highest levels of leadership is not just about representation: “Greater depth and breadth of experience, perspective, and relatability facilitate innovation, which is critical to capturing and maintaining a global future” (Forbes Coaches Council, 2021, n.p.). Leaders with racially diverse backgrounds are needed to realize institutional visions of delivering learning that makes our nation stronger and a global competitor. One’s life experiences create filters through which they see the world; increasing the diversity of the filters on a leadership team increases the awareness of the landscape an institution must navigate to succeed (Forbes Coaches Council, 2021). Through the narrations of four accomplished senior-level academic leaders, this study illuminates the important benefits of a diverse leadership team.

The Black Lives Matter movement, emergent in 2020, provides an urgent backdrop for the continuing need to identify and distinguish the institutional policies, practices, mindsets, and behaviors that breed higher education environments that can

stifle the success of Black employees. This socio-historical backdrop also demonstrates the need to foster conditions where people of color thrive and find joy in their work. Who better to call out those nuances than the women at the highest levels of leadership who continue to negotiate and maneuver them? Lederman's (2022) research on the rise in diversity hiring among college presidents focused specifically on hiring in the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer, which contributed to a national reckoning about institutional racism and societal inequities, found that more than a third of the presidents and chancellors that colleges hired were members of racial minority groups. He quoted one consultant in his study that works at a search firm in saying, "There's no doubt whatsoever that the social justice movement of the last couple years has forced the hands of many boards (the board of regents that the president or chancellor report to)" (n.p.).

Another consultant in Lederman's study said she was "unsurprised that minority hiring was likelier at community colleges than at more selective institutions, which have been the least diverse in the ecosystem" (n.p.). In fact, one analyst suggested that hiring decisions were sometimes made on the vitality of the organization. This analyst, who worked at a firm that conducts scientific research that strengthens public understanding said, "it has been long discussed in circles of women college presidents that they were most typically hired at struggling institutions where they were being given an institution to turn around, which doesn't set people up for success." Although I did not find empirical research detailing this phenomenon, and found little research focused on why community colleges had more women of color leaders than 4 year settings, Lederman has documented some perspectives on the topic salient for further consideration.

An institution committed to diversity will have a critical mass of visibly diverse individuals across all institutional levels, including senior-level administration positions (Obear, 2018). It is not always easy for colleges to become more diverse and inclusive in their administration leadership. There is indeed a pipeline problem for particular groups in certain academic fields (Brown, 2021), but most chief academic officer positions do not require an earned doctorate in a specific field like STEM, where there is a shortage of earned doctorates of color. Some women of color, however, have opted not to promote into administration roles due to a plethora of reasons ranging from the level of perceived stress, lack of interest in leading at that level, their love of teaching and desire to stay in the classroom, and/or the level of scrutiny and lack of diversity they see in those roles. These are legitimate reasons that shape the complex choices of all workers, women in particular, who continue to bear the majority of responsibility of care work of both youth and elders in the United States (Hochschild & Machung, 2003). Nevertheless, to imply that an undeveloped pipeline is the chief obstacle to diversifying the academic leadership realm is no longer an adequate explanation for this phenomenon. There are varied structural and interpersonal points in play. Several colleges have created racial equity plans that have increased the number of faculty and administrators of color, which is an essential piece in closing the achievement gap in college completion.

The diversity gap in leadership at predominately white institutions is well documented (Brown, 2019; Chen, 2017; Gardner, 2019; Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015). The disproportionately low ratio of administrators of color in senior-level positions at Primarily White Institutions (PWIs), in comparison to their student bodies, signals the degree to which institutions have not fully addressed racial inequities across the

institution. Despite the rhetoric of educational systems as places of promise and equity, the demographics I describe reflect how institutions have a tremendous amount of work to do to redesign the higher education system in a way that ensures that all Americans, including the emerging majority demographic—students of color—have equitable opportunities to succeed. Although diverse representation in leadership is not the only signal of issues in institutional inclusion, it is an important one.

Those at the helm of academic leadership hold great decision-making power, and the decisions at the top influence institutional culture. They should be made with the critical voices, experiences, and perspectives of racially diverse individuals who represent racially diverse student bodies. “It is in the hands of those in positions of instructional leadership to ensure that all students have access to and develop the social, intellectual, cultural, and emotional capabilities required in the 21st century” (Chen, 2017, p. 17). If institutions do not prioritize racial diversity hiring efforts at all levels, particularly senior-level positions, the growing racial/ethnic equity gap in student attainment will remain. Creating equitable systems of hiring at the highest level of the institution is a key aspect of an institutional culture of inclusion that supports staff and students alike. As Gassam (2018), a diversity, equity, and inclusion scholar, says, “Organizational leaders play a critical and often underestimated role when it comes to fostering an inclusive and equitable workplace” (p. 1). Their role is integral in creating an opportunity-rich environment for all faculty, staff, and students. “No matter how many diversity training and inclusion programs are incorporated into the organization, all efforts will crumble without support from senior leaders. Representation matters—especially at the top” (Gassam, 2018, p. 1).

The need for a greater diversity of women and men of color in academic leadership is obvious and pressing. This mission is only part of the work involved in moving institutions forward on the paths toward racial equality and equity. Becoming a student-ready college, an institution committed to creating a climate that prioritizes diverse student needs in the 21st century, requires institutions to also cultivate environments wherein those leaders feel seen, heard, and valued.

A significant recurring theme in the literature is the persistence of uninviting or hostile campus climates and their impact on the professional and personal lives of female faculty and administrators of color (Chen, 2017; Jean-Marie, 2011; West, 2017). Racism lives within our educational systems. White professionals in seats of power who subscribe to upholding white cultural norms, intentionally or not, often exploit the labor and resources of employees of color (Brown, 2018). As critical race scholars have described at length (e.g., Howard & Navarro, 2016), the reproduction of racism in educational systems often occurs without much disruption because those with the power to change institutions also received their education within institutions with persistent inequities, where white men are primary beneficiaries of leadership positions. Whether students (Cabrera, 2019) or leaders, White people often go about their lives with little awareness of or attention to, their racial biases and racist attitudes (Brooks & Theoharis, 2019; Johnson, 2018; Patton, 2016).

Sexism in the academy further exploits and silences Black women in professional spaces. The small percentage of women of color who have managed to successfully navigate their way to senior-level academic administrative roles have valuable insights on how to create a diverse, inclusive, and equitable culture across all levels of the academy.

In what follows, I present the background and details of the qualitative narrative study I conducted on the personal and professional experiences and persistence strategies of Black women serving in senior academic leadership positions at PWIs.

### **Background for this Study**

For institutions to benefit from the knowledge and perspectives of people of color, diverse bodies and ideologies need to occupy space within all levels of the institution, especially at top leadership levels (Razzante, 2018). In 1980, Mosley observed that,

Black female administrators in the white academe are an endangered species. They are still tokens in higher education. Black women, where they are represented, are most often in positions peripheral to the policy and decision-making core of higher education. They feel overworked, underpaid, alienated, isolated, uncertain, and powerless. (1980, p. 296)

Nearly four decades later, researchers indicate that women of color continue to be disproportionately represented at the bottom of the organizational chart. Despite notable accomplishments, few are described as academic superstars occupying senior-level positions at PWIs (Gutierrez y Muhs, 2012; Niemann, Gonzalez, & Harris, 2012). Many Black women are pioneering their way into these positions and distinguishing themselves as scholars and educators, yet, the numbers are still disproportionately and unacceptably low (Miles, 2012). Black women currently serving in this role are great canaries in the mine that can offer valuable insight into why this continues to be the case.

In addition to underrepresentation, Black women serving in senior-level academic leadership roles face a myriad of unique challenges at PWIs, including feelings of having

to contend with stereotypes and labels of tokenism (e.g., hired to ‘check a diversity box’ rather than for expertise) and others’ views that Black women in senior-level roles are not legitimate leaders and experts. Other challenges include inequitable lower salaries, workplace hostility and indifference, and a host of power inequities that their White counterparts do not have to face (Holmes, 2003; Jean-Marie, Williams & Sherman, 2009; Patitu & Hinton, 2004; Wolfe & Freeman, 2013). These research accounts foster knowledge of challenges that seek to limit our power and authority. They also limit the strategies we can use to negotiate these challenges. As Simpson (2000) emphasized,

Black female scholars holding academic administrative positions are low in numbers, but triumphs are sizable—the telling and passing on of our stories and learned strategies are essential for our own survival and for those preparing to follow our footsteps (p. 715).

A variety of institutions and academic cultures can benefit from these lessons, as can those women aspiring for leadership positions. To better understand our perspectives, scholars have conducted varied research with women of color who work in institutions of higher education (Apugo, 2019; Daniel, 2018; Gutiérrez y Muhs, Niemann, & Gonzalez, 2012; Hills, 2019; Senyoga, 2017). They have also conducted studies on faculty (e.g., Abdule-Raheem, 2016; Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007; Jones & Osborne-Lampkin, 2013; Louis et al., 2016; Pittman, 2010; Turner, 2002) and on staff (Apugo, 2019; West, 2017; Calafell, 2012). Further, scholars have conducted these studies in various environments, including research institutions, community colleges, and small private schools.

Although scholars acknowledge that diverse groups of women do not always experience the same challenges, common findings from these studies include a lack of

acknowledgment of women's contributions; lack of mentoring or grooming by their supervisors or other executive leaders on campus; feelings of being treated as stereotypes rather than individuals; feelings of voicelessness and constantly being unheard; and a nagging need to prove their worth and intelligence to those with whom they work daily. In terms of Black women's experiences, Leath & Chavous (2018), for instance, examined their experiences of campus racial climate and stigmas at PWIs. They found that Black women reported a more hostile racial climate than did White women. They also reported less positive intergroup association norms and more racial tension and mistrust, magnifying the pervasive issues that Black women face in their working lives in PWIs.

The body of research on African American women serving in administrator roles (Alexander-Lee, 2014; Bailey, 2008; Bailey, 2010; Baxter-Nuamah, 2015; Bright, 2010; Britton, 2013; Crawford & Smith, 2005; Dixon, 2005; Hague, 2016; Sober, 2014; Takara, 2006; West, 2017) focuses on a variety of experiences from identifying characteristics that contributed to the advancement of these administrators, to barriers and coping mechanisms these African American administrators encounter through their work. Britton's (2013) study of the experiences of four African American women serving in a presidency role at a community college explored the challenges and strategies that helped them succeed professionally. Her research found that the women's relationships with their professional mentors impacted their career ascension significantly. Britton also emphasized the importance of holding proper credentials. For example, earning a doctoral degree is essential if one aspires to the presidency. In addition, career ascension to the presidency generally follows a traditional pathway, which involves holding key leadership positions, such as the chief academic officer role. While there are certainly



individuals who become president outside of this traditional pathway, most presidents have served as the chief academic officer prior to their role as president. Three of the four narrators in her study were vice presidents of academic affairs/chief academic officers before becoming president.

Sober's (2014) research focused on the resilience of Black female student affairs administrators at PWIs. She found tokenism, unspoken expectations, heightened visibility when their presence integrated white spaces, and being mistaken for other Black women employees as common challenges these women encountered. How they navigated these exhausting battles also came with risks that could impede their career advancement. Hague (2016) explored the voices of African American women leaders on factors that impact their career advancement in community colleges and found that both race and gender impacted their career advancement opportunities. The participants shared a variety of professional experiences that captured how Black women's experiences within PWIs result in needs, expectations, ideologies, and problems that differ from those of Black men and White women. These studies are significant contributions to understanding the challenges Black women face working in PWIs.

### **Need for Research**

There is a paucity of scholarship on the lived experiences of Black women serving in senior academic affairs leadership roles at PWIs (Bailey, 2010; Britton, 2013; Takara, 2006). The chief academic officer, also referred to as the vice president of academic affairs, provost, chancellor, and several other titles, is traditionally the second in command to the president (Martin & Samels, 2015). These are highly visible roles in the institution with most white employees reporting to that leader in a PWI. Provosts sit

at the epicenter of the academic decision-making in the academy. Although their roles vary across institutions, they traditionally oversee the most important academic initiatives (Julius, 2016). Julius posited that “how the institution will engage its multiple constituencies—will fail or succeed depending upon the commitment, effectiveness, and ability of the provost” (n.p.). This makes the role a highly coveted, influential position.

The Chief Academic Officer typically has jurisdiction over all academic deans who oversee all faculty. They, directly and indirectly, supervise all academic employees, including faculty department chairs, academic coordinators, librarians, and chief researchers. As they advise the president on all academic matters, their daily duties typically consist of overseeing transfer and articulation agreements; monitoring curriculum and institutional and program learning outcomes; academic program review; curricular updates; and overseeing fair and equitable faculty recruitment, hiring, onboarding, retention, and promotion and rank. They work to ensure compliance with accreditation agencies and state regulations. Depending on the institution’s size, the chief academic officer might conduct faculty performance reviews, oversee the selection and scheduling of course offerings and deletions, and deliberate on and render final decisions on academic grievances. The provost position has traditionally been seen as the highest intellectual office in the academy and the pinnacle of the faculty profession (Thacker & Freeman, 2020). Since the role’s inception, White males have remained the primary holders of these positions.

Without more literature that calls out the experiences of women of color ascending the academic affairs leadership ladder, race and gender will continue to quietly shape access to and experiences within these leadership opportunities (Bailey, 2010;

Takara, 2006). Very few studies consider this unique gender/racial positioning—what Black feminist scholars call intersectionality (Collins, 2019; Collins & Bilge, 2016; Crenshaw, 1989; 1990; Nash, 2017)—of Black women serving in key academic leadership roles leading to the presidency (Leath & Chavous, 2018). This scholarship would have been extremely valuable for me to consult as I promoted through the ranks in my career and worked through my doctoral program. The intersectionality of race and gender in leadership brings an awareness that one is constantly under the microscope. It demands that one leads differently, more cautiously, bringing a strange juxtaposition of oppression by intersectionality and privilege by the power that resides in the senior academic administrator role.

Scholars who have conducted intersectional research have highlighted the need to increase research on this topic in leadership studies. For example, Wise (2013) studied the narratives of female community college presidents of color. She found that participants experienced “dysconscious racism, classism, and sexism both internally and externally from their respective ethnic groups. A common thread was both gender and ethnicity-specific transgressions” (p. 124). Some Latina participants in the study described examples when Hispanic men did not support them—times when they felt invisible or excluded in primarily male Hispanic professional groups. These are examples of sexism within their ethnic group. Wise (2013) also highlighted the need to further study women of color in executive leadership positions in higher education who do not aspire to be president.

Another educational scholar, Bailey (2008), documented the importance of Black women executives identifying factors that influence their career advancement and success

in administrative positions, as this information can guide others. Educational researcher Bright (2010) examined Black women senior leaders at traditionally white community colleges, and her work suggests that Black women aspiring to senior-level administrative positions at PWIs can expect to see fewer and fewer faces like theirs as they climb to the top of the institution. More than half of the women in her study reported that they were the first and/or the only Black woman ever to hold their position or a senior-level administrative position in their community college. This was very similar to the narrators' journey in my study, each were the first in their institution to hold a senior-level academic administrator role. This reflects and shapes institutional culture and the lives of the Black women who occupy these roles. Bright also found that many of her participants directly observed their institutions as encumbered with unwritten hidden rules and double standards that obstructed their advancement or highlighted persisting inequities for Black women. She advocated for research that explores the challenges facing Black women who currently hold specific types of senior-level administrative positions and their recommendations for increasing the number of Black women in these roles. She recommended studying the experiences of the very few Black women in academic deanships in community colleges for their experiential wisdom.

Because scholars consider the term "leadership" as a set of stances, and a set of actions, rather than only ascribed roles (King & Ferguson, 2011), Black women's resistance strategies is another important dimension of the research. For example, Razzante (2018) called for more empirical research that identifies the minute ways racially minoritized administrators negotiate the oppressive structures within PWIs to eliminate and transform their existing toxic environments. He found that oftentimes,

administrators of color choose communicative strategies based on their abilities, field of experience, situational context, and perceived costs and rewards. They use their experiences of marginalization and ‘outsiderness’ to resist patriarchy and whiteness within their institutions. These are leadership strategies of resistance. Other scholars (Guitierrez Y Muhs, 2012; Stanley, 2006, Takara, 2006; Travis & Thorpe-Moscon, 2018) have argued for more research on how Black women in various roles resist subjugation, thrive, and create more inclusive academic spaces within PWIs.

Similarly, Alexander-Lee (2014), a higher education scholar who studied characteristics that contribute to advancing Black female administrators in PWIs, found they must have a solid network or ‘village’ that supports them inside and outside of the academy to help ward off the onslaught of biases and micro and macroaggressions they encounter. She also found that all women in her study had very active spiritual and religious foundations that they felt were the glue holding each of their lives together. Alexander-Lee (2014) argued that “collecting their narratives, honoring their contributions, and realizing their importance to the educational process can only serve to improve the quality of education and to contribute to a more productive and cohesive society” (p. 20). Understanding complex strategies of resistance and support in educational spaces is just as pressing today as it has always been for scholarship and practice.

If administrators are unaware of Black women’s experiences within their institutions, how can they collaborate to improve their experiences? If institutions are not aware of how their policies, practices, and procedures have an inequitable impact on the teaching, learning, and working conditions of people of color, how can they prevent

themselves from continuing to write and produce inequitable policies and practices? “The historical experiences of Black women in education offers valuable insight into the larger social and civic role women and Blacks played in the struggle for racial and gender equality” (Collier-Thomas, 1982, p. 178). For PWIs to hire, promote, and retain academic administrators of color, various institutional stakeholders must become aware of the unique challenges women of color face and the persistence strategies they as minoritized leaders must employ to lead and resist domination. This is the focus of my research. I conducted a narrative inquiry study with four Black women who held senior leadership roles in higher education institutions.

### **The Research Puzzle**

*“I write for those women who do not speak, for those who do not have a voice because they were so terrified, because we are taught to respect fear more than ourselves. We’ve been taught that silence would save us, but it won’t.” –Audre Lorde*

The starting point of this research was my inquiry into the experiences of Black women leading in academic affairs positions in PWIs. In the past decade, I held positions in several roles and storylines in the educational landscape of one institution. They include educational counselor, midlevel manager, senior level academic administrator, and senior student affairs officer. All positions brought lessons; however, one journey stood out more than the others, and that was my experience leading in the world of academic affairs. As a result, this research puzzle (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004) focused on the broad question of how Black women serving in the uniquely powerful role of senior academic administrator lead and persist in this particular moment in time (2021), and how their PWIs frame their experiences. As noted above, this is also a pressing question in the literature. Using narrative inquiry, I explored the experiences of the

selected four narrators in this study through their reflection on and moving back and forth between their individual and collective experiences in this role. Each experience, narrative, and institutional culture serves as a piece of what Clandinin and Connelly (2004) refer to as the research puzzle. The puzzle shares some aspects of a research problem in traditional social science research, but also honors the personal questions that bring a researcher to a narrative inquiry, as legitimate grounding for the inquiry.

There is meaningful scholarship on the implications of race/gender intersectionality for Black women in higher education leadership roles (Collins, 2019; Crenshaw, 1989, 1993). However, limited scholarship exists on the experiences of Black women who lead in PWIs through senior academic administration roles. Continued “silence about the ways in which academic attitudes and institutional practices reproduce hierarchies of race and gender” (Gutierrez y Muhs et al., 2012, p. 11) will only exacerbate the racial hierarchies present in modern-day academia. For multiple reasons, the time is now to spotlight the experiences of Black women granted the opportunity to lead in chief academic officer, provost, and dean capacities. Given the small number of Black women occupying these roles, the need for access to and greater representation in these positions remains pressing. Further, these powerful institutional roles have responsibilities that stretch beyond academic stewardship to set the institution’s academic goals and strategic priorities (Stewart, 2019). They sit at the epicenter of academic decision-making and contribute to the very culture of the institution. Describing the impact of the provost’s role, Provost Daniel Julius (2016) states,

The most important academic initiatives—concerning students, faculty, shared governance, the distribution of resources, how the institution will

engage its multiple constituencies—will fail or succeed depending upon the commitment, effectiveness, and ability of the provost (n.p.).

Representation of women of color in these academic leadership roles is critical; their leadership style, communication style, perspective, knowledge, and lived experiences add value to the positions and shape institutional cultures. Their unique experiences provide insights that contribute to transforming institutional cultures and enhance leverage to affirm and explore these leaders' wisdom.

Unearthing the experiences and persistence strategies of Black women leading in academic positions that most commonly pave the way to the college presidency is also critical to fostering an understanding of productive aspects of Black women's leadership development. In this research, I initially set out to study their experiences in any postsecondary institution that was a PWI or historically white institution (HWI); however, all the women who responded and participated in the study worked at community colleges. White people are still over represented in positions of power at community colleges nationwide; however, community colleges' leadership tend to be more diverse than four-year institutions. This pattern is important because research shows that having a racially diverse representation of faculty and staff in leadership positions increases student outcomes and success rates (Neal & Georges Jr., 2020). The perspectives of the few Black academic leaders that have made their way can help eliminate the “gap in collective interpretive resources that put Black women an at unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experience” (Palazzi, 2017, p. 7), renew determination for women of color currently serving in those roles, and help institutions identify strategies to recruit, hire, and retain more of them.



## **Purpose of the Study**

*“If there’s a book that you want to read, but it hasn’t been written yet, then you must write it.”*

- Toni Morrison (2016)

The purpose of this qualitative research study, a narrative inquiry, was to examine the personal and professional experiences and persistence strategies of Black women serving in academic leadership positions at higher education institutions that are PWIs. I focused specifically on Black women leading in senior-level academic, administrative roles, including position titles of chief academic officer, provost, academic dean, and other similar roles. I examined narrators’ stories of navigating male-dominated terrains laced, as research has documented, with daily nuances of bias, microaggressions, macroaggressions, and racial discrimination (Apugo, 2019; Baxter-Nuamah, 2015; Bowser, 2020; Gutiérrez y Muhs, 2012). This narrative study explored how they experience the intersecting dimensions of race and gender at the highest level of academic leadership in PWIs.

## **Inquiry Questions**

*“Black people are the magical faces at the bottom of society’s well. Even the poorest Whites, those who must live their lives a few levels above, gain their self-esteem by gazing down on us... Over time, many reach out, but most simply watch, mesmerized into maintaining their unspoken commitment to keeping us where we are, at whatever cost to them or to us.”*

Derrick Bell - 2018

Three primary inquiry questions guided this narrative inquiry into Black women’s experiences, sufferings, navigations, and persistence strategies while serving in senior academic leadership positions at majority white institutions. They reflect a Black

feminist theoretical grounding wherein we see institutions as racialized and gendered spaces that shape the experiences of Black women in senior-level roles in varied ways. Although the spaces and some of the intersectional nuances differ, the narrators in this study all described how institutional racial dynamics shaped their experiences as Black women leaders.

Individual narrative inquiry questions:

1. How do Black women leaders experience the intersecting media of race and gender in their senior-level academic leadership roles in their PWIs/HSIs?
2. What are the institutional messages and controlling images about Black women they encounter in their leadership roles?
3. How do they navigate and resist the racial/gendered institutional, cultural messages they encounter in their leadership role at their PWI/HSI?
4. Where do they find joy and fulfillment within institutionalized systems of domination?

### **Epistemology**

This study is situated in Crotty's epistemology of constructionism and Dillard's (2000) theoretical approach of endarkened feminist epistemology. Crotty (1998) described constructionism as a rejection of the objectivist epistemology and post-positivist perspective that objective truth is waiting for us to discover. Constructionism embraces the view that meaning can only exist through our engagement with the realities in our world and the partnership of subject and object to generate meaning. I used constructionism as an epistemological background in this study as I explored and documented how the narrators reflect on and interpret their academic leadership

experiences within the setting of a PWI. Thus, this research study was a meaning-making mechanism for the selected narrators and for me as the researcher.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

I also chose to use Dillard's endarkened feminist epistemology as a theoretical perspective that aligns with the tenets of Black feminism. I used this rich model to provide the analytic, conceptual, and representational groundwork for the methodology I pursued using narrative inquiry. Accordingly, I highlighted my investment in the courageous voices and unique experiences of the Black female academic administrators participating in this research. In this theoretical perspective, stories are vital sources of meaning-making and knowledge about Black women's lives within broad structures and discourses that often dismiss or marginalize them. Stories are sites of meaning making and vehicles for connection. Dillard (2000) defined endarkened feminist epistemology as:

A way to articulate how reality is known when based on the historical roots of Black feminist thought, embodying a distinguishable difference in cultural standpoint, located in the intersection/overlap of the culturally constructed socializations of race, gender, and other identities, and the historical and contemporary contexts of oppressions and resistance for African American women. (p. 662)

This perspective centers on African American women's voices by embracing narrative research as a legitimate way of understanding Black women's experiences and diversity. Dillard (2000) argued that Black women can and should narrate their lives directly and supports narrative research in a form that does not require presenting data in a way that

“denaturalizes, reduces, and diminishes their richness and meaning” as they are translated from one context to the other (Dillard, 2000, p. 664).

This is an appropriate perspective in a study in which Black women challenge the traditional racial/gendered conceptions of what it means to be an academic intellectual knower with enough status and authority to lead academic divisions within the academy. The historical norm is seeing the white male as the credible authority of knowledge and rightful leader in these positions (Palazzi, 2017). Foregrounding Black women leaders’ knowledge and experiences embraces an approach of epistemic justice (Fricker, 2007), calling out Black women from their outsider-within placements leading in roles that have been traditionally developed and maintained by white male ideas and interests (Collins, 2000). Discounting women leaders as authorities and knowledge creators is a form of epistemic injustice; their knowledge is not deemed credible.

By examining women’s life experiences through their voices and a black feminist theory (BFT) lens, I utilized my African American-centered cultural identity and community as an overt component of the research process rather than a post-positivist theoretical perspective that follows an objectivist epistemology asserting that objects in the world have meaning prior to, and independently of, any consciousness of them (Crotty, 1998). To avoid the suggestion that the narrators in my study were mere “ingredients” in my “research recipe,” I move toward Dillard’s (2000) idea of “research as a responsibility, answerable and obligated to the very persons and communities being engaged in the inquiry” (Dillard, 2000, p. 663). Through this conceptual framework, race and gender become culturally engaged explanations of the narrators’ ways of telling their

stories. My relationships “alongside” these women are part of the inquiry process (Clandinin, 2013). I provide more detail on this perspective in Chapter 3.

### **Theoretical Framework**

*“Oppressed groups are frequently placed in the situation of being listened to only if we frame our ideas in the language that is familiar to and comfortable for a dominant group. This requirement often changes the meaning of our ideas and works to elevate the ideas of dominant groups”.*

Patricia Hill Collins (2000, p. 7)

This study centered on the insidious forms of racism and sexism with which professional intellectual leaders grapple within their institutions. In taking this explicitly-ideological approach to foregrounding racism/sexism as structural and cultural features that shape institutions of higher education where Black women move, lead, and navigate, this study reflects and uses the tenets of Black feminist theory to present and analyze the often-silenced narratives of African American women administrators working within institutionalized systems of domination.

Also salient to my study is how Black women find joy in their work. “Black feminist theory,” wrote Collins, “investigates how intersecting oppressions of race, gender, and class foster contradictions between dominant ideologies of American womanhood and U.S. Black women’s devalued status” (2008, p. 14). At its core, “Black feminist theory centralizes and validates the intersecting dimensions of race and gender experienced in the lives of African American women” (Hague & Okpala, 2017, p. 3). It also seeks forms of resistance and theorizing that advance institutional visions of equitable futures.

Black feminist theory provides a scope to better understand African American women's interactions and triumphs. It has sparked critical thinking about the social condition of African American women in the United States. It is grounded in the assumption that, despite all our/their striking differences, most Black women share commonalities, perceptions, and experiences based on structural and cultural conditions (Collins, 2008; Hague & Okpala, 2017). Dillard (2006) noted that cultural and social contexts, including international diversity, matter in how "African-ascendant" women understand and orient their priorities. With this understanding, BFT holds that race/gender are always important, but how they play out in different contexts can vary. In this study, I used BFT to understand how African American women experience highly racialized academic leadership positions in different PWIs. I used this theoretical lens to inform several of my research questions and examine and explain prominent themes that emerged from the collective narratives of Black women administrators.

As noted by Dillard (2016) and other black feminist scholars, "Engaging in deep and sustained dialogue with Black women leaders is key to understanding our realities, experiences, culture, and leadership—and to inform your own as well" (p. 34; Brock, 2011; Gutierrez y Muhs et al., 2012; Rothenberg & Mayhew, 2014). Using this stance, I explored, in this narrative study, how Black women's experiences in senior academic administrator roles reflect the particulars of their racist/sexist institutional dynamics. I also centered on the strategies they use to navigate and thrive in these spaces and the leadership forms they embrace in doing so.

## **Methodology**

This study used a narrative inquiry approach (Clandinin, 2013) to explore Black women's lived experiences in their leadership roles. Due to the significantly small number of Black women who have historically led and continue to have the opportunity to lead in this area, the number of women in the study was small. After extensive efforts to recruit widely, I successfully recruited four women who currently serve in senior-level academic leadership roles at community colleges. Unlike traditional social science research design, narrative inquiry reflects the belief that "individual experience is a valid source of experience." Also, Clandinin (2013) argued that "the knowledge developed from [narrative] inquiries lead more towards wondering about and imagining alternative possibilities and less to generalizations and certainties" (Clandinin, 2013, p. 52). This methodology provided a way to explore Black women's thoughts, feelings, insights, interpretations, and varied experiences on their own terms, through their own stories. In Clandinin's (2013) model of narrative inquiry, she wrote,

It focuses on a way of understanding experience. It is a collaboration between researcher and participants over time. Narrative inquiry focuses not only on valorizing individuals' experiences but is also an exploration of the social, cultural, familial, linguistic, and institutional narratives within which individuals' experiences were, and are, constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted (p. 18).

To Clandinin (2013), narratives are vehicles for conveying experiences that also reflect broader cultural and institutional dimensions shaping those experiences. My research questions reflected these layers.

Using Clandinin's (2013) well-known narrative inquiry approach for this study created the opportunity to make visible the nuanced ways that racism and sexism create unique challenges for Black women leading at high levels within PWIs of higher education. "Narrative inquiry studies the participants' experience in the world, an experience that is storied both in the living and telling and that can be studied by listening, observing, living alongside another, and writing and interpreting texts" (Clandinin, 2013, p. 18). Understanding narrators' ways of experiencing their institutions can help others, including other Black women, understand leading while Black and female in PWIs. Ultimately, my goal as a researcher was to understand the professional experiences and strategies of Black women serving in senior-level academic roles at PWIs, and what these narratives reveal about the contours of navigating racism/sexism in these specific academic roles in their majority white institutional contexts.

## **Methods**

I gathered data by engaging in conversations with narrators who are all currently employed as chief academic officers, provosts, academic deans, or similarly situated leadership positions with titles unique to their institutions. In narrative inquiry, the focus is on stories as a vehicle to access experiences within unique cultural, familial, institutional, or community contexts (Clandinin, 2013). Thus, interviews often take on an informal character, as Clandinin (2013) expresses, "Conversations create a space for the stories of both participants and researchers to be composed and heard. Conversations are not guided by predetermined questions" (p. 45). This was the case with my study. I drafted questions and used them as a guide for the IRB and to guide the narrators as they shared their stories.



Other resources are useful for enhancing our understanding of experiences. I looked up photographs, past academic publications, and highlights written about the narrators for their community engagement work/awards/recognitions and used them as artifacts when needed to prompt the telling of stories for this narrative study. "Learning to use, study, and understand documents and files is part of the repertoire of skills needed for qualitative inquiry" (Patton, 2002, p. 295). To my surprise, the documents were never needed to prompt the narrators; they had no problems remembering key experiences in their professional journeys and being transparent about their successes and challenges. However, the materials were still useful in the analysis phase of the study. I scheduled two opportunities for one-on-one virtual conversations between myself and the narrators at two different points during an academic year—once at the beginning of the academic semester and another toward the end of the semester.

I also invited all narrators to join a one-hour virtual group conversation, but due to their demanding schedules, only two narrators were able to participate in the focus group at the same time. I met the other two narrators individually and engaged them with the focus group questions. I defined PWIs in this study as those institutions where student enrollment consists of at least 50% or more White students and whose histories, policies, practices, and ideologies center on whiteness or the white majority. PWIs, by design, tend to marginalize the identities, perspectives, and practices of people of color (Moralis & Raible, 2021). I originally planned to ask narrators to respond to a self-study questionnaire for the purpose of gathering specific demographic, career path, organizational culture, and institutional data; however, due to the demand on their time

and the challenges with scheduling the interviews, I decided to integrate some of the questions from the questionnaire into the focus group questions.

I engaged in narrative analysis guided by BFT, using Clandinin's (2013) techniques and Reissman's (2008) thematic analysis through a Black feminist framework. I collected what Clandinin calls field texts and then analyzed and shaped them into interim research texts. These strategies allowed me to engage in relational ways during data engagement with narrators after initial narrative collection and negotiate around unfolding threads of experience to compose research texts (Clandinin, 2013). I will provide more details on these aspects of Clandinin's approach in Chapter 3.

