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Leading in Gendered Spaces: Women Presidents' Perceptions of Their Experiences in Community Colleges

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LEADING IN GENDERED SPACES: WOMEN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

PRESIDENTS' PERCEPTION OF THEIR EXPERIENCES

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Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership and Administration

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Dedication

To my parents, John and Shirley Moe.

And to the women who paved the way.

LEADING IN GENDERED SPACES: WOMEN PRESIDENTS' PERCEPTION OF THEIR

EXPERIENCES IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES

by

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Finally, I acknowledge all the educators and researchers who are striving to make a difference. Collectively, we must continue to make access to education a priority for all since education remains the great equalizer. I acknowledge the benefits I have received from education. It is the gateway to critical thought, intellectual development, stronger individuals, and better communities. We must continue to advocate for education at all levels, encourage others to pursue education, and support policy and practices that make education a reality for all students. We also must also acknowledge the underrepresented and listen for unheard stories. Through our research and advocacy, we must make sure that all voices are heard.

Abstract

Gender inequality in leadership is an ongoing challenge found in higher education, including community colleges. Since women remain underrepresented in leadership positions at community colleges, specifically as college presidents, the purpose of this study was to document and better understand the experiences of women in these roles by focusing on three research questions:

- RQ 1: How do women presidents describe their experience in male-dominated community colleges?

- RQ 2: How do gender identity and gender expectations of women impact the behavior of women community college presidents?

- RQ 3: How do women presidents navigate their role within male-dominated community colleges?

Through the lens of post-structural feminism, this research provides insight about how women experience their roles as leaders in the gendered environment of male-dominated community colleges and the strategies they use to navigate and be successful in their roles. Knowing how women community college presidents attribute meaning to their experience, construct identity, and successfully lead within a male-dominated community college context adds to understanding about this phenomenon and could reduce the gender gaps that exist, inform policy and practice, as well as give insight to career pathways for women leaders of the future. This qualitative research showed that as more women become community college presidents, authenticating their leadership is critical and has valuable outcomes for the institutions they serve.

The fact that women community college presidents lead from a position of otherness informs their actions, behavior, and how they must maneuver to successfully navigate this male-

dominated environment. This study demonstrated that women community college presidents are not only finding ways to navigate the male-dominated system, but they are also trying to embrace the authenticity of their leadership. The findings also show that although women community college presidents want to be viewed as competent leaders and resist being labeled by gender, they often reinforce a view of gender that is very essentialized. While they reject some of the discourses and create their own experiences, they are unintentionally reproducing inherent discourses of gender oppression.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Community Colleges are Gendered Spaces

Higher education institutions such as community colleges are gendered spaces, meaning they are historically male-dominated and reproduce masculine cultural expectations, which systemically marginalize women (Acker, 1990, 1992; Caton, 2007; Eddy, 2009; Twombly, 1995). Traditionally, the image of the typical college president has not changed significantly (American Council on Education [ACE], 2007, 2012, 2017; Amey et al., 2002; Gagliardi et al., 2017; Gianni, 2001; Vaughan, 1986, 1989, 1996, 2004). Furthermore, research over the past three decades has illustrated that leadership has traditionally been male dominated, and there is a gap in the skilled leadership pipeline to fill future community college president vacancies (Faulkoner, 1995; Gutierrez et al., 2002; June, 2007; McFarlin et al., 1999; McNair et al., 2011; Perrakis et al., 2009; Vaughan, 1996, 2004; Vaughan et al., 1994). Leadership in community colleges remains highly gendered and masculine styles of leadership are the norm (Amey & Twombly, 1992; Eddy, 2009; Eddy & Cox, 2008; Eddy & Khwaja, 2019; Gilllet-Karam, 2017; Glazer & Raymo, 1999). To succeed, women must often modify their behavior to embody these masculine leadership norms or emulate characteristics typically displayed by men (Eddy & Cox 2008; Nidiffer, 2001).

In 1970, only 5% of community colleges had women presidents (Ferrori & Berte, 1970), and while the percentage doubled to nearly 10% later in that decade (Brooks & Avila, 1974; Koopke, 1978), it remained less than 14% of community college presidents throughout the 1980s and into the early 1990s (National Institute for Leadership Development, 1993; Vaughan et al., 1994). The next two decades offered some improvement and women increased their representation as community college presidents to 23% by 2006 and 26% in 2011 (ACE, 2012).

While women in the role of the president at community colleges increased 7% between 2006 and 2016, men still represented slightly more than 64% of community college presidents and women nearly 36%, with only 7% being women of color (ACE, 2017). Even though community colleges are more likely to consider non-traditional candidates for the presidency compared with other institutions of higher education, there remains room for improvement (ACE, 2012; Amey & VanDerLinden, 2002; Betchtold, 2008; Cook & Young, 2012; Tedrow & Rhoads, 1999; Townsend & Twombly, 1998, 2007) since women and minorities are still less likely to serve in high-level positions overall (Warner & DeFleur, 1993). The disproportionate representation of women community college presidents is problematic because lack of diversity can hinder organizations and society (Page, 2007).

Underrepresentation of Women Community College Presidents

Women are still not reaching the top positions in leadership at community colleges in ways that mirror the U.S. population or reflect the enrollment of community colleges in the United States. Women make up more than half of the nation's population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020) and represent 56% of all enrolled community college students, and these numbers are projected to increase (Gagliardi et al., 2017; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2018b; U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Candidate pools should reflect student populations (Perrakis et al., 2009), but that is yet to be reflected in the number of hired women presidents. Despite these data, the highest levels of leadership still are dominated by men, and fewer women are represented in this top tier, which is not reflective of the students and communities served. When women are not reaching the highest leadership positions at a proportionate level, colleges are not getting the benefit of their experience and knowledge. This lack of representation is detrimental to advancing equity and inclusion in community colleges. Furthermore, the amount

of community college president vacancies is expected to increase. As a result, this "leadership pipeline crisis" combined with the lack of gender diversity in leadership has been heavily discussed by the leading community college organizations including the American Association of Community Colleges, Achieving the Dream, the Aspen Institute, the League of Innovation, and the American Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT), and have all acknowledged and are working to ensure more women enter the presidential leadership pipeline (Brown, 2014; Bumpus, 2014; De Los Santos, 2014; Trueheart, 2014; Wyner, 2014).