### **Significance of Study**

*“Black women have had to develop a larger vision of our society than perhaps any other group. They have had to understand white men, white women, and black men. And they have had to understand themselves. When black women win victories, it is a boost for virtually every segment of society”.*

-Angela Davis (2014)

For far too long, dominant groups have silenced and discounted Black women's testimonies and stories. There is much to learn from how Black women have found dignity in an academic world made for whiteness. Her sheer presence in a senior leadership role in the face of a patriarchal and racialized society is a testament to the strength of her Blackness (Palazzi, 2017). The significance of my study covers three areas: personal, scholarship, and practice. First, in terms of personal value, by exploring the narratives of Black women academic leaders at PWIs, I hoped to create a space, however small, where they and we can speak our truths without fear of severe repercussions and with the potential of helping others. I experienced moments of

connection among two narrators who participated in a focus group together. There were deep head nods in response to certain statements that resonated with the other narrator, call-and-response patterns of finishing one another's sentence in an affirming manner, laughter, smiles, and facial expressions of disgust when certain racialized experiences were shared. It felt almost as if we were in church, shouting yes instead of amen, clapping to make a statement when a narrator shared an experience about standing their ground. The community felt uplifting every time I entered the space with a narrator. I was amazed at their interest in supporting my doctoral journey and ensuring that I complete it.

In narrative inquiry, researchers create a space to “come alongside” (Clandinin, 2013) participants, and we go where participants take us conceptually and experientially. We become part of the places and relationships they live as we live alongside the participants (Clandinin, 2013; Dillard, 2000). By reading, sharing, and connecting with other women in these esteemed roles, I hoped that Black female leaders—both the narrators in this study as well as other leaders—find healing affirmation, community, and opportunity. It was beautiful to experience the automatic connections between myself and the narrators, and between the two narrators who participated in a focus group together. Affirmations and encouragement flowed freely. Drs. Angelou and Tubman met for the first time, connected, and committed to finding each other at an upcoming conference to fellowship. The community that developed inspired me each time we met. I eventually met two of the narrators in person, by chance, at a conference workshop for African American vice presidents and deans possibly interested in becoming presidents. I learned that one of the narrators had just been named president that same day.

Second, there is a scholarly contribution. This study amplifies the testimonies of Black women serving in high-impact educational leadership roles. It takes seriously how, as leaders in high-impact positions, they are authorities of their experience. Little scholarship exists on how Black female leaders in these roles navigate an institutional culture and/or practices that, research has found, undermine their authority and/or presume them incompetent (Gutiérrez y Muhs et al., 2012) due to their intersectional positioning at odds with conceptions of authority in PWIs. The narrators' testimonies reveal their experiences and navigations and further establishes their credibility and identity as competent, knowing professionals. Examining, documenting, and sharing the experiences and navigations of these women, whose physical identity alone works against the established image of the ideal intellectual for a chief academic officer role, amplifies their wisdom and need for resistance strategies.

Third, the research findings contribute to practice. The data revealed that their race and gender influence their academic leadership roles in their work settings, but it most often occurs in subtle ways. Higher education institutions must open their hearts and ears to the personal narratives and experiences of racially minoritized women navigating varied PWI climates and successfully leading as academic administrators. Creating opportunities for us as Black women to fully flourish in our fullness as women and women of color allows important perspectives and new ways of leading to bloom. This also broadens the pathway to the presidency for more women of color. In an edited collection on women of color and academia, Gutiérrez y Muhs et al. (2012) argued that:

Predominately white and male employment educational institutions systematically disfavor women of color, not solely through individual bias but as part of larger

systems of education, employment, media, and other civil society institutions that perpetuate and extend the privileges created by group subordination (p. 4).

Black feminist scholar bell hooks (1988) posited that “women and men need to know what is on the other side of the pain experienced by those living in the margins,” and that “we need detailed accounts of the ways our lives are fuller and richer as we change and grow politically, as we learn to live each moment as comrades working to end domination” (p. 26). Collins (1986) argued that many Black female intellectuals have made creative use of their marginality and drawn upon their outsider-within status to generate a distinctive standpoint. For PWIs to hire, promote and retain academic administrators of color, their leaders must become aware of the unique challenges women of color face and the persistence strategies they must employ to lead and resist domination. This study created opportunities for Black women to narrate their encounters within these racialized spaces to position their institutions to better serve, promote, and retain these women.

This study focused on the subtle ways Black women leading in academic areas of PWIs are expected to assimilate to and promote the culture prevalent in PWIs. The study captured how Black women experience their institution’s stereotypes, biases, and prejudices. It also captured how they navigate white boardrooms, leadership teams, consensus, and spaces that can often lack empathy and action for the Black and Brown bodies existing in those chilly spaces, while creating road maps to find and create Black joy and Black love (Brown, 2018). This research shines a light on how these women triumph, build community, suffer, find dignity, create joy, and creatively demand the right to live as fully human in the face of white academic culture. According to Green

(2011), “if diversity is, in fact, a compelling interest for society, then higher education leaders and researchers alike need a better understanding of how diversity is achieved and experienced among the administrative ranks within colleges and universities” (p. 711).

The four narrators in this study showcased their rich experiences in these roles.

### **Organization of the Dissertation**

This study is organized into six chapters, including a narrative chapter focused on the individual women. Chapter I comprises an introduction to the research puzzle, the purpose of the study and inquiry questions. I then describe the epistemology, the theoretical perspective and theoretical framework. I briefly introduce the methodology and the methods and wrap the chapter up by explaining the significance of the study. Chapter II contains the literature review on the historical overview of African American women in higher education; the cost of success for women of color; the reality of racism in the academy; and the concept of racial battle fatigue that affects people of color in social and institutional structures. In Chapter III, I outline the research methodology used to conduct this study. In Chapter IV, I describe the narratives of the individual leaders. Chapter V consists of my findings regarding their narratives and interpretations. In chapter VI, I summarize the study, answer the inquiry questions, provide implications of the data, and end with a personal reflection on my experience conducting the study.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This chapter contains an overview of the literature within which I situate my study. First, I briefly introduce the origins of the study's theoretical framework—Black Feminist Theory. Then, I examine scholarship on Black women in leadership positions outside of academia and turn to their/our history in higher education, which provides a conceptual and empirical foundation for my research. In the next section, I turn to new scholarship on women leaders of color in higher education to address common issues. Next, I highlight findings about Black women's experiences in leadership, challenges, and successes in the academy, mentor, and networks. These key findings teach the reader what we know from the valuable research thus far, and in narrative inquiry terms, surface questions that merit asking. To build the necessary foundation for my study, I mention the methodologies scholars used and share the few studies I discovered where scholars used narrative inquiry for their studies related to Black women and their leadership.

## **Origins and Applications of Black Feminist Thought (BFT)**

Throughout American history, White women's movements for equality often intentionally excluded and undercut the voices of Black and Brown people to advance its agenda (SPLC, 2019, no author). This history is evident in White women's exclusionary fight for suffrage, vocal opposition to school integration during the civil rights movement, and impactful role in the recent storming of the US Capitol by a mob of mostly White men; yet many White women were visible in riot photographs and others were reflected in media posts when domestic violence occurred at our nation's Capitol. These varied examples and experiences drove, and continue to drive, Black women to develop and shape a feminist theory and praxis to include issues unique to them (Taylor, 1998).

In 1984, for example, bell hooks called on Black women to develop a theoretical framework to evaluate strategies, challenge, and change structures of domination (Taylor, 1998). Scholars refer to this now as Black Feminist Thought (BFT). As Acuff (2018) describes, BFT "refers to a standpoint epistemology in which Black women are empowered to recover their subjugated knowledge and use it to study how matrices of oppression (race, gender, class) reinforce each other in varying contexts" (p. 203). BFT reflects diverse voices and theorists (e.g., Patricia Hill Collins, Cynthia Dillard, bell hooks, Jennifer Nash, among others). It works to reclaim Black women's ideas that had often been silenced. It uses the intersecting lenses of race, class, and gender to reinterpret existing work, and it also extends the idea of who is traditionally known as an intellectual while simultaneously extending the location of Black intellectualism outside of the academy and the Black middle class (Collins, 2000). BFT provides a platform for Black



women researchers to gather meaningful data to inform and explain the point of view of Black women narrators.

Davis and Brown (2017) used BFT to critically examine the experiences of Black female faculty by analyzing the literature regarding their holistic experiences in academia. They found that Black female faculty are automatically discounted on several levels and that the “resilience with which Black women persist through being automatically discounted is courageous and problematic at the same time” (Davis & Brown, 2017, p. 6). Their work is courageous because their resilience creates space for them to triumph in ways that transform their current reality; and problematic because their struggle for authenticity occurs against an oppressive system designed to silence their coming to voice (hooks, 1989). Joseph (2020) used BFT to study and describe the professional work experiences of mid-level Black women administrators in community colleges and uncovered how race shapes the participants’ experiences and impacts their leadership and influence within their professional domains. BFT works to affirm, rearticulate, and empower Black women while simultaneously stimulating resistance (Collins, 2000). A study such as this that amplifies the storied experiences of Black women serving as intellectual leaders at PWIs is what BFT scholars view as an act of Black women’s activism because it challenges oppressive structures through creating Black female spheres of influence within the spaces that have historically undermined them. Black women’s experiences, constructions, and resistance as leaders are aspects of educational practices and cultures central to social foundations.

Collins (2000) describes the overarching purpose of BFT as “to resist oppression—both its practices and the ideas that justify it” (p. 25). She goes on to

illuminate core themes in BFT, beginning with its aim to explore and document Black women's work status and identify patterns of race and gender inequality during specific eras and their positions in specific occupational fields and professions. This study situates itself within the BFT core theme of analyzing Black women's work, especially through the lens of their "labor market victimization as mules, dehumanized objects, living machines that can be easily exploited" and the ways we overcome and flourish despite the conditions (Collins, 2000, p. 51). Studying the racial and gendered institutional conditions of Black women in the roles I am studying can provide new knowledge on their work aligned with BFT. Black Feminist Theory exposes and critiques the stereotypical portraying of Black women as following in one or multiple categories of mummies, welfare recipients, jezebels, or matriarchs who emasculate men, or who are promiscuous, angry, oppositional, emotional, and/or unfeminine beings. Hill Collins emphasizes that controlling portrayals are so often taken for granted that they almost become "virtually impossible to escape" (Collins, 2000, p. 98). This is among the reasons BFT works to challenge those images. My study amplified moments when and where these types of controlling images appeared in narrators' institutional contexts and articulated which controlling images women find themselves working against, and how they persevere and define their own identities in these contexts.

Controlling images work to maintain Black women's status as "outsiders and others" and sets expectations for behavioral conformity. Yet, Black women were not "just passive consumers of controlling images of Black womanhood. Instead, these women crafted identities designed to empower them" (Collins, 2000, p. 108). This led to the incorporation of another core theme in BFT, the construction of a collective, self-defined,

Black women's standpoint: engaging in the courageous act of speaking in our unique and authentic voices that come from a self-defined knowledge that's often essential to a Black woman's survival (Collins, 2000). This theme is about knowledge production, resilience, and power. My positionality and the use of BFT helps nurture space for the narrators to come to voice and speak freely while contributing to a collective, self-defined standpoint on Black women's experiences in academic leadership roles. I designed this study as a space where we speak comfortably, for ourselves, about our experiences and realities, which resulted in a beautiful community that filled my spirit more than I knew possible. We always concluded with gratitude for one another and high spirits.

### **Black Women in Leadership Outside of Higher Education**

Much of the writing on Black women in leadership at predominately white institutions have focused on faculty, student affairs administrators, and presidents (Boss et al., 2019; Razzante, 2018; West, 2018; Williams Shealey, 2009). Several key studies have been conducted on Black women in leadership, including in corporate, nonprofits, Black motherhood as a form of leadership, and medicine. This section will focus on the experiences of Black women in leadership outside of academia. Holder, Jackson and Ponterotto (2015) examined the experiences of racial microaggressions in the workplace and coping strategies of Black women managers in corporate American positions. These researchers found that despite their career success and senior-level positions, they were not immune to persistent experiences and consequences of racial microaggressions. A primary racial microaggression the participants experienced was related to the stereotype of being intellectually inferior. Mooreland's (2017) study on leadership examined the intersectionality of race and gender in leadership by adding the perspectives of

professional Black women leaders in PWIs. The leaders in this study unanimously reported experiencing daily racial microaggressions in the workplace. Participants frequently reported feeling excluded and not feeling heard. Most participants felt seen-not-heard; however, all participants reported bringing new and different perspectives to the table, whether others listened or not. Participants also reported increased pressure to imitate their White colleagues and make fewer mistakes.

Researchers Smith, Watkins, Ladge and Carlton's (2018) conducted a study on Black women executives who have occupied senior-level executive positions in American corporations. They found that one main driver of the women's ultimate success was their ability to navigate the "intersectional invisibility" challenges they faced. The researchers defined this term as the tendency to be overlooked, disregarded, or forgotten due to status as a member of two underrepresented and devalued groups. The women in this study felt their underrepresentation as Black women made them highly visible in their workplaces. Yet, at the same time, they expressed feeling invisible. Nearly all the executives in the study spoke of having to adapt to this invisibility and how they had to employ different strategies based on their career stages. The women went on to share that, through their journey of "feeling both visible and invisible at work, they developed a keen awareness of their unique, albeit disadvantageous, position" (Smith, Watkins, Ladge & Carlton, 2018, n.p.). The study documented the women's resilience and work to, ultimately, combat their invisibility. They did so by taking on distinguishable, high-risk roles that helped them ascend to the upper echelons of their companies, thereby defying controlling images, undermining oppressive structures as a form of resistance, and

refusing to relinquish control over their self-definitions—a quest that extended beyond individual survival to also include group survival.

Jackson (2020) interviewed Black female physician assistant (PA) leaders in the United States to understand their career trajectories, perspectives, and lived experiences. Jackson found that the Black women PA leaders experienced cognitive dissonance from their colleagues and students associated with their intersectionality. They also found that inequities prevail in academia between males and females in terms of workload, respect, and wages, despite women being the majority in PA education leadership and the PA profession in general. All the participants agreed that mentors played a significant role in their leadership development. Liggins-Moore's (2016) study examining African American leaders' perceptions of their common challenges as they advance to executive leadership and their personal capabilities required to attain leadership noted the importance of mentoring in the upward mobility of these executives. They also found spirituality to be a core foundation for the African American women leaders.

Perpetual challenges the participants encountered were the expectations that they should be “superwomen” and the need to speak “correct” language that did not always match their cultural language and stereotyping. As Liggins-Moore (2016) framed it, “For Black women, a dominant, aggressive, assertive, self-assured woman may be perceived as a so-called angry Black woman, even though these traits are congruent with typical leadership characteristics” (p. 3). By pushing back against these common, controlling images, these Black women are participating in interrogation and resistance efforts, a form of Black women's political activism that can bring about institutional change (Collins, 2000). Learning the strategies that the women in these positions employ to

succeed in these roles provided valuable insight into the contradictory culture of academia as experienced by Black women.

### **Historical Overview of African American Women in Higher Education**

As many Black feminist scholars have noted (e.g., Crenshaw, Hill-Collins, Nash), the structural intersections of gender and race play a significant role in shaping women's educational experiences. Zamani (2003) noted, "Being female and African American places African American women at the confluence of two forms of oppression" (p. 7). Too often, these women must weigh the cost of silence against the cost of speaking up, the cost of being seen as cocky and arrogant as it relates to their intelligence against the cost of "presumed incompetence" and controlling images (Collins, 2000). This current struggle is not new at all; the culture of white academia has always been deeply rooted in social and racial hierarchies.

Historians of education have detailed the varied ways Black families had to fight for the right to education for their sons and daughters and how African American women often led the charge across the nation (Perkins, 2015). "The first generation of college-educated African American women (pre-Civil War through 1880s) were overwhelmingly educated outside the South" (Perkins, 2015, p. 721). Those educated often sought to utilize their education for racial justice, but many expected their contributions to be in the home and church (Perkins, 2015) rather than formal education. For some of those who did earn college or graduate degrees but did not choose to teach at elementary or secondary schools, a position such as Dean of Women at the college level enabled them to use their learned skills (Evans, 2007). Similar to situations in which some Black

women find themselves today, even with credentials, many Black women were limited to certain fields and positions within those fields.

For centuries, the availability of formal education for women in the United States was not universal, and even more inequitable was access to formal education for African American females (Zamani, 2003). In 1890, only 30 African American women in the United States possessed a baccalaureate degree, compared to over 300 African American men and 2,500 White women (Perkins, 2015). By 1940, it was reported that 66% of all Black college graduates at all-Black colleges and universities were Black women (Perkins, 2015). Black women school founders of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, such as Nannie Helen Burroughs, Mary McLeod Bethune, and Charlotte Hawkins Brown, among others, while differing in their educational approaches and philosophies, were united in their belief that African American women had to assume the initiative in educating themselves and their people (Thomas & Jackson, 2007). The challenge of having to be twice as good to get half the recognition has always been magnified for Black female scholars whose social position has meant that, historically, they lacked the credibility that whiteness provides (Evans, 2007). Navigating supervisors' and power holders' attitudinal and organizational biases are among the many entanglements we encounter in our institutions. Another complexity is how leaders of color navigate leading direct reports who are primarily white, an area with little research. Embracing Black culture and refusing to conform to stereotyped expectations in the face of institutionalized systems of domination that center whiteness is a revolutionary act of self-love in which Black women must continue to engage.

The entry of African American women into the higher education workforce brought new opportunities for these great minds; however, it also contributed to oppression and racism, isolation, and systemic discrimination (Bower & Wolverton, 2009). African American female administrators at PWIs continue to face racial tensions and challenges in the academy; many continue to feel placed in difficult and uncomfortable positions. As a result, many remain reluctant to publicly bring attention to race-based campus issues for fear of political backlash or job loss (Wolfe & Dilworthe, 2015). However, some still muster the strength to speak truth to power and make their voices and concerns about racial inequities known.

### **Black Women in Higher Education Leadership**

In 1980, educational scholar, Myrtis Mosley, published an article about the status of Black female administrators at PWIs. She asserted that Black female administrators in White academe are an endangered species, that they were “tokens” whose positions in the institution were most often positions peripheral to the policy and decision-making core of higher education (Mosley, 1980). The term ‘endangered’ connotes both sparse representation and the climate or isolation for women in those roles that might threaten their continuance. Mosley (1980) found that these women often felt overworked, underpaid, alienated, isolated, uncertain, and powerless. Four decades later, the literature finds Black female administrators in PWIs similarly situated (Alexander-Lee, 2014; Bower & Wolverton, 2009; Mercurius, 2019; Vaccaro & Camba-Kelsay, 2016; West, 2017). Black women remain among the most underrepresented groups in executive and senior leadership roles in higher education (Smith et al., 2019). Women of color continue to be underestimated and devalued regarding their ability and potential to lead, as



evidenced by their significantly low numbers in these academic leadership roles at PWIs across the United States.

### **Black Women's Experiences in the Academy: The Reality of Racism**

One body of research on Black women's experiences in higher education has focused on the social context, climate, and the pervasive racism/sexism baked into policies and daily practices in these spaces. Many researchers (Mena, 2017, Muhs et al., 2012, Sanchez, 2010) have found the commonplace presence of microinsults and microinvalidations. Microinsults are behavioral and verbal expressions that perpetrators tend to express unconsciously yet convey rudeness, insensitivity, or demean an individual's racial heritage or identity (Sue, Capodilupo & Holder, 2008). Microinvalidations, while also largely unconscious, work to invalidate, negate, or diminish the psychological thoughts, feeling, and racial reality of Black Americans and other racial groups (Sue et al., 2008). People of color working in predominately White spaces frequently experience microinvalidations and microinsults, and the perpetrators are usually individuals who profess to be racially colorblind (Sue et al., 2008). These microaggressions are problematic to both perpetrator and victim because of their unconscious, subtle, and covert nature. Perpetrators often dismiss them as innocent acts that realize minimal, if any, psychological harm to victims (Sue et al., 2008). Yet, these women continue to find ways to resist subjugation and persist through the subtle encounters of belittlement that come their way. Unfortunately, sometimes these events and resistance occur at an enormous cost to their well-being and confidence (Gutierrez y Muhs et al., 2012). The fight against internalizing these damaging ideas is a battle with which most Black women working in predominately white spaces must contend.

Another aspect of the racist climate is the practice of grouping, Othering, and tokenizing women of color in PWI spaces. Researchers have found that women of color often confront the reality that others do not perceive them simply as individuals as they grant their White colleagues, but rather as representatives of their race (Niemann, 2017; Wingfield & Wingfield, 2010; Zarate, 2001). As such, they may face microaggressions that mark their presence as “other” and unwelcome (Senyonga, 2017). Black women often experience what scholar Darrius Hill (2019) coined “academic mammying,” drawing from the ideas of Patricia Hill Collins. He defined this as a mechanism of mistreatment prompted by the burdensome levying of undue expectation (or under-expectation) on Black women’s performance, embodiment, and competence. We judge leaders through established conceptions of leadership that are gendered and racialized. Hill (2019) explained that academic mammying often manifests in the rigid subordination of Black women—particularly in relation to White men. This pattern echoes Hill Collins’ (1990) articulation of the “controlling images” that shape perceptions of Black women. As she noted, “By meshing smoothly with systems of race, class, and gender oppression, [these controlling images] provide effective ideological justifications for racial oppression, the politics of gender subordination, and the economic exploitation inherent in capitalist economies” (Hill Collins, 1990, p. 271). The constant challenge of being viewed as an “other” can be exhausting and debilitating—a point that surfaced in my dialogue with the narrators in this study.

Racism is too often rendered a taboo topic at the highest levels of the institution because campus environments at PWIs too often promote racial silence, presumably due to the lack of a critical mass of allies and the high stakes of institutional leadership issues.

Rarely are racism and racist institutional norms explicitly named among the range of plausible reasons for racial dissimilarity people experience on campus (Harper, 2012). Whiteness plays a dominant role at PWIs by producing and reproducing these specific forms of racial marginalization that perpetuate a subordinated status for Black women (Daniel, 2018). Black women leading as provosts, chief academic officers, and/or senior vice presidents are a rare sighting and, therefore, frequently face the exhausting work of justifying their presence as a competent and credible scholar and leader (Cobb-Roberts, 2012). Calafell (2012) expressed her experience as a Black woman in the academy in a performative narrative format to draw parallels between her experiences and illustrate how women of color are constructed as monstrous Others. Calafell (2012) wrote:

I understand now that my presence in this space is conditional. I must pass and tame my Otherness, showing only the side of my nature that they see themselves in. I must perfect a performance of obedience and become a model representative of my Otherness. My shapeshifting is permitted only under certain restrictions. My Otherness makes for pretty pictures for brochures and the webpage, but that is only when my monstrosity is controlled and at their service. Yet another form of being put on display (p. 118).

Despite being invisible, ignored, disrespected, or devalued, when women of color write about their experiences in the margins, they resist external definitions and reconstruct their own definition of who they are (Rodriguez, 2011). As Clandinin and Connelley (2000) articulated, being invited to share your reality can be an empowering experience, which I saw the narrators in this study experience.

## **The Cost of Success for Women of Color**

The treatment of Black women during slavery and post-slavery remains haunting. “During slavery, Black women were not allowed any privacy, not even for their bodies, which were inspected, prodded, used for experiments, and vulgarly displayed for the economic profit of Whites” (Kupenda, 2012, p. 21). Today, others still try to control our images and ways of being. Success, for us, comes with a Black tax, the psychological weight or stressors that Black people experience from consciously or unconsciously thinking about how White colleagues perceive the social construct of Blackness (Palmer & Walker, 2020). This tax is sustained through countless racialized interactions; oftentimes, the racial diversity that PWIs desire comes at the expense of people of color. In these environments, “white supremacy is more like a poison. It seeps into your mind, drip by drip, until it makes you wonder if your perception of reality is true” (Brown, 2018, p. 67). Claiming our right to contribute, at every level, to solving the world’s complex problems comes with an array of costs for Black women.

## **Racial Battle Fatigue**

Those who endure the burdensome, negative impact of racism, whether on a micro or macro level, carry its burden with them, and those who challenge racism expend a great deal of personal energy, often throughout their professional lives (Pizzaro & Kohli, 2018). Racial battle fatigue refers to the accumulation of the emotional and psychological baggage that comes from others’ requirements to perform, function, and thrive in a world created with the goal of Black people failing on multiple levels (Acuff, 2018). Dominant groups did not design their universities and colleges for Black people.

Racism endured by people of color in PWIs, combined with racism in their broader lives, exacts a profound physical and emotional toll (Gorski, 2019). When left untreated or dismissed, the cumulative physiological symptoms of racial battle fatigue resulting from racial microaggressions will likely become harmful for people of color working in PWIs (Smith et al., 2006). Working in a challenging environment where employees feel alienated decreases our ability to make valuable contributions and increases the desire to leave that toxic climate.

Scholars have addressed some aspects of the negative impacts on the well-being of people of color resulting from professionally laboring in PWIs. For example, Pizzaro and Kohli (2018) found that expecting racial justice in majority-white spaces can be emotionally and psychologically taxing for people of color because there is too often no escape from the racism. There is also little acknowledgment of its existence. Participants in their study felt pressure to prepare for the strong possibility of the next racist encounter with a colleague or supervisor and “pressure to be hypervigilant in their work to protect both themselves from unwarranted critique and their students from psychic assaults” (p. 985). Bowser (2020) investigated the experiences of three generations of Black women and the transmission of trauma and learning related to racial battle fatigue and racial micro and macroaggressions. Bowser’s findings highlighted that many of the women’s responses to experiencing gendered racial micro and macroaggressions were psychological stress responses, including resentment, fear, frustration, and anger. The emotional/behavioral stress responses resulted in withdrawal or isolation from others, increased commitment to spirituality, and stereotype threat. Physiological responses included insomnia, fatigue, and pounding heart.

Resilience, well-being, and reframing have been important forms of resistance for Black women. Black Feminist Thought (BFT) has emphasized the importance of Black women's creative and theoretical work. This has significantly contributed to scholarship and personal experience, and is a necessary orientation in BFT. As detailed above, racism, sexism, and class-based subordination that women of color face can be painful and debilitating to their spirits, bodies, and careers, particularly in academia where white, male, heterosexual, and upper-middle-class culture reigns (Niemann, 2012). Allen, Carter, Karikari, Okello and Quaye's (2020) study on the notion of self-care highlighted white racial frames that inform how Black student affairs educators survive racial battle fatigue. They found that wearing the mask, "the various representations Black people wear to be legible—that is, palatable—in the presence of whiteness" (p. 422), and hiding their full identities were common coping strategies. They also spoke of the fatigue from putting on this mask and hiding their pain. The need to "be brave and courageous" and "not show your true self" exhausted them. Findings also showed that participants gauged their well-being by not having to deal with, think about, or experience the constant barrage of racism that exacerbated their racial battle fatigue. More research is needed on this aspect of leadership. My research adds the narratives of four Black women serving in these demanding leadership positions, illuminating how they triumph, build community, find dignity, create joy, and creatively demand the right to live as fully human in the face of white academic culture.

### **Controlling Images (Stereotypes and Expectations)**

Patricia Hill Collins' (2000) canonical work, *Black Feminist Thought*, noted various stereotypes, what she called "controlling images," that shaped Black women's

realities. Among them were a sexy jezebel, a mammy, or an angry, outspoken Black woman. Scholar Harris-Perry (2011) argued that Black women still encounter these images today in contemporary American life. Scholars have noted that pervasive negative imagery has been a source of stress for Black women and is used as a justification for their mistreatment and oppression (Abubakar, Evans, James, Spates & Watts, 2019; Avery, Cole, Jerald & Ward, 2017). In my study, I investigated the subtle messages Black women received in their institutions that may be rooted in controlling images. I considered whether their experiences reflect messages of inferiority, incompetence, intolerance, and exclusion from colleagues, supervisors, and sometimes even students. Controlling images continue to morph and proliferate today in new forms to justify the ever-present surveillance and control that Black women must work to resist (Dunlap, Golub & Cambraia, 2010). As race and gender-based discrimination continue to permeate the academy, the culture tax of being Black and female—in an environment where many have never seen a Black woman in any role of authority—means the women in these roles face the multifaceted threat to their status quo as leaders and bear the brunt of assaults of negative controlling images. I found that this was true for the narrators in this study. They experienced the energy-draining aspects of constantly justifying their competence but nevertheless rose above the challenges and led in their own culturally-indigenous way.

Other studies have identified this pattern. Research scholars Commodore, Covington, Googe, Johnson, and Lockett (2020) explored public discourse connected to articles and news reports about Black women presidents at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). The researchers found that media outlets often created narratives defining these women presidents through one of three controlling images. The

first narrative was connected to the controlling image of a mammy, a faithful, obedient domestic servant. The second was a matriarch, an aggressive and emasculating leader. The last was Sapphire, an angry, bitter, or scorned Black woman. Given these dominant and damaging beliefs, the study concluded that researchers should provide more opportunities to empower Black women in senior leadership voices and the power to tell their own stories. Black women's rights to their own framing of their lives, stories, and identities is a core emphasis of Black feminist thought.

Commodore's (2019) work deconstructs the problematic controlling idea of respectability politics and its impact on Black women in leadership at HBCUs. Navigating Whiteness as a Black woman trying to survive in a culture of professional whiteness is exhausting. The term respectability politics has appeared in Black feminist thought as both a controlling force and a lever of activism. The concept refers to "attempts by members of a marginalized group to show their values as being continuous and compatible with mainstream and often conservative values, rather than challenging the status quo" (Commodore, 2019, p. 442). The controlling image of respectability can define the proper behavior for Black women, a concept situated in the idea of conformity laced with expectations of assimilation to white, middle-class behaviors and standards. Commodore (2019) found that while Black women encountered HBCUs spaces that were full of racial pride, they also experienced gender discrimination. They fought to be seen as professionals and not just a "watchdog" or "house mother" (Commodore, 2019, p. 445). Shining light on the ways Black women carry the burden of navigating and pointing out problematic thinking and actions from a racial and gendered lens, and the cascade of challenges it brings, is an expense Black women are often charged.



Educational researcher Lindsey (2019) studied Black women administrators serving in cabinet-level roles and examined how race, gender, and leadership inform their self-conception, emergence, development, and well-being. The researcher pointed to an interesting extension of controlling images. They noted the surveillance of Black female administrators' physical characteristics. They found that this scrutiny served as a controlling behavior to avoid authentic conversations that could expose unequal dynamics in cabinet-level leadership. White colleagues and superiors would engage in talks about Black women's hair and other physical attributes rather than having meaningful discussions that leveraged the participants' competence and knowledge about work-related initiatives. By clarifying and identifying where the operations of inclusive and equitable leadership practices end, institutions and individuals in positions of power can work to eradicate those boundaries.

### **Isolation (Where are the Networks of Trust?)**

Sandra (2012) investigated the status of Black women who chose a career as a higher education administrator and found no single variable that improved the likelihood of "professional success" for Black women. This finding was coupled with statistically significant results that indicated that Black women earned less, experienced less social support, and were less likely to attain senior-level administrative positions than their Black male, White female, and White male colleagues. One of the six primary inferences drawn from the data was that Black women shared a collective experience of isolation and marginalization in higher education. Crawford and Smith's (2017) study on the availability of mentors for African American female administrators who hold or have held senior-level administrative positions in higher education in New York found that

participants often affirmed they were isolated because the chances to network with non-Black managers were few. Networks of trust often came from other Black women outside of the institution. Many women felt frustrated and isolated because a senior mentors had not noticed or observed them to determine whether future contributions would be viable or if they had attributes worthy of investment. One theme in the literature is Black women's feelings of isolation and/or exclusion in studies that examine their experiences of racism and sexism as workplace stressors (Alexander-Lee, 2014; Cook, 2012; Everett, Hall, Hamilton-Mason, 2012). Building networks is crucial for survival and success at this level, but finding or developing allies at this level can be challenging due to the hierarchal nature of this coveted position.

### **Impression Management Labor**

Goffman (1963) built on the importance of having a socially accredited identity acceptable to others by turning his focus to stigma. He exposed the challenges of those whose marginalized identities discredit them as “those with some attribute that leads them to be reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted and discounted one” (Goffman, 1963, p. 147). His concept of impression management and labor ideas are useful for interpreting Black women's leadership experiences in PWIs. Black women serving in senior-level positions not only visibly stand out when they walk into predominately White board rooms, they often have unique experiences relative to Black women in other walks of life. The executive component of their identities (i.e., race, gender, class) and their educational and occupational achievements often require them to intentionally manage the stereotypical race- and gender-based expectations (Smith et al., 2019). The constant management of one's natural and professional self to

counter the prevailing stereotypes is often grueling and exhausting but many feel others would challenge their authority even more if they didn't engage in impression management.

“U.S. society is entrenched in misogyny and white supremacy, which insidiously appear in the lived experiences of Black women in their professional workspaces” (Bhasin, 2019, n.p.). Women of color are severely underrepresented in positions of power across the gamut: women of color hold fewer than 5% of board seats in Fortune 500 companies, while White men hold two-thirds of board seats and White women hold nearly four times as many seats as women of color (Catalyst, 2020). Black women executives are expected to navigate an environment that punishes them most when they are assertive or seek power in white spaces not designed for people like them (Stallings, 2020). Black female executives report spending significant amounts of time and energy consciously preparing to face small acts of bias, exclusion, or discrimination each day, which requires daily vigilance to guard themselves against hurtful situations (Travis & Thorpe-Moscon, 2018). These experiences have varied costs and require acts of impression management.

In Hyppolite's (2019) study on Black women's journey to executive leadership, many of her participants who serve in a senior administration capacity indicated that they received labels of “being angry, standoffish, antisocial, and speaking very directly or harshly” (p. 116). She found that Black women in executive positions felt that they had to find the delicate balance of always pushing ahead while also knowing when to let things go and that resilience is a required quality for their leadership. The social expectation of Black women to achieve professional success, raise children, keep the household, and

uplift their community—all while negotiating the racial and gendered expectations of White professional culture—is extremely daunting (Harris-LaMothe, 2013). Each narrator discussed their navigations as wives, mothers, and executives, and the strategies they must employ to protect their peace.