This underrepresentation is partly a result of community colleges still being challenged by traditional constructs of worker expectations, job and career choices, and issues of equity (Betchtold, 2008; Eddy & Cox, 2008; Gill, 2013; Hannum et al., 2015) that are often based on masculine norms within community colleges. Organizations, including community colleges, reproduce and reflect societal power dynamics and leadership expectations where organizational practices emphasize men and marginalize women (Acker, 1990, 1992; Buzzanell, 1994; Mills & Tancred, 1992). Male-dominated expectations for leadership ultimately discriminate against women and result in exclusionary practices (Caton, 2007; Lester, 2008).

Since community college leadership has been historically White males (ACE 2007, 2012, 2017), as reflected in the leadership paradigm, it makes it hard for women and other minorities to authenticate their leadership (Eddy, 2009). When leadership expectations are masculine, leaders who emerge are disproportionately men (Eagly, 2005). In community colleges, women are forced into adapting reactive strategies to establish themselves as leaders in masculine-normed community colleges (Eddy & Cox, 2008; Tedrow & Rhoads, 1999). The expectation to adapt to masculine norms makes it challenging for women to lead with relational authenticity, an ability to promote values and interests of the larger community and simultaneously identify with and

accept those values and interests as appropriate (Eagly, 2005). Additionally, women are positioned as the other or the outsider (Eagly, 2005). As women continue to slowly but steadily advance to the highest leadership positions, increasing the understanding of women's experience in these roles is necessary to better understand how they authenticate their leadership. Women presidents are worthy of further research since women's lack of proportional representation at the presidential level could indicate barriers that inhibit advancement to presidential roles. As community colleges pave the way for access to higher education for underserved students, they should also be paving the way for diverse leaders, including more women, to access the presidency.

The Case for More Women Community College Presidents

As society faces more complex challenges, a collective mindset that includes diverse perspectives will offer superior solutions to address these complicated problems (Page, 2007). A diverse leader sends a message within the college and within the community that diversity is important and valued (Muller, 1996). Many diverse leaders have experienced bias and discrimination and consequently are positioned to not only serve meaningfully in higher education, but also challenge the social and economic injustice that exists to empower the least educated and underserved (Rodriguez, 2015). In higher education, students come from a variety of backgrounds including gender, race, geographic, socioeconomic, and other types of diversity. Diverse leaders serve as mentors and role models (Erkut & Mokros, 1984). Presidential leadership has been demonstrated to influence the advancement of a campus-wide diversity agenda that prioritizes the success of students of color and other diverse students (Kezar & Eckel, 2005). By increasing diverse community college leadership, community colleges have an opportunity to lead higher education in creating a positive climate for women and minorities

(Townsend, 2006). Community colleges that create conditions to recruit, support, and engage a diverse student and staff, close equity gaps and increase student success and outcomes (Kuh et al., 2010). When diversity efforts are a priority, underrepresented students feel a greater sense of belonging, and the majority students are more likely to relate well to individuals who are different, and all students express greater college satisfaction and demonstrate a greater awareness of social problems (Whitt et al., 2001). Ultimately, this positively impacts student success. Therefore, ensuring diversity, equity, and inclusion has the potential to create stronger community colleges and positively improve outcomes to the regions they serve. Diversity must also be reflected in the faculty, staff, and college administrators, including the president.

Having diverse leaders, especially women, as community college presidents promotes diversity of thought, perspectives, and values (Rodriguez, 2015). More diversity is needed to "reflect the world as it really is and will become" (Gianni, 2001, p. 211). Proportionally including women in these highest levels of leadership promotes equity by opening access, opportunity, and advancement. Studies have shown that increased representation among positions of power help advance other minority candidates (Benson et al., 2016; Opp & Smith, 1996). Improving inclusion also means creating a climate where women are respected, valued, supported, and able to fully participate. However, to do so, it is important to have a greater understanding of the experiences of women community college presidents (Eddy, 2009). There is justification for this inclusivity from both a social justice and an economic standpoint. Education should be diverse, equitable, and inclusive to serve the public good.

There is also an economic case to be made for advancing more women to the presidency (Page, 2007). Women may have qualities that will better prepare them to meet the demands of changing and the complex role of a community college presidency, including an intuitive sense,

ability to see the big picture, and collaboratively work to achieve goals (Gianni, 2001). Diverse college leadership enhances diverse student and employee recruitment and retention as well as student experiences (Holub & Foote, 1996; Opp & Smith, 1996). If community colleges can attract and graduate more students, there will be better results not only for the college, but also in terms of developing a more skilled, diverse, and competitive workforce. Ultimately, this can drive regional economic development since diversity creates stronger economies.

Need for More Research on Women Community College Presidents

Gender should be a key construct for research and data analysis (Glazer-Raymo, 1999). In a comprehensive review of the literature conceptualizing women in community colleges, Drake (2008) explained that differences in gender in leadership representation, norms of behavior, and lack of proportionate women's inclusion illustrate inequity within community colleges that need to be addressed. Since there is underrepresentation of women community college presidents, this means the existing research focuses on perspectives of male presidents, and more research is needed on women and other minorities (Amey & VanDerLinden, 2002; Eddy, 2009; Hannum et al., 2015; Perrakis et al., 2009). The research that does exist on women is often about women faculty and administrators, not only women presidents, and frequently focuses on the career development process, leadership styles of, and barriers experienced by women; but not a lot of research has been done to understand what women presidents experience as leaders and how they maneuver or navigate within the male-dominated community college (Boggs, 2003; DiCroce, 1995; Oikelome, 2017; Power, 2005; Stout-Stewart, 2005; Tedrow & Rhoads, 1999; Vaughan, 1989). While more studies are documenting women's stories of leadership, their perspectives, and their experiences (Blevins, 2001; Gill, 2013; Gillet-Karam, 2017; Muñoz, 2017; Oikelome, 2017; Switzer, 2006), there still needs to be more research with

this focus. This research intends to contribute to that gap by documenting how women navigate gender and experience the role of the president within male-dominated community colleges.