American colleges, universities, and scholars must do a better job of validating the service of Black women and increasing their contributions, voices, and experiences. Black women in leadership roles continue to deal with bias, experience fewer opportunities, and feel undervalued (Sales et al., 2020). If institutions are not creating a culture that liberates women of color to voice how racism and sexism exacerbate ideas of “presumed incompetence” (Muhs et al., 2012) and make it difficult to find joy in their leadership roles, how committed are they to higher education’s democratic values? We must give voice to these women’s experiences to identify the structures and ways institutions perpetuate racism and sexism.

As many scholars have argued, if academia is to position itself to respond to the needs of our future citizenry, the culture of academia must become more inclusive, and its leadership must reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of its student population (Abdul-Raheem, 2016; Hankins, Saunders & Situ, 2003; Kets, 2015; Stewart & Valian, 2018). To strengthen the pipeline for women of color, and Black women leaders, specifically, and to support the potential impact of women of color in education, more stories, perspectives, experiences, voice, and answers to important questions are needed from the very Black women occupying these spaces to grow the awareness of their experiences and strengthen institutions. My research focused on foregrounding their successes,

barriers, supports, persistent strategies, and ideas regarding possibilities for radical cultural change within the academy, which I address in the coming chapters.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

As a Black woman who served as an academic administrator in the Midwest, I have been both challenged and disappointed by the lack of gendered racial diversity in academic leadership positions in majority-white higher education institutions throughout the United States. As I positioned myself in this role, I searched for women colleagues with whom to build communities of support. It did not take long to notice that my experiences, network, challenges, and the opportunities that came my way differed significantly from those of even my White female colleagues. There were certainly commonalities we shared woman-to-woman; the colorblind state in which they appeared to experience and fulfill their leadership role separated our experiences. In the last few years, I have been drawn more than ever to studying the dynamics of race and gender and their impact on leadership, agency, and liberatory experiences in senior-level academic positions such as chief academic officers and provosts. With so few Black women having the access and opportunities to secure these elite positions, it is important that we, as Black women, capture, collect, and document our distinct standpoints on self, professional experiences, and strategies for success as we navigate our time in these key roles which most often lead to a presidency position in the academy.

This chapter focuses on my methodology. I first explain the rationale for narrative inquiry. Next, I turn to the study's epistemology, theoretical perspective, and theoretical framework of BFT. I then restate the aspects of my study that led to my puzzle/problem statement and purpose and follow with the inquiry questions. I also explain my role as a researcher with regard to the study purpose and participants, which is important for a narrative study that "comes alongside" other Black women in leadership. Next, I shift to defining the narrators of interest, recruiting and selecting them, and how I collected the data. I then turn to the data analysis; I explain the study's validity, ethical considerations, and limitations. The section ends with the conclusion and the study timeline.

### **Rationale for Narrative Inquiry**

I used a narrative inquiry approach to explore the experiences of this group of women. This method of inquiry positioned the study to attend to women's storying, inviting the narrators to make meaning of their experiences, and the institutional factors that shaped their experiences, while also incorporating the researcher's position and experiences into the study. This approach empowered narrators to retell stories from a remembered past in one experience to a present moment in another while constructing an identity for the future (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). According to Clandinin and Connelly (1990), narrative inquiry is the study of how humans experience the world expressed through storying. The proponents of narrative inquiry claim that "humans are storytelling organisms, who, individually and collectively, lead storied lives" (p. 2). Narrative inquiry focuses on experience and the qualities of life (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). It includes elements Clandinin and others describe as three "commonplaces" that inquirers must explore simultaneously: temporality, sociality, and locality. Temporality

means that people, places, and events under study are always in transition (Clandinin, Pushor & Orr, 2007). Narratives always have a location in time and place, which shapes how we think about and make meaning of those experiences.

This study included Black women's reflections on their leadership experiences over time. The narrators shared incidences of the past and present while simultaneously forecasting the outlook of future experiences for themselves and others. The second commonplace, sociality, refers to attention to the personal and social conditions of the inquirer and the narrators while also acknowledging the relationship between the inquirer and the narrator (Clandinin, Pushor & Orr, 2007). Clandinin and Connelly emphasize that this form of inquiry is relational. I invited the narrators to share their personal feelings, hopes, desires, challenges, coping mechanisms, and emotional labor that shape their professional experiences with a researcher whose lived experiences consist of navigating similar professional white culture as a Black woman leader. It was clear in our dialogue that they were speaking with me as a woman with similar experiences. We constantly nodded, affirmed, exchanged cultural facial expressions that required no words, and signaled to one another that we shared perspectives on multiple experiences.

The third aspect of narrative inquiry is a locality and focuses on the specificity of the location where the events or experiences occur (Clandinin, Pushor & Orr, 2007). This study examined the culture of the PWIs where these women lead. How does the institutional culture differ across PWIs? Where are the similarities? What impact does this place have on their experiences? Providing "a narrative view extended over time, shaped by personal and social conditions, and situated, correspondingly, in a multiplicity of places" distinguishes narrative as both a phenomenon and a method (Connelly &



Clandinin, 1990, p. 9). Narrative researchers describe the storied lives that people live, collect them, tell stories of them, and write narratives of the experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). They analyze them for their experiential and contextual dimensions. Narrative inquirers consider the individuals sharing their experiences as narrators of their storied lives rather than viewing them as research “participants”.

Oral history traditions are central to the African American experience, making narrative inquiry a meaningful method of capturing the experiences, feelings, and thoughts of Black women leading in Academic Affairs. Employing narrative inquiry in this study provided a useful method to intimately explore the richness of these women’s experiences. With so few Black women provided the opportunity to lead in this capacity, it is my hope that their journey was much smoother than mine. The forms of racial oppression Black women have experienced while working in PWIs documented in the literature included marginalization, silencing, the policing of Black women’s expressions, respectability politics, colorism, presumed incompetence, and a feeling of invisibility and of being hyper-visible (Alexander-Lee, 2014; Apugo, 2019; Bright, 2010; Cobb-Roberts, 2011, Gutiérrez y Muhs et al., 2012). However, there is more to learn about women’s unique navigations in a unique position of power. This research created the much-needed space for these women to tell their diverse stories in a textured way, which allowed us to illustrate how we feel, suffer, and hope. Personal narratives are ways of making meaning, individually and collectively, that majority groups do not often see or hear—but need to—if we really want institutional transformation to happen.

## **Epistemology**

Survival for most Black women in senior leadership positions at PWIs is often an all-consuming activity that leaves little room for these women to participate in studies such as this one (Collins, 2000). In addition to having a limited amount of time, so few Black women currently occupy the senior-level academic administration roles I was seeking to represent; building the study around four executives' experiences proved highly insightful and valuable. Situating this study in Crotty's (1998) epistemology of constructionism and Dillard's (2000) theoretical approach of endarkened feminist epistemology provided an underlying understanding of the nature of reality and knowing for Black women laboring in PWI. Crotty (1998) described constructionism as an approach to knowledge in which meaning exists only through our engagement with others and the realities in our world. In this view, he noted, "meaning is not discovered but constructed" (p. 5). Endarkened feminist epistemology (EFE) also commits to the belief that we make meaning of our experiences through our "interaction with our culture, communities, and symbols, even given that there are various visions and versions of being an African ascendant" (Dillard & Bell, 2011, p. 344). Social constructionism as a way of knowing stands on the belief that there is no objective truth waiting for us to discover—meaning it is constructed in relation to a phenomenon (Crotty, 1998). The constructionist viewpoint, and Dillard's EFE, reject the idea of objective truth but do not subscribe to the belief that meaning is simply subjective.

Constructionism does not espouse that we create meaning individually or independently of the world. It acknowledges that we work with objects that already exist to construct meaning with the world and things and experiences in the world (Crotty,

1998). As the researcher in this study, I approached the research design with the belief that the narrators will make meaning of their experiences and the persistence strategies they employ as they navigate these spaces . Understanding the varied ways these narrators interpret and make meaning of their unique experiences in traditional white settings, in this temporal moment, against the backdrop of this historical era—where the eerie murders of unarmed Black bodies at the hands of those sworn to protect and serve has evoked a national proclamation and cry for justice through the Black Lives Matter movement—adds another layer of meaningfulness to this study.

### **Theoretical Perspective: Endarkened Feminist Epistemology**

In this project, I used EFE as the theoretical perspective or philosophical stance, which shaped its methodology. Because White men have historically controlled American structures of knowledge validation, their perspectives and interests pervade the paradigms and epistemologies traditionally found in academic scholarship and research (Collins, 2000). Endarkened feminist epistemology provides a counter vision to those perspectives, a way for:

People of color and people of spiritual consciousness to engage with Black cultural knowledge and wisdom, providing the ability to see, hear, and recognize the depth of the voices and experiences that these Black women live in the context of their Black womanhood inside of the majority white educational establishment (Dillard, 2016, p. 30).

Therefore, I approached the research design from an EFE in full recognition of who I am as an African American female researcher and leveraging that identity to be relational

and helpful to participants both in and following the research. This empowered me to examine more culturally indigenous ways of engaging in research and legitimize these Black women's knowledge within the community where they are grounded (Dillard, 2000). Constructionism brings to the forefront the interplay of humans engaging with their human world and the meaning-making that results from that interaction (Crotty, 1998). Using EFE as a theoretical perspective positioned me to set up the research design so that I could best draw from Black feminist intellectual traditions and engage with the narrators as they made meaning. I accepted a variety of guiding assumptions that shaped the methodological choice I made. Using EFE as a theoretical approach guided my study and set up the conditions so that narrators could engage in unedited and unmasked conversation with a researcher whose gender and race matched theirs.

Endarkened feminist epistemology works to emancipate the often-subjugated knowledge of Black women as the “other” through “declarations of love that center and affirm that Black life matters” (Dillard, 2016, p. 29). Through the centering of Black women's experiences as we create a home place in majority-white spaces, my hope is that this study's readers will be able to engage with Black cultural knowledge and wisdom as the narrators share “the ways we feel besieged, experience our lives, and make a way through, both on behalf of our humanity and in honor of the countless others on whose shoulders we stand” (Dillard, 2016, p. 30). This level of intimacy with the narrators' transparency makes us all accountable to the women in the study and those with similar experiences. Endarkened feminist epistemology guided my methodology of narrative inquiry in creating opportunities to explore our lives as Black women against a Black backdrop—that goes beyond the gaze of the majority—which often minimizes the

constant barrage of oppression we experience into something small, insignificant, or dismissible (Dillard, 2016). I relied on EFE to provide context for the study's methodological process, to position myself in relation to the study, and explore, affirm, and better understand the cultural contexts in which the narrators centered themselves.

Using EFE aligned with a narrative inquiry, the telling and (re)telling of individual and collective stories in educational research allow us to move these explorations to a place where they can be seen, heard, and recognized (Dillard, 2016). It was a set of theoretical assumptions that empowered me, as a Black woman who had served as an academic leader in a PWI, to engage in this study from a place of “we-ness”. Endarkened feminist epistemology,

provides legitimization for the voices of Black women, not of their existence, but as analytic, conceptual, and representational tools that explicate deep meanings of the very basis of educational research and leadership, its ontologies, epistemologies, pedagogies, and its ethical concerns” (Dillard, 2000, p. 661).

This approach guided the rationale for my methodology. EFE, coupled with BFT as a theoretical framework, worked together to provide the tools, strategies, and ways of thinking and being to properly capture the experiences, silent sufferings, survival strategies, and joy of Black women who lead in majority-white academic spaces.

### **Black Feminist Thought as Theoretical Framework**

In this study, I used BFT as the theoretical framework. Anfara & Mertz (2015) define a theoretical framework as “an empirical or quasi-empirical theory of social and/or psychological processes, which can be applied to the understanding of phenomena” (p.

15). I applied BFT to study the experiences and persistence strategies of Black women senior-level academic administrators. This theoretical framework allowed me, as the researcher, to highlight, “see”, and understand certain aspects of the phenomena under study while concealing other aspects (Anfara & Mertz, 2015). Black Feminist Thought as a theoretical framework guided and framed how I designed and conducted the study. Black Feminist Thought affected the inquiry questions, study design, and analyses obtained (Anfara & Mertz, 2015). The core components BFT shaped the inquiry and interview questions and guided how I interpreted and analyzed Black women’s experiences. Centering BFT as a framework to analyze Black women’s experiences in PWIs created space for their distinctive thoughts, experiences, and interpretations to shine as legitimate knowledge producers of their own lived realities in their workplaces.

The use of BFT as a theoretical framework, drawn from Collins (2000), foregrounds particular tenets in guiding the design and analysis: that Black women’s racial and gendered positioning—their intersectionality—shapes their experiences; that they navigate ‘outsider-within’ to create independent self-definition; grapple with controlling images; produce knowledge from their individual and group location; and validate their knowledge that may differ from the Eurocentric knowledge validation process (Collins, 2000). The BFT lens distinguishes common challenges confronting African American women as a group while acknowledging differences among women. For Collins (2000), individual Black women will “not have identical experiences nor interpret experiences in the same fashion” (Collins, 2000, p. 29). This means individual narrators’ storied moments are as valuable as women’s collective stories.

The tenets of BFT guided my view of the data in a way that viewed them as subject matter experts in their own lives. Through this theoretical framework, this study “specified domains of power that work to constrain Black women, as well as how such domination can be resisted” (Collins, 2000, p. 23). By using BFT as a framework, I added valuable insight into the experiences of Black women’s leadership in academic affairs at PWIs as studied, experienced, and told by Black narrators and the researcher.

### **The Research Puzzle**

One common methodological practice in qualitative research entails documenting a specific problem statement for one’s research. “In narrative inquiry, we approach the problem statement as narrative fragments, enacted in storied moments of time and space, that is framed in a puzzle (rather than a ‘problem’)” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 17). Narrative inquirers are drawn to puzzles by an autobiographical drive to understand experiences in our work, lives, and communities through the sharing of others’ life stories. Although the literature also helped frame the puzzle—because the project can contribute to building scholarly understanding in the literature, as does this one—the approach differed from a traditional social science design focused on a problem. The literature is carefully woven throughout “from beginning to end in an attempt to create a seamless link between the theory and the practice embodied in the inquiry” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 41). The literature and the researcher’s personal quest came together to develop the research puzzle.

This research explored the narrators' experiences through reflection and vacillating between their individual and collective experiences in this role. The call to

participate in this study went out to a wide array of networks where communities of Black academic leaders were thought to be present and yielded four narrators, currently serving in senior-level academic leadership positions at community colleges across the country. Each experience, narrative, and institutional culture served as a piece of exploring what Clandinin & Connelly (2004) refer to as the research puzzle. The puzzle shares aspects of a research problem in traditional social science research, but also honors the personal questions worth asking that bring a researcher to a narrative inquiry as legitimate grounding for inquiry. This research puzzle focused on the broad question of how Black women serving in this uniquely powerful role of senior academic administrator led and persisted in this moment in time in the year 2021 and how their PWIs frame their outlooks.

In this sense, my autobiographical experiences and interactions with others led to the puzzle. Narrative inquiries pull from autobiographical experiences; however, they also embrace and pull from the literature. Accordingly, this study also drew from the small body of literature on the meaning-making experiences of Black female academics and administrators. Their stories “illuminate the ubiquitous power of numerous dominant ideologies in higher education—including white supremacy, patriarchy, and classism—while simultaneously exposing how members of the academy routinely rely on these prevailing belief systems” (Gutierrez y Muhs et al., 2012, p. 18). Together, our stories become known in a way that amplifies their unknown, unheard, and often untold stories.

Black women are lauded for their strength, grit, and resilience regarding how well they take the daily slights and racist blows and are often encouraged to practice self-care. This study shifts the focus from self-care, which is an individual adjustment, to



privileging the ideas of Black women on how to encourage institutions to be more supportive and intentional in creating an educational culture that is more loving, caring, healing, and affirming of Blackness and the Black woman. If knowledge is power, this empirical data from experiential stories should empower institutional leaders with information that can help them create more inclusive and equitable institutions where Black women, and all women of color, can thrive in these coveted leadership roles.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative research study, a narrative inquiry, was to examine the personal and professional experiences and persistence strategies of Black women serving in academic leadership positions at PWIs. In this study, I aimed to capture the narratives documenting how they navigate, suffer, survive, and thrive in majority-white higher education institutions. I focused, specifically, on Black women leading in senior-level academic administrative roles, including position titles of chief academic officers, provosts, academic deans, and other similar roles. I examined their stories of navigating male-dominated terrains laced with daily subtle messages of whiteness, often embedded with toxic ideas and offensive assumptions of Blackness.

By capturing how these women navigate what can sometimes be an alienating, inimical culture and structure of the academy, we can see how talented and brilliant these women are. Noting how they show up and courageously lead and approach their work in thoughtful ways, in all-white boardrooms, on majority white leadership teams, and in majority-white environments, we develop a deeper appreciation of their presence in these spaces. This research shines a light on how these women triumph, build community,

suffer, find dignity, create joy, and creatively demand the right to live as fully human in the face of an academic culture designed for white leadership.

### **Inquiry Questions**

Individual and cultural narratives guide this narrative inquiry into Black women's experiences, sufferings, successes, and persistence strategies navigating majority-white institutions as senior academic leaders.

Individual narrative inquiry questions:

1. How do Black women experience the intersecting dimensions of race and gender in their senior-level academic leadership roles in their PWIs or HSIs?
2. What are the institutional messages and controlling images about Black women they encounter in their leadership roles?
3. How do they navigate and resist the racial/gendered institutional cultural messages they encounter in their leadership role at their PWI or HSI?
4. Where do they find joy and fulfillment within their work and role?

### **Researcher as an Instrument**

In a qualitative study, the researcher is a significant part of the study. In my role as a researcher, I bring five years of experience serving as a senior-level academic administrator and a provost at a PWI. The high visibility of these institutional roles can add a level of difficulty and fear for narrators to share their experiences of discrimination and survival strategies while serving in these roles. These brave women did not let this stop them from participating in the study and it seemed natural for them to stay highly respectful of their institutions and shared praises of the wonderful work being

accomplished within the institution, while still holding them accountable. Using BFT as a framework ensured that I kept these challenges top of mind when collecting, interpreting, and analyzing the data to help the narrators share their experiences in ways that they might not with other racially or institutionally positioned researchers (Collins, 2000). As I conducted this study I carefully considered whether and how to pepper in my varied work experiences out of the same fear of future discrimination should I choose to change institutions in the future.

I recently transitioned from the Academic Affairs leadership role to a Vice President of Student Affairs position. This study was conducted with the realization that my identity and lived experience as a Black woman who navigated and served in an academic leadership role in a PWI, paralleled in some ways the experiences and challenges of the narrators recruited for this study. During the study, it became clear that the narrators and I had familiar challenges and experiences, which fostered similar angles of vision and standpoint as Black women. However, as a researcher using BFT as a theoretical framework, I approached the study with the assumption that Black women are a unique group, set undeniably apart because of race and gender with a unique set of challenges (Collins, 2000). There were indeed many similarities between the narrators and me, and this approach proved valuable because there were just as many differences and unique experiences between us.

As a researcher using BFT, I brought with me the assumption that racism is a normal fact of daily life in the United States of America; therefore, racism is structurally and systemically embedded in academia. Black feminist theory positioned me, as a Black researcher, to integrate my experiences of navigating a senior-level academic leadership

role in a PWI to engage with the storied experiences of these women with familiar yet fresh eyes. As part of my methodological approach, I worked to create a safe space for these women to “tell their stories, to find empathy, to articulate their own frustrations and successes to someone who respected their efforts and understood some of the walls facing them” (Simpson, 2000, p. 716). I am intimately familiar with the burdens of being Black and female in a space that is unwilling to acknowledge that racism and sexism exist within its walls. I bring an awareness of the leading role that race privilege plays in creating professional opportunities ranging from who has access to information and when; to whose ideas will be heard and supported; to who is deemed credible and who is not. This is what Fricker (2007) calls epistemic justice. I brought to the study my hope that having the common experience of being Black, female, and a former provost would help the narrators share their experiences in ways that they might not with other racially or institutionally positioned researchers (Dillard, 2000). As such, I committed to the endarkened feminist epistemology stance within which we: theorize the realities of Black women through situating our knowledge and actions in the cultural spaces from which they arose (Dillards, 2016). The coming alongside of these women while they lived their stories allowed this study to locate unique cultural experiences as they were happening, as they were told, and as they were retold. The more we engaged during interviews—in coming alongside—the more we celebrated, encouraged, and affirmed one another for the ways we triumphed through the many cultural challenges.

To further establish this study’s credibility, I employed member checks after collecting and interpreting the data.

Member-check is the process whereby researchers return to participants to

ensure that their categories, constructs, explanations, and interpretations seem right and to discover if something is missing. The researcher presents to all or some of the research participants their interview transcript and/or the researcher's interpretation and all or part of the data report to allow them to comment on the findings and the researcher's interpretations of their own quotes. They can correct mistakes made during the interview or add information stimulated by the member-check. The researcher then incorporates these reactions in the study findings (Goldblatt, Karnieli-Miller & Neumann, 2011, p. 389).

Member checks further aligned this study with the endarkened feminist stance where "research is a responsibility, answerable and obligated to the very persons and communities being engaged in the inquiry" (Dillard, 2000, p. 663). I conducted member checks at the analysis stage through a kind of "back and forth" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 167), where I composed research texts of the narrators' stories. I offered to share it with them so they could be involved in the analysis process, but each fully trusted me to tell their stories and suitably incorporate their voices. I worked through this process until my advisor and I felt we had moved the text along in a way that represented the narrators' stories, as I understood and narrated them. This was a narrative inquiry process of back-and-forth writing, clarifying responses during interviews, revising, setting it aside, writing another narrator's narrative unit, and holding it up against another research text, until finally, there seemed to be a sense of whole (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Although challenging, the process was also inspiring, knowing the power of what was being developed.

This process is tied beautifully with BFT's relational framework of analysis that centers on empowering Black women to self-define their experiences and control their stories individually and collectively. Approaching member checks in this way helped with adjusting any data that the narrators or I found to be overly revealing. This helped ensure that I, as the researcher, was vague enough about their roles and institutions because the limited number of women across the country positioned to participate in this study could unintentionally identify them. This all worked together toward the study's purpose of providing a glimpse into our suffering, pain, challenges, hopes, joy, and successes to interrupt the silencing and oppressive structures of the academy.

### **Narrators of Interest**

The narrators in this study were Black women in senior-level academic administration roles in a PWI. Narrative and oral history inquiries commonly use the term narrator rather than participant to represent their storytelling role. For this study, a senior-level academic administrator was defined as individuals holding the titles of chief academic officer, provost, academic dean, and other similarly situated roles which may use other terminology at a specific institution.

### **Recruitment and Selection of Narrators**

The first step was to seek IRB approval to conduct the research. Once approved, an initial list was compiled identifying professional networking groups and organizations that target Black women in higher education. Women currently holding the positions of chief academic officer, provost, academic dean, or similar roles with a different title were approached. The recruitment process entailed sending an inquiry email with an attached

letter to potential narrators who were germane to the story through my personal, professional networks. Recruiting also occurred through list-serves, private social media groups designed for Black women in higher education leadership, and LinkedIn and other professional social media platforms. I created a flyer with my image, contact information, and study purpose to keep the ask short and reveal my identity as a Black woman. Due to the limited number of Black women who fit the criteria, and were available to participate, my sample size was small, and I was able to successfully recruit four Black women to participate in the study. In addition, “qualitative studies typically use relatively small samples to produce a detailed, rather than an exhaustive and generalizable understanding of the phenomenon” (Baxter-Nuamah, 2015, p. 29). The recruitment process used purposeful sampling. Patton (2002) notes:

The logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in selecting information-rich cases for in-depth study. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of vital importance to the purpose of the inquiry; thus, the term purposeful sampling. Studying cases rich with information yields insights and in-depth understanding rather than empirical generalizations (p. 230).

I never specifically targeted women working at a four-year institution or two-year institution; however, all women who agreed to participate in the study were working at a community college. It is difficult to speculate on why there were no participants from other institutional types since the recruitment materials went out broadly, and the only institutional type listed in the recruiting material was predominately white institutions. In the email, I explained that I was conducting research that would culminate in the completion of my dissertation. I spelled out my focus on Black women serving in senior-

level academic leadership roles at PWIs. I shared that the research served as a gift to understanding Black women's realities, experiences, and leadership in PWIs, hopefully encouraging more Black women to share their stories in honor of countless others on whose shoulders we stand. I invited them to participate as narrators and informed them of the commitment involved. The research involved committing 3-4 hours during which I conducted two individual virtual interviews about their leadership experiences and persistence strategies and the opportunity to engage in one group virtual interview. Two narrators participated in the group virtual interview and the other two engaged in what was originally supposed to be a focus group on an individual basis.

In the letter, I also informed potential participants that I would work to ensure complete anonymity. I explained that names of individuals, job titles at present or former institutions, e-mail addresses, phone numbers, and other identifiers would be omitted in transcripts or reported findings. I provided directions on how to contact me and provided the contact information for my dissertation committee chairperson, Dr. Bailey (see Appendix A). Prospective participants who responded with interest to the email received a phone call in which I provided further information about the study and addressed any questions or concerns. All participants voluntarily consented to participate in the study verbally. I did not ask for a signed consent form due to maximizing confidentiality of their identity. Selected participants then received a confirmation letter attached to an email from my Oklahoma State University address.



## **Data Collection**

In qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument (Patton, 2002). I used three data collection methods for this study. The first method was facilitating in-depth, semi-structured interviews to explore how Black women senior-level academic administrators experience leading in PWIs, and what strategies they employ to find joy and fulfillment in their academic leadership roles. The narrators' stories were the center of this study. The second method included collecting documents and artifacts—photographs, past academic publications, and/or community engagement work, awards, and recognitions—which were used to either prompt the narrators' storytelling and/or to provide information for the study that I analyzed later. The last area of data collection was a self-study questionnaire to gather specific demographic, career paths, organizational culture, and institutional data. I did not disseminate the questionnaire as planned; however, I did incorporate some of the questions into the focus group sessions.

Dialogic interviews served as the primary source of data collection for this study. The purpose of interviewing was to allow the researcher to “come alongside”, which meant to enter the perspectives of others, find out what was in their minds, and learn more about their lived experiences through gathering their stories (Clandinin & Connelley, 2000). I used an interview guide to ensure the same basic lines of inquiry were consistent with each narrator even though the conversations unfolded in varied ways. The purpose of these interviews was to capture how the narrators viewed their world as senior academic administrators in a PWI, to learn their terminology and judgments, and to capture the complexities of their individual perceptions and

experiences as Black women serving in these roles (Patton, 2002). It was a delight to experience how forthcoming the narrators were with their perceptions and experiences.

Given the COVID-19 pandemic circumstances during 2020-2022 and the diverse regions represented in this study, I conducted the dialogic interviews using Zoom technology software. Zoom is a cloud-based video communications application that allows researchers to set up virtual video and audio interviews, live chats, screen-sharing, and other collaborative capabilities (Antonelli, 2020). Zoom offered me an interview method to collect sessions in a virtual, face-to-face format, and I used this tool to record interviews with narrators who consented to recordings. The interview process involved taking handwritten notes and transcribing the recordings into textual data.

In addition to interviews, I collected documents and artifacts about narrators' professional experiences. These provided information about narrators that I could not observe and revealed situations that took place outside of the evaluation period (Patton, 2002). I used documents such as institutional write-ups, job descriptions, and a host of other artifacts like images of the narrators to further reflect on narrators and analyze the data. The inclusion of documents and/or artifacts helped me, as the evaluator, to understand the contextual background of the narrators' stories more fully.

After our first interview, I determined I would incorporate the self-study questionnaire into the focus group sessions to help the narrators get to know one another. The initial purpose of the self-study questionnaire was to identify the characteristics of the persons in the study and how they perceived and discussed their backgrounds (see the letter in the Appendix B). The responses helped me locate the narrators in relation to each

other. By integrating the questionnaire into the focus group session, I offered these extremely busy women the opportunity to connect with the researcher and one another through some common characteristics and/or common ground.

During the entire data collection process, I composed field texts. Field texts are researchers' ways of talking about what passes for data in narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Field texts are imbued with interpretation. I used BFT as the lens which foregrounds certain aspects of the texts in both the writing and interpreting stages of the research. Narrative inquiry is attentive to the relationship of the researcher and narrator and how this relationship is shaping the nature of the field texts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In this study, I routinely kept richly detailed field texts. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) emphasized that in making field texts, it was imperative that I, the researcher, was aware of where we were "at any particular moment—temporally, spatially, and in terms of the personal and the social" (p. 95). I used BFT as the value stance of the field texts as I engaged in the process of retelling their stories. Below, I have included a list of narrative questions I planned to ask to elicit stories in my dialogue with the narrators, aligned with narrative inquiry. I did not ask every question but used them selectively to prompt rich, detailed stories about each categorical subject.

### **Narrator Interview Questions**

#### **Professional Journey**

- How do you describe your current role, and what was your journey like getting there?
- What do you remember about your first week in this role?

- To what do you attribute obtaining your current position as a senior academic leader?
- What are your greatest successes, personally and professionally, in this role?
- What are your greatest challenges, personally and professionally, in this role?
- When you look back over your career, what remarkable events, experiences, or persons stand out for you?
- What has contributed to your remaining in the Higher Education profession?
- What is it like to conduct your role and do what you do?

### **Challenges**

- What issues, if any, confront you as a Black woman in academic leadership?
- What, if any, is the most memorable experience you have had with racism or sexism in the academy?
- How would you describe what it feels like to be a Black woman in academic administration in your institution?
- Knowing what you know now, what three pieces of advice would you give to Black women who aspire to lead in Academic Affairs at a PWI?
- What strategies do you rely on to persist through adversities?
- What, if any, experience(s) have you had as a Black woman leader in the academy that would align with that statement?

### **Supports**

- How did/do you sustain yourself while dealing with systemic challenges connected to your identity?

- What internal and external supports do you rely on most heavily?

### **Institutional Culture**

- Describe the culture of your institution.
- How would you describe the climate for women of color in general? What about Black women, in particular?
- Are there any hidden or unwritten rules for success at your institution? If so, with which ones did you grapple?
- How would you describe your institution's commitment to diversity?
- How has the institution demonstrated this commitment?
- How is the commitment reflected in faculty hiring? In academic administration hiring? In curriculum? In promotion in rank?
- Are there other Black women in senior leadership positions on campus?
- How would you explain the absence or presence of Black women in leadership positions at your institution?
- Describe the resources and supports available to women and people of color within your institution?

### **Identity**

- In what ways, if any, has your racial and gendered identity shaped your experience in this role?
- How do you tend to your identity as a Black woman in the academy?
- What would be the title of your professional life story?

## **Work/Life Balance**

- How do you spend your time away from your job?
- What life dimensions, other than work, are important to you?
- What things outside of your job make you happy?
- In what ways do personal responsibilities affect your work life, and how does your work life affect your personal responsibilities?
- How do you nourish your well-being?
- How does your institution, if at all, create opportunities for flourishing?
- How does your institution, if at all, work against your well-being?
- What brings you joy at work?

## **Data Analysis**

The narrator interviews, field, and research texts served as data sources for this study. The data analysis process involved a review of the data from the interview transcripts and a document review to identify emerging themes. In line with narrative inquiry, I used BFT and a process of analysis that drew deeply on the narrative inquiry commonplaces as a framework for my interpretation of my field texts.

I selectively wove in my experiences as a Black woman who served in a senior academic administrator position alongside the narrators' stories where they served to enrich the narrators' stories. "The multiplicity of narratives invites a broader and more representative understanding of the complexities of Black women's experiences in these roles and of the positioning of a researcher in those landscapes" (Clandinin, Pushor & Orr, 2007, p. 30). "Coming alongside" the narrators enabled me to tell and retell the

narrators' stories in a responsive, reflective, and empowering way. The data preparation portion of the analysis included transcribing each interview recording. I used Black feminist thought as a framework to guide which narrative fragments to tell, which to reject, and which to retell. Each field and research text were done in the narrators' imagined presence so that I, as the researcher, continued to "live" with them.

Once I had data, I used the BFT lens and its tenets (Collins, 2020) to examine where, when, and how these women experienced gendering and racializing in their unique roles in the academy. I reflected from the narrators' standpoint and applied the specialized thought of BFT to reflect and interpret the distinctive themes in the narrators' storied experiences, emphasizing the intersecting oppressions that shaped their stories. The data analysis process served as a social site for intellectual activity with, between, and among the narrators and me, as we reviewed and revised the texts that tell and retell their stories. I applied the BFT lens to dissect and interpret the subjugated knowledge of these Black women's standpoint on their roles, experiences, and living within the institutional culture of PWIs (Collins, 2000). Specifically, I focused on which power relations and controlling images the women experienced in their contexts. I considered the messages they receive and their sources of resistance and support. The use of BFT helped me explore and examine when, where, and how the placements of intersecting divergences play out at this level of leadership, in these types of institutions, at this moment in time. I also focused on how these women make knowledge claims and the basis of those claims toward epistemic justice, which I describe in Chapter 5.

After creating field and research texts and conducting thematic analysis (Reissman, 2008), I began to carefully tell and retell the stories of these brilliant Black

women academic administrators, using their wisdom and knowledge to survive and thrive in predominately white higher education institutions through grouping textual narrative units by themes and through the individual stories of each narrator. Capturing the lived experiences of these narrators as they lived them met the BFT credibility criterion for Black women when making knowledge claims (Collins, 2000). The use of BFT allowed me, as the researcher, to invoke my own lived experience with the voices and stories of the narrators, to collectively share our experiences, wisdom and knowledge claims about our experience leading in this specific capacity and “become a symbolic representation of a whole wealth of experience”. This study connected us as leaders, as knowers, through firsthand observations and experience.