Purpose of the Research

In workplaces, women and men exist within organizational structures that are not gender neutral (Acker, 1990). Masculine images, thoughts, and ideals dominate within organizations where power and control are unequal. Gender inequality and underrepresentation of women in leadership positions is a challenge for community colleges (Gianni, 2001; Perrakis et al., 2009; Townsend, 2006). Women in community colleges, just as in most organizations, lead in gendered spaces (Caton, 2007; Eddy, 2009, Twombly, 1995). This male-centric view marginalizes women and reproduces gender inequity. In 2019, the researcher did a qualitative unpublished pilot study with high-level women administrators that demonstrated that this inequity still exists. In this study, women described work experiences in community colleges explaining how they have had to navigate situations of gender bias and inequality, further illustrating the need for more research in this area. To advance women and create more equitable environments, "we need to better understand the experiences of women currently leading two-year colleges relative to men in similar positions" (Eddy, 2009, p. 8). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to understand how women presidents perceive their experience and maneuver as presidents within male-dominated community colleges. More specifically, this research seeks to understand how these women presidents perceive their experience and navigate within male-dominated community colleges.

Since community colleges are male-dominated spaces, women presidents lead in an environment where male gender expectations are the norm, and women are judged accordingly. Men and women typically respond negatively to women leaders who do not demonstrate

stereotypical behaviors (Chliwiniak, 1997) and can affect their ability to build relationships and lead effectively. Often, the gender expectations for behavior and action do not fit into the male-dominated paradigm (Eddy & Cox, 2008; Nidiffer, 2001). For example, a man is praised for being tough and is assumed to be competent. On the other hand, a woman is expected to be nurturing and kind as per societal tradition. Women who deviate from that expectation and are strong or assertive, may be seen as aggressive or abrasive. But if she is perceived as too kind, she may be perceived as weak. These are just a few examples of the double standards experienced between men and women. The title of president does not remove these expectations from the women serving in this role. Women community college presidents must still constantly maneuver these gendered societal dynamics, the double bind (Eagly & Carli, 2007) of conflicting societal expectations. It is important to understand how they perceive their experience of gender in the workplace and how they describe the strategies they use to navigate and be successful in their role as president.

<div align="center">**Significance of the Research**</div>

This research will provide insight to better understanding how women leaders perceive their experience, modify their behavior, and navigate the gendered environment of community colleges along with the strategies they use to be successful in their roles. Documenting how women presidents describe their experience in this male-dominated context can provide greater understanding of how they navigate their role in the community of college leaders. Knowing how women presidents perceive their experience, their environment, and navigate within a male-dominated community college context adds to understanding. The research will contribute to the body of knowledge that can make community colleges more gender inclusive. This understanding can also provide guidance for other women to navigate leadership roles. This

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research may provide insight on making community colleges more equitable, offer understanding for informing policy and practice, as well as give career insight for future women community college presidents.

In summary, the overarching goals of the study were to better document and understand the experience of women community college presidents. This could impact policy and practice in multiple ways. First, by making gender-inclusivity needs more visible, it becomes a conscious part of decision-making and hiring practices. It could also help reconceptualize male-dominated expectations for leadership to create more equitable community colleges and could inform hiring decision makers such as Boards of Trustees. The data from this study could also inform career pathways for women and other marginalized groups. This would better prepare aspiring women leaders as well as helping women in these positions learn from the experience and navigation strategies of other women. Finally, the information shared could help influence doctoral and other leadership programs to better prepare higher education leaders.

Research Questions

These questions are designed to better understand the experience of women presidents in the community college. They aim to discover what these women leaders experience, how they navigate their role within the male-dominated community college, and how gender impacts their behavior in this role.

Research Question 1

How do women presidents describe their experience in male-dominated community colleges?

Research Question 2

How do gender identity and gender expectations of women impact the behavior of women community college presidents?

Research Question 3

How do women presidents navigate their role within male-dominated community colleges?

Definitions

In this study, the term "president" was used to identify the chief executive of a college. Chief executive titles can vary by institution. While many community colleges have similar organizational structures, not all are structured the same. It is common for community colleges to have different hierarchal organizational structures; as a result, the title of president is not always indicative of the highest leader. For example, some colleges may be a single-college district and others may be a multi-college district. Additionally, titles for leadership positions may not be the same across all institutions. For example, in some institutions, the highest-ranking official may be called the president, and in others, the highest-ranking official may be called the chancellor. In some institutions, the title of president could be used for campus-based leadership, not the overall college district leadership. For this study, I interviewed the highest-ranking college official at community colleges, the individual who typically was responsible for (a) overseeing all decisions, (b) setting and implementing the mission and vision, and (c) reporting to the board of trustees or similar governing body. For practical purposes and consistency, throughout this research and paper, I referred to these highest-ranking officials as presidents. The complexities and responsibilities of the role of presidents will be explained in Chapter 2.

This study referred to community colleges as "male-dominated" spaces. As explained and supported in greater detail in Chapter 2, community colleges remain gendered spaces (Acker, 1990; Caton, 2007; Twombly, 1995). While community colleges tend to have more women students, women in leadership are not proportionate to men in leadership (Gagliardi et al., 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2018). However, gendered spaces are not just about the numbers of men or women within community colleges. Ultimately, norms, roles, expectations, and the overall culture are rooted in patriarchy, which makes community colleges a male-dominated space.

Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation is organized in five chapters. In this first chapter, the topic, purpose, and significance of the study are explained. The research questions guiding this study have been presented as well as key definitions of how the term president is used in the context of the research as well as a definition for the term male-dominated context. Chapter 2 reviews the literature about the importance of community college presidents and their changing roles and responsibilities. This is followed by a description of the challenges of filling the leadership pipeline including the underrepresentation of diverse leaders. The literature review continues to explain that community colleges are male-dominated spaces and makes the case that studying women presidents is necessary. Finally, the chapter explains the use of post-structural feminism as the theoretical framework guiding this research. The methodology is outlined in Chapter 3 and explains that the study incorporates qualitative research and analysis to understand participants' experiences from their point of view by documenting their stories and perspectives. The data collection and analysis process are also described. Chapter 4 describes the findings that emerged

from the data. The way these findings relate to other concepts and the literature along with a

discussion on implications for further research are discussed in Chapter 5.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

This section will first review the literature on the importance of and the characteristics of community college presidents of the past three decades including their changing role, then it will examine the current demographic makeup of presidents to demonstrate that a leadership gap still exists. It will also explain how community colleges remain gendered spaces and make the case that studying women in president positions is necessary.