### **Quality and Validity**

I sent the “research texts” to each narrator to review in case any wished or had time to engage to ensure I captured their voices and stories clearly, and how they intended them to be represented (Clandinin, Pushor & Orr, 2007). I also collaborated with my dissertation chair in analyzing and negotiating the research texts. This process invited opportunities for further thoughts and sustaining and extending the conversations with one another, empowering the participants to compare my descriptive results with their lived experiences (Clandinin, Pushor & Orr, 2007). The findings did not include any identifying information. When using individual responses, I applied pseudonyms; each narrator chose their first name pseudonym, and I chose their last name based on a historical Black female icon who blazed.



## **Ethical Considerations**

“Qualitative studies are frequently conducted in settings involving the participation of people in their everyday environments. Therefore, any research that includes people requires an awareness of the ethical issues that may be derived from such interactions” (Orb, Eisenhauer & Wynaden, 2000, p. 93). I provided the narrators in this study with a full description of the study during the recruitment process and informed them that their participation was voluntary; they could withdraw from the study at any time. The identities of the interviewees are confidential. The IRB approved the study and I received informed consent verbally from each narrator and took precautions to provide the utmost privacy for each participant. One example was to keep all electronic data in an electronic drop box with password protection.

An ethical dilemma that could have occurred in this study was that when interviewing Black women about their experiences in higher education, memories of discrimination, microaggressions and/or racist, brutal comments could trigger pain, and the narrator could become distressed. This did not happen, but if it had, I was prepared to stop the interview and implement solutions for the participant’s distress. “The moral obligation of researchers is to refer participants to counseling or ensure that they have regained control of the situation by talking. In some cases, a follow-up phone call or visit may be appropriate” (Orb et al., 2000, p. 94). The solution I was prepared to offer was providing specific resources, as outlined in the IRB. I would have contacted the IRB/my advisor and looked to scholarship on ethical codes and guidelines to provide insight if I encountered an unexpected ethical dilemma. I also assured each narrator in advance that they could end the interview at any time, without consequence.

I approached the study thinking through any concern's narrators may have with confidentiality and worked to ensure that what narrators shared and what I captured would not expose their identity. With so few women serving in these roles, their identities and institutions could be made vulnerable through a process of elimination. If I was privy to sensitive information about their institutions, or anything that could render their roles, leadership, or positions vulnerable, I found ways to make the information free of factors that exposed any identities or did not incorporate the information at all to ensure their safety.

Time is a very expensive commodity for each of the narrators, and I tried to be extremely mindful of that as I set up the study. I hoped to engage in two individual sessions and one additional focus group with all four narrators; however, it became very clear, very early, that their schedules would never align in a way that all could join in on one session. Next, I thought if I broke them up into two focus groups, both sets of two could align. Unfortunately, after several attempts working with their assistants to schedule, only one date was available where two of the narrators could come together in a focus group. I then decided to use the focus group questions in individual interviews with the other two narrators. Scheduling took hours working with their assistants over a range of weeks because of their work demands. I worked with one assistant to reschedule an interview three times before we were able to complete the final interview. Being flexible and mindful of their time was an ethical consideration in this study's design.

## **Limitations**

1. This study was limited to Black women serving as chief academic officer, provost, academic dean, or a differently named position in higher education institutions that described the same responsibilities of these named positions.
2. This study did not explicitly solicit factors affecting other racially minoritized women serving in academic administration roles in higher education.
3. I assumed, in this study, that narrators would respond and narrate their experiences and truth as they knew it and experienced it.
4. This study was limited to Black women serving in senior-level academic leadership roles at community colleges because of those who eventually agreed to participate.
5. Time was also a limitation of the study. By design, only three meetings were scheduled, understanding the demanding schedules of leaders in these roles. However, I would have liked to have had an additional meeting and to have the narrators comment on and engage in their narrations, but their demanding schedules did not allow this to be possible.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to collect the varied stories and document the experiences, persistence, and resistance strategies of Black women who ascended to senior academic positions in traditionally white institutions. Their experiences serve as a guide for other Black women who aspire to become senior-level academic leaders. According to Collins (2000), Black women have “always had to live two lives—one for

the majority culture and one for ourselves. Behind the mask of behavioral conformity imposed on African American women, acts of resistance, organized and anonymous, have long existed” (p. 107). This study aimed to capture the experiences, nuances, and strategies these women employ to persist. Through this process, I hoped that the Black women narrators in this study serving in academic leadership roles in traditionally white spaces would have their ideas, experiences, brilliance, and strength elevated, amplified, and validated.

The perspectives of these women were important because embodied within these narratives were specialized knowledge that theorize a dismantling standpoint of, and for, African American women and that encompasses a coherent and dynamic epistemology (Dillard, 2016, p. 14).

This research extends the limited literature on the persistence strategies of Black women in academic leadership roles at PWIs. It is an exchange of stories from one female academic leader of color to another who is simultaneously serving as a narrative inquirer. As a woman of color similarly positioned, I have the power to explore and connect and understand similarly to—and different from—their experiences. This type of close, connected approach is a unique contribution. Through growing awareness and understanding of the experiences, sufferings, and persistence strategies of Black women navigating higher education academic administration, individuals in seats of power are better positioned to take a significant step towards standing in solidarity with Black women, “as we articulate suffering and declare our sovereign right to love as our work ethic and to carry out our leadership in service to communities of affiliation and care” (Dillard, 2016, p. 29).

## CHAPTER IV

### NARRATORS' EXPERIENCES

Deep breath in. Deep breath out. I tried to still myself, a technique I learned from one of the narrators in this study, calming myself due to my brain dancing around in my head because not only had four narrators agreed to share their journey as trailblazers in academic leadership at PWIs across the country, but I had also finally completed all interviews. The trust and transparency they offered me and the ways they dared to story their journeys cautioned me to proceed with care to affirm, validate, and explicate their culturally-rooted knowledge throughout the analysis and representation process. Dillard's (2006) EFE calls on scholars to be accountable to the people with whom we engage. It demands that we honor and give weight to the powerful moments shared throughout each step in collecting, considering, and retelling the narratives. In the spirit of centering women's experiences, I crafted and retold their journey through a selection of a series of statements using their specific words. I distinguish my words from theirs by placing theirs within quotation marks—direct quotes, in their fullness, unedited. I peppered my thoughts throughout the stories to locate myself within the work, engage in reciprocity, and come alongside (Clandinin & Connelley, 2000) the narrators. At times I saw myself

in each narrator's story. I shouted "amens" aloud when I felt moved to do so and shared my personal thoughts and experiences as time and opportunity allowed.

As I approached our conversations, I found that opening our time together with my professional journey and pieces of my personal story helped establish rapport and trust to begin the dialogue. It was uncanny how many experiences we all had in common. Below is a chart which compares and contrasts narrators and/or their narratives. Each narrator chose the first name of their pseudonym, and I chose the last name (Robinson, Angelou, Truth, and Tubman, respectively) as a nod to the Black women who have been iconic changemakers across time in the United States. Those figures are Michelle Robinson Obama, who needs no introduction since she was the first lady in the White House less than six years ago at this writing. Maya Angelou (1928-2014), the poet laureate and civil rights activist, who wrote several seminal autobiographic pieces that discussed the Black struggle, beauty, and freedom. Sojourner Truth (1797–1883) was an African American abolitionist and women's rights activist also known for her famous speech entitled, "Ain't I a Woman?". Harriet Tubman (1820-1913), the monumental activist and abolitionist, was known for her role as "conductor" in the underground railroad. I asked each narrator to title their professional story, and I used these titles as the heading for each of their stories. I tweaked details about places, degrees, and positions to protect anonymity.

## **Dr. Michelle Robinson's Story**

“Education is Your Passport to Your Future”

As a first-generation student who grew up in Compton, it was clear—and she stated several times—that Compton shaped Michelle, strengthened her, and prepared her to be the dynamic changemaker she is today. “I saw people, in all spaces, doing all kinds of things, who looked like me.” That impacted how she operates today. Growing up and seeing Black success and excellence everywhere around her made her believe she could do anything.

Dr. Robinson currently serves as the Vice President for Academic Affairs at a predominantly white community college in the Midwest region of the country. She has worked in higher education for nearly 20 years. She courageously works to transform delivery, support, and educational processes to serve the 18,000+ diverse students attending her institution in an equitable and inclusive way. She serves as the academic lead for one campus in a large system. She leads the college's student success plan. She leads with fire and ambition and hopes to one day show up to commencement where there are no vacant seats because so many graduates are sitting in the chairs.

Dr. Robinson shared during our interview that she has been married for 20 years. She beamed as she shared and stated that this is a great point of pride for her. Like the other narrators, she shared that motherhood is a significant part of her identity. She is the mother of three teenagers, and having a daughter that is currently in college gives her insight and additional encouragement to transform the college experience for those whom higher education has not always served well. When she thinks about the educational

resources she and her husband have been able to provide for their children, she gets emotional, “it almost chokes me up thinking about how prepared for college my daughter is and to see the difference in thinking about all the things I didn’t know in college because I was a first-generation student”. Being the first in her family to navigate and successfully complete college makes her more passionate about her work as a community college administrator. Despite her humble beginnings, Dr. Robinson earned three degrees in the same area and spent years working in the industry. It was not until attending a dinner party where someone told her she could teach college courses with a master’s degree did she think about going into the field of teaching. She started volunteering and tutoring in the postsecondary space to get some experience. She was then offered a part-time teaching opportunity and decided she would seek a doctorate to teach full-time. During her doctoral program, she began to entertain the idea of one day becoming an academic administrator.

She insisted, “Opportunities are given. You as an individual don’t make opportunities for yourself. You prepare for opportunities”. As a full-time faculty member, Dr. Robinson described herself as highly engaged inside and outside the classroom. “You know, as Black women, we’ve been out here preparing for opportunities. But you have to have somebody who will sponsor you and speak your name.” Fortunately for Dr. Robinson, her president took an interest in her and began to mentor her. Shortly thereafter, an academic dean position opened at her institution, and she was prepared to promote. She came to recognize the limitations of the classroom in shaping large-scale student success. With her president’s support, she moved from the faculty ranks to academic administration, where she hoped to make broader changes.



As the institution's current chief academic officer (CAO) a lot of areas and departments report to her. Her portfolio consists of more than a dozen direct reports. The library, online learning, all academic schools, academic advising, and the Office of Diversity, Equity & Inclusion report to her. "The fact that I'm in this job still blows me away every day. Like, I'm a Compton girl, and like, that just stands out to me". One of the first challenges she faced was learning to use her own voice and be herself. The trifecta effect of being female, Black, and young seemed to present multiple challenges for Michelle. She is the only person of color, male or female, on her president's leadership team, and she has learned to leverage her positionality in an impactful way. Dr. Robinson believes that having Black women in administrative roles matters because,

At any point where you have someone who has lived experiences that can impact that classroom, I think that's going to make a big difference (in success outcomes). The relationships in the classroom matter, and I ultimately make sure who is in the classrooms, as far as instruction.

Dr. Robinson extends her point about the value of such experiences for the classroom, commenting,

People don't want to talk about why there aren't more Black women in these academic leadership roles because this is an 'intellectual' role to many people. I think some of that intellectual part keeps it from being a leadership role for (certain) groups of people.

She believes her industry background, credentials, and time as a full-time faculty all played into her landing the role.

What happens in the classroom, the number of hours that students are in the classroom, and the need for that classroom to be inclusive, faculty don't always want to talk about that. I think there's a lot of privilege (in the faculty realm) and that plays into why there's not more diversity in the CAO role.

Dr. Robinson is her institution's first Black CAO. The college opened its doors nearly 60 years ago.

Just being in this seat, you know, my colleagues, the other Vice Presidents are twenty-plus years older than me. In addition, me being African American, I know it matters. How I'm perceived by women, women of color, and just people of color, is important, and I do take that seriously.

There are dozens of community colleges in Dr. Robinson's system. Out of the dozens of CAOs, as well, only two are Black. "The other one is CAO at a college located in a Black community. I'm in a diverse community". Although seen as a diverse community, her student population is still 70% white.

### **I'm Just a Compton Girl**

When describing herself, her work ethic, and her approach to work, Dr. Robinson often referred to herself as "just a Compton girl". I asked her to break this striking comment down for me.

To be a Compton girl, to me, is just gritty. You know, Compton is not cosmopolitan at all, period. It's hard work, it's gritty, honest people who put in a

good day's work whether it's at a desk or on the (production) line. People hustle hard. Compton is just, is Black, you know. It's Black, it's a Black city. Hard-working people who look like me. They're creative, innovative, in just raw and gritty kinds of ways. Gritty, getting down in the details of the work, no matter how hard, no matter how messy.

Dr. Robinson is known for working hard and getting down in the thick of things when needed, not delegating it to others. She brings the strength of her community with her and does not try to assimilate into the white institutional culture that meets her daily at work.

### **Encountering Racism at the Top**

Dr. Robinson reflects on her experiences with racism in leadership.

I've dealt with racism in this role. It's faculty who treat me all kinds of ways I know they wouldn't do if I wasn't Black, or if I wasn't female, or if I wasn't young. It's always confusing why they're doing it. Is it because I'm young? Is it because I'm a female? Or is it because I'm Black? To the point where I just kind of ignore it. Like it don't matter which one it is, I don't have time to try to figure it out. I'm just going to push through it.

The type of racism she has encountered typically comes in the format of implicit bias statements or people making assumptions about her. As Sue (2010) has found in his research, microaggressions come as everyday slights, invalidations, and indignities by "well-intentioned" folks and educators. Yet, Dr. Robinson acknowledges that her environment, from a city and state perspective, is quite liberal. She deems herself fortunate that her city is at least light blue in terms of majority voting patterns reflecting

the Democratic party and feels she has more freedom than a colleague who works in Texas, Georgia, or Oklahoma. Although she states that the people in her city do not accept a “whole bunch of you know blatant racism, sexism, homophobia, those biases still have power in the classroom and in the institution's protocols and policies”. Her encounters with racism and sexism show up in more subtle and nuanced ways, as Sue (2010) described microaggressions above.

When she is feeling up to it, she sometimes uses her Blackness as teachable moments, such as when a faculty member makes a blanket statement about what the institution needs to do to serve Black males (requirements). For example, she sometimes challenges them and asks, “Would you do (require) that for my son?” And they respond, “No, your son probably doesn’t need it.” Then she would follow up with, “Well, don’t say that about all Black males.” She shares that racism is quite covert there and primarily shows up in how people respond to her. She often overlooks it due to years of experience dealing with covert racism. “If it was 10 years ago when I had got this job, it probably wouldn’t be the same. I might be snapping off on people in regards to the stuff they assume and say to me.”

Overseeing the academic units on campus as a Black woman requires thick skin and lots of confidence while not seeming overly confident and tough, or you would be stuck with the angry Black woman stereotype.

I have faculty who, like, correct my emails and send them back to me, and I’m like ‘thanks.’ I’m not about to argue with them. Okay, thank you, I never said I was an editor, and I’m not going to try to be an editor, you know what I’m saying.

It means you are constantly choosing your battles, many of which you likely would not have to deal with if born with different skin color and gender.

### **Racialized Perceptions of a Black Woman**

In academia, like in other fields, everyone has their perception of reality. There are assumptions of presumed incompetence regarding our narrators in certain academic situations, but Dr. Robinson continued to share how presumptions about motherhood requirements can even differ across races. “How someone perceives me as a mother is not the same as how they perceive my (white) colleague as a mother”. The assumptions made about her colleague’s need for support and flexibility differ strikingly from those made about the support and flexibility she may need.

I don’t even know that they view me as a mother. You see what I’m saying? They don’t view me as a mother. They view me as a strong executive. I don’t know that they view me as someone's wife.

Being a wife is a large part of her identity.

Like let’s be clear, (racial bias) is happening all the time. The notion of Black women being strong is very real. At work, I’m a workhorse. Like I pride myself on being a hard worker, but I think the view is, ‘she a horse, that’s a horse, she got it, she ain’t never overworked’, you know.

The weight that comes with navigating covert racism, microaggressions, racial bias, on a frequent basis can become agonizing. So much so that Dr. Robinson has asserted her power and chosen not to “care” about those encounters.

You probably wouldn't be in this role if you have not figured out how to do it, how to navigate it (racism), but it doesn't mean it's not happening. And this is the thing, I just don't care. You know what I'm saying? I've chosen not to care.

Reporting these incidents to HR is a risky move. Covert racism is difficult to prove and is often defined as subjective. These scholar leaders know this.

I'm not running to HR. I've had people in my office that have disrespected me. Said things to me that I do not believe they would have said to someone else. If I was someone else, and I looked a little different (white), HR might have been running over here like, oh my God, we have to save her because that wasn't right. Do you see what I'm saying? Nuanced acts of racism is real, it's just, I don't care. I don't care to respond to it because I don't have time for that.

How does one lead when constantly navigating things that are never written into your job description and situations that are invisible to your leader and colleagues?

Leading in a senior leadership role in PWIs as the only person of color takes a strong degree of confidence.

You have to find confidence. Like you got to know how you practice confidence. What things make you feel more confident. This is not a job you can go into if you're not confident because so many people are smarter than you. So, I mean, if you're not confident, they're going to smell it, and it's going to be over for you fast. Because you're going into a lot of rooms, and you're going to be the only one that looks like you. For me, it's not just race; it's race and age. Sometimes it could even be because I [wear my hair short].

Can you imagine the exhaustion that comes with constantly having to show up, represent, and serve as the voice for an entire demographic of marginalized students? For Dr. Robinson, and for me, the level of preparation necessary to constantly be aware of mindless stereotypes, to counter them, and prove them to be untrue is flat out tiring.

Knowledge brings me confidence, so I make sure I'm going to be well versed before I go to a State meeting with all of my colleagues. Whether everybody read something beforehand or not, I'm going to. I'm going to be knowledgeable about the topics and bring something of value. Being prepared is a number one confidence builder for me.

Often, these women describe overpreparing, spending days and evenings, time on and off the clock, ensuring they are prepared for questions that might come their way. This is one of the many burdens they know comes with leading while Black in these executive roles..

### **My Blackness is my Superpower**

A call for racial reckoning has been prevalent in the United States since 2020. With the national attention around the rise in murders of unarmed Black men at the hands of police officers, colleges across the country have added social justice to their agendas. As they face loud cries for prioritizing racial equity, many realize they lack the people with the perspectives needed to deal with such demands. Dr. Robinson uses this knowledge to her advantage.

Everybody had to deal with all the DEI issues, but only one person in the room got the perspective from lived experiences. So, to me, I think of it almost like my

superpower. I got a perspective that everybody, the college, needs and nobody else in the room has it.

Dr. Robinson fully embraces and owns her Blackness.

You walk into my office, and it's a beautiful picture on my wall of Sojourner Truth with a walking stick, walking Black refugees to freedom. I'm Black, you know. Like people know that's who I am, and that's that. So that's my perspective. That's how I see the world. That's how the world treats me. And that's how I show up. I think part of that is just so Compton, you know. My husband always says all Black people can be actors and actresses because that's what we do all day long. I'm doing that all the time; you know what I'm saying.

This type of performance can be a handy tool in navigating the rocky terrains of spaces that were not made for people like me/her in leadership. There is a time and place for everything; the key is having the power to decide for yourself which time calls for what behavior.

### **We Work Over Here**

Dr. Robinson is a firm believer in working hard. It is in her DNA. This is what Black people do in her community. Her parents' and her grandparents' generations believed in working hard, and rarely, if ever, were they fairly and equitably compensated for the level, quality, and quantity of work they performed. Dr. Robinson firmly believes that education provides an opportunity to change that for future generations.



I believe college changes people's lives. We, as Black people, weren't always able to have education. Education is the way we change our trajectory. Many of us have Black excellence and believe in what we do as educators. I know that my life is changed because of education. I believe in the power of education. I know how to learn. I value learning. I value being knowledgeable. As somebody who is over Academic Affairs, I innately respect all the faculty and what they do, no matter what they say or do to me, because I know what they do.

Dr. Robinson's level of respect for faculty, as ambassadors of teaching and learning, despite the disrespect she experiences from some faculty, says a lot about the heart and care she brings with her in her leadership.

### **It Ain't a Pipeline Issue**

Why are there so few of us in senior-level academic leadership positions at PWIs?

Oftentimes we still hear that the pipeline remains a problem. In reality, many women of color and qualified Black women are already in the pipeline. They just may not fit into the institutional culture for the “type” of leader an institution is searching for. When I asked Dr. Robinson about the lack of Black women in senior leadership, she automatically dispelled the pipeline issue myth.

It ain't a pipeline issue. My institution is committed to diversity. Some of that commitment comes because I'm in this role, so like keeping that commitment to the fire is me. I think most of the people here will talk a good game and they mean it. They have good intentions; the actions are sometimes a shortcoming. I also think that sometimes they don't know how to do it either. As a Black person,

I have some very unique professional networks. I could email 10,000 sorority sisters in five minutes. Like we had to recruit some nursing faculty years ago, I just emailed my sorority sisters and got access. We have knowledge that can help the recruitment challenges that organizations have. I think we should be willing to use those and talk about them and help explain to our Caucasian brothers and sisters that these things do exist. I can go tap into some HBCUs and find people in master's programs. Institutions have to be willing to do some work.

Dr. Robinson also pointed out that some challenges lie in our lack of knowledge, as Black people, about opportunities that exist at community colleges, which employ significantly more women of color in senior leadership roles than traditional four-year universities. She suggests we need to do a better job of describing the rewards of working for a community college. We need to tell those stories to one another to create a more diverse professional group of careers. She believes we need to help expose people to these options, and help cultivate their imagination of what is possible for them. Also, we must hold HR accountable for using their resources in nontraditional ways if they really want to be innovative in recruiting diverse professionals. Dr. Robinson also pointed out that we, as Black women already holding these elite opportunities, must show up and speak up about these important issues. She uses the phrase “being at the table” as a metaphor when raising this point.

When we're at the table, then we have to be at the table. If you're going to be at the (executive leadership) table, then you got to be at the table. Don't just be sitting there, not saying anything.

Being the divergent thinker on these issues can certainly isolate leaders in her position; however, we must continue to advocate for better representation at the top. Dr. Robinson added that speaking up and risking being the single voice advocating for issues of diversity across institutional issues only works when the organization is truly committed to diversity. Always being the one speaking up can be defeating when nothing ever changes because the organization is not really committed to the work of diversity.

To create diversity when it's not an initiative of the organization, you put minorities in a bad situation. I'm not putting Black teachers, Asian teachers, or LGBTQ teachers in the classroom just to say, here's some numbers. I'm doing it so that students are better served, so they have a better sense of belongingness. If we put out a survey and ask students, 'do you feel like you belong on this campus' and the answer is 'no,' then we're not doing what we need to be doing.

Transformation and building a sense of belonging goes beyond access alone; she suggests institutions must be willing to create environments that respond to the feedback that students, staff, and faculty of color share, on which actions aid them in feeling included, welcomed, safe, and valued. That is what equity looks like: when institutions begin to take responsibility for their role in becoming an institution ready to serve and support their racially minoritized students, staff, and faculty.

### **First, I Prayed, then Music.**

Sometimes it takes all you have to muster the strength to get up and carve out space for yourself in a setting that was not designed with you, or folks similarly situated to you, in mind. Three of the four narrators relied heavily on prayer for strength and

energy to face the trials that come their way. Dr. Robinson found that music also has the power to help her persevere through stressful and challenging moments. “One of the strategies that I rely on to push through adversities is music. I have different playlists for how I feel. Sometimes I just play those songs in my head”. She gave one example that occurred during a particularly rough patch of the fall semester. She described a time when most faculty were not happy, they complained, and the circumstances began to wear her out. She had an early all-faculty meeting where approximately 200 faculty usually attend. She explained that not knowing how the faculty would show up made preparing challenging. She woke up particularly anxious because complaints had escalated that week.

First, I prayed. That month one song had been inspiring me, Bill Withers’ “Lovely Day”. So, I listened to it a ton on my way to work. I texted the staff and asked them to pipe that song at the beginning of the meeting. We started the meeting a little bit before the meeting time, and she just played that song and it changed my spirit. It changed the spirit of the meeting. When she started playing music, all I saw was people dancing, and you know, the chat was positive. I try to be honest with myself when I’m struggling; that’s a biggie for me. Music really does change things, and prayer, prayer.

When thinking about strategies that could help one navigate racial battle fatigue, music does not readily come to mind. However, when she told that story, I could instantly think of numerous times when I used music to help me blur out the haunting memory of when someone hit me with a macroaggression, and I brushed it off when I should have addressed it. Or, like Dr. Robinson, times I used music to pump me up and gather my

thoughts before going into yet another meeting where I anticipated my input would not be valued because I was the only Black woman in the room and often the youngest.

Dr. Robinson mentioned the power of prayer throughout our conversations. She would most often share her gratitude for God moving and blessing her in multiple ways. Be it blessing her with favor in certain situations, blessing her with a supportive husband, or being thankful for the opportunities presented at various times across her career, it was clear that her spiritual beliefs guided her, provided protection, and comforted her even in challenging times. This was certainly a theme I noticed in each of the meetings with Drs. Robinson, Angelou, and Tubman. Prayer was their secret weapon against the trials and tribulations that racism and discrimination brought with them.

### **Dr. Kaye Angelou's Story**

#### **She Grasped the Opportunity**

Dr. Kaye Angelou is a firm believer in going after what you want. After her supervisor overlooked her one too many times for a promotion, she went directly to the hiring supervisor over an academic dean position, in which racial diversity was almost nonexistent in those ranks, and asked for the job. Although they did not acquiesce and hire her for the role she requested, they eventually offered her an academic dean role in a different discipline. This is how she began her academic career and the position in which she learned so much about what it takes to be successful in academic leadership as a Black woman.

An academic scholar who currently serves as the Vice President of Academic Affairs at a community college in the southern region of the country, she is the first Black

woman to serve in the role in the college's decades of existence. Dr. Angelou's story comes with over thirty years of experience working in academia. Her journey to the chief academic officer role is unique because she has not been a full-time faculty member like most executives who serve in this role, and she is keenly aware of that difference. Her institution is part of a large district system that educates tens of thousands of students; her campus traditionally enrolls over 10,000 students annually. The college is a historically white institution, yet it currently holds status as a Hispanic Serving Institution, with Hispanic student enrollments slightly higher than Anglo/White student enrollments. Her primary role is to foster and sustain an academic culture that promotes collaboration, innovation, and excellence in teaching and learning.

She is the product of a strong Black woman. She described watching how her mother navigated life, doing what she needed to do, which set the tone and example for how she, in turn, navigates life and performs in her current role. "If my mom could do it, how could I not, with three degrees"? In addition to her mother, she is inspired by her husband of thirty years, her two adult children, and her grandchild. Although Dr. Angelou grew up poor, she did not know it at the time. She admired her mother's ability to raise children, including her mother's sister's children, making sure none of them succumbed to the environment of poverty that surrounded them. Her mom even pursued her GED because education was so important to her. Like Dr. Robinson, Dr. Angelou attended college as a first-generation student. Her mom's continuous and consistent support and encouragement affirmed that she could do whatever she set her mind to, and with that belief, her faith in God, and hard work, she completed three degrees.

## **I Love My Name**

As a new senior leader overseeing academics, it is crucial how one's leadership brand is established. One of the first decisions that Dr. Angelou made as the new CAO at a new institution was that she wanted everyone to call her by her first name, Kaye. No doctor salutation, just Kaye. She quickly realized that the culture she was entering was much more formal than she had anticipated. Everyone was accustomed to addressing the person filling such an important position with "doctor". She really wanted everyone to work well together, and coming from the student affairs "side of the house" instead of academics, she felt having folks call her by her first name would help build rapport and relationships among her new staff and faculty; plus, she loves her name. One dean specifically told her having staff address her by her first name is "not right". She also noticed that some Black faculty did not like staff and others calling her Kaye. Administrative assistants were calling her Kaye, and she quickly learned this choice was upsetting, particularly to Black women. Here's why,

Many felt that it was being disrespectful. But my thoughts are, them (white people) calling you doctor doesn't mean they're respecting you. They may respect you less because you're an African American female, I don't know, but at the end of the day, them calling you doctor doesn't enhance your likeness from them.

To Kaye, addressing each other by the first name, regardless of your position or stature, was a humanizing act. Humanizing each other enhances your presence with those individuals. However, for those (typically white people) who want to "ebonicize" her first

name, that is, trying to make it sound overly ethnic, and for those who continue to mispronounce it, she prefers them to call her Dr. Angelou.

### **The First and Only**

Being the very first African American to be hired in her academic leadership role in the college's history is one of Kaye's proudest moments. The weight of such a tremendous feat remains top of mind for her. The leader who had the final say in her hire and gave her the opportunity to show her effectiveness as a leader was a Black woman. Kaye was cognizant of the gaze that comes with a Black woman hiring another Black woman, so she wanted to "work extremely hard to make sure that I would never embarrass her." She described,

You carry a lot of pressure being the first. The pressure not to embarrass anybody. That's a heavy burden. Not a burden, a heavy responsibility to have to carry. I wanted to represent the Chancellor well. I never want to embarrass the college—especially not the African American population. I work incredibly hard to know the job, to do the job. And to make sure that I'm never perceived as slacking off on the job.

So much so that even today, she continues to take on more responsibilities than she should, "just so I can prove that I belong at this academic executive leadership table". She pointed out that ensuring she is always raising the bar and never giving anyone reason to believe that she is slacking is very challenging.



## **You Have to Work Twice as Hard Mantra**

Her specific Academic Affairs role is a critical leadership role. Other than the president, most colleges structure this leadership role as the final decision maker on all things academic. Kaye's institutional authority extends beyond just the academic realm. People often seek her out to make decisions in areas such as student affairs. She is the go-to for most things.

This is a huge responsibility as a Black woman. I know that I cannot act a certain way. I cannot act the way that I've seen some of my white peers act. I know that I cannot do the things I've seen them do and still be able to keep my job. As Black people, at some point early in our life, we are often told that we'll have to work harder than our white peers, and that's just the way it is.

Kaye's parents taught her what many Black parents teach, that being Black meant always working harder than their white counterparts. You will work twice as long. You must be better at what you do than white people. It means you have to carry more, just to be at the same level as your white counterparts.

I live by that mantra, whether it's true or not. I don't turn down any assignments, even if that means I probably should, because I already have too much on my plate. More than my white colleagues. I always want to learn and grow, and I know that I'm blessed that I can make it work.

Phenomenal woman, that is who she is, which is why I chose the last name pseudonym of Angelou, the icon who wrote the poem, "Phenomenal Woman". Taking on extra activities to model herself as a professional African American and giving back to

the African American community and future practitioners so that others will do the same are important to her.

### **I Am a Spiritual Woman**

With so much responsibility and so much on her plate, a logical question is, how on earth does she manage all of this? How does she push through adversities as the first Black woman to lead in such a powerful role which white men have historically filled? “Prayer is my strategy. I’m a very spiritual person. I don’t hide that fact either”. She frequently goes to God in prayer. If anything pressing is occurring at work, she will always go to God. Her president is aware of her faith and will even quote her sometimes when they have a difficult situation, saying, “you’ve gone to church, I know you’re covered.” He makes these comments even though he does not attend church. “I have to always give credit, give my recognition, and my acknowledgment to God. I am a spiritual woman. I give Him all the credit”. Kaye shared an incident at work that spun out of control very quickly and reached the president's attention because she chose to stand up for herself in response to disrespectful treatment from faculty that she believed would not have occurred if she were white and/or male. The level of disrespect she experienced and the open forum before all faculty in which it took place clearly traumatized her because she referenced the event in each of our three meetings. She relied on prayer to help her find resolve about the matter. She took a week after the incident to reflect more on the situation in which two white women strongly challenged her and peppered her with questions about a decision that was not hers to make while not asking any questions when the opportunity arose for them to engage with the two white men more responsible for the decision. She felt prayer was the proper strategy that would guide her to the next steps,

which ended with her sending an email that would help set the tone for how these particular faculty members, and faculty in general, would interact with her in public meetings moving forward.

### **Mistaken Identity**

At Kaye's institution, there has been a shift in the VP of Instruction role from male to female. So much so that she has grown accustomed to working with women at her level. Therefore, she does not feel that she experiences much gender bias. She experienced a couple of incidents she believed could have been based on gender or race, but she deemed it unworthy of her time to try to distinguish between the two. She feels her Blackness as a chief academic officer is a much harder pill for folks to swallow than her gender. Isolation is a huge challenge that comes with working at this level within the institution. Being Black and female makes it that much more isolating because even when she is at the table with her counterparts, "there's no one in the room for me to say 'girl, please' to when there is some nonsense taking place". She is grateful to have a mentor with whom she can talk some things through from the "leading while Black" perspective.

Dr. Angelou has yet to find a network of Black female academic leaders with whom she can exchange stories about encounters with racial bias, discrimination, and stereotyping and explore how they managed these challenges. Such stories include instances of mistaken identity, which she has experienced one too many times and which seem to happen solely because of her skin color. Kaye shared a story during our focus group of a time when she was treating her white administrative assistant to lunch at a nice

restaurant, and the waiter automatically brought the bill to her assistant. She shared that iterations of that example have happened to her many times. Dr. Tubman, who was in the focus group with us, chuckled because that has also happened to her.

She provided another example of an incident she recently experienced at a higher education conference. She was the only African American female in her group of white colleagues that went to a particular store after a day full of workshops. They had just attended a workshop on discrimination, racism, and racial equity, so she was still nicely dressed in business attire. Her white colleagues all wore casual shoes and some even carried backpacks with them, but she had a nice designer bag on her shoulder. In the store, an older woman walked up to her as she and her colleagues were standing around together and said, “Excuse me, Ma’am, do you work here”? Her white colleagues were shocked because the Black woman leading the workshop they had just left shared an example of mistaken identity almost identical to the incident they just witnessed.