The Community College President

Presidential leadership drives the improvement of and influences the success of the community college and its students (Maliszewski et al., 2012). Presidents provide the administrative, political, symbolic, and entrepreneurial guidance that makes a community college function, as described in Table 1.1 (Kezar & Eckel, 2005; Rupp et al., 2016). Presidential leadership sets the tone and strategy for institution-wide progress. Not only do presidents impact the college, they also influence the community they serve (Levin, 1991). Consequently, the college president is a direct contributor to the success or failures within a community college and the region served. The more capable the leader, the more positive the results.

Changing Role of the Community College President

The community college president has gained additional importance in recent decades as the responsibilities of the role have become more complex. Leadership is more multi-dimensional than it was in the past and has extended beyond day-to-day college activities (Amey, 2013; Amey et al., 2002; McFarlin et al., 1999; Sellingo et al., 2017). The evolving dynamics of education in America's community colleges are driving a new set of required skills for high-level administrators, especially presidents (Aspen Institute and Achieving the Dream, 2014).

Table 1.1

The Diverse Roles of the Community College President and Role Impact

Administrative Importance	Political Importance	Symbolic Importance	Entrepreneurial Importance
- Carry Out Board Policy - Allocate Resources - Oversee Critical Personnel Decisions - Establish & Reinforce Accountability - Safeguard Institutional Autonomy	Maintain Relationships & Meet Needs of Internal & External Stakeholders, including Students, Faculty, Staff Administrators, Elected Officials, Trustees, Educational Partners, Business & Community Leaders, & Others	- Embody Institutional Values - Represent its Ideals - Maintain or Transform Organizational Culture - Drive the Spirit of the Institution	- Advocate for Legislation - Raise Funds - Establish & Maintain Donor Relationships - Negotiate Contracts - Develop Business & Industry Partnerships

Adapted from *Leadership Strategies for Advancing Campus Diversity: Advice from Experienced Presidents*, by A. Kezar and P. D. Eckel, 2005, American Council on Education, p. 3.

Now more than ever before, a contemporary college president must be a leader who is physically, emotionally, and mentally strong to handle a job that has become 24/7 (Bowles, 2013). Table 2.1 presents the responsibilities of the community college president and how they impact their time.

College presidents are under increased pressure to perform tasks beyond day-to-day college operations (McFarlin et al., 1999). From knowledge of academics and instruction to finance and fundraising, marketing, crisis management, and legislative advocacy, community colleges are facing new challenges that are requiring diverse skills and capabilities for leaders.

National trends suggest that financial challenges (a) deliver more programming with less

funding, (b) address student struggles with food insecurity and other social needs, (c) increase

pressures to measure success, and (d) increase graduation rates combined with other challenges

that have broadened the leadership skills needed to be a president (Aspen Institute, 2014).

Table 2.1

Top Community College Challenges and Time Spent

President's Primary Use of Time	Top Challenges Facing Presidents, 2016	Top Challenges Facing Presidents, Future
Budget/Financial Management	Never Enough Money	Budget/Financial Management
Fundraising	Faculty Resistance to Change	Fundraising
Managing a Senior-Level Team/Governing Board/ Community Relations	Lack of Time to Think	Enrollment Management
Enrollment Management	Problems Inherited from Past Leadership	Assessment of Student Learning
Strategic Planning	Others' Perception You Are Infinitely Accessible	Accreditation

Adapted from *American College President Study 2017* by J. S. Gagliardi, L. L. Espinosa, J. M. Turk, and M. Taylor, 2017, American Council on Education (ACE) and Center for Policy Research and Strategy (CPRS).

Presidents must effectively engage multiple internal stakeholders from the boards of

trustees, administrators, faculty, staff, students, and sometimes even parents. Outside of the

institution, presidents must build effective relationships with community partners and business

leaders, along with the politicians and legislative leaders who demand increased accountability

while often decreasing state funding. This requires presidents to have strong business and fiscal

management skills, the ability to raise funds, and political savviness.

The American Association of Community Colleges (2012) identified organizational strategy, resource management, communication, collaboration, community college advocacy, and professionalism as six leadership competencies required by the next generation of community college presidents. Community college presidents must also be able to respond to environmental challenges such as declining funding, shortage of funding sources, increasing enrollment, underprepared students, retiring employees, and accountability demands (American Association of Community Colleges, 2012; Malm, 2008). From academics to marketing and researching to motivating, the skillset of today's community college president is demanding. The contemporary president must be able to navigate the mass media and social media and utilize public relations strategies to promote return on investment and navigate potential crises. Presidents must also be able to leverage and enhance the resources of the institution by fostering collaboration and partnerships. These leaders must navigate under increased scrutiny and sometimes contradicting expectations from stakeholders. Consequently, not only are the responsibilities changing, but there is also a shortage of leaders to fill these roles.

The Community College President Leadership "Crisis"

Consistently, the research over the past three decades on the community college presidency has illustrated both a gap in prepared leaders as well as lack of diversity in that leadership (Cook, 2012; Gutierrez et al., 2002; June, 2007; McFarlin et al., 1999; McNair et al., 2011; Perrakis et al., 2009; Vaughan, 1996, 2004; Vaughan et al., 1994). As a result, leading community college organizations, including the American Association of Community Colleges, Achieving the Dream, the Aspen Institute, the League of Innovation, and the American Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT), have all acknowledged and are attempting

to address this shortage of leaders as a "leadership pipeline crisis" (Brown, 2014; Bumpus, 2014; De Los Santos, 2014; Trueheart, 2014; Wyner, 2014).