Further, after wrapping up that visit, they went to eat. While still having on her business attire and still being the only Black woman in the group, another woman walked up to her and said, “Excuse me, Ma’am, do you work here”? This time, before she knew it, one of her white colleagues was so embarrassed that she said, “No! She doesn’t work here. Is there something we can help you with”? Kaye explained, “So dressing the part of a professional was not even enough.” She told them, “I’ll just go dress down because clearly, my suit is giving the impression that I work in the service industry and so forth.” She concluded with, “We are often mistaken for lesser roles than what we are.” Dr. Davis, the other focus group member, agreed adding, “I’ve certainly been a victim of

being mistaken for lesser roles in every professional position I've held since graduating from college.”

### **Bring Forward Who You Can Work With**

Infusing equity into your hiring practices takes a delicate approach depending on where your institution is located geographically. Some states have banned affirmative action even though it is a federal mandate. Centering racial equity in hiring practices requires intentional practices and support from the institution's president and chief human resources officer.

At my level, with my hires (all hires that need her approval), I ask my team that they bring forward a diverse pool for the President and I to consider. If you don't agree to work with them, I don't care what they look like, don't put them in the finalist pool.

In discussing how Dr. Angelou's college verbal commitment to racial diversity spills over into the hiring process and its impact on increasing diverse hires, she believes her institution is committed to diversity. However, an institutional commitment to racial diversity in hiring can only go so far. Each hiring supervisor demonstrates their commitment to racial diversity through the candidate pool and ultimate hiring they present. She believes the challenge is not always having a diversely qualified pool of applicants. There is a strong possibility that without equity champions on the search or hiring committee, the committee may go with the status quo and submit all-white finalists.

My colleagues and I are currently on a search committee together hiring for positions on our campuses, and it's been very much a challenge. You can see that the hiring is coming down on racial lines. The individuals that my colleagues are wanting to see in the positions are all white and all external. I just told them I can't do that. Although the pool of candidates was diverse, the diversity lived within the internal candidates, and her white colleagues chose to move all the external candidates forward as finalists and none of the internals who were the qualified racially diverse applicants. I told them I can't do that, and I didn't put any of the white externals on my list. Those are the behind-the-scenes situations that I'm having to navigate.

Kaye shared that she can be outspoken and firm in her beliefs. She pointed out to her colleagues the biases in their judgment around the diverse applicants. Comments like, "She didn't know the theoretical term for leadership". I told them,

These are not the individuals we have pegged to go to leadership trainings. The ones pegged don't look like me. So no, she wouldn't know the theoretical term for service leadership but she knows the practice, and she is a servant leader. And that is more important than just knowing what the term is.

She pointed out that the quest for "polish" in the role, in the way of academic speech and jargon, does not mean that is the best-fit person for the role. She went on to state what she shared with her colleagues,

We can't backtrack 30-40 years of these individuals' lives and say you should have gotten a better education. Well, maybe they got the education that their

community provided for them. That's not their fault. If they don't sound polished, it doesn't mean that they cannot be polished because I was one of those individuals at one point.

Advocacy for racial equity and speaking truth to power in relation to racial biases that white leaders hold in making hiring decisions are certainly invisible workloads of Black women serving at this level of leadership. "So those are the hard conversations that they really don't want to hear. And they still wanted to do what they wanted to, but I would not sleep well at night if I didn't say it." This conversation was fresh on her mind because they were still in the hiring process.

### **I Rely Heavily on Rules and Policy**

Often, we, as Black executives, find security in knowing and following the rules and policies set forth by our institution. When one stays within written and widely established boundaries, we hope that when that uncomfortable situation happens such as others challenging our authority and competence, the rules and policies will support and speak for us. Dr. Kaye shared that "oftentimes, I do feel like I'm an outsider, but I don't allow that to be shown to them. Like they (white colleagues) somehow have the upper hand over my existence." Many feel that she is outspoken; she feels she must be, and when she is, she makes sure that her language strongly aligns with the college's rules and regulations.

I rely heavily on rules and policy. I am driven by it because if I'm doing exactly what the rules and policies say, there should be no problem right? I tell

everybody, I'll do anything for you as long as it's not illegal, immoral, or unethical.

She learned early on that she was never going to get buy-in from all faculty, so she set her own threshold to measure her success. If 85% of the faculty bought into her leadership, then she has achieved success in that realm. "There will always be 5%, or so, that wouldn't be happy with God". She tries not to dwell on the small group that seem impossible to please and works with those in the middle to gain their trust and support.

She shared a story about meeting with a white staff member who was struggling to promote due to her reputation. The staff member had asked for a meeting to get some advice from her. The meeting awkwardly turned to the staff member making part of the meeting about other staff's perceptions of Kaye and what she allegedly said during an address to the staff. After listening to the staff member repeat herself repeatedly about how various members of the staff council believed she made a statement that she did not make, she turned to the woman and said,

I can keep telling you that I didn't say that, but clearly, you're not listening.

Remember, there are stereotypes about African American females, and you are sitting here perpetuating some of them. As the Vice President of Academic Affairs, coming on board to a new job, I'm not dumb enough to walk into a room of folks and right off the bat tell everybody, if you don't like it, you can leave.

This incident was similar to the example she provided of the faculty meeting where two white faculty members badgered her about making a statement she learned from a



leadership program. Such incidents require constant navigation and can be very distracting and depleting.

I constantly have to go back to what my upbringing was, what was expected of me, and doing what's right. You know the mantra of not doing anything illegal, immoral, or unethical is very true to my heart and my belief system. I follow very strictly the rules. I'm not a rule breaker. I might bend them a little bit when necessary but, generally speaking, I stay away from breaking rules because I never want to have to explain why and how to get out of it.

When faced with adversity, after praying, she often feels prepared to step back, reflect on the situation, and formulate a plan she feels will work. She always tries to do what will represent her well as a VP and African American female because of the stereotypes that exist for us in leadership roles. She continues to persevere in a fashion that she feels is "vice presidential and that would not only represent her well at the end of the day, but also her mother, and Black women in general, in a positive way". She uses the community gaze she feels upon her to keep her grounded and accountable for what she was hired to do.

One thing I didn't have because there was no one who looked like me at this level; I didn't have a mentor within the college. So, I had to kind of bump along on my own, to try to prove myself over and over again, remember, to all-white colleagues every time.

Although painful at times, she figured it out. In addition, she is participating in a study that will provide insight to future Black women who will hopefully see themselves in a

similar role, breaking glass ceilings and showing up in the wholeness of their Black womanhood.

## **Dr. June Truth's Story**

### **You Make Me Want to Be Brave**

Dr. June had the most difficult calendar of all the narrators, which meant we had to reschedule a few times due to such demands. She also led the largest institution in the study. “Ok. So, you are the grad student? Ok, I will be much calmer. I was thinking, ‘is this the student interview’? I get so many requests for things I wasn’t quite sure who you were.”

Meet Dr. Truth, hands down, the busiest professional I have ever met—her portfolio includes ensuring quality education is occurring in classrooms for over 40,000 community college students in her system. Yet, she still made time to participate in this study. Within minutes of our time together, I shared with her my recent promotion to a senior-level executive role and my tight deadline to finish up my dissertation, and she responded, “You can do it. You can make it! Gotta bring your chops, Eunice. Bring your chops”. I later found out that credentials and credibility, for Dr. Truth, make up chops.

Dr. Truth is an academic leader who serves as her college’s first Provost of Academic Affairs at a community college. She reports directly to the Chancellor and oversees all academic leaders in a multi-campus system. She has nearly 20 years of experience in higher education. Like Dr. Angelou’s institution, her college is a historically white institution, and their current enrollments qualify them as a Hispanic Serving Institution. Her unique contribution to the role is that she holds a specialized

terminal degree that not many in this role have, in addition to earning a doctorate in higher education. Not only has she served as a full-time faculty member, but she has also served in an esteemed position outside of higher education in a completely different career path. Her primary role is fostering a positive student experience, promoting teaching excellence, championing innovation across the college, and developing strong internal and external partnerships.

Dr. Truth recently celebrated over two decades of marriage and is the mother of three children. She once enjoyed a successful career in a non-education field, but after becoming a mother, she felt the need to pause and redefine herself. That search led her to a man in a coffee shop who told her she would make a great teacher and offered her the opportunity to teach a class as an adjunct. Nearly 20 years later, she's blazing trails in the world of higher education administration.

You gotta respect my chops. I've been an adjunct, an instructor, an assistant professor, an associate professor with tenure, a course coordinator, a department chair, a dean, a VP, an executive VP, and now a provost. There isn't much in the academic space that my career hasn't been able to cover, and I think that gives me a lot of credibility in spaces that accompany my credentials.

She has seen other ethnic female and male minorities sort of struggle a little more in the academic space for respect, yet she believes that,

Having two terminal degrees has always given me an immediate amount of, 'well she's smart, right, so we can't take that away from her'. Whether or not people

really wanted to like me or wanted me to be in spaces, I felt like [my degrees] walking in the door always gave me an immediate amount or dose of respect.

It is rare in higher education to find an administrator with two terminal degrees in completely different fields. Her credentials alone speak against any notion of presumed incompetence. In describing what it feels like to be an Afro Latina woman in academic administration at a historically white institution, she says,

It's days of constant proof. Of demonstrating your ability, of proving that you deserve to be in the space that you're in. Of always being you know, above reproach, sort of you know, failproof. Don't make a mistake, right, because then it's criticized one hundred times over. So just a constant state of being on your toes, dotting your I's, and crossing your T's. And not just because that's the way you are, but it's because it's the way you have to be, to kind of just maintain.

These experiences surface across each narrators' story—experiences that would exhaust many of us. Yet, interacting with Dr. Truth and experiencing her confidence level, you would not think that encounters with racism or sexism challenge her at all.

### **Own the Skin You're In**

To lead at this level, “particularly when you're on the academic side of the house, it's very important to have credentials, credibility, and a healthy amount of courage as well”. She went on to affirm experiences to which other narrators referred: to be a Black woman in this role, you are always walking into a multilayered space that combines physical, social-psychological, and mental dimensions all at once.

There are stereotypes that you'll have to walk through when you're in this role. You have to be able to own that. I've seen people who on paper, as well as from what I knew of them, were extremely competent, but because in their department of themselves, or in the execution of their own skills, their own comfortability with this skin, they failed miserably because they weren't owning or commanding a particular space that they were in.

She described the art and science of being firm and commanding while still demonstrating grace, compassion, concern, and empathy. For Dr. Truth, there is a balance.

It does not mean you need to be walked over. We don't have to come off as that angry woman they like to call us, Eunice, but I have to be firm. That takes a healthy balance of liking yourself and being okay with you (yourself) at the beginning, middle, and end of the day. In this role, you're criticized, like under a microscope of super-smart people. We're in the business of people. Part of this leadership becomes a fortitude issue, like do you even have the constitution, the wherewithal, the strength within yourself to say, I can do this. I can stand in this space.

Fortitude, strength, wherewithal, and a belief in your abilities are required for any Black woman serving in this role at a PWI where she is the only person of color in executive leadership. Each woman in the study either explicitly named each characteristic as necessary for success or shared an example of times they exhibited them. "The culture of academics is thick. We're persnickety, we are. We have our credentials. We are doctors,

you know, we're the professoriate, we are the keepers of the camp. Academic Affairs has a culture unto itself."

Having a leader, a president/chancellor, who supports you and endorses you is a game-changer and makes a world of difference for the women blessed to experience that. Dr. Truth states that the level of support provides her with an overwhelming feeling that,

I am supported, that I am worthy, that I deserve to be in this space, and that I'm valued in this space (the support of her Chancellor and Vice Chancellor). So then when I go out here, and I have these little (makes gestures around negative experiences) it's like, oh, whatever, because then I come back over here, I have the support for what I'm doing.

Dr. Tubman also shared that having one's president's support means everything and cultivates a culture you can thrive in. Dr. Truth knows this can be hard to come by and marvels at the challenges her colleagues at other institutions face when having very different experiences with their leaders.

### **The First**

Each narrator was the first at their institution to hold their role. Both Drs. Truth and Robinson were the first and only in their college system to hold the role, and Drs. Angelou and Tubman were the first at their campuses to hold the position. Each narrator is a trailblazer in this work and leadership level at their institution. When Dr. Truth thinks of her experience as the first, she is overwhelmed with humility. She shared that even as she applied for her latest position, she did not really think she would get the role. She had

applied for a couple of presidencies in the same system in the past and was unsuccessful, so she was not optimistic that she would be hired.

I felt an immense amount of humility. But then an overwhelming burden to be successful because there's so many people just gunning for you to step left or fall off the ledge. I felt an overwhelming sense of emotion, kind of desire, push, if you will, to succeed and to do well. Not just for me and everyone I represent, but for the community that we serve because that's one of the great joys I take in this position. We serve this county, which is a huge population of Latinos, as well as African Americans that make up our student body. So, these are my people, and if I'm succeeding, we're succeeding, they're succeeding. Which means communities are becoming better that look like me.

We both beamed as she said those words. The burden these women carry to make their communities better comes from realizing they are the hopes and dreams of not only the marginalized groups standing at the institution's outskirts but that they also represent the wildest dreams of their ancestors. Dr. Truth shared that being the only person that looks like her at the table forces her to be courageous.

It's innately who I am; I just have to be true to myself, and so, if there are issues that impact people of color like me, or if there are issues that are just near and dear to my heart or of close concern, then I have to speak up on those issues. I don't care if I'm the only person speaking up because it's impacting me or people who look like me. So, if I can't do that, then I'm really not a leader, and I shouldn't be in that role. I don't believe you're put into places to change and be

different or to acquiesce to the system that you find yourself a part of. I think you're put into those roles to be essentially who you are, and that's what you are supposed to be bringing to the table.

To each narrator, leadership means speaking up for the voices that are not in the room, including advocating for the student populations that are underserved and overly stereotyped. I find it inspiring to hear and learn about how they exercise their courage. In those moments, I too, feel powerful and encouraged to be bolder in my advocacy for racial equity.

### **That's Not My Story**

Dr. June has held her current position for fewer than five years, but in that time, in this role, she does not recall feeling like an outsider. She attributes that to her supervisor's commitment to diversity and his vision for wanting to be inclusive at the outset. Prior to this role, she worked as a CAO (Chief Academic Officer) in a district system where she felt like an outsider on that leadership team because that group of colleagues wanted to appear as though they were the wiser ones.

I was like, 'yeah, not really, but I guess I'll let y'all talk.' I don't have the energy, and they weren't making decisions about things that was going to make or break anything critical. In that space, they felt like they were the all-knowing wise ones and needed to talk, so I let them talk.

Her thoughts on the notion of Black women serving as CAOs having a disproportionate amount of the invisible work is that it does not happen much at her level. She certainly experienced demands for invisible work as a faculty member; however, her perception is



that the additional requests and work she receives now has more to do with the position than her being a woman of color in the role.

It's not disproportionate to the people of color; it's just the nature of work right now. If you're in a space and you're a leader, I'm not gonna wait for the person who is trying to ignore the work. I'll ask you about it, tell you something needs to be done in case you don't know, and then if you don't do it, I'll take it and get it done if it's going to impact operations in my area.

Her current position is so far removed from the day-to-day student interactions that she does not receive the pull of extra responsibilities from students of color making requests outside of her workload because she is one of a few Black leaders on campus. She has experienced that previously in teaching, or lower-level roles, but that is not her story in this role.

I will say that when I do go to campus, I am recognized. They're like, wow, Dr. Truth, we're so proud of you! You make us so proud. You give us something to aspire to, but it's never like, can you help me with this. I do get requests from staff to speak at DEI events, and so forth; it's more the proximity to the top and the visibility of the role that I'm tapped more (for requests).

She is the only narrator who does not believe she experiences more invisible work than her white colleagues due to her racial identity or gender in this particular role. She acknowledges that it happens more at lower-level institutional positions.. Besides, she is quite removed from the day-to-day student interactions.

## **I Love to See a Black Woman Running Things**

When asked about some of the microaggressions the other narrators had experienced in their roles, Dr. Truth did not share many of the same experiences. When she heard the example two other narrators gave about taking a white employee out to treat them to lunch and the waiters assuming their white employee was going to pay, Dr. Truth commented, “I think the way I carry myself, it’s pretty obvious that, like yeah, bring the ticket to me”. She had never been mistaken for the one not paying.

What’s really funny is I did have the reverse experience just last week. I had taken the administrative assistant team out; there were about seven of them. They were mostly white women, one Latina, and one African American male, and me. We were being waited on by like three different people due to shortages, and one of the guys came over and said, ‘I love to see a Black woman running things’, as he’s handing me the bill. Now all we were doing was chatting and laughing, and everybody’s dressed down for bowling. I laughed and asked him why he said that; he replied, ‘because I can tell you’re taking your team out. This is so nice to see’.

Even though she could not relate to the mistaken identity examples I shared, she could relate to older white men not wanting to address her by her doctorate salutation.

Faculty, who tend to be older, white, and male want to just call me June. Which you know, I could be called a lot worse. I’m like, ‘Yeah, what’s up, what do you need?’ But likewise, they then become Tom, Henry, Bill, right? If you want to play that game, we could do that too, right.

Black women's leadership requires a certain level of readiness to address the plethora of microaggressions, slights, invalidations, and presumed incompetence moments throughout one's career.

### **Race Always Comes into Play**

Few Black women serve in the CAO but many of us have the credentials. Why are there not more of us in these critical roles? Why does the representation of Black women in these roles continue to be a challenge when more Black women, than ever, are earning terminal degrees? If the pipeline isn't the issue, what is? Dr. Truth's perspective is that credentials alone are not enough. She states,

Career trajectory matters. I do know a lot of people who have a doctorate and some higher education experience, and maybe they even taught a little but their teaching was scattershot. Your length with institutions matter. It's a lot of people walking around with PhDs and EdDs, that don't mean a lot. Progression and growth at an institution or various institutions demonstrate leadership. I haven't been in an interview where I ever had to say, 'I did this, and I did that,' because the story was laid out, and I didn't have a story that they had to figure out.

She provided examples of the confusion she has experienced as a hiring supervisor in trying to figure out what people are really trying to do after seeing their erratic resumes. She pointed out that their scattered work history interfered with demonstrating their end goals. Black women need access to coaching and mentoring opportunities from those who have successfully navigated the rough terrains of securing an executive-level

academic leadership role. Although the right experience and credentials are important, Dr. Truth stated that race still comes into play.

I'm not a fool who feels like we live in a color-free world or whatever it is people say, 'I don't see color'. I just think that when you have the right experience and the right credentials, it makes it easier for you to get the interview. Then it comes down to whether you're a fit for the institution, and people might not want to admit it, but sometimes 'fit' goes to that racial component. I'm not a fool to think that's not a consideration, but it's also why I don't apply to schools in South Dakota, right. I'm not trying to be mean or funny or anything, but you just have to know (what regions are open to Black leadership). So, I think you need to have the right experience, the right credentials, and then market yourself in the appropriate places.

Progressive places open to not only hiring but fully supporting Black women in senior-level academic positions may be few and far between, and while the demand for more diverse leadership is growing across the country, Black women are also becoming more selective about where they feel willing to lead. Environment matters. The competitive nature for the few that "fit" the institution's culture is growing inch by inch, making it important for those institutions to be transparent about the work that they've engaged in around racial equity and inclusion, especially when their city and state make it hard to recruit racially diverse candidates. Dr. Truth feels being creative with institutional benefits can help attract more qualified and diverse candidates. "We're not going to overcome the politics (of a state's history). We're going to have to find a better attraction tool like relocation packages or sign-on bonuses". She is already discussing with

colleagues innovative ways to attract more diverse leaders, acknowledging that her state's politics and history may deter some women of color who live in liberal states from wanting to work at her institution.

The insidious way that racism and sexism show up in her institution mirrors how it has shown up for Dr. June outside her institution.

It's just an innate part of life. 'Of course, I'm not judging you because of your skin; of course, that's not what I said'. You are never going to prove that, like, unless something is overt. But nobody's hanging signs outside of my door or putting nooses over my office, but yeah, I mean, you still experience racism. It's in all those tangibles and intangibles, you know. Whether or not they just want to call you June and not Dr. Truth. 'Hmm, that's weird. He (white male) is Dr. August, he is (white male) Dr. May, and then I'm just June. Something as small as how one chooses to address the panel. I don't care enough, first of all, because I'm real comfortable with me. But for some people, that's their (gotcha move), 'you're not measuring up, ha ha', but I have, clearly because I'm still in this seat. I'm not proving anything to you or anybody else since my mere existence seems to completely piss you off. I might as well smile and look cute while I'm up here and say yes, I'm June; who are you? Because it don't change anything.

Her expressions aligned with her passion for her truth. I felt this. That constant ping that your skin color seems to provoke in some folks to prove that you are less than, you are not good enough, you are unqualified, simply because you were born with lots of melanin. The slights, the cold shoulder, the ignoring you, the leaving you out, the not

inviting you to the happy hour, all those small things add up, and you must continue to affirm and reaffirm that it is them, not you. It is their problem, not yours. How each woman of color chooses to do that and what it looks like varies. For Dr. Truth, when asked if she has experienced racism in this role,

Of course, I've experienced racism and sexism, but you and I both know it will be so hard to prove. And even explaining what just happened will miss some people. I don't want to say I ignore it all because I'm very much aware of cultural bias, racism, and all it encompasses, but I'm also, like, very well-read, and if you haven't read *Caste* (by Isabel Wilkerson), I mean it's an amazing book. These entrenched systems on top of systems of nonsense that we explain, you think you going to change that because me and you complaining about it? And that's not to say don't speak up or out about it. It's just, you know, yeah, that's true (racism), and that's a fact, and that's real, but me and you trying to convince people of that (facial expression that says, 'girl please'). That's kind of why I don't engage in it because it's too silly on some level.

The inability to prove that someone is being racist, stereotyping, or using microaggressions certainly shapes how we as Black women navigate, move, speak up, and/or speak out against the indignities that come our way. We know slights when we see, hear, and experience them; thus, the onus somehow falls on us to be gentle and mindful of how we react and respond as racially minoritized leaders in PWIs. We are fully aware of the likelihood of our reactions being misinterpreted and amplified. So, while it might seem that we are dismissive of these racialized encounters when they happen, we are actually choosing our battles very carefully.

We have plenty examples of racial encounters as women of color CAOs (in historically white institutions), but what do you do? Like you can't name names and take receipts. Plus, what you're trying to explain is, well, a matter of interpretation, and see again, I'm too smart. I always go; can I prove it? Remember, my prior career required me to operate off of things that can be proven. How do you say what I just said to you? Oh, Dr. April and Dr. May (they didn't call me Doctor). They're going to be like, 'oh well, you know, they might have just felt like they know you so well'. But why they know me so well, but not them? You see what I'm saying? So, it's an argument, and it's silly, and I don't have time for that, so I'm like, I'm just going to keep knowing what I know. Because it's the skin that I'm in, and it's my experience.

Dr. Truth did a wonderful job of articulating the nuanced ways in which we encounter microaggressions and why some of us choose to ignore them when we can and give our energy to more meaningful challenges.

### **Dr. Janell Tubman**

#### **I've Earned It**

Dr. Janell Tubman was born to a single mother. She credits her mother for providing her and her sister with a very good life. Even though she was a first-generation student, she and her sister always knew they would attend college. They did not have a choice but to go. Her mom was so committed to educating her girls that she sold all her stock and paid for their college. Dr. Tubman graduated college with no debt. After talking to her academic advisor, she decided to go directly to graduate school and earn a

master's degree in counseling. However, her advisor envisioned a different path—he recommended teaching. She was initially opposed to the idea, but he asked her to take one class in counseling and one in birth through kindergarten education, and, as he expected, she fell in love with the course work. Speaking of love, she married her high school sweetheart right after she completed her undergraduate degree, and he was starting his career as a college football coach.

Her dream job was to become a preschool coordinator for school districts to ensure children who needed early intervention could get that through partnerships with hospitals; however, the principal she met coaxed her into becoming a prekindergarten inclusion classroom teacher. Today, Dr. Tubman is a scholar who currently serves as provost of academic affairs at a community college in the Midwest region of the country. She has worked in higher education for nearly 25 years, 14 of which have been in administration. She is the chief academic officer for a multicampus college that educates over 5,000 students in a district system with dozens of colleges. The college is a predominately white institution, with 70% of its student population identifying as white. She is the second Black woman to hold the role of CAO out of many community colleges in her district's history. Her primary role is to expand academic program offerings, finalize program alignment reviews to identify opportunities for growth for current and future academic programs, expand the work of teaching and learning, lead the work of closing achievement gaps, and continue the college's diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts all while leading the faculty.

Dr. Tubman has spent most of her career in community colleges, where she has taught as faculty and served as a department chair and a dean. She also worked at a four-



year institution as a program coordinator for a bachelor's degree program. She is the mother of two boys, one is currently a college student, and the other is in middle school. After completing her doctorate, she and her husband decided to move to the South, leaving her post as a program coordinator and returning to the classroom as faculty. After one short year as faculty, the President approached her and recruited her for an academic dean position that had just become vacant. He was so interested in having her in that role he told her he could appoint her, or she could apply. She chose to go through the interviewing and search process "because I don't want anyone to say that somebody gave me something that I didn't earn". So, she went through the process and became an academic dean for nearly ten years. "I loved the dean role because, as a faculty member, I can enact change in my class. As a department chair, I can enact change in the program, but as a dean, my hand is touching it all."

During that time, her president informed her that she was on the path to the presidency. Dr. Tubman disagreed because she was not interested in becoming a president, as she loved what she was doing. But her president told her she was too bright and strong to end her career as a dean. She listened but was not convinced. The next president hired at her institution was a Black woman. In her very first one-on-one meeting with her new president, she was told the same thing.

She told me that we're going to map out my next steps on the path to the presidency. I couldn't even see that for myself. It wasn't even something that had ever crossed my mind. This was probably three years into me being a dean when we had this conversation.

Like Dr. Robinson, Dr. Tubman described the importance of others recognizing her talent and opening a door for her to step through.

### **Not Wanted Here**

Dr. Tubman has held her current role for two years. She became a leader in academic affairs three years ago and was promoted to provost and vice president of academic affairs a bit later.

This journey has allowed me to meet a lot of great people and make some really good networking connections with other Black women who are in positions of leadership that support me. I value their thoughts and opinions because I know that every decision I'm making, everything I do is being watched by somebody. When I got here, this was a culture where I knew which faculty did not want me here. And I made it very clear to them that I knew they did not want me here. So let me make it clear to you that I have earned my position and I am smart enough to lead academics.

Dr. Tubman has a beautiful network of mentors. When she was a dean, her president invited her to sign up for the Lakin Institute, a mentorship program that connects Black leaders with resources and support to prepare them for a presidential post in higher education. This helped Dr. Tubman establish a wide network of colleagues aspiring to become president.

One of my mentors said to me, a lot of people have little respect for women of color who lead academics at a PWI because they don't think we're smart enough to do that because the brain trust of the institution is your academics. We're not

supposed to be smart enough to do that. People you meet will automatically think you're the Vice President of Student Affairs because it's okay for us to be in student affairs. We can play in that stuff; we can do that. But we're not smart enough to be leading academics because those are the scholars of the institution. She alerted me that I'd have people that were going to challenge me and question my curriculum vitae because they want to make sure that I've earned all of that. And you know what, I experienced everything that she said.

The sage words of her mentor influenced her not to dwell on individuals but to work to change the culture through her leadership and to draw clear boundaries in managing how people will treat her. She went on to provide an example of one of the many times she was challenged and how she made it clear that she would not tolerate being disrespected because she was a Black woman.

I had a white gentleman who teaches [science] challenge me about a curriculum question in a faculty full assembly. I leaned into him, walked right over in a tiered room, and I said, you know, I respect your question, and out of respect for faculty and for academics, I'm going to answer your question. But after I answer your question, I'm going to tell you why you should never challenge me again when it comes to academics. So, I answered his question and I said, Dr. Cooper, I don't think you would have challenged a white male if they were standing here the way you just challenged me, so let me put you on notice. You will not challenge me in this type of forum again and I completely take offense to it.

Her example gave me chills. She shared that people started clapping. She shared that the faculty member approached her after the meeting and apologized. “I accepted, but I told him my issue with this is, don’t try to openly challenge me in public and then apologize in private”. She knew the potential risk involved in choosing to manage the situation that way; however, it was important for her to set the tone and show the faculty body that she knew what she was doing and she was confident in her leadership. I chose the last name of Tubman as her pseudonym because she freed my mind during our time together.

### **I’m Speaking for Every Black Student**

When working in a PWI where the hiring habits at the highest level continues to perpetuate white culture instead of diversifying it, the one lone ranger who finally breaks through to the executive level of the organization is often seen as the spokesperson for all diversity. If they are Black, they are certainly expected to be the voice for all Black people.

In my state, we have over two dozen community colleges, and I am the only Chief Academic Officer, Vice President of Academic Affairs, Provost that looks like me. We meet twice a month, and when I go into those meetings, I have learned by the questions that they pose that I am speaking for every Black student enrolled in all 24 plus community colleges when giving my thoughts on something. I’m speaking for every Black faculty member that they have, they had, or they do not have. I’m very aware of that. I get asked all types of questions on how we should handle this, or how do we go about recruiting faculty of color, how do we keep faculty of color? As for me, I appreciate the ask; however, it becomes a weight on

my shoulders because I want to make sure that what I say and do does not cause anyone to say, “Hey, we tried that, and it didn’t work so we’re not doing that again.” That’s a lot of pressure, and I carry a lot of weight. I do carry it with a lot of pride, but I also carry it from a place of, “Wow, I have got to get this right.”

My spirit quickened because I certainly recognized that weight and pressure. The work of being the only and single representative of an entire multidimensional group of people is not only tedious but impossible. It is very difficult to bring forth your divergent perspective, thoughts, gifts, skills, and personality in places that have not examined the prevailing assumptions of white culture (Brown, 2018). The amount of emotional labor that goes into prepping to step into these spaces and recovering from the heavy lifting of delicately pointing out problematic racist thinking and behaviors is significant.

### **I Don’t Know If They Even Miss Us**

When asking about why representation matters at this level of the institution, particularly in this specific role, Dr. Tubman made a chilling claim.

One of my mentors talked about how hard it is being a CAO if you have a predominately white faculty because it’s hard for some of them to see us as the leader of an academic unit. We’re just not supposed to be smart enough, and we’re not supposed to be able to understand all of the ins and outs because we’re dealing with these scholarly people in academia. I just think it’s that place of, they’re not ready to accept the fact that we are smart enough and that we are capable of doing that. So, it just becomes that challenge of nobody wants to really do the work to find out why we’re not here but also, I don’t know if they even

miss us. Which is, you know, disheartening in itself. They don't even miss us because we're not supposed to be here anyway.

If we want to carve out a space for ourselves, we must act on our own behalf. One way to do that is to tell our stories, share our experiences, and make our needs for support visible beyond just hiring us. We have to constantly balance the risk of telling our truth and furthering the myths with our silence. Our leadership in the academic space matters. It is needed. Dr. Tubman elaborates,

We know representation matters. It's always eye-opening to me how many of us there are in student affairs leadership. I mean we're everywhere, and I'm like, is it that they think we can just plan stuff for students? As CAOs, we can actually do our jobs really well; we know how to engage in those conversations about academics. We understand what curriculum and instruction mean. We know how to engage in these conversations, and for some reason, some people don't think we do. And if we do, they believe we need a white male to help us understand that. I'm dealing with a predominately white faculty here that I have to assert myself very often because I have white males who will challenge me on what they think I don't know or what they think matters or should matter as I'm making decisions.

And still, for our sanity, we must always exert our power to choose when we wear the mask and when we take it off. We choose who has earned the right to be given access to our vulnerability and who has not. We determine when responding is an option and when

it is not. To be Black, female, and a CAO means we must claim our identity as intellectual powerhouses because if we do not, many will never know.

### **I Have Represented Us Well**

It takes courage to lead and be your authentic self when you are in an environment where you are believed to be the one representing a multidimensional group of people who are often thought to be monolithic. Dr. Tubman's courage is driven by integrity, ethics, and the desire to make her mother proud.

I lead with courage because I want to make sure that I'm making my mother proud all the time. I'm always making decisions from a place of integrity and ethics. I try to ensure that I never say or do anything that's going to cause shame or harm to myself and in essence, my family. So, as I'm leading, I'm always making sure that I'm advocating for what is right, whether it goes along with the majority or not. If it's the right thing to do, then I'm going to be all in for it. I have to stay true to who I am and be my authentic self because I like to sleep at night. Being a great role model for others to see, particularly those who will come after me, I hope they will feel that I've represented us well. I carry that burden very heavily and very seriously that there are not many that look like me. I want to make sure I've done the right things and that I'm not one who didn't speak up for something that wasn't right for students as a whole, and in particular students of color.

Being a Black female executive in a role that is usually maintained by white men is a difficult task. Oftentimes, these women find themselves in a situation where it feels like

the institution wants our embodied racial diversity without our diversity of thought and culture (Brown, 2018). These women are bridge builders. These women are innovators. These women are change agents working to build a more inclusive and just institution. These women are courageous.

Being courageous is not easy. It also does not necessarily get easier the more you practice it. Dr. Tubman illustrates this,

It's hard every day because the advocacy can't stop. I can't show up one day and say I'm not going to advocate for students of color. I can't show up and not be at the top of my game every day. I don't get the pass to not be prepared for a meeting. I have to be overly prepared. So, I take offense when I'm asked to help a white male colleague on my level to prepare for a meeting because I can't show up not ready. There's no one coming to help me prepare for a meeting. I can't show up half-stepping, so please don't ask me to help this white male do his job. This is coming from one of the most compassionate leaders I have ever met, who would do anything to help others. This is the outcome of having to carry the agonizing weight of managing daily microaggressions and injustices as a Black woman. At some point, you grow weary, but you never give up.