Many factors have contributed to this leadership "crisis." The main reason for the presidential shortage is the retirement of numerous current presidents combined with a limited number of individuals with the comprehensive skillsets previously described to fill those expected vacancies (American Association of Community Colleges, 2012). There are not enough potential leaders in the pipeline to fill the expected vacancies. Additionally, the evolving responsibilities, increased stress, and negative impact on quality of life may make the job unappealing to possible candidates (Bowles, 2013). What is notable is that even though this leadership gap has been discussed for more than a quarter of a century, until recently, there has been little done to change the trajectory of community college leadership. Consequently, many colleges need to do more work to create a culture that reduces gender and racial bias (Perrakis et al., 2009; Tedrow & Rhoads, 1999), which will be discussed in the next section.

A Look Back—A Historical Overview of Community College Presidents

Historically, the image of the typical community college president has not changed much since the 1980s (ACE, 2007, 2012, 2017; Gagliardi et al., 2017; Vaughan 1996, 2004). At that time, the average president was Anglo, male, married with children, and held a doctorate in education. That image still holds true in 2019 for more than 80% of community college presidents (Gagliardi et al. 2017). As previously illustrated, women and minorities are not reaching the top positions in community colleges in a way that mirrors the U.S. population or reflects the enrollment of community colleges. The representation should be more proportional so that diverse perspectives are included in the leadership decisions of community colleges and so that the students served see mentors and role models who look like them.

Between the 1980s and 1990s, the main change in demographics was the age of the typical president that increased from around 50 years of age to being older than 61 years of age, giving reason for researchers to repeatedly warn that many institutions will lose presidents due to retirement in the near future (Amey & VanDerLinden, 2002; Eddy, 2010; Ekman, 2010; Fain, 2008; Jaschik, 2006; Perrakis et al., 2009; Shults, 2001; Whissemore, 2011). What is concerning is that leaders approaching retirement have been a noted concern for decades, and studies are continuing to show significant gaps in diversity and the leadership pipeline as illustrated in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1

Demographic Characteristics of Community College Presidents in the United States

Demographic	1986	1998	2001	2006	2011	2016
Men	90%	80.7%	78.9%	71.2%	67.7%	64.2%
Women	10%	19.3%	21.1%	28.8%	32.3%	35.8%
Minority	8.1%	13.1%	14.9%	14.4%	12.9%	20.2%
Average Age	52 years	N/A	N/A	59.1 years	59.6 years	60.2 years

Adapted from *American College President Study 2017* by J. S. Gagliardi, L. L. Espinosa, J. M. Turk, and M. Taylor, M., 2017, American Council on Education (ACE) and Center for Policy Research and Strategy (CPRS).

Leadership Gaps and Underrepresentation of Women

While community colleges are more likely to consider non-traditional candidates for the presidency compared with other institutions of higher education, there is room for improvement (Cook & Young, 2012; Howard & Gagliardi, 2018; Tedrow & Rhoads, 1999). There is still

underrepresentation in leadership among women and minorities who are less likely than Anglo males to serve in high-level positions overall, especially as presidents (Warner & DeFleur, 1993) and the glass ceiling barrier to advancement continues to exist in higher education (Jackson et al., 2014). These gaps in leadership suggest barriers to access and inclusion within the community college system for women and individuals of color. It is important to also acknowledge there are significantly fewer women minority presidents in comparison to White women presidents as shown in Table 3.1, which illustrates another leadership disparity (Howard & Gagliardi, 2018).

Women are completing education at higher rates than their male counterparts, both at the undergraduate and doctoral level, yet their numbers are not reflected in leadership positions (Johnson, 2016). While women serving as community college presidents have increased nearly 25% since 1986 and now reflect nearly 36% of all community college presidents nationwide, this still does not reflect the demographics of the U.S. population or the community college population, both of which are more than half the population (ACE, 2017; Gagliardi et al., 2017; Ma & Baum, 2016). Studies have also shown that women who do advance to the top tiers of leadership must overcome gender barriers and stereotypical role expectations (Blevins, 2001; Eddy, 2005; Hannum et al., 2015; Johnson-Bailey & Tisdell, 1998; Shreiber, 1998; Vaughan, 1989). Vaughan (1986) noted the need for more role models for women on the career path, the need to remove gender bias from the interview process, the importance of finding ways to break the traditional male network, and the need for eliminating the double standard, where women are subject to different societal expectations than men, as key factors to ensuring more women advance. These factors suggest barriers to access and engendered expectations still exist, and the community college still remains a male-dominated organization.

In relation to gender, institutional norms and expectations are often defined traditionally and based on masculine norms within the community college. Male-dominated expectations for leadership ultimately discriminate against women and results in exclusionary practices (Lester, 2008.) Gender influences perception of women's leadership abilities since expectations are based on the male-dominated context that marginalizes women into specific gender roles (Caton, 2007). Consequently, the perception and role of governing boards in hiring, power imbalances, combined with policy that inherently favor men over women force women leaders to navigate a male system impact hiring practices and outcomes. Organizational culture and women's leadership styles have been a focus of much research (Eddy, 2005; Stout-Stewart, 2005; Switzer, 2006). Gianni (2001) described how women's leadership styles and intuitive ways of knowing are different from men and suggested that women have the potential to better position community colleges for the future by transforming the male-dominated context of community colleges.

Another focus of research on women in leadership positions centers on their career paths and barriers to attaining high-level positions. Studies have shown that women who advance to the top tiers of leadership must overcome gender barriers and stereotypical role expectations (Blevins, 2001; Eddy, 2005; Hannum et al., 2015; Johnson-Bailey & Tisdell, 1998; Shreiber, 1998; Vaughan, 1989). These same studies also showed that women experience a different career development process than men (Gutierrez et al., 2002; Johnson-Bailey & Tisdell, 1998; Shreiber, 1998). Academic preparedness combined with access to mentors along with an inclusive environment are factors common to men's career development process but, while needed for women, are less common (Muñoz, 2017). Women presidents have routinely shared experiencing significant barriers as they climbed the ranks including gender bias, discrimination, double

standards as well as challenges balancing their role as a mother or spouse (Vaughan, 1986, 1989). The challenges of gender bias, negotiating the male-dominated organizational context, and balancing personal and professional lives remained struggles for women once they attained a high-level leadership role (Tedrow & Rhoads, 1999). Women repeatedly expressed experiencing these issues and what many researchers have referred to as the double-bind that puts women in a position of irreconcilable demands because of their gender (Caton, 2007).

The Need for Diverse Leadership

More than six million students across the nation are enrolled in community colleges (Boggs & McNair, 2016; Ginder et al., 2017), which is the entryway for many individuals to attend universities or enter the workforce. The community college is often the only access point to higher education for many low-income, first-generation, minority, and other underserved students (Berkner et al., 2008; Erkut & Mokros, 1984; Ginder et al., 2017; Ma & Baum, 2016; Shapiro et al., 2017). As the diversity of the student enrollment increases as displayed in Table 4.1, it is reasonable to expect that leadership should also begin to reflect the student body so that students have role models and see individuals like themselves in leadership roles (Gutierrez et al., 2002; Perrakis et al., 2009; Rodriguez, 2015). However, that is not happening. There is still significant underrepresentation of leaders who look like the populations being served. More studies are needed to document the voice of women and other underrepresented leaders to understand their experience and create a more inclusive community college. Diverse leaders are needed to further promote equity and inclusion (Alexander, 2005; Eddy, 2009, Kerby, 2012). College presidents from diverse backgrounds have a rich sum of experiences and thus bring a unique perspective and understanding of gender and race to the way to lead in a presidency (Cortada, 1996; Holub & Foote, 1996). Educational excellence requires both diversity and equity

that also must be reflected at the highest levels of leadership, especially the president (Perrakis et al., 2009).

Table 4.1

Student Race and Ethnicity Distribution in Public Two-Year Community Colleges, 2014

	Asian	Black	Hispanic	White	Other
Student	5%	14%	22%	49%	10%

Adapted from *Trends in Community Colleges: Enrollment, Prices Student Debt and Completion* by J. Ma and S. Baum, 2016, College Board Research Brief.

Research also suggested that traditional styles of leadership may not be adequate to lead community colleges due to the influence of economic, social, and cultural factors that have created new challenges (Amey, 2013) like those explained in the previous section. Consequently, presidents must bring a diverse leadership skillset to adjust to the evolving needs and complexity of community colleges. Therefore, hiring more diverse leadership, including increasing the numbers of women and minorities who often have non-traditional leadership styles that emphasize participation along with shared power decision-making (Chiliwiniak, 1997; Townsend & Twombly, 1998), could better position community colleges for the future. Research shows that women are empathetic, nurturing, promote teamwork, are strong multi-taskers, and have other leadership traits. These traits potentially complement the changing role of the president and needs of the contemporary community college. Since women are likely to lead at institutions that enroll underserved student populations, these women presidents are able to help them achieve success (Howard & Gagliardi, 2018). Increasing the number of women presidents

could also change the culture of the community college and open more opportunities for women (DiCroce, 1995; Getskow, 1996; Vaughan, 1989). As current presidents approach and enter retirement, this creates an opportunity to advance more women and minorities into the presidency. As student populations become more diverse and inclusive, community college presidents need to be prepared, experienced, and forward thinking so that marginalized groups are accepted, respected, and have a voice. A pipeline for leadership must be created to ensure there are qualified leaders, including women, who can take on these roles.

Diverse leadership, especially at the president level, may provide additional perspectives to effectively solve the challenges posed in today's complex education environment (Boggs & McNair, 2016; Eddy 2009). More community colleges are reflecting the tenets of diversity and inclusion in their mission statements and initiatives. However, it is important to ensure that they are being practiced throughout the institution, especially in recruitment and hiring practices to sustain gender parity (Howard & Gagliardi, 2018). When hiring for the presidency, it is important to appeal to, be welcoming of, and include diverse candidates—both so they want to apply for the job and later will stay in the job. Therefore, to better understand how to do this, it is important to listen and understand the experience of women who are in these leadership positions to reach these diversity and inclusion goals.

Creating a Pipeline for Diverse and Sustained Leadership

As community colleges struggle to discover who will replace retiring presidents and to better understand the characteristics needed for future presidents, it is necessary to create a sustainable leadership pipeline. To do this, colleges will need to find ways to implement diversity and representation as well as ways to identify and train new leaders internally and externally (Aspen Institute, 2014; Morris, 2015; Perrakis et al., 2009). The more this pipeline is

inclusive of women, the more candidates there will be to fill these roles. Upcoming leaders also need a variety of mechanisms from mentorship opportunities, post-graduate education, and access to tools that will help them develop the leadership traits necessary for success. At the college level, individuals and leaders need to reflect on how policies of diversity and inclusion are implemented. Institutions must realize that leadership is not just one-size fits all as well as the importance of looking at skillsets differently (Amey, 1999). The traditional approach of valuing leaders with only higher education experience or from certain academic paths may need to give way to also placing importance on other types of experiences or skills, including non-academic backgrounds. As the demands of a president change, valuing diverse skillsets and new types of qualifications beyond traditional academic skills for the contemporary president are necessary.

The review of the literature and historical trends of the past three decades illustrated an ongoing pattern of a need for more representative leadership as well as a need for a sustainable pipeline for community college presidents (Cook, 2012). Some researchers also argued that institutions and institutional leadership, including trustees, must take responsibility for creating a culture of inclusion and promoting a culture that reduces gender and racial bias (Perrakis et al., 2009; Tedrow & Rhoads, 1999). Therefore, this research can contribute to increased knowledge about the experience of women who have reached the presidency and how gender impacts their behavior. While much has been written to document these challenges, it is disappointing that there has been slow and little progress to change the reality, especially in the case of women in presidential roles in community colleges. Analyzing women community college presidents is important. This study will add to the understanding of the experiences of women community college presidents.

Women as Community College Presidents

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2020), just over 50% of the U.S. population are women. Not only do women represent slightly more of the overall population, but women are also completing education at higher percentages than men, at the undergraduate and doctoral levels (Johnson, 2016). This is especially true in community colleges where in 2017, more than 3.3 million or 56% of the nearly six million students enrolled were women, and this number is projected to increase (NCES, 2017). However, despite the student representation of women on campuses, the number of women in the highest leadership positions is still not representative, and men continue to dominate community college leadership (Eddy & Cox, 2008; Johnson, 2016). While women in the presidential roles at community colleges increased 7% between 2006 and 2016, men still represented nearly 65% of community college presidents and women around 35%, with only 7% being women of color (ACE, 2017).