### **I Do Not Need a Phone Bible; I Need a Physical One**

The complexity of the CAO role can be daunting. When dealing with daily challenges, it is important to be armed with strategies for dealing with adversities. Self-reflection is an important strategy for Dr. Tubman.



I'm not a big journaler at all; I am a thinker. I spend time every day really thinking about what I've done for the day and what decisions I've made, and how did it impact people. Did I come off inappropriately, unintentionally? All of those things are critical. Self-reflection is the greatest for me. I start my morning reading my daily meditation and devotion. By the time I get to the office, I have a scripture that I read every morning. There are also moments during the day that I might need to kind of step away, close the door for a minute, let myself get still. I'll text my husband and ask him to say a prayer real quick. And sometimes, I need to touch the Word. I've got a physical Bible in my desk drawer that sometimes I need to pick up. You know, just open it up to read a scripture. You know, I don't need a phone Bible, I need a physical one that I need to put in my hands for a minute. Just like, okay, let me get back to me, so I can continue the day in a way that I can leave and be happy with the day.

These women all know the challenges will come. Having a toolbox with strategies is imperative to enable leaders to push through adversities when they arise. For most of the narrators, reading scripture, meditating, and praying are methods that have helped. I made a note to bring my physical Bible to work because I wanted to experience the level of peace, courage, and certainty that everything would work out that Dr. Tubman shared that she experiences after her prayer and/or Bible time.

## **I Don't See How You Can Do This Without Spousal Support**

Dr. Tubman has been married for nearly 30 years and has been with her husband since high school. He also works in higher education and has proven to be a significant support for her.

I typically, unfortunately, rely on my husband. I sent him a text yesterday and said, I need you to send up some extra prayers for me right now. Because I'm just in a space that is challenging to me at this moment and I've got to make some decisions and respond to someone. And if I respond to her right now, it's not going to be in the way that I need to. So, he texts back, 'you know it's already done. You know what you need to do. I'm sure you're about to still yourself'. He knows that I need to just stop for a moment. I'm not one of those people that's got to talk to somebody; I just need to stop for a moment and take it all in.

Dr. Tubman's husband was initially the one they planned would move up the academic administration track. He was on the path, but the opportunity came to Dr. Tubman first. He was offered a position at another institution that would have furthered his track, while she was promoting and moving up. Rather than relocating to accept the position he was offered, he told her that it was her time. They identified a job for him at her new institution as part of her contract until a faculty position became available. Her husband is a significant part of the peace she finds at home that spills over into her workspace where she can find moments to get an encouraging word or an uplifting prayer from her spouse.

## CONCLUSION

The narratives of Drs. Robinson, Angelou, Truth, and Davis recreate and shine light on the professional realities of some Black women as they blaze trails and make the world a better place through their leadership as Chief Academic Officers at historically white institutions of higher education across the country. The narratives in this study include truths from aspects of my journey and the journey of these four pioneers. In the next chapter, Chapter V, I interrogate, compare, and interpret their narratives, highlighting similarities and differences in their experiences to generate cross-case themes and key issues informed by the research purpose, questions, and theoretical perspective and framework of this study.

## CHAPTER V

### FINDINGS

In this chapter, I used interpretive-analytic consideration to transition from field to research texts as a way of connecting with the narrators and to avoid letting the field texts speak for themselves. I carefully analyzed the field texts, spending numerous hours reading and rereading the texts to construct a summarized account of the content across field texts. The initial analysis identified key characters, tensions, context, scenarios, and topics dealt with, which allowed me to see what was there. I then began to narratively analyze and group the field texts: names and/or roles of the characters in the texts, storylines that interweave and connect, silences that became apparent, tensions that emerged, and settings and places where actions occurred (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Moving across field texts, I asked questions of meaning and social significance. I discovered themes within and across the narrators' stories that helped me delineate, compare, and make sense of the differences and similarities across the narratives and further articulate the concepts constructed from the individual narratives.

This study included Black women's reflections on their leadership experiences over time, reflecting the temporal aspect of the three commonplaces. Temporality was a feature of their narratives through locating their life at a particular time or a series of moments over time incorporating a past, present, and future as it appeared to them (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Time, particularly leading through a pandemic, influenced the narratives they told, where they told them from, and how they told them.

As I wove the multiple accounts together into a textured account of narratives, I saw clear links to my experiences when I served in the role of provost. The ways in which they told their stories jogged memories of past encounters I had with challenging notions of my presumed incompetence. Had I heard these stories prior to the periods that I spent agonizing over microaggressions I experienced from a supervisor, had I known how these women methodically navigated similar challenges, I believe I would have experienced much more joy and less agony serving in that role. Engaging with each narrator in an ongoing relationship by meeting over three different periods throughout a semester allowed me to construct narrative accounts that intertwined experiences and deepened understandings of our everyday navigations in these spaces.

The field texts were a simple transcription of our interviews and interactions; however, moving to research texts meant repeatedly reading the texts and searching for meaning and significance in the field text data. This positioned me to look for patterns, themes, and tensions within and across the narrators' individual experiences and group experiences. Using BFT as the interpretive lens allowed me to use my cultural experience and knowledge to unpack, interpret, mine, and serve the experiences and narratives of these Black women's standpoint on their roles, experiences, and living within the

institutional culture of PWIs and HWIs. I constructed themes through the process of looking within, between, and among the narratives. The study's purpose, inquiry questions, and theoretical framework also informed the themes. The areas I detail here about the experiential focus of Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) model of inquiry are categorized as follows but described in the heading of each section using emic terms from the narratives. Creating a work-life balance: when work is a 24/7 proposition; staying well while leading through an international COVID-19 crisis, making a way out of no way: leadership as an academic unicorn, persistence strategies for success, and finding joy.

Creating a work-life balance: The theme, "when work is a 24/7 proposition," came about through high-energy conversations filled with laughter, dialogue that took on the spirit of "it is what it is", and facial expressions galore when discussing how the role of CAO and work is all-consuming by default. This section captures the many creative ways the narrators created their own sense of balance between their work and personal lives. Although difficult, I have showcased the many ways the narrators work to create meaningful spaces for their personal endeavors and establish boundaries that prevent their work responsibilities from taking over their personal family and wellness space. Mental health and wellness disproportionately impacted Black and Brown families during the pandemic. Staying well while leading through an international COVID-19 crisis showcased the load the narrators were supposed to carry and the strategies they employed to help them lead through the pandemic and not lose themselves. There were somber moments as the narrators reflected on their personal loss due to COVID-19, as well as the losses in their institutional community, peppered with the massive loss of life throughout

the country. Short moments of silence occurred throughout our conversations as they gathered their thoughts and determined how they could take care of themselves and their wellness during such a difficult time of leadership.

Making a way out of no way: leadership as an academic unicorn captures the unique ways these scholars use their cultural knowledge, where they find their support, and what fuels their success as Black women serving as senior-level academic administrators. The theme, persistence strategies for success, explored how women led in many ways in the face of persistent inequalities, inequities, opaque cultural codes, racial and gendered stereotypes, and biases. The matter-of-fact confidence in their identities as Black women filled the air as they brought to bear how, when, and where these patterns of race and gender confound and bring additional challenges to their leadership. I could not help but smile as leaders transitioned into the telling how they adapt, maneuver, and navigate to enact their leadership in those moments. The last themes of finding joy captures the multitude of ways that these women find joy in their everyday lived experiences.

Each interview was surprisingly filled with smiles, laughter, frequent exchanges of cultural expressions, hand movement and body gestures as these mighty women narrated how they managed higher levels of stress and anxiety caused partially by the alienating environment of white academia during a time when the COVID-19 pandemic was simultaneously causing unprecedented disruption across the landscape of higher education and the country. Nearly six decades after colleges integrated, the academic administrator demographics and the culture of academia remain distinctly white (Gutiérrez y Muhs et al, 2012). These are the narratives of those who differ from this

norm. This chapter showcases the voices and amplifies the experiences of these pioneering women who lead in academia during a period when the world is rushing to become a new post-pandemic society.

### **Theme One:**

#### **Creating a Work-Life Balance: When “Work is a 24/7 Proposition”**

*“My husband is a police officer, so when he signs off from his shift, he turns it off. It’s a challenge for him to understand why I won’t turn it off. That’s his thinking, versus my thinking. I can’t because that’s what I signed on for”.*

Work-life balance is the conceptual notion of finding a steadiness that amounts to minimum conflict and maximum efficiency between work life and family commitments. Despite the heavy use of the concept, researchers have yet to come to a consensus of what really constitutes such balance (Fonseca, 2018). I used, creating a work-life balance as a conceptual frame for making sense of the narrators' efforts to be a wife and a senior executive, to be mother and boss, to be a daughter and chief academic officer, to be a colleague and the only person of color in senior leadership. The patterns in their stories amplify the difficulty of clarifying the meaning of work-life balance. Although their experiences can appear contradictory to the idea of a work-life balance, to the narrators, they have drawn lines in the sand, and established boundaries that work for each of them. Their experiences are all marinated in emotional strength, strong self-definitions, and the amount of refusal to try to do it all needed, to confront oppressive working conditions that can deplete all energy, leaving none for one’s family. All narrators discussed the complex, demanding, time-sucking nature of the CAO role.



This reality was immediately evident each time I worked with their assistants to try to schedule our one-hour meetings. Some were booked out a month ahead, and if they were not booked out, they only had about three or four one-hour slots available in the entire month. Some had to reschedule, and in one case, about ten minutes before our interview started due to a news group showing up requesting her comments on an institutional matter. Dr. Tubman used the words “all-consuming” in her description of occupying the role of a CAO. She brought to the position the understanding that the higher one moves up into senior administration, “the less opportunities to separate work from home because it starts to become a twenty-four-seven proposition because it just doesn’t stop”. She shared that serving in a high-profile role in a smaller community blurs the line between work and home even more. Something as simple as a dinner date with her husband can become a work commitment in the blink of an eye.

The last time we went out to dinner, we went to this new place, and after we sat down and looked over and there’s this guy, I’m in the rotary with. So, of course, he comes over, introduces his wife, and there went our alone time.

She described her work and personal life in this role as fully intertwined. She looked backwards at the experiences that brought her here, she looked inward as she reflected on the impact of various experiences, and she looked outward as she spoke of the opportunities for change and all were situated in the place of predominately white colleges, some early experiences were at a university and the latter were specifically at community college. She shared how carefully intentional her role called her to be about drawing boundaries to protect her alone time and family time. Her husband allows 30 minutes of vent time about work, then he cuts it off, and they move on to family matters.

She does not allow herself to work in the house on the phone, does not check emails for the first hour when home, and tries not to engage in emails too much on the weekends. If she does, she gives herself a set window of time to do that, “and that’s that,” she states matter-of-factly.

They each, as do I, beautifully juggle all that comes with an executive's life while ensuring their family is well taken care of and feels loved. Each participant has been married for at least two decades. Drs. Angelou and Tubman both have two children, and Drs. Robinson and Truth have three. Dr. Angelou is the only empty nester and shared that having no children at home makes it more difficult “to turn it off”—work that is—because she no longer has to rush home and get dinner on the table. She shared that COVID-19 made it even worse “because then I had a five-second commute from my workstation”. She felt that saying yes to an executive academic leadership role meant that she signed up to be present for all major student activities, whether in the evenings or on the weekend. From her perspective, the moment she accepted the job, she inadvertently agreed to work the hours needed to get the job done, regardless of how demanding and inconvenient. However, she always found ways to balance motherhood and being a wife. She was very appreciative of her support system: her sister helped watch the kids when they were younger, and her husband’s outdoorsy nature made it easy for him to keep the kids busy as she worked.

All women narrated the impact of working at this level on their personal lives. In narrative inquiry people are always in transition and the transition of this particular time of the study, they were all continuously working to find ways to balance their commitment to their work and the priority they’ve placed on their family. The boundaries

between work and their personal lives were messy and interconnected but they took the lead in keeping them as untangled as possible. Dr. Angelou talked about the hardship it placed on her marriage as her husband struggled to understand why she would not just turn the work off when she got home. Dr. Robinson talked about the power that came with her framing of work/life balance: “something is always going to be suffering, something always giving, and being honest with myself about that is how I find sanity”. For her, mother’s guilt sometimes popped up when she could not be present for her children, and even times when she was there but not fully “present” in the moment due to work. Most narrators struck a compromise by attending one of their children’s extracurricular events while simultaneously checking emails or making a couple of phone calls. This is likely common for most mothers serving in this role; these women bear the extra burden of contending with the existing stereotype that Black families are not as involved in their children’s school and/or extracurricular ventures as white families.

Dr. Truth’s perspective is that creating a work-life balance in a demanding role such as this means accepting that some sacrifices are necessary while also acknowledging that it is possible and necessary to establish non-negotiables for what you are willing—and not willing—to sacrifice in both your work and personal life. She worked to manage her children’s expectations and communicate with them directly about her limitations and contributions. For example, her kids knew that she was not going to attend the twenty- or thirty-minute holiday parties that were a big deal in elementary school. “I’m not gonna run to the school to do thirty minutes of candy and kids screaming, like I’m not, so don’t get mad. What I will do is make the stuff ahead of time.”

Similarly, she communicated to her work colleagues a year in advance that missing her daughter's graduation was non-negotiable. So as her colleagues, who were responsible for planning the commencement date for her job, went back and forth with the dates, "I started screaming from the rooftops that there's a conflict". She continued to remind them that if they landed on a date that conflicted with her daughter's graduation date, she would not be at the college's commencement, regardless of her role as the chief academic officer, who usually works with the president to confer degrees. There was a theme in the narratives that self-advocacy, clear communication, and courage are all required to draw boundaries between work and home life.

Common ways that work presented itself outside of traditional hours for these women were text messages and phone calls from the president; phone conversations from work seeping into the drive home and carrying over into the home; the overwhelming expectations to respond to emails during evenings and weekends; and attending student events during the evenings and weekends. Ways that the personal crept into the work realm included an array of children's appointments, parent-teacher meetings, sick children, school holiday parties, children's sports or dance exhibitions that cut into the traditional work hours, and the need to occasionally pick-up children from school.

Dr. Angelou pointed out that while sometimes intrusive, work also spills into personal life positively. It motivated her to further her education, "work motivated me to grow because I knew in order for me to develop and advance, I needed to have an advanced degree". So, although juggling the role of wife, mom, boss lady, daughter, and friend "definitely takes a toll," as Dr. Angelou described, these women find ways to consistently show up and be present for their families, while being devoted to their jobs.

They find ways to draw boundaries, identify non-negotiables, and be intentional about finding ways to separate and/or integrate the two when needed. They each create and define what balance is and how it will look in their life. Dr. Robinson expressed, “my husband helps me be a better [leader]” and talked about the “one team” approach that she and her family take to create a work-life integration that is acceptable for them.

## **Theme Two:**

### **Staying Well While Leading Through an International COVID-19 Crisis**

*“I Don’t Need To Go To Therapy, I’m Stronger Than That, But I’m Not”*

The strong Black woman archetype can be damaging to Black women serving in rigorous executive roles. Narrative inquiry is concerned with the sociality in which experiences occur. In this particular study, the social conditions, the environments in which these women find themselves navigating, are very similar. There is commonality in the sociality and place of navigating majority white academic spaces. In Narrative Inquiry, sociality captures “the environment, surrounding factors and forces, people, and otherwise, that form each individual’s context” (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007, p. 23) and place represents, “the specific concrete, physical and topological boundaries of place or sequence of places where the inquiry and events take place” (p. 23). Even in different locations in the U.S., the women narrated similar contextual dynamics. Yet there were mini-spaces that stood out in the narratives: homeplaces, large public meetings, executive team meetings, and email all emerged as key places of navigation. There is also a temporal commonplace evidenced in that pandemic conditions shaped their experiences during the time of the study. They narrate the commonalities and differences as they

share the impact of the pandemic on their overall well-being. Constantly navigating stigmas, tokenism, stereotypes, and quelling the myth of presumed incompetence is exhausting, yet we are expected to be strong enough to handle anything that comes our way. In this section, I present the narratives of these leaders that define the social conditions we navigate mentally, spiritually, emotionally, and professionally and how they make room to take care of their mental health and wellness.

When thinking about the mental resources needed to continuously juggle all the responsibilities that come with being a wife, mom, and the only African American senior-level executive amongst your colleagues, and all the isolation and health challenges that came with COVID-19 during the period in which my inquiry unfolded, I wondered about the effects and/or toll these circumstances took as they practiced what might be considered radical self-care, in the sociality commonplace of white academia, on behalf of their overall wellness. Particularly, I considered the demands of their work during such an unprecedented time; we were eighteen months into COVID-19 when I conducted these interviews. Destruction from the virus impacted each woman personally, whether through the death of a loved one who had COVID, the overwhelming mental strain of being the single point of contact for all COVID-19 deaths on campus, or the isolation that came with the mandatory quarantines. The temporality of the pandemic was a commonplace that all the narrators shared, it shaped their view of the world and their leadership as they navigated this peculiar time.

The span of the pandemic went through many phases. From immediate to frantic, as the virus whipped speedily across the country and throughout the world, we engaged in the most rigid shutdown practices across the country, something I had never

experienced in my lifetime. By the time of our interviews, a growing number of folks were growing restless with quarantines and isolation. We had learned a lot from completely closing campuses, to figuring out how to work remotely, to now returning to campus. During this entire period, narrators were asked to do more than they were already doing. They described receiving additional responsibilities such as sending daily emails out to the college informing them about the number of positive COVID-19 cases on campus; they instructed faculty on the new classroom safety and sanitation protocols the colleges would be rolling out, and they sensitively and thoughtfully communicated faculty and staff deaths caused by the virus. Dr. Tubman articulated the mentally draining and taxing responsibilities for providing those key and timely updates that required working around the clock, seven days a week. Being responsible for communicating campus COVID-19 rates, who was positive, and who had to quarantine, or isolate was a daunting task. “It has been mentally taxing, and I have really relied on my faith in these moments to ensure that I can be a support to faculty, staff, or whomever I need to be in the moment.”

The familiar battle for Black women to not grow numb while still finding ways to protect our psyche was something Dr. Tubman wrestled with. Traditionally within white-male dominated social institutions, Black women use “everyday behavior as important locations for constructing a Black feminist consciousness” (Collins, 2000, p. 270). For Dr. Tubman, prayer was her go-to behavior, combined with reading the Bible, this helped her manage stress. I could certainly relate because they were both my primary strategies for managing stress as well, this was one of many sociality commonplaces between Dr. Tubman and I. Not only did we have moments of navigating similar challenges, we had

similar strategies that we employed to navigate those challenges and both heavily relied on our faith to guide, uplift, and validate us. Dr. Tubman strongly identified as a woman of faith, this was an alternative way that she produced and validated her knowledge.

Collins posits that subordinated groups have long had to use alternative ways to create build positive self-identities and validations (Collins, 2000). In addition to prayer, it was important for Dr. Tubman to work her faith in a way that it was visible to others. For her, part of working her faith meant starting and ending with kindness. “Making sure that kindness is a part of what we’re doing. Being kind to each other goes a long way”. Her relationship with Christ shaped what she believed and how she led.

Like many of our colleagues, Dr. Angelou suffered a personal loss that weighed heavily on her health and wellness. She lost her mother-in-law to COVID-19. She still never stopped working. I wondered if she even had the opportunity to step away without being bombarded with the thoughts of the work that would pile up while she was away. Collins (2009) calls out the outsider-within status that accompanies Black women who are agents of knowledge within academia and how they must navigate the tension of the differences between the cultural context of African-American communities and families, who would likely expect her to step away from work and grieve, and the expectations of PWI social institutions for Black women, who would likely allow the work to pile up as she stepped away and unintentionally making her less likely to feel like she can step away. Exceptionally, Dr. Angelou chose to use this devastating loss to help her decide that she did not want to be what she called a “casualty”, so she flipped it into an opportunity to overhaul her physical health and strengthened her mental wellbeing. “I started cooking at home, I changed my eating habits, and I made it a priority to exercise. I



started walking every day, and I lost about 25 pounds”. Dr. Robinson described seeking therapy as part of managing the increased anxiety and stress she felt.

I had some stuff that I had to go to therapy for and that messed me up real bad because I don't feel like I'm the kind of person who should have to go to therapy. I don't need to go to therapy, I'm stronger than that, but I'm not.

The insight the narratives provided spotlighting the level of responsibility, stress, anxiety, demand, and navigations clearly highlight how therapy and wellness support should be built into the contracts of women serving in these roles.

The narrators consistently emphasized how the pandemic increased stress and duties and propelled them to be intentional about their wellness. They chose a self-defined standpoint of not succumbing to the stresses of the pandemic and they were determined to come out on the other side of healthier. Dr. Truth mentioned how isolation limited her ability to play to her strength, which was people-oriented relationships.

I'm very relational. I'm very people-oriented. I like to come to work and have breakfast dates or lunch or you know, dinner or cocktail hour to connect because I truly believe that's how you really engage with people and get to know them. So that was a drain, and I had to get myself out of that. I had to figure a way out of it because it was just too much.

She decided to start doing other physical activities to fill time that would have normally been spent engaging face-to-face with people. Like Dr. Angelou, she committed to exercising and healthy eating, and she lost 50 pounds! She started each day with a prayer, “because I'm a person of faith, and then I work out, and it's made so much of a

difference”. She showed me before, and after pictures, she gave me workout tips, we laughed, I interjected with oohs and aahs, and immediately became inspired to be more intentional about my overall health.

Dr. Robinson spoke of the heaviness she experienced while leading during a time of indescribable deaths from this new disease within and outside the institution.

There were days when I couldn’t even open social media because it was so indescribable to know that many people had died. The very first person who died in our state was my cousin, so it hit us hard and fast. It reminded me a lot how we as African Americans don’t deal with trauma; trauma is part of who we are. Its trauma being here in this country, so we just be like, that’s just what it is.

She acknowledged that she still has not really dealt with it yet; she just pushed through it all and feels like, at one point, “there’s going to be like a collective grief that has not happened yet”. She and her family chose gratitude to balance it all. Thinking about the joys they have experienced as a family was a strategy that helped her manage it all.

Amidst losing students, colleagues, faculty, and staff during the pandemic each narrator found strategies to help them maintain a healthy mental and physical state as work demands intensified. The temporality of the pandemic shaped their narratives, their relationships, and their leadership. Collins (2009) power of self-definition was fully at play here, which can be described as utilizing the energy to maintain independent self-definitions beyond the limitations or challenges set before Black women. Each narrator described unprecedented levels of nimbleness, innovation, communication, and leadership expected of them and their peers across the country. These women found ways

to push through, and some came out even healthier on the other side. Two narrators turned heavily to working out and eating better and had amazing transformations in areas of weight loss, energy level, and overall health. All narrators leveraged the isolation to find more creative ways to connect and engage with their loved ones, colleagues, and staff more deeply.

A year after the start of the pandemic, some of their faculty and staff were still out on leave or working remotely because they feared coming back to campus, but all narrators were back on campus, finding ways to enhance the safety of the campus and the learning opportunities for both students and faculty. All felt their role was to hold it together and be strong for their teams. This is a form of impression management, feeling the need to show up in a particular way. Dr. Tubman said it beautifully, “I don’t want to look as stressed as I sometimes feel because if I look stressed, it’s going to fall on every other person on my team, and they will all feel it”. As a result, she is very cognizant of her body language, facial expressions, and how she presents herself, and relies heavily on her faith to get her through it all. Collins (2009) speaks of the weight that Black women carry of “hiding the self-defined standpoint from the prying eyes of the dominant group” (p. 107). Despite the stress points that her work imposed, Dr. Tubman continuously displayed a notable amount of self-worth.

Eating better, working out, increasing physical activity, cooking more, eating out less, focusing on the small joys of life, being grateful, and standing on their faith were strategies that narrators used to invest in their mental and physical wellness. They implemented these strategies when facing intense situations that required their steady support. The demands on their emotional wellbeing were intensified with the backdrop of

racial unrest overlapping the pandemic across the country. One narrator provided a glimpse of the losses she helped her team navigate in less than a month. She shared,

We had a faculty member commit suicide in the midst of this pandemic. Next, a faculty member's daughter passed away from COVID-19, another faculty member's grandmother passed away from COVID-19. Then a faculty member's husband was killed.

Each leader narrated the importance of working their way through the day with kindness as they relayed these messages to the President and her/his executive team, creating communications to share with all faculty, comforting those who needed it, working to ensure classes can be shifted to remote when necessary, working with faculty to find other options when remote was not possible, and managing dozens of meetings per week. Temporality shaped their narratives, their agential decisions about how they wanted to act and lead during this time, and the radical self-care (Lorde, 1980) they employed. I believe the thoughtfulness and care they emphasized helped them stay well in leading during this unprecedented time. I left each meeting, each encounter with them, feeling so inspired.

### **Theme Three:**

#### **Making a Way Out of No Way: Leadership as an Academic Unicorn**

*“You Gotta Own Who You Are - I'm a Black Woman”*

I use the concept of Black women intellectuals as the conceptual frame for the narrators' self-authoring of their identities as Black women. These narrators' self-framing highlighted their move beyond the often-all-consuming activity of surviving to also

thriving in their intellectual and leadership work. Collins (2000) defined controlling images as those images that portray African American women as stereotypical mummies, matriarchs, angry Black women, and other ideas defined by elite groups to exercise their power to manipulate ideas about Black womanhood. Narrators described such images and negative qualities that some attach to Black women, experienced at least one of these stereotypes, and pushed back against them within their professional careers. As Black, female, and senior academic administrators in PWIs and HWIs, they articulated some common experiences. However, as Collins (2009) emphasized, “despite common challenges and experiences, not all women have the same experiences nor agree on the significance of our varying experiences” (Collins, 2000, p. 28). Using a Black-feminist-inspired analysis of their narratives helps surface their significance, similarities, and differences in experiences. All occur within the commonplace of community colleges that are classified as majority white or historically white institutions.

One controlling image that has been problematic for Black women in the past and continues to rear its head in nuanced ways in institutions is the notion of “Black women becoming less ‘feminine’ because they work outside the home, competing with men, and their work takes them away from their children” (Collins, 2000, p. 54). Dr. Robinson spoke of this incongruence when she highlighted how colleagues treated her and a white woman’s mothering role differently in the workplace.

How someone perceives me as a mother is not the same as how they perceive my (white) colleague as a mother and her ability to figure it out and balance it. So, her needs to have supportive flexibility is perceived very different than mine. I don’t

even know that they even view me as a mother. They view me as a strong executive.

While her white colleague was encouraged to “hurry up and go home to be with your kids”, Dr. Robinson’s status as a mother was overlooked, and she was expected to stay however long it would take to finish up the work. This essentially placed her in a predicament in which, if she wants or needs to get to her children, she ultimately has to pipe up and say, “I gotta get out of here and get one of my kids,” forcing her to intervene and advocate for herself, where it was freely offered to her white colleague. This aligns with one of BFT’s core themes of Black women being viewed as “dehumanized objects, mules, living machines, more easily exploited than fully human women which would be white women” (Collins, 2000, p. 52). BFT documents how Black women’s labor is peppered with oppression of race, gender, and class.

One theme that stood out to me in the data was the narrators' refusal to hide their self-defined standpoint as Black women (Collins, 2000). Each narrator displayed a remarkable sense of self-worth, a form of self-definition central to BFT. This was personified by a statement that Dr. Truth made, “People want to label me with so many different things. And being all that, and then some, because there’s so much more to me than just being [an] Afro-Latina CAO.”

Each leader confidently narrated the value they currently brought to their institutional role. While constantly maneuvering and deflecting psychological attacks on their intellect, womanhood, and Blackness that could ultimately lead to feelings of self-doubt, the narrators showed that they regularly and intentionally chose not to care about

every microaggression and instance of differential treatment they may experience stemming from their Blackness. Why? Because at the end of the day, each woman spoke of being very comfortable with who they are as Black women. Aligned with Collins (2009) emphasis on the importance of Black women's work to define one's identity and reality within the matrix of oppression, these leaders seemed to individually and collectively craft their own self-definition that empowered them.

They knew the difficulty of proving acts of racism from a legal standpoint and recognized the fruitless labor involved therefore, they conserved their energy on encounters they thought were a waste of time to try to prove, educate, or point out. Instead, they narrated their selective resistance. They methodically controlled when and how they resisted and when they felt it was time to let their intellect, credibility, innovation, and leadership do the resisting. Dr. Truth recalled one of many times when speaking on a panel, various (white) audience members would refer to all her colleagues on the panel as "Dr." and turn to her and call her by her first name only. This was a clear racialized and gendered dismissal of her credentials, an enactment of the daily type of micro-aggressions that cumulatively shape Black women leaders' experiences. Yet her narrative framing was:

You can call me pretty much anything you want, that doesn't move me. For some people that's their job at trying to make you feel like you're not measuring up, but I have clearly because I'm still in this seat. So, I'm not proving anything to you or anybody else. So, since my mere existence seems to completely piss you off, I might as well smile and look cute while I'm up here and say yes, 'I'm June, who are you?'

This beautiful act of strong-willed resistance— “I will not be moved”—or one very similar was displayed by each narrator.

Black women intellectuals have long lived in this private, hidden space of Black women’s consciousness, the inside ideas that allow Black women to cope with and, in many cases, transcend the confines of intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality. (Collins, 2000, p. 108)

So, when Dr. Robinson says, “Racism is happening all the time. I don’t care. I’ve chosen not to care. It’s not my problem to deal with”, I interpret that statement from a Black woman’s standpoint in understanding that she is living out the very words Collins has used, “We’ve always had to live and navigate in two different worlds, one for them, (in which the reality is racism), and one for ourselves (where we are always working towards liberation)” (Collins, 2000, p. 110). She explained that she would not spend her valuable time proving herself worthy of white validation. Instead, she chose to leverage her Blackness, inner strength, intellect, and leadership to blaze trails.

One loud and clear theme among narrators was their comfort in their own skin and confident in their identities as Black women. One even named her Blackness her superpower.

So, like, right now, my institution, like all institutions, are dealing with all the DEI matters everybody has to deal with. But only one person in the room has the perspective, you know what I’m saying. So, to me, I think of it (Blackness) as my superpower. That’s my superpower. I have a perspective everybody needs, we need, that nobody else in the room has.



This narrative articulation, this perspective, rocked my world. It was so obvious, and of course, I have used my lived experience as a Black woman to solve many challenges at my community college, but I never heard it said like that before. Her crafted identity was created to empower her. Collins (2009) would define this act of crafty resistance as not being “a passive consumer of controlling images of Black womanhood, instead developing identities to empower them”. Dr. Robinson not only empowered herself, but she also empowered me as well.

Some narrators had experienced less racism as administrators than they did when they were faculty, and all spoke of how they continue to encounter and navigate racialized messages in their roles. All narrators spoke about the lack of time or energy they are willing to devote to caring about others' racialized perceptions of them, and all had unique and common ways of addressing stereotypes, biases, micro, and macroaggressions as they encountered them. The temporality of their narratives were amplified as they highlighted both an ancestral connection and community connection as they described their strength in generational terms—that it lies in the foundation passed down to them from their mothers, grandmothers, aunts, mentors, and all the strong, caring, persevering, and bright Black women that helped usher them into their Black womanhood. Their narratives reveal the nuances of Black women finding dignity in spaces not made for them, as Collins (2009) describes is characteristic of the outsider-within perspective. It emphasizes their impact in institutional transformation and also breaks down false binaries between the work they do in institutions and the work they do in the world. Their activism spills outside the walls of the institution in a way that one

can also feel their impact in the communities they serve and among the families and friends they love.

Each narrator was grounded in their own self-defined knowledge of who they are as Black women (Collins, 2000). Drs. Angelou and Tubman each mentioned fashioning themselves after the wise and influential Black female role models in their family, particularly their mothers and grandmothers. Dr. Angelou frequently mentioned how her upbringing prepared her for her success and the challenges she faces today.

I had a very strong mentor in my mother. She was not college-educated; she went back years after high school to get her GED, but she really pushed us. She helped me recognize that I could do whatever I set my mind to.

Even today, after her Mom has passed away, she continues to rely heavily on the guidance she provided her and credits her mother for the courage she has today. Dr. Tubman's story is very similar; she credits both her mother and grandmother for how she leads with courage today. She always wants to make sure that she is making them proud, and this foundation helps guide her in making decisions from a place of integrity and ethics and avoiding any actions that could cause shame or harm to her family. This familial grounding compels her to stay true to herself and remain authentic. Dr. Robinson also credits her upbringing but emphasized how place was salient in her narrative of self-identity; her city, Compton, shaped her and her Blackness. In Compton, she saw people who looked like her in all spaces, doing all kinds of things, and she narrated that commonplace as making a difference in how she saw the world and how she operated. Growing up in a city that was not just "Black but Blackity Black" gave her a "Black

perspective, and that's how she sees the world, that's how the world treats her, and that's how she shows up". Compton countered the controlling images that many Black girls and women grew up seeing. She narrates her identity as grounded in a particular space. This is the place where she first found joy and consistently encountered images of Black power and beauty that she narrates as allowing her, even today, to methodically, assertively, and successfully navigate the contradicting white academic spaces in which she leads today.

This self-defined voice that Collins (2009) introduced can also be a collective voice. In observing the interaction between Drs. Tubman and Angelou, their exchange was a perfect example of the range of voice in the telling and retelling of similar experiences. The words differed, but the standpoint was the same, and they built upon each other's words to validate similar experiences. As Dr. Tubman shared the insights of her mentor, another Black female CAO at a different PWI, on the challenges of leading an academic unit as a Black woman, she affirmed that her experiences have been similar. She was consistently met with "mm hmms, good points, those are good points, so true, yes" from Dr. Angelou and I. Then Dr. Angelou would share her experiences, and they would be met with "So true, yes, let me add to that, and laughter" from both Dr. Tubman and me. The more we interacted, the clearer one could see we had, and were further forming as we came alongside one another, a collective voice. We narrated deriving our identity from the strengths, trials, and triumphs of our mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and other Black female mentors, that have had to navigate white supremacy their entire life while finding freedom and liberty in our collective strengths and triumphs.