Several studies have made the case for including more women and cultivating more diverse leaders to promote inclusion and the success of a diverse student body (Alexander, 2005; Howard & Gagliardi, 2018; Kerby, 2012). Women represent a group that has been marginalized and, therefore, can help to usher in an era of greater understanding for the changing demographics of community colleges. Therefore, women have the potential to better position community colleges for the future by transforming the male-dominated context of community colleges by contributing their knowledge as leaders, but they will not be able to do that if underrepresentation continues.

Women Community College Presidents Must Navigate Gendered Spaces

Gender affects perceptions of leadership abilities, ability to build relationships, use of power and expectations about behavior that are often rooted in stereotypes (Caton, 2007,

Johnson et al., 2008). Eddy (2009) described how the academy and academic leadership continue to be gendered structures saturated by male-oriented norms. Research has demonstrated that women leaders frequently face "additional struggles with respect to navigating and managing the perceptions of others" (Meister et al., 2017, p. 672). Women in the workplace are impacted by expected gender roles. Role Congruity Theory explains how differences in gender roles ascribed to women compared with those of men result in prejudice and bias in the workplace (Eagly & Carli, 2007, 2009). Women are associated with collaborative traits while men are associated with independent traits. Competence is typically viewed as a masculine trait (Madden, 2011). As a result, women are not viewed as strong leaders. This assumption results in males emerging as natural leaders and given more opportunities to lead, since women are perceived and expected to be more compassionate and nurturing and not strong and intelligent. Thus, they are often seen as less competent to lead. If they are assertive, they are viewed as aggressive; but if they are warm and nice, they are considered weak. These stereotypes are a contributing factor to the gender gap that exists in leadership today, including the double-bind, where women are faced with multiple irreconcilable demands (Catalyst, 2007).

Not only do women in leadership roles face stereotypes, but their pathway to advancement also contains more obstacles than men. Eagly and Carli (2007, 2009) described how women must be more strategic and work harder to navigate the labyrinth to career advancement. Women must balance family responsibilities, face discrimination, and overcome pressures from socially expected gender roles. Women constantly face gender-based leadership barriers that create a glass ceiling effect (Diehl, 2014). These competing expectations are known as the double bind that creates a resistance to women's influence and leadership (Eagly & Carli, 2007, 2009; Tedrow & Rhoads, 1999).

These stereotypes are perpetuated by power structures in organizations that favor males. According to Acker (1992), these gendered organizations exist when "advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine" (p. 249). The male-dominated structure of organizations is reinforced by work activities and communication that are all affected by gender. For example, the male traits of being "lean, mean, aggressive, goal oriented, efficient, and competitive," is more important than women's traits of being "empathetic, supportive, kind and caring" (Acker, 1990, p. 253).

These obstacles and stereotypes also exist in community colleges. Community colleges are bureaucratic institutions that are political in nature with policies and procedures that create different experiences for men and women (Acker, 1990; Eddy & Cox, 2008; Switzer, 2006). These traditionally based organizational structures favor men (Eddy & Cox, 2008). Despite women's struggle for equality and removing gender barriers, these challenges still exist in community colleges. Women in academia must work and navigate careers in a gendered environment (Howe-Walsh & Turnbull, 2016). Community colleges have a structure where women are judged by male models of leadership (Eddy & Cox, 2008). This masculinity pervades institutional practices including hiring processes that favor males (Twombly & Amey, 1991; Vaughan, 1989). The influence of the masculine system marginalizes women creating barriers for women's leadership (Twombly, 1995). Women are judged by male expectations, thus perpetuating gender stereotypes. As a result, when masculine leadership traits are perceived as preferential, leadership styles of women become viewed as a weakness rather than a strength (Madden, 2011).

While research has been dedicated to documenting this leadership gap and even more on the labyrinth (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Kark & Eagly, 2010) women must navigate, less has been done to understand how women are successful once they ascend the ranks and attain leadership positions, especially at the president level. In sum, current research focuses on women's pathway to leadership and not their experiences once they attain high-level administrative positions (Gill, 2013; Gutierrez et al., 2002; Muñoz, 2017; Stout-Stewart, 2005; Tedrow & Rhoads, 1999). Therefore, more research is needed to understand how women who have obtained a high-level leadership position navigate their role as leaders in the male-dominated context of community colleges.

In summary, gender inequality and the underrepresentation of women presidents remain a challenge for community colleges (Gianni, 2001; Perrakis et al., 2009; Townsend, 2006). Gender affects perceptions of leadership abilities, ability to build relationships, use of power, and expectations about behavior that are often rooted in stereotypes (Caton, 2007; Kark & Eagly, 2010). Like many institutions of higher education, community colleges are gendered spaces that have been reflected and reproduce a male-dominated culture that systemically marginalizes women (Acker, 1990; Caton, 2007; Twombly, 1995). Identity is the set of meanings defining an individual's role in society as well as defining characteristics that distinguish themselves from others (Stets, 2013). Studies have documented the importance of examining how women scrutinize their identities and how they cope to navigate that experience (Meister et al., 2017; Sinclair, 2011, 2013). This research seeks to add to this body of knowledge. It is important to understand how women perceive their identities, their role, and how gender impacts the perception of their experience as women presidents at community colleges. Once women have

ascended to a presidential position, more research is needed to understand how they navigate the male-dominated context of community colleges.

Theoretical Framework

High-level administrative leadership at community colleges is a male-dominated realm. In order to understand how women community college presidents navigate their roles as leaders in this gendered environment, a framework is required that accounts for dominant-gendered norms. High-level women administrative leaders are positioned where normality is granted to men and otherness to women (Betchtold, 2008; Eagly, 2005; Lester, 2008; Pasque, 2013). This means that in social and leadership situations, men are the expected norm, and thus, women must find ways to adapt or assimilate to an environment where males are dominant. The power and relational dynamics of the male-dominated context of community colleges are omnipresent constraints that women community college presidents must navigate. Roles and behavior are often prescribed based on gender. This is exemplified in the male-dominated context of community colleges where community college presidents are typically male. When a woman becomes a community college president, she is atypical and outside the gendered expectations of a leader (Eagly, 2005). As a woman, she becomes the other and, thus, is forced to behave within societal gender expectations.