## **Theme Four:**

### **Persistence Strategies for Success**

*“You are never going to prove that (racism) unless it’s overt and nobody’s hanging signs outside of my door or putting nooses over offices. But yea, I mean you experience it (racism), period. It’s (racism) in all the tangible and intangible things.”*

In this section, I capture the multiple strategies the narrators use to persist and thrive as Black female senior-level academic leaders in a postsecondary academic culture originally designed to serve the interests of wealthy white men (Gutierrez y Muhs, 2012). I use Collins’ (2009) term, Black women’s oppression, as the conceptual anchor to emphasize the backdrop of the contradictory culture in which we as Black women navigate and are hired to lead. As discussed in the literature review, it is a common experience for Black faculty at PWIs to recognize and respond to the racialized and gendered complexities in traditionally white institutions. For Collins (2009), this is one form of intellectual activism. Like Black faculty, these narrators “share their experiences from a place of empowerment despite their marginalization on numerous levels” (Gutierrez y Muhs, 2012, p. 78). These leaders own how they navigate and respond to the call for their leadership in spaces where the institutional culture expects them to be white. This section will engage in making meaning of the nuanced ways Black women describe leading and navigating in places where they are often the only Black executive in sight.

#### **Relations with owners of capital**

Each narrator articulated the need to gain buy-in from faculty while also realizing, like all executives, they would never get buy-in from all faculty. The realization that they

wouldn't get buy-in from all faculty went beyond the common acknowledgement that you'll always have people who don't like you. It was laced with the understanding that institutional racism is propelled by individuals who consume and reproduce the ideology of white supremacy. One immediate leadership strategy that Dr. Tubman employed was making very clear that she knew who did not want her there. She shared that she also "made it very clear that she earned her position and she's smart enough to lead academics". She did as her mentor, a Black female president at a PWI instructed, she picked moments that she would "put her foot down" when racialized challenges came her way. She described pushing back against those assumptions and behaviors by showing them that she knows what she's doing. She has a warm, caring, and engaging aura about her. Her brilliance, paired with her thoughtfulness completely drew me in each time we met, and her narratives emphasized that she leads by thinking about and advocating for all stakeholders. Dr. Kaye finds setting her own threshold helpful to assess her success with building relations and gaining faculty trust. She measured success by assessing if she could gain buy-in from at least 85% of the faculty believing in her leadership and supportive of her decision-making, she was doing well.

Dr. Robinson acknowledged the importance of faculty who are owners of capital, and the importance of leveraging her experience as a former full-time faculty member to gain credibility from faculty. She also spoke of the importance of her credentials, as a form of capital, and the power of the doctor salutation in front of her name in strengthening social relations with other owners of capital within the institution. She explained, "It helps me that there is a doctor in front of my name. For some people in my role, that doctor, for a lot of faculty, matters". She also described a speaker's advice when

presenting at her school. She was a Black woman who told Dr. Robinson that she always has them read her entire bio because it's important for every white audience member to know that she's a scientist to counter lurking stereotypes. Dr. Robinson's strategy is not to take offense at every dig that comes her way. She narrates an example that manifested in the commonplace of email, an institutional mini-space in which narrators described some racialized slights and navigations. She said,

There are faculty who correct my emails that I send out and send them back to me with their edits. My response is simply, thanks. I'm not about to argue with them over some edits. I'm not an editor, and I'm not gonna try to be an editor, so thank you.

Dr. Truth also narrated the importance of credentials, as its own form of capital, for women of color leading in these roles in PWIs.

They've got to respect my chops. I've been an adjunct, an instructor, assistant professor, and an associate professor with tenure. Whether they like my face in this role or not, they have to have a healthy respect for the Afro-Latina woman that I am in this space.

She's been a departmental chair, a dean, a vice president, and an executive vice president and now serves in another lead academic role. Because she has covered many areas in her academic career, she believes these experiences give her much credibility in spaces that accompany her credentials. She shared that earning two terminal degrees gives her an immediate amount of "She's smart right? We can't take that away from her, right?". She wanted to clarify, though, "now, that didn't mean the dose of respect would stay there or

that people would like to give her the respect; it's just the credentials they can't deny". In addition to her credentials and experience, she emphasizes that it must be accompanied with: "A healthy dose of courage to walk through the sorts of stereotypes and mental dimensions we navigate because it takes you liking you and being comfortable in the skin you're in to successfully navigate these spaces." All narrators acknowledged that being a chief academic officer comes with a certain amount of criticism and being under the microscope of super-smart people. They narrated and displayed a level of emotional intelligence that conveyed their expertise in the business of people.

### **Safe and Supportive Spaces**

The narrators shared and spoke highly of the support, love, care, reliance on, and empowerment they received from their spouses. The frequency in which they relied on their spouse for a variety of support and the fuel it provided them, which helped them be more strategic at work and home, was distinctive for Drs. Angelou, Robinson, and Tubman. Dr. Truth alluded to how her marriage partnership helps her navigate the work and time demands of her institutional role, and other narrators shared in detail how their relationships with their husbands are a source of power providing energy to persevere, lead, and change. They narrated themselves as connected in this way, meaning their spouses were part of their team. Dr. Tubman shares, "I typically, unfortunately, rely on my husband. I don't see how you can do it without your spouse's support. My spouse's support is critically important to me. I can engage in real talk with him." These examples align with Collins' (2009) writing about the power of love relationships; they can tap into deep feelings and ground and empower Black women. The narrators spoke of their spousal partners as sources of strength, support, and sustenance.

Dr. Robinson and her husband have been married for 20 years. Her greatest pride is her twenty years of marriage. Being married twenty years and looking forward to fifty years is a matter of pride and strength given that many people have never seen close to twenty years of marriage to the same spouse. When asked about the support she most heavily relies on, she shared:

I lean on my husband a ton, probably too much. I feel bad sometimes, a lot, you know, I trust him. We operate as a team, so you know, this journey has been all of ours. It feels like I have a coach, a cheerleader; I have whatever I need. I got someone to go get my liquor and go get my ice cream. So, you know, I depend on him a ton.

The joy in her voice and body language aligns beautifully with the way she describes the value that she places on her husband. She is very clear that she does not pacify her husband and that he is very confident in who he is as a man. The fact that she earns more money than he does is not a challenge for him because they both know that he takes care of her in all the ways she needs him to, and being taken care of financially is not a need that she has of him.

How these women spoke about their love relationships with their husbands made it easy to see the role their significant others play in their work-lives behind the scenes as well as provides a contrast with their work experiences. The narratives showcased their spouses as life supports or safe spaces; when the narrators are fighting their toughest battles, the physical vicinity of wherever they connect with their spouses outside of the workplace is the commonplace where they morph into peace amid their storms. As one



narrator emphasized, they are a team. Their love for and from their spouses' shape, empower, and sustain them. Although they sometimes encounter tragic loneliness in their academic roles, their experience of loving and being loved by their spouses is central to their sense of self. Through the telling of their individual experiences, a trend emerged that amplified the significance of their spouses. They narrated their spouses' love and support as the secret weapons that helped these leaders chop through the rugged vines of the jungle on their quest to create greater access and success for the most vulnerable of college students, those attending community colleges. Their behind-the-scenes team was a powerful network that contrasted their sense of loneliness at work.

### **Prayer Is My Strategy**

The narrators all illustrated how they suffer through the pernicious environments of historically white academia, this commonplace of the social conditions of the environment of higher education and all the surrounding factors is traditionally within the commonplace of a physical building but the temporality of the pandemic broadened the space where it could also be in the virtual land of Zoom and other remote meetings. Yet, they narrate their triumphs through capturing the many ways they effect change and work to create student-centered cultures of success. When listening to the strategies they employ to not only survive but thrive, for all of the narrators, prayer frequently crossed their lips. Prayer helped them make their way through the suffering of their hardest days. Their spiritual strength was both astounding and familiar. When serving and leading in spaces where resistance and opposition are ever-present, and our brilliance is sometimes even undermined, prayer is the reliable tool that leads us to love and gives us an unshakeable strength. Dillard (2016) states, "We lead and love as Black women in a place

that has never affirmed Black womanhood. So, we affirm it for ourselves” (p. 34). Prayer ushers us into that space where we regain the strength to affirm ourselves.

In my very first interview with Dr. Tubman, she told of one of the many times she was encouraged to prepare for the presidency when she was sure that she only wanted to go as high as a dean role. After saying no to considering a senior-level leadership role many times, prayer helped her get to the point of seeing herself as capable of succeeding in a vice president position. BFT explores the hidden space of Black women’s consciousness. For Dr. Tubman, self-reflection allowed her to “cope and transcend the confines of intersecting oppressions of race and gender” (Collins, 2000, 108). When asked about her strategies for success in this role, self-reflection was her secret sauce.

I start my morning reading my daily meditation, and you know my devotion.

When I get to the office, I read a scripture every morning to make sure I stay centered. Moments during the day, I might text my husband and tell him I need him to send a prayer real quick for me. Sometimes, I’ve got to touch the word, so I have a physical Bible in my desk drawer that I might need to pick up and read a scripture.

That routine helps her continue with her day in a way that she can leave and be happy with the day.

Like, Dr. Tubman, Dr. Angelou also said, “Prayer is my success strategy. I’m a very spiritual person, and I don’t hide that fact either”. She spoke of frequently going to God in prayer when adversity strikes or when facing major challenges. Prayer was another commonplace that captured the quality of a space that was shared among all the

narrators. Dr. Angelou shared that even though her supervisor, the president, does not go to church, she will “tell him in a minute; I need to pray about it,” bringing her spirituality directly into the workplace—a spiritual spatial commonplace that manifested in her and other women’s narratives. Engaging in deep and sustained dialogue with these women made me stand taller in my faith and encouraged me to be bolder with my spiritual truths, caring, and strength.

We all have to learn to speak words in ways that have love at the center, especially love of ourselves. In order to do the work of leadership, we must show up strong and whole, with a great sense of what work is ours to do as Black women on this earth” (Dillard, 2016, p. 35).

Prayer helps us show up strong and whole. Dr. Angelou gives God all the credit for the position she holds today. She believes that her hard work and perseverance contributed to her being able to secure the position, and for her, it all starts and ends with God.

Dr. Robinson begins our time together by recounting her journey and how clueless she was as a first-generation community college student and asserts that it was only by the grace of God that she made it through college and is able to sit in the role she currently holds. She credits God for not letting her fail when opportunity opened its door to positions she thought she was ready for but realized she was not prepared as fully as she preferred at that point. Dr. Truth also spoke of starting her day with prayer and shared that she is a woman of faith. It was striking how frequently prayer emerged in all the narratives because I never asked a specific question about the narrators’ religious beliefs or practices. The narrators brought to bear their spirituality and their relationships with

God as powerful resources that help them develop a particular way of seeing and navigating their realities.

### **Theme Five:**

#### **Finding Joy in the Face of Oppression and Bias**

*“I enjoy my job. The thing that you can’t do in the classroom is really impact at a large scale, a lot of students’ success. And that’s probably the thing I really enjoy about my job now”.*

Each of the narrators in this study exudes hooks (2000) ingredients of love: care, respect, commitment, trust, and open communication. These are a few characteristics that come to mind when combing through the data. For hooks, love is something we choose and there can be no love without justice.

The heart of justice is truth telling, seeing ourselves and the world the way it is rather than the way we want it to be. More than ever before we, as a society, need to renew a commitment to truth telling (hooks, 2018, p. 66).

These women not only exude love, they also lead with love, and find joy in the face of oppression and bias through love. To hooks (2018), love involves action. The thought, care, and brilliance they lead with are declarations of love. Even when they encounter digs and slights, they choose to be and think from their recognition of their worthiness (Dillard, 2016). In BFT, the sharing of their truths through their narratives is both an act of justice and love. So how do these women find joy? They narrate a variety of ways in which they find joy. Some find it in their everyday practices living out the mission of a

community college, which is providing open access to quality, affordable education to all, particularly to students of color. They find joy in breaking glass ceilings and being a role model for future generations. They find joy in bringing people together to solve complex problems. They find joy in the everyday opportunity that they must help others.

Using some of their own educational experiences as examples, they described their deep belief in the power of a college experience to change lives, especially for members of the Black community, who not so long ago, did not legally have the opportunity to access and participate in education. They describe working daily to create positive opportunities, upward mobility, and social advancement for those seeking higher education. They love this complex, time-consuming, demanding work. When asked about the moments they find and experience joy at work, none of the women had difficulties responding to this question. The answers readily and freely rolled out of their mouths. They narrate the deep, meaningful impact of what their work means to them.

For Dr. Truth, joy comes with helping others. She finds deep joy in the moments when she can help someone reach their next level, be it their next level of leadership or their next level of learning or understanding. “Being able to help others navigate particular paths that they weren’t previously able to do makes me happy”. She pointed out that she must find celebratory moments in the small joys of senior-leadership roles because big wins are few and far between. The moments in which she’s finding these joys would be considered temporal from a narrative inquiry perspective. “The big wins you never get credit for because they usually come with a lot of upheavals, unrest, and change that people don’t want to remember”. So, she finds joy in the small celebratory moments, such as helping a faculty member figure out that they no longer have to do

those three burdensome things to upload their grades; they could simply click this button and upload. When we find joy in helping others, the opportunity to experience joy through meaningful work is endless.

In such demanding jobs, it's also critical to find joy and inspiration outside of work. For Dr. Truth, finding time to read, enjoy nature and beautiful places, and have interpersonal engagement with people fill her tank and bring her joy. Dr. Angelou experiences joy at work when she can go to student activities and functions on campus, like recognition and award ceremonies. She elaborates, "I enjoy seeing the growth and development of students across the span of their college journey. Visiting with them and learning the ways that college has positively stretched, influenced, and developed them brings me joy." It reminds her that they have done something right for those students, and when they go out into the workforce, they are going to do wonderful things. Seeing the changes, she's helped with brings her joy. Outside her job, her family continues to inspire her and makes her really happy. Watching her children grow over the years and become professionals themselves, and expand their horizons brings her joy. She has a two-year-old grandson and loves watching him develop.

Like Dr. Angelou, attending student engagement activities brings Dr. Tubman great joy when she can see student success in action. When narrating markers of her meaningful work, Dr. Truth also finds joy in resolving student issues, particularly those they did not think could be resolved.

I love the work that I do, and I love the reach of the work that I'm able to do.

Resolving student issues for me are exciting, those that they didn't think could be

resolved or those opportunities that I have to encourage students to move forward. Then you hear from them at the end of the semester and they were successful in their courses and they want you to meet their mom and children and all those things.

On the business side, joy comes when she has accomplished a monumental achievement like a major signing with a four-year university that created dozens of new articulation agreements. The joyous moments most frequently emerge when she sets students up for success opportunities. Outside of work, joy and happiness come from spending time with her family. “My family, my boys make me very happy, my husband makes me very happy. I love going home, knowing that when I walk in the house, I’m just mom and wife at that moment. This was a consensus among all the narrators. They found joy in spending time with their families. Dr. Robinson finds joy when cynicism does not win. She talked about how we become cynical as we get older and the longer we do this work, but the triumphant moments where she can stand her ground and stay positive, even amid tremendous disrespect, being kind and standing her ground brings her joy.

Moments when all of Dr. Robinson’s hard work, authenticity, and relationships work together and people notice it brings her joy. She gave the example of the time the faculty union president tried to get the faculty to give their accreditors negative feedback about her leadership, and the faculty collectively went against him and stood up for her and negated the lies he was spreading,

Eunice, the faculty stood up for me; they stood up for me. They were like that’s not true, she’s done an amazing job, and they stood up for me. And do you know,

three weeks later, he stepped down from union president! Like yes, I believe in God.

Those unexpected moments when others acknowledge her hard work, and the faculty stands up and speaks the truth to power on her behalf, bring her joy and remind her that God is real. Increasing student success brings her even greater joy. Her hope is to one day attend graduation with no empty chairs because of the overflow of graduating students. The work that she contributes to make this a possibility is struggle for group survival, which BFT explains as a form of resistance that “represents the foundations of Black women’s activism” (Collins, 2000, p. 216). Like many of the narrators, outside of work, her family inspires her, makes her happy, and propels her to conquer any challenge that may cause her to fail.

I experienced joy listening to how they frame their successes and resist and challenge social norms. How they lead, foster success, and hope fueled my fire and challenged me to bring more of my authentic self to work as part of my contribution to the movement for radical higher educational change. Their contributions to this research, their institutions, and academia as a whole is nothing less than remarkable. Their spiritual strength and confidence in who they are makes their leadership unique. Their nimbleness and agility make their leadership relevant. Their brilliance and resilience make their leadership necessary. Their support systems and relationships with their spouses and how they protect their mental well-being make their leadership sustainable. All those qualities together make their leadership the heart of education. They meet the challenges that they face with courage, prayer, and confidence in a way that not only says, “I am here,” but propels their leadership success. Amidst seemingly impossible schedules, they continue



to give back to those coming behind them and even those coming alongside them. I was overwhelmed with gratitude for their time. They manipulated their schedules, stayed after work, moved meetings, and sacrificed lunch breaks to meet with me and ensure they met my deadlines. Each narrator is the epitome of what Maya Angelou describes as a phenomenal woman, and I am forever changed through my interactions and time spent with these brilliant and brave pioneers.



## CHAPTER VI

### DISCOVERIES AND IMPLICATIONS

*“My mentor said to me, a lot of people have little respect for women of color who lead academics at a PWI because they don’t think we’re smart enough to do that because the brain trust of your institution is your academics. People you meet will automatically think you’re the Vice President of Student Affairs because it’s okay for us to be in Student Affairs. We can play in that stuff, we can do that, but we’re not smart enough to be leading academics because those are the scholars of the institution. She was right because I’ve experienced all of that.”*

In chapter V, I made meaning of the experiences of a group of narrators, four Black women serving in senior-level academic administrator roles at PWIs and HWIs using narrative analysis that incorporate attention to commonplaces and BFT. In this chapter, I provide a brief overview of the study’s purpose and methods, answer the inquiry questions, put forward implications for theory, practice, and research, and recommend further research. I end this chapter with a personal reflection of my experience conducting the study.

The experiences of Black women in senior-level student affairs roles and those serving as president have been explored in multiple ways. However, few studies have examined how Black women serving in senior-level academic affairs roles have navigated and persisted at this level, specifically in PWIs and HWIs, using BFT as the lens through which to study this experience. In this study, I used my positionality as a Black woman who was a former provost at a PWI to inform my inquiry, data collection, and meaning-making. The purpose of this study was to examine the personal and professional experiences of Black women serving in senior-level academic leadership positions at PWIs and HWIs and, in doing so, illuminate their persistence strategies and how they find joy and thrive despite their frequent encounters with bias, stereotypes, and discrimination. The study design did not set out to specifically explore the experiences of Black women leading in a community college setting; however, it is important to note that all narrators were leaders at community colleges. Researchers show that public two-year colleges continue to hire the most diverse collection of leaders (Lederman, 2022). This could be one explanation for the results of my recruitment.

The inquiry questions guiding this study were:

1. How do Black women leaders experience the intersecting media of race and gender in their senior-level academic leadership roles in their PWIs/HSIs?
2. What are the institutional messages and controlling images about Black women they encounter in their leadership roles?
3. How do they navigate and resist the racial/gendered institutional cultural messages they encounter in their leadership role at their PWI/HSI?

4. Where do they find joy and fulfillment within institutionalized systems of domination?

In this chapter, I answer the inquiry questions using narrative inquiry and BFT, which positioned me to explore the narrators' experiences against the distinctive themes of Black women's experiences (Collins, 2000). I listened to and engaged with each narrator during three guided conversations conducted over twelve weeks. I examined documents, photographs, and other public artifacts related to their leadership roles. I listened to and transcribed 13 hours of conversations and over 500 pages of field texts. I learned with them and several had the opportunity to share their experiences together. I offered the narrators the opportunity to read and adjust the research texts as they saw fit.

I interacted with narrators through Zoom due to the presence of a national pandemic that limited in-person engagements. Virtual interactions may seem less relational than in-person meetings; nevertheless, we still built relationships beyond just verbal communication. Smiles and laughter were still exchanged, facial expressions of shock and “yes girl, I know” were exchanged, follow-up questions emerged in conversation, body responses led to more detail, and narrators posed questions to me as well because I too am a Black woman who shares with them the unique positioning of having served in a senior-level academic leadership role. Using both narrative analysis and BFT, I interpreted and analyzed their narratives and moved from composing field texts to research texts. My narrative analysis created 5 themes. 1) Work-Life Balance: A 24/7 Proposition 2) Staying Well while Leading through an Institutional COVID-19 Pandemic 3) Making a Way Out of No Way: Leadership as an Academic Unicorn 4) Persistence Strategies for Success, and 5) Finding Joy.

## Discoveries

In this section, I answer the inquiry questions based on the themes I discussed in Chapter V. “Narrative inquiries are always strongly autobiographical” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 121). Therefore, I will weave my perspective, through use of the “I” pronoun, throughout this chapter to illuminate my presence and experiences alongside the narrators, always located somewhere in the inquiry space along the dimensions of time, place, and the personal. In answering the inquiry questions, I draw from overarching categories and themes (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The answer to one question often overlaps with another.

**Inquiry Question 1: How do Black women leaders experience the intersections of race and gender in their senior-level academic leadership roles in their PWIs/HSIs?** The field and research texts reveal that while all narrators have experienced and navigated challenges around their gender, their racialized experiences took precedence over their gendered experiences. Yet, their intersectionality as women and identity as African-American/Black was too entangled to pull apart cleanly. They narrated the entanglement. It is important to note that while my recruitment materials and process required participants to be women who identified as Black, one of the narrators identified as biracial, both Black and Latina. All women identified as women from a cis-gendered perspective. All narrators were keenly aware of the subtle and nuanced challenges that holding the title and working in a role as prestigious as a vice president of academic affairs, or similarly titled role, as a Black woman brings. Such challenges include precarious situations about whom we are perceived to be and who members of the academy think we should be, how we must negotiate, communicate, and demonstrate

our competency and authority, the credentials we must earn, and the cultural insight we must provide.

In support of the scholarship by Holder, Jackson, and Ponterotto (2015), these narrators found that despite their career success and senior-level positions, they were not immune to the insidious impact of racism and sexism. Their narratives reveal that while their race and gender influence their academic leadership roles in the settings in which they work, it most often occurs in subtle ways, in varied spaces, from passing but cumulative slights, overt challenges in large public gatherings, and dismissals in executive meetings. For example, all have experienced encounters where one has chosen not to acknowledge their earned credentials when addressing them while simultaneously acknowledging the credentials of their white colleagues in the same breath. It shows up in the expectation that some narrators serve as the sole voice and authority representing all Black perspectives and experiences in their leadership meetings. It invites some faculty to challenge them in ways they believe they would not be challenged if they were white. It sometimes means they are overlooked as the knowledge bearers in the room. Other times, it propels them to speak up when they otherwise may not because if they do not share the perspective of the marginalized, it will not be accounted for.

Their narratives surfaced a pattern of a strong work ethic, both in terms of their orientation to their work and in responding to racial oppression in the workplace. Travis and Thorpe-Moscon (2018) found, in their study on Black women executives, that these women reported spending significant amounts of time and energy consciously preparing to face small acts of bias, discrimination, and/or exclusion each day, which requires daily vigilance to guard themselves against hurtful situations. This showed up in leaders'

narrations as they reflected on the additional work they took on, the additional articles and materials they read to ensure they were very knowledgeable on topics listed on agendas for future meetings with their executive colleagues, and/or the many ways they worked to support and make themselves available to the masses that needed and pulled on their time. They made sense of their racialized experiences and their orientation to their work through the support of their family identities, ancestral guidance, community membership, significant others, and sometimes, mentors, if they had one— —only two narrators spoke of a mentor. Some journaled, most prayed and/or read their bible to sustain themselves. One narrator considered her encounters with racism, sexism, and/or ageism to be “not as bad” as other regions of the country that her girlfriends have to work within and navigate, which helped her sharpen her perspective of her experience.

In Hyppolite’s (2019) study on Black women’s journey to executive leadership, she found that Black women in executive positions felt that they had to find the delicate balance of always pushing ahead while also knowing when to let things go. Strategic choices and resilience are thus required qualities for their leadership. The narratives in my study also revealed patterns in which the narrators decided when to and when not to even “deal” with the racial “nonsense” they encountered. They understood that negotiating their identity as Black women with non-Black peers, staff, and others required an expensive amount of energy they were not always willing to part with. More often than not, dealing with racism and/or sexism would be on their terms; they would decide when they would call out, call in, or interact with those experiences. The narrators shared stories of resisting subjugation and others when they intervened in situations to set the tone for the respect that they deserve as the academic leader. Those narratives



illuminated the subtle and nuanced ways in which racialized stereotypes, biases, micro, and macroaggressions find and seize these women in their professional habitats.

Their narratives also revealed a pattern that affirmed their leadership “is necessary right now”. Their visibility in their roles mattered to students of color. They spoke of moments when a student of color would see them in the hallway and react as if they were meeting a celebrity. One student saw Dr. Tubman and said,

“It’s you! I’m going to call my mom and tell her I met you!” Those moments when students see themselves in you and become inspired to do more, it’s in those moments that I say, “I’m needed in this space right now.”

Dr. Truth shared how moved she was when not only African American students and staff saw themselves in her:

But the Latino ones as well. Receiving that kind of love, that oh my gosh, Dr. Truth, I heard you are Latina, wow, gives me a real push to excel because of all the people, my people, behind me.

Each narrator framed their work in terms of responsibility beyond the demanding requirements of community college leadership. They carry responsibility with them, because of their racial identity, to make their community proud. The weight of this call to succeed could sometimes feel overwhelming, but all women embraced it, and they each carried the call with fulfillment. Dr. Angelou emphasized, “Being the very first African-American woman to do this job; you carry a lot of pressure with this role. The pressure not to embarrass anybody. That’s a heavy burden, not a burden, a heavy responsibility to

have to carry”. For others, they carried the expectations their grandmothers and mothers had instilled in them. Although a heavy responsibility, they used these family values to propel them into success.

**Inquiry Question 2: What are the institutional messages and controlling images about Black women they encounter in their leadership roles?** The narratives revealed that the leaders received and processed messages from numerous sources that shaped their perceptions of leaders before occupying these roles. All described and gave examples of being the first or the second Black woman in their institution’s history to ever serve in this role. Two expressed disappointment that they were still the only or one of two out of dozens of institutions in their districts due to their belief that many diverse practitioners were interested and qualified to fill these roles. However, the institutional message and controlling images (Collins, 2000) of the current demographic makeup of individuals in these roles across their network gave the impression that white was the preferred and/or qualified race for this particular role. In this sense, leadership, whiteness, and masculinity were historically normalized for this position. If institutions are to counter these loud messages that academic leadership has a certain look, gender, and race, and we want to pivot to live up to the principle of meritocracy that higher education,

We must ask how merit’s meaning has been recast in ways that leave some groups feeling justified in the fictitious belief that they have earned, on their own, and therefore deserve their success. As the meritocracy intensifies, the striving so absorbs us that our indebtedness recedes from view. In this way, even in a fair meritocracy, it induces the mistaken impression that we have made it on our own (Sandel, 2020, n.p.).

For the narrators, their leadership stories and how they seized the opportunity to lead exude gratitude, humility, community, and care for all, particularly the least among us, and less of an air of meritocratic hubris. Their narratives worked to transcend an individual narrative but one of a collective, bigger version of success beyond working to succeed for themselves. They take pride in their work, are individuals with their own strengths, families, investments but they never frame their work in individualist terms. Their narratives amplify a theme of community: of indebtedness and respect for their families, service to students, their husbands, and their community.

Patterns in the narratives revealed that, as Collins (2000) articulated in her classic theoretical text, Black women deal with racialized and gendered stereotypes in their institutions formulated by members of dominant social groups and the larger social, political and economic context of the U.S. Most narrators provided examples of these encounters occurring with white faculty members. They all received messages that we, Black women, were/are not worthy of professional address given that many addressed them without using their earned prefix of “Dr.” when their white colleagues in the same setting received that respectful form of address. Dr. Robinson also illustrates the level of scrutiny that goes into the credentials of women of color,

I do think it helps me that there is a doctor in front of my name. But, for a lot of the faculty, that doctor also depends on what it's in. Some faculty think that because I majored in [a non-science field], that's soft. It matters how you present it, approach it, whether or not your credibility gets questioned.

Most provided examples of messages that Black women were less intelligent, that we do not have any place in senior-academic leadership in PWIs through common encounters of mistaking their identity and roles with lower-level positions. This supports the findings in Holder, Jackson, and Ponterotto's (2015) study that a primary racial microaggression that women in senior-level positions experienced in corporate America was related to the stereotype of being intellectually inferior. Although their study focused on Black women in corporate America, the narrators in this study had similar experiences in academia. This also reflects the importance of intellectual activism as a tenet of BFT (Collins, 2000) and as a form of epistemic justice—having one's knowledge base recognized (Fricker, 2007).

The patterns in their narratives revealed a theme of working harder to demonstrate their competence and belonging in the role. Dr. Truth is adamant that a Black woman, and in her particular case, a Black and Latina woman serving in this role “has to bring her chops, in particular, when you're leading on the academic side of the house”. This means that you have to not only have the credentials but the credibility that comes from your experience and accomplishments, which comes from having an unmatched work ethic. Your chops work against the controlling images and institutional messages. “Whether they like my face in this role or not, they have to have a healthy respect for the Afro Latina woman that I am in this space”, says Dr. Truth. Dr. Robinson described how professionals that have worked hard and made it to this level should automatically be respected, but as a Black woman, that is not our reality. So, she makes sure that she arms herself with knowledge, “And it's not about them. It's for me and people who look like me. I'm going prepared wherever I go and the more prepared I am, the better I feel”. The

high level of preparation required to counter the controlling image of presumed incompetence was a recurring theme throughout. This labor incorporates epistemic justice (Fricker, 2007), owning the right to be heard, to be seen, and to be recognized as a knowledge bearer amid countering controlling images. The narratives showcase the ways these women show up and maneuver scrutiny in ways that are tied to their positionality and speak in ways to increase the chances that their voices to be heard.

Field and research texts also revealed an institutional pattern of tokenism. Some acknowledged navigating the controlling image of “being viewed as a symbol of race rather than as an individual” (Gutierrez y Muhs, 2012, p. 65). Most narrated experiences in which they were expected to speak on behalf of their entire race. Dr. Tubman shared,

When I go into our bimonthly meetings, I have learned by the questions my colleagues pose that I am speaking for every Black student, that’s in all 25 community colleges when I’m giving my thoughts on something. I am speaking for every Black faculty member that they have had or don’t have.

None of the narrators specifically resent the asking, as they have valuable perspectives to bring from their outsider-within position in the academy (Collins, 2000)—a superpower, in fact, as one narrator described it; however, their narratives acknowledge that it’s a heavy burden and unrealistic expectation that one Black person can speak on behalf of the whole multidimensional group.

Despite these institutional messages and controlling images, a primary narrative pattern is that every single leader loves her job. Dr. Kaye shared, “I am committed to my professional life. I love my job. I love working on the campus. I love all the activities that

go along with it". The narratives revealed a strong pattern of enjoyment in serving in this role and living out the mission of a community college. They each receive joy and fulfillment in being role models, mentors, and coaching up-and-coming professionals of color in the academy. Dr. Robinson talked about her joy related to her institutional goals:

I enjoy my job. The thing that you can't do in the classroom is really impact at a large scale, a lot of students' success. And that's probably the thing I really enjoy about my job now. I want to see more students graduate. I want to go to graduation one day and it's not enough seats because we didn't know so many students were gonna come to graduation.

Their ability to impact large scale change drives and fulfills these leaders. They all truly believe that a Community College education is the path to liberation and want their institutions to be intentional about their role in equitable student success.

**Inquiry Question 3: How do they navigate and resist the racial/gendered institutional cultural messages they encounter in their leadership role at their PWI/HSI?** Environmental stressors and institutional climates can make leading as a senior-level Black academic administrator difficult, and typically, the racial climate is only visible to the racially minoritized employees. The narratives reflect varied navigation and resistance strategies. Each leader described working to build cultures of camaraderie, centering strong relationship building as a skill set and priority, both within and outside the institution. Investments are made in building authentic relationships with faculty, colleagues, and students for the betterment of students and their success. The narratives highlight a shared vision and commitment to the institutional mission of a

community college center their focus on student success through quality learning and support. This focus and vision for educational equity in success outcomes propel them to refuse to assimilate with any culture that works against their vision and charge.

One strategy of resistance is focusing as much as possible on the valuable educational mission to which big picture, the valuable mission to which they contribute, rather than the microaggressions and indignities that emerge in their institutional cultures. This is a choice they make with their labor. Their belief in education's ability to change lives shape their leadership and resistance. Dr. Robinson reflects, "You know, the longer that I do this work, the more passionate I become. I believe in the power of education. I believe college changes people's lives. This is the way we (Black people) change our trajectory." This belief in and commitment to the power of college degrees, particularly for students of color, serves as fuel for these institutional leaders when they have to weather and navigate turbulent racial and gendered tribulations. It shapes how they resist and how they lead. It keeps them focused on the educational outcomes and whom the institution needs to become to best serve its students.

Patterns revealed that the narrators' resistance strategies are intermingled with their approach and how they lead. Resistance and leadership for these women are entangled, overlapping, and difficult to pull apart. Employing the lens of BFT in analysis provided me with the vantage point of making visible the connected and nuanced ways in which these women infuse resistance strategies into their daily leadership work. One resistance pattern is their understanding that they will never get buy-in from all faculty and employees; some will simply not care for them because of their intersecting identities and positioning in this prestigious role. For example, Dr. Angelou articulates,

I learned that I was never going to get buy-in from all faculty and employees, so I set my own threshold that helped me to know if I was succeeding. If I have 85% of faculty supportive and bought into my leadership, then I'm succeeding.

Learning that our existence as Black women in academic leadership will upset some folks and leading fearlessly and courageously despite that understanding is a resistance strategy that every narrator articulated. Dr. Truth builds on this notion, and her quote illustrates another pattern of resistance raised in the narratives—choosing not to sweat every microaggression, bias, or stereotype that attacks these leaders. Instead, each described picking one's battles and letting many slights and insults roll off.

I don't care enough (about the microaggression of calling every white person on the panel doctor but addressing her only by her first name, and she's the only person of color on the panel). I'm real comfortable with me. That doesn't move me. For some people, that's their, 'you're not measuring up', but clearly, I have. I'm in this seat, so I'm not proving anything to you or anybody else. Since my mere existence seems to completely piss you off, I might as well smile and look cute while I'm up here because it don't change anything.

This confidence in their self-identity as a Black woman or Black and Latina woman emerged from each narrator. Dr. Tubman illustrated another resistance strategy. She narrated and exuded confidence that she earned her position and had the intellect and ability to lead in an academic position.

I know that every decision I'm making, everything I do is being watched by somebody. When I got here, this was a culture where I knew which faculty did



not want me here. And I made it very clear to them that I knew they did not want me here. So let me make it clear to you that I have earned my position, and I am smart enough to lead academics.

This air of confidence and courage to lead with that confidence was a beautiful pattern displayed in the narratives of these scholars as they resisted subjugation in the various forms that it tried to assert itself. Our racial and gendered background causes us to lead in maneuvering ways due to the realization of the ever-present yet subtle ways in which we encounter the interlocking systems of oppression in the academic environment.

Sometimes the moment calls for them to make visible the microaggression, and a pattern emerged where these intellectuals would call out the disrespectful behavior if they deemed it appropriate as a resistance strategy. These sometimes occurred in very public spaces, a type of sociality and place-based narration that underscored the stakes and visibility of the challenge and the resistance. Dr. Tubman described one of those moments,

One white gentleman challenged me about a curriculum question. In the full assembly I leaned into him and said, out of respect for faculty and academics, I'm going to answer your question. I answered his question and said, Dr. Smith, I don't think you would have challenged a white male if they were standing here the way you just challenged me. So, I'm putting you on notice, you will not challenge me in this type of form again, and I completely take offense to it.

Fully recognizing the risk in this level of calling out, the narratives captured a pattern of temporality, in which there is a time for everything, whether dismissing or resisting.

When the time called for demanding respect, for showing nonbelievers of our competence and qualifications, they/we narrated examples of courage in which we were not afraid to do it. Our resistance to any other narrative propels us to speak up and demonstrate our strong leadership.

**Inquiry Question 4: Where do they find joy and fulfillment within institutionalized systems of domination?** The narratives showcased the subtle ways in which they seized the opportunity to make the path inside the academy more welcoming for future generations of academic practitioners and leaders. I could see their eyes light up when they described the appreciation they received from students, staff, and faculty of color. This was proof that their hard work was paying off, and their presence alone made the academic terrain more inclusive. Students and faculty of color could now at least see themselves, as Black and biracial women, in this elite seat of power. The narrators found joy in this notion of their reality. How they work to eradicate systems of inequalities helps them lead with an ever-present sense of purpose and fulfillment.

As I shared earlier, many of the answers to the four inquiry questions overlap. Patterns in the narratives clearly revealed that the narrators find joy in their success as measured by the students, faculty, and staff success. They narrate joy when they can serve as mentors, coaches, or support in helping their team and members of the institution create clearer pathways to success for all students, particularly those who higher education have not historically served well. . Dr. Truth mentioned that one of her greatest joys is bringing siloed and fragmented work and groups together through multiple initiatives to address institutional challenges. “Whether it’s core curriculum revision, co-

requisite remediates, accelerated learning, bringing different groups of people together to work, even groups that may be contentious, but ultimately, we get somewhere.”

Making meaningful connections was also a pattern that brought the narrators joy and fulfillment. Dr. Truth went on to say, “I always encourage people to forge those relationships because it’ll give you strength when you need it”. Dr. Tubman spoke specifically about the relationships she has developed and maintained with students throughout the years.

The student relationships, I think that has been the greatest thing for me. Moments when students that I’ve taught say, particularly those that I was their first Black teacher and they’ve kept in touch throughout the years and celebrate my success with me. They say, ‘We saw this in you. You’re something we hadn’t seen before, and you’re doing things we’ve never seen anybody do that we actually know. So those moments for me are what have made my career so worthwhile.

For Dr. Angelou, the work itself and being a trailblazer in this role that is engaged in very important work in a helping field brings her joy. “I can start my day at 7:30 am and end it at 8 pm and just be happy as a lark. I just love working; it’s what my mother instilled in me”. The spirit of finding joy and fulfillment in doing good work with integrity while helping others brings each of the narrators’ happiness. Dr. Robinson built on this point when she shared that just being in the role is a major and fulfilling accomplishment. “Me being African American, I know it matters. From a higher education standpoint, that part to me is an accomplishment, just being in the seat. I’m one of two Black women filling this role across my entire state.

Another narrative pattern is the joy and pride the narrators feel in knowing how important seeing them winning and thriving in this role is to other women of color. Dr. Tubman shared,

Representation matters. Our leadership matters because we can do our jobs really well. We know how to engage in those conversations about academics. We understand what curriculum and instruction means. For some reason, people don't think we do, or they think we need a white male to help us understand how to engage in academic conversations and leadership.

Our presence is important to folks across the college and even more broadly, and this knowledge alone brings us joy. Dr. Angelou chimed in with Dr. Tubman and affirmed everything she said and went on to add,

Our presence is certainly needed also for future leaders who are coming behind us. Young women who aspire either for presidency, provost, or a chancellor position; they need more of us in these roles to be mentors for them.

The narratives reveal not only the types of contributions the leaders' value but some of the ways in which our leadership adds value to institutions. . These moments affirm our place and grow our sense of belonging. The patterns shared showcase the places and times that the narrators identified how, when, and where they find moments of joy and fulfillment within the institution.

## Implications

### Implications for Practice

The data collected for this research study has several implications for practice. I will address the following separately: The importance of institutional commitment to racial equity in hiring, advice for Black women aspiring to lead in academic affairs at PWIs & HWIs, and advice for White presidents on how to set up a Black woman CAO for success. Narrative Inquiry focuses on trying to understand experiences. Narrative Inquiry is a collaboration between researcher and the participants, over time, in a place, and in social interaction with milieus” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20). It is not simply about reporting on knowledge but also about coming to understand differently through asking questions worth asking.

**The importance of institutional commitment to racial equity in hiring.** The narrators indicated a need to transform the recruitment and hiring process to best position the institution to successfully recruit, hire, and retain academic administrators of color. Narratives emphasized the opportunities for growth in search processes and faculty hiring in each institution. Each pointed out complexities related to their ability to invoke change related to their success rate in growing a diverse faculty body. All the narrators agreed that their institution was committed to diversity; but many felt that was not enough. Narratives highlighted the need for the buy-in to equity must filter down throughout the institution, supervisor to supervisor. Some narrators pointed out that the hiring process is also saturated with subjective glitches that complicate moving beyond a verbal commitment to racial equity in hiring to a tangible plan of action. There are points within

the process that leaves space for personal bias and affinity group bias that can downplay the qualifications of candidates of color.

Dr. Kaye pointed out that the institution can commit to diversity, equity, and inclusion, but “that only goes as far as the hiring supervisor”. The system is set up such that the hiring supervisor can determine what the commitment looks like. Most narrators expect their team to forward a diverse pool of applicants for final review, but the reality is that the hiring supervisors have the autonomy to only forward those they agree to work with and feel would be a good fit for the role. The word “fit” can be problematic, this is because fit guides one to hire for people who are like those in positions of power that do the hiring. Fit guides institutions to hire for people with similar backgrounds to the majority that already exist within the organization. This can undermine an institution’s diversity, equity and inclusion work, and exclude the diverse pool of candidates they worked hard to recruit. What ways might this happen? Dr. Kaye noted, “I’m going to be honest, it’s a challenge to get African Americans in on the academic side sometimes”. She gave a specific example of a hiring situation where she was the only person of color among her peers on this hiring committee, and she watched the process all come down to racial lines. None of her colleagues advanced the internal candidates, who were all candidates of color. They only advanced the external candidates who were all white. “Those are the hard kind of situations and the silent, behind-the-scenes that I’m having to navigate”. We must do a better job of educating search committees about the biases they bring into the process before serving on committees. Asking ourselves, what ways does bias perpetuate homogeneous culture that excludes others through institutional

hiring processes? There should be mandatory bias and cultural competency training for anyone wanting to serve on a search committee.

We must find ways to train and reeducate colleagues about entrenched racialized and gendered attitudes impacting hiring practices. We must engage in best practices around increasing diverse applicant pools in academic leadership and faculty positions. All the narrators felt their institutions were committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion; however, Dr. Robinson pointed out that some of that commitment comes because she is in the role “keeping that commitment to the fire”. Institutions must move that work and expectation beyond just the most senior leader of color to enact collegewide change. While institutions and leaders can have good intentions, sometimes they lack the knowledge to implement that change. That the strength of having a good bench ready to help lead diversity initiatives related to recruitment and hiring. Dr. Robinson spoke about the unique professional Black networks she has through the contacts she has made through her lived experiences and how that can be converted to an institutional asset that does not always require her to be the person to turn to when trying to recruit diverse pools. For example, “I could email 10,000 sorority sisters in five minutes. There is some access that we have, and some knowledge that we have that add to the recruitment value of the organization”. If the college then built a listserv and asked all its employees to contribute to building out the listserv of diverse professionals with whom to share faculty opportunities, the myth of the pipeline issue would burst. But the college would have to be willing to approach their recruitment process from an equity mindset, and not all colleges are willing to change their traditional processes. Another strategy is to identify

and purposely invest in developing future leaders who many not be ready for the position at the moment but could definitely be developed into the next leader.

Like her peers in this study, Dr. June believes her institution is extremely committed to racial diversity.

Walking into these roles has shown us that it does matter to the students who their leaders are. But I'm hand strung by my pool. I'm happy to see that we're slowly changing. I think we were like 90% Caucasian faculty, and now it's 80%. I think we have to do a little bit more by way of how we attract diverse faculty and I'm working right now on a strategic process for that.

Institutions would also benefit from finding ways to make the campus culture more supportive of the needs of the diverse folks they are trying to hire. The best way to do that is to become more educated and aware of the climate for the folks of color already employed there and learn more about their experiences. Providing climate surveys incorporating racial climate as a component of the survey and allowing employees to complete the survey anonymously is a strategy that institutions can employ. But we must be mindful that if there are only a handful of people of color within the academic division, they may be less likely to tell the truth or complete the survey out of fear of being identified. Taking the time to read research such as this one and using it as a launching pad to engage in internal conversations facilitated by an external consultant is a great place for executive leadership to start in their efforts to reflect on their environment and strategies.



### **Advice for Black women aspiring to lead in academic affairs at PWIs &**

**HWIs.** The narrators provided advice for Black women aspiring to lead in academic affairs at PWIs and HWIs. The narrators revealed that anyone considering stepping into the Vice President of Academic Affairs must first know themselves. Dr. Truth articulated this well, “You have to know yourself first and foremost and be comfortable with every aspect of you because I find that when people are critical, they pick away at the kinds of the crack”. This particularly holds true with defining for yourself who you are as a Black woman and what added value that brings to the role and institution. Dr. Tubman described the importance of being self-aware and having self-control because “people will try to get you out of your character, but if I’m self-reflecting, self-aware, and I have self-control, I can engage with you professionally and not agree with you”. Knowing your strengths and strengthening your weaknesses happens when you self-reflect, and there will be ample opportunity to strengthen those muscles as you navigate, encounter, and dismantle institutional barriers.

Bringing your A-game, both in credentials and credibility, echoed throughout the narrators’ narratives. “What you know, know well. What you don’t, be okay with owning that and say, ‘yeah I don’t really know that, talk to me a little more about that part’”, stated Dr. Truth. Every scholar talked extensively about preparation and hard work. . Courage also came up. To be Black and lead requires a healthy dose of courage. When I asked Dr. Truth to expand on her vision of what courage means, she answered, “It’s strength. That inner strength that you could stand when there’s accolades, and when there’s noise, insinuation, and negativity”. The narrators indicated that perseverance is required in contending with criticism. “Criticism is harsher for those of us who

experience marginalization to contend with because it is compounded by covert and subtle messages that convey we do not belong and should leave the academy” (Vo, 2012, p. 100).

The stories revealed that navigating microaggressions zapped leaders’ energy. Because such incidents are so present, so daily, so cumulative, choosing one’s battles carefully is important for containing and storing one’s energy for the battles that matter most. The narrators also mentioned cultivating and exuding confidence as a requirement for success as leaders in academic roles. Each narrator showcased their confidence throughout the narratives. Dr. Tubman built this out,

You must be confident in your approaches. You will have challenges. You will feel as if you don’t belong but be confident in your abilities, in your knowledge, in your experiences that you’re bringing into the position with you.

Courage and confidence are intertwined depending on the narrator providing the advice for future academic administrators of color. Dr. Tubman stressed the importance of being true to yourself. Others spoke about this as well. “Be true to yourself every day. Don’t agree to anything that won’t allow you to sleep at night”. In other words, have integrity in all that you do. Use courage, cultivated from support networks and other resources, when pushing back is challenging. Have confidence in your decision-making ability.

Other implications for practice related to advice for Black women aspiring to become CAOs and provosts was the need to know how to communicate effectively. Deep communication skills that come from “knowing your stuff and being able to talk and not being so rehearsed”. Dr. Robinson shared that this builds confidence and gives one

credibility. And not just verbal communication but written, the ability to facilitate, listen, the whole package. Having this insight not only helps aspiring professionals prepare for the role of CAO, it also provides a blueprint for institutional leaders to develop training and development opportunities in these areas for their existing staff of color.

The final discovery and implications for practice that I highlight is **advice for white presidents on how to set up a Black woman CAO for success**. Concerted efforts to increase the number of Black women administrators in general and senior-level academic leaders start with the institution's president. The narrators indicated that the support of the president has been essential to their success as a CAO. The narrators were very clear about this point. Each narrator credited their president for creating an environment at the executive table where they feel empowered to contribute and lead, and not just lead but courageously and confidently lead.

The data indicated that a major intervention president/chancellor can enact to help ensure the success of their newly hired Black CAO is to make sure she has a support system. It is important to provide her the authority to make the critical hires required to change the culture and get the work done. The president's knowledge of informal rules, which people have social capital and influence in particular realms, and transparency about resources and/or lack thereof can serve these leaders well. Authenticity rose to the top of the data. These women find tremendous value in having a leader who is authentic and transparent in their conversations with them. The authenticity and willingness to let them know when they are doing well and when they are missing the mark helps assure them that the president is not and would not set them up for failure. An example of

setting them up for failure would be hiring them and knowing the president is actively searching to leave the college within the next year or two.

Having these leaders' back is essential. When challenges arise, because they certainly will, these scholars need the president to be courageous enough to support their decisions even when the pressure comes from faculty or other leaders who do not like the decision. This bleeds into clear communication and transparency as well. If the president wants the leader to carry out particular responsibilities, they need to communicate that information clearly. "And if there are bad things that they need to do, the faculty body needs to know what's coming from the president". Finding immediate opportunities to help her get a couple of wins under her belt is a helpful strategy, particularly when bringing in a person of color. Being very intentional about how to position the person for success goes a long way.

Personalized professional development through coaching and mentoring helps them become even more skillful administrators. Giving the women plenty of space to lead, giving deference in decision making, and then visibly supporting those decisions are all actions that a president who wants to retain the talent they have should take. Dr. Truth suggested making statements like, "I'm not really sure what's going to happen in that area; that's up to Dr. Truth. I know that whatever she does decide will be the right thing for our college". Frequent visible affirmations of their leadership and the president's confidence in their leadership help develop a healthy institutional culture for this leader. The more the president shares their confidence in the leader's ability to do the job, the less they have to prove that they can do the job.

Presidents and other leaders should also inquire about difficulties retaining diverse faculty and academic administrators. They need to look for patterns in departures and expect comprehensive evaluations of the institutional culture and the workplace environment for marginalized groups. The president should make clear the challenges they anticipate the leader will encounter and be honest about the folks that will have some challenges with their leadership before the person actually starts in the role. “Presidents know who we’re dealing with. They know who works at their college. Warning the leader of the challenges ahead of the challenge builds trust, even if those challenges do not eventually occur as anticipated. If a president can employ most of the items discussed, the new leader will be on a solid path to success.

### **Significance of the Study and Implications for Future Research**

This study amplifies the voices and illuminates the experiences of Black women serving in senior-level academic leadership roles at PWIs and HWIs. It is significant because it creates a new sense of meaning about the experiences, strategies, knowledge, and wisdom of Black women leading in these specific roles, at community colleges, in the midst of a pandemic. The ways in which the three commonplaces of narrative inquiry--temporality, sociality, and place—manifests throughout the narratives and were simultaneously explored throughout the analysis is an important perspective and contribution of this research. This study offers readers the opportunity to also imagine their own use and application of the shared narratives. In addition, it adds to the scant literature about the experiences of Black women serving in these roles across the country. In this narrative inquiry study, I incorporated a BFT lens to interpret the data, which enabled the in-depth study of the intersections of race and gender for women leading in

senior academic roles and how they use their power, strength, and courage to make transformational change in PWIs and HWIs. I evaluated their leadership during an unprecedented pandemic, specifically at community colleges that are majority white or historically white and captured the narratives of how these leaders maneuver and navigate the harsh realities in their professional lives. Findings from this study illustrate how these leaders effect change in the face of oppression, racial and gendered stereotypes, and micro and macroaggressions.

The findings deepen the understanding of the courageous truths of these leaders' professional journeys within the academy. This study offers presidents and boards of regents ways to cultivate a more welcoming and inclusive environment where these women, and future Black women aspiring to be CAOs, can thrive and not have to navigate the toxic nature of academia that members of underrepresented groups too often encounter. All narrators in this study lead the division of academic affairs at community colleges across the nation. Community colleges are often perceived as places where lower, middle-class, and racially diverse Americans can pursue the American dream of economic and social mobility (Galizio, 2021). The narratives told by the narrators reveal threats of racism and sexism in their community college settings; however, an opportunity exists to further explore the experiences of Black women serving in senior academic positions at traditional four-year universities and colleges.

This study illuminates the narrators' firsthand knowledge of the experiences many Black women encounter in academic environments in which they are positioned to lead and typify life for Black women in majority-white academic spaces. While many barriers exist for these leaders, just as many, if not more, fulfilling opportunities and positive

experiences exist for them. Through their narratives, the narrators shared emotional content that revealed spaces, places, and times when they found joy in the face of oppression and biases. Through using a narrative voice to construct their accounts, this study allows readers to absorb and truly understand the narratives. The narratives showcase the varied strategies—from picking and choosing one’s battles, to preparation, to visibility and role-modeling for other leaders and students of color—narrators rely on to push through the group-based discriminatory practices that are still present in academic spaces today. An opportunity exists to study the perceptions of white presidents and their knowledge and awareness of the toxic nature of academic spaces for members of historically underrepresented groups serving in an executive-level role, particularly in academic leadership.

A surprising discovery in this study is the significant role the narrators’ spouses play in their success and how they provide practical daily support and spiritual support and serve as an outlet for releasing the narrators’ stress and a strategic partner in helping them navigate the “isms” and their effect. This study also aligns with the findings in the literature that representation in leadership matters to students, faculty, and staff (Collins, 2000; Dillard, 2016; Gutiérrez y Muhs et al., 2012). It stretches those findings by highlighting the joy representation brings those in positions of power serving as representatives. More research is needed about the myth of the pipeline problem when recruiting and hiring Black women in academic leadership roles. The narratives countered the notion of the lack of diversity in academic leadership positions being solely a pipeline issue. An opportunity exists to further explore the practice of tokenism, hiring only one person of color in an entire level of position or department and listening to,

understanding, and learning from the experiences and psychological insight that the many individuals of color in that position provide.

“Narratives are the best way of representing and understanding experience” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This research offered narrative fragments storied by Black women senior academic administrators who refused to let their professional experiences be seen as the same as their white women and men colleagues. They expose for all those willing to read, storied moments of time and space, reflected and interpreted through a BFT lens, the reality that we, Black female senior administrators, do not function in a color-and gender-blind profession (Collins, 2000; Gutiérrez y Muhs, 2012). More research is needed that incorporates a narrative view of what seed of change need to be planted for future generations of Black women serving as senior academic administrators to have more fulfilling, triumphant, liberating, and dignified experience in majority-white academic spaces. This study affirms that Black women can carve out spaces and contexts that embody pure joy and create their own sense of belonging, even in spaces that are inhospitable to their experiences. More research is needed on what allies and white administrators can do to effectively facilitate climate and cultural change.

### **Implications for Theory**

An implication for theory that arises from this study is the notion that leadership for these narrators is a form of resistance. This research implies that the leadership strategies the narrators showcase also serve as resistance strategies due to their status as women of color leading in educational systems “entrenched in byzantine patterns of race, gender, and class hierarchy” (Gutiérrez y Muhs et al, 2012, p. 2). Furthermore, from the



data collected in this study, it is evident that the narrators see their leadership as a contribution to improving the climate and culture of academia for future generations of Black women aspiring to serve in academic leadership. . Second, the narrators suggest that a culture of respect can be created from the top down. “Persons with the greatest formal power and authority have an ethical obligation and moral responsibility to be particularly sensitive to their treatment of persons with less power” (Gutiérrez y Muhs et al., 2012, p. 453).

Each narrator gave a tremendous amount of credit to their president related to the support that they provide them and how this positions them for a greater level of success. If leadership for these narrators is resistance, public and intentional support from their president regarding their leadership endeavors is a significant investment in these leaders. It is also a way of growing hope and modeling the possibilities for future generations, in essence strengthening the pipeline for more Black female academic leaders.

### **Researcher Reflection on Research Experience**

“The contribution of a narrative inquiry is intended to be the creation of a new sense of meaning and significance” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 42). When thinking about the narrators’ storied experiences, some questions linger when I reflect on this research. With all narrators coming from community colleges and seeing the overlapping themes and similar experiences of the nuanced ways they navigate their racialized experiences, I wonder how different and/or similar their experiences would be if they were leading in a four-year college, a private college, and/or a university setting. Space and place can matter in narration (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). While none of the

women spoke of their context from the lens of a community college versus a four-year institutional setting, I wonder whether their work and experiences would differ if they were working at a four-year university setting. Would they be spread as thin as they currently are? Would the faculty be more or less welcoming to them?

With the coming alongside and working within the space of the narrators' stories, not staying silent, and presenting my experiences, inquiries, and perspectives as a Black woman who has walked and navigated as a leader in a PWI community college environment, the narrators were able to welcome me more fully into their stories. Their welcome and our commonalities were core elements of the sociality, which also encapsulates the researcher/participant relationship and impacted what the narrators contributed and what I interpreted and retold. Upon seeing me and hearing my brief introduction, one of the narrators stated, "Oh, you're the grad student. I can be more relaxed with you". After spending the first five minutes sharing my personal and professional story, every narrator found similarities in my narrative and built on my narrative to establish common ground and open-up. As a result, all the narrators spent a significant amount of time-sharing information with me about their landscapes, communities, family, and work. There was beauty in sensing that we were all living our own stories, across regions and landscapes, never having met, yet finding many similarities within our personal and professional lives. I carried a great sense of honor to listen to how they narratively told of their success as we negotiated our relationship and purpose in useful ways each time we came together over the period of a long fall semester.

Even today, some of the successes and acknowledgments they told of come flashing to mind as I experience my own successes and joys. Over each meeting, their stories grew and transformed as they let me into their world to gain a fuller view of what is behind the veil of their public experiences. I felt my own growth and transformation as I learned new ways of thinking and being. Particularly, the courage and confidence in who they are as Black women and how they use it to help others grow, inspired me. As I began to listen to, live, and retell the stories of these dynamic women within the inquiry field, I felt my confidence rise and began to hold my head a little higher as I thought about the many accomplishments and how these leaders led with love for the mission of a public quality postsecondary open-access education. This made me reflect on how significant it is to consider who is inquiring and who is retelling and modifying told stories, and the impact this has on the stories that are shared and told. Again, I felt a tremendous amount of honor and responsibility to showcase how these warriors narrated their resistance, triumph, success, and joy as members of a very select group of Black women who have seized the opportunity to lead in these critical roles.

Working alongside the narrators and maintaining the momentum that brought us together (Connelly and Clandinin, 2000) made it easy to see that none of the women saw themselves as victims. They all clearly saw the oppressive nature of academia toward individuals of color, but they were not intimidated by it. They each narrated how they “brought their chops” (credentials, experience, confidence), the phrase coined by Dr. Truth, with them every day and committed to leaving the spaces they encountered more inclusive and equitable than they found them. They knew the significance of their presence in these roles, in these spaces, and they take that knowledge seriously and lead

with great integrity and responsibility. Dr. Robinson, the first Black CAO in her institution's history, captured this sentiment beautifully,

Just being in this seat, you know, my colleagues are twenty-plus years older than me. In addition, me being African American, I know it matters. How I'm perceived by women, women of color, and just people of color, is important, and I do take that seriously.

These scholars lead with confidence, despite the insults, slights, and microaggressions they are forced to navigate.

The narrators do not narrate themselves as powerful, they narrate themselves as courageous, for they know the risk involved in showing up every day, daring to lead in racialized spaces, in a time of high racial unrest across our country, as a confident, knowledgeable, Black woman. They narrated deep appreciation for the support they have, particularly the confidence and trust their presidents and/or chancellors have placed in their leadership. They spoke of how their leaders' trust and support propel them to greater success and allow them to better navigate the gendered and racialized challenges they encounter in the larger institutional community because they know their leader "has their back". How they give credit to their leaders, mentors, family members, and others who champion them capture the beautiful humility they lead with.

Despite experiencing deep and haunting personal loss during this research, I experienced a beautiful level of joy every moment that I was able to spend interviewing these brilliant warriors. I grew personally and professionally from listening to and absorbing their narratives. I acquired new strategies; I was introduced to different ways of

leading, and I even found advice in the narratives that would strengthen my marriage. I felt less alone and more seen when their narrative encapsulated experiences I had been grappling to understand. The process of this research, the field texts, the research texts, the time with the narrators, and the time reading the literature have benefited me greatly.

There is value in narrating these women's leadership experiences. Being silent about the academic attitudes, environments, and practices that reproduce hierarchies of race and gender is not an option (Gutiérrez y Muhs, 2000, p. 7) for Black women bringing change through their leadership in majority-white academic spaces. I believe that the landscape of higher education is ready for a change, to break the historical mistreatment and devaluing of the tremendous talents of the plethora of Black women sacrificing their mental and physical health to be the change they want to see in higher education. I believe that higher education is realizing that educational equity starts with change and that change means letting go of gendered and racialized stereotypes, inequities, and inequalities to build a more inclusive, student-centered, and successful institution. I believe in a better tomorrow and that by joining hands across racial and gendered lines, we will solve today's problems and be better positioned to solve tomorrow's problems.

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## APPENDICES A

Dear Colleague,

My name is Eunice Tarver, I am a PhD candidate in the College of Education at Oklahoma State University. I am also, like yourself, a senior-level administrator in higher education. I am writing to request your participation in the data collection phase of my dissertation, titled “Behind the veil: Experiences and persistence strategies of African American women in academic leadership at predominately white institutions. The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences and success strategies of African American women seated in senior-level academic leadership roles. You have been selected as a possible participant because you are currently listed as a Chief Academic Officer, Provost, Vice President of Academic Affairs, or a similarly positioned role at a predominately white institution.

As a participant, you will be asked to participate in two Zoom interviews that should last no more than 60 minutes and one Zoom focus groups with a small number of African American women serving in similar roles. Open-ended interviews will be conducted in order to accurately obtain an understand of how African American women leading in senior-level academic roles experience their roles and succeed at their institution of higher education. If you agree to participate, the interviews will be scheduled at your convenience in the summer and fall 2021 semesters. Interviews will be recorded on Zoom and will later be destroyed after transcription is completed.

All data collected will be confidential. I know how important it is to protect the confidentiality of African American women serving in roles where we are hypervisible and easily identified. Your name will never appear on any document. Instead a pseudonym of your choice will be used in the data. Your institution’s name will never be mentioned and a pseudonym will be used in place of its name. We will not disclose what state the institution is in or any other identifying factors for you as the participant or the institution.

If you would like to know more information about this study, an informed consent form can be obtained by sending an email to me at [euniceb@okstate.edu](mailto:euniceb@okstate.edu) or we can schedule an appointment to discuss any questions you may have prior to agreeing to participate.

Your participation in this study is highly desirable and completely voluntary. I really hope that you would be willing to participate in this research study and share your story and the experiences that have lead you to this point in your professional life. I know from personal experience as an administrator, student, and mother how precious time is and how busy the lives we lead are and have set the study up to be amenable to your busy life and I am most flexible and committed to working around your schedule.

Please feel free to contact me with any questions and/or to confirm or decline participation in this study.

Thank you so much for taking the time to review this email. I hope to hear from you soon.

Respectfully,

Eunice Tarver  
PhD Candidate  
[euniceb@oksate.edu](mailto:euniceb@oksate.edu) (email)  
(918)504-6967 (cell)

## APPENDICES B

### CONFIDENTIAL DEMOGRAPHIC/DATA FORM/SELF-STUDY QUESTIONNAIRE

#### Biographical Data/Personal Data:

1. Name
2. Code Name/Pseudonym of Choice
3. Office Phone
4. Cell Phone
5. Age:
  - \_\_20-29
  - \_\_30-39
  - \_\_40-49
  - \_\_50-59
  - \_\_60-69
  - \_\_70+
6. Marital Status
7. Number of Children
8. Years of Administrative Experience:
9. Years of Administrative Experience Working in a PWI:
10. Positions Held Before Current Position: Title/Institution/Number of Years
11. Educational Background: Institution/Degree Received/Year
12. Current Institutional Data
  - Institution Name
  - City & State
  - Enrollment Numbers
  - Student Demographic Breakdown
  - Size of President's Cabinet
  - Number of African Americans Serving on President's Cabinet
  - Number of Women Serving on President's Cabinet
  - Number of African American Women Serving on President's Cabinet
  - Race/Ethnicity of College President
  - Racial and Gender Demographics of the College's Board of Regents
13. Current Title
14. Name of the Division you oversee
15. Number of Years in Current Position
16. Approximate Number of Direct Reports



APPENDICES C



**Oklahoma State University Institutional  
Review Board**

Date: 07/07/2021  
Application Number: IRB-21-287  
Proposal Title: Behind the Veil: Experiences and Persistence Strategies of African American Women in Academic Leadership at Predominately White Institutions.  
Principal Investigator: Eunice Tarver  
Co-Investigator(s):  
Faculty Adviser: Lucy Bailey  
Project Coordinator:  
Research Assistant(s):  
Processed as: Exempt  
Exempt Category:

**Status Recommended by Reviewer(s): Approved**

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The IRB application referenced above has been approved. It is the judgment of the reviewers that the rights and welfare of individuals who may be asked to participate in this study will be respected, and that the research will be conducted in a manner consistent with the IRB requirements as outlined in 45CFR46.

**This study meets criteria in the Revised Common Rule, as well as, one or more of the circumstances for** The multiplicity of narratives invites a broader and more representative understanding of the complexities of Black women’s experiences in these roles and of the positioning of a researcher in those landscapes **which continuing review is not required.** **As Principal Investigator of this research, you will be required to submit a status report to the IRB triennially.**

The final versions of any recruitment, consent and assent documents bearing the IRB approval stamp are available for download from IRB Manager. These are the versions that must be used during the study.

As Principal Investigator, it is your responsibility to do the following:

1. Conduct this study exactly as it has been approved. Any modifications to the research protocol must be approved by the IRB. Protocol modifications requiring approval may include changes to the title, PI, adviser, other research personnel, funding status or sponsor, subject population composition or size, recruitment, inclusion/exclusion criteria, research site, research procedures and consent/assent process or forms.
2. Submit a request for continuation if the study extends beyond the approval period. This continuation must receive IRB review and approval before the research can continue.
3. Report any unanticipated and/or adverse events to the IRB Office promptly.
4. Notify the IRB office when your research project is complete or when you are no longer affiliated with Oklahoma State University.

Please note that approved protocols are subject to monitoring by the IRB and that the IRB office has the authority to inspect research records associated with this protocol at any time. If you have questions about the IRB procedures or need any assistance from the Board, please contact the IRB Office at 405-7443377 or [irb@okstate.edu](mailto:irb@okstate.edu).

Sincerely,

Oklahoma State University IRB

VITA

Eunice Tarver

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Thesis: BEHIND THE VEIL: EXPERIENCES AND PERSISTENCE  
STRATEGIES OF BLACK WOMEN IN ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP  
AT PREDOMINATELY AND HISTORICALLY WHITE  
INSTITUTIONS

Major Field: Social Foundations of Education

Biographical:

Education:

Completed the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy in  
Education at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater,  
Oklahoma in July, 2022.

Completed the requirements for the Master of Human Relations in Human  
Relations at University of Oklahoma, Tulsa, Oklahoma in 2003.

Completed the requirements for the Bachelor of Arts in Psychology at  
Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in 2000.

Experience:

Vice President of Student Success & Equity at Tulsa Community College,  
February 2021 – present.

Professional Memberships:

National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2021-Present