A feminist lens examines issues associated with gender inequality. However, this lens emphasizes a commitment to social justice and advancing the well-being and circumstances of all people, not just women (Connell, 2012; Golombisky, 2012). Feminist scholarship must embody a desire for both women and men to be free from sexist gender role patterns, oppression, and domination (hooks, 2014). Feminist methodology critically evaluates assumptions about difference using three criteria including (a) bringing women's voices into research and

knowledge, (b) examining power relationships without harming the research subjects, and (c) benefitting women while improving society (DeVault, 1999).

To add to the knowledge about women who have advanced to presidencies at community colleges, this study used the feminist post-structural lens to examine women presidents' experiences to understand how they perceive leading within the male-dominated context of community colleges. Post-structural feminism challenges the notion that gender is biological. Instead, gender is reflected by relational systems that may include sex but are not determined by sex or determining of sexuality (Scott, 1986). Gender is an opportunity to uncover the power structures that create and justify the hierarchy between men and women. This theoretical framework assumes that gender is a social construct and women are positioned within social situations, with power and relational dynamics, where normality is granted to men and otherness to women (Broido & Manning, 2002).

Women remain underrepresented as community college presidents, so putting the social construction of gender at the center of this research is relevant. According to Lather (2017), "through the questions that feminism poses and the absences it locates, feminism argues the centrality of gender in the shaping of our consciousness, skills and institutions as well as in the distribution of power and privilege" (p. 83). This study aimed to make the experience of women community college presidents more visible and consistent with the ideological goal of feminist work. Studying women from the perspective of their own experience contributed to the understanding of how they navigate the community college environment as well as lead within it.

Gender is a basic organizing principle that greatly shapes our lives. In the post-modern era, the political, economic, social, and cultural system is perpetuated not by scientific discovery, but by stories told within the system that often sustain inequity (Haraway, 1985). From this

epistemological perspective, knowledge is socially constructed and situated. Therefore, examining women's lived experiences is a valid way to create knowledge.

Historically, women have been less represented, and consequently, women's perspectives are not always a part of what we know, and thus, the existing knowledge may be distorted or incomplete (Harding, 2004). Marginalized groups, like women, are socially situated in a way that gives them a unique perspective and research that looks at power dynamics should start from the marginalized (hooks, 1984). In society, the dominant group attempts to force the marginalized group to accept the dominant conceptual framework. From this perspective, "starting off research from women's lives will generate less partial and distorted accounts not only of women's lives but also of men's lives and of the whole social order" (Harding, 1993, p. 56). By taking a feminist critique and analysis of the social structure, researchers can better understand the effects of various power relations on the production of knowledge.

Women serving as presidents in community colleges have a perspective that must be included in the body of research. These women have experienced the community college through their struggle to navigate the labyrinth to the presidency. These women presidents lead in community colleges that have been historically defined by a male-dominated system. This patriarchal system does not enable women as an underrepresented group in leadership to make sense of their own experiences where they know themselves instead of just being known by others. Thus, their experiences can reveal challenges to be explained that can influence research agendas, policy creation, and other women. Examining the topic of women's leadership within a feminist framework helps examine the beliefs, identify bias of the dominant group, and re-examine what constitutes as knowledge. This provides less distorted pictures of women leaders and more objective knowledge.

It is critical to acknowledge that individuals are shaped by their material circumstances and that there are different experiences, needs, and interests that result in different types of thinking and interacting. Not all women have the same lived experience. Therefore, it is important to note that the experience of women is not a monolith, and there is plurality in their experiences (Collins, 2004; Harding, 2004; hooks, 1984). Gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and other intersectionalities can impact a woman as an epistemic agent. All these factors contribute to how we understand the world as well as place boundaries on what we are able to know.

Post-Structural Feminism

Examining the "production and reproduction of the subject's gendered identity" (Scott, 1986, p. 1058) is relevant to understanding the experience of women. From a feminist post-structural perspective, it is valuable to study discourses of how underrepresentation and differences in gender distinguish gender inequality in the creation of gendered subject positions. We are born into gender where our gender identity is a repeated act that is performed (Butler, 1990, 1993). However, by stopping this performance, Butler (1990) suggested that we can "change those meanings through discourse and affective means and by recognizing how we are embedded and impacted by these social constructs" (p. 93).

The dominant discourse defines conventional meaning and ways of being and, as a result, establishes what is considered normal (Kumashiro, 2004). St. Pierre (2000) described how post-structuralism can offer critiques and ways to examine societal structures by looking at these discourses, shared cultural narratives, and how they are produced. The feminist post-structural lens allows us to not only understand how women have come to know themselves, but also

questions the legitimacy for the framework of that understanding and has the potential to bring women's voices to the forefront.

Words do not reflect the world or have meaning by themselves. The meaning of language comes from the cultural narrative, and words have multiple meanings created through discourse and interaction (Davies, 2000; St. Pierre, 2000; Weedon, 2004). Discourse is the effect of language that creates shared narratives that organize thought and behavior (St. Pierre, 2000). Meanings get attached to words, set rules for behavior, and shape our understanding of the world (Wheedon, 2004). Women presidents perform based on this discourse. They are positioned or position themselves to lead based on male-dominated shared narratives. This discourse reinforces the male paradigm that influences role and leadership expectations. Women leaders often experience contradictory narratives and are forced to navigate within incompatible discourses.

In the post-structural framework, existence is created through discourse (Davies, 2000). In other words, who we are and how we act is a social construct, not an individual identity. This establishes subjectivity where people are produced as subjects of discourse and cultural narrative. By understanding that we are constructed by multiple discourses that shape our understanding, we can begin to question and reposition ourselves as well as our understanding of the world (Butler, 1993; Davies, 2000).

This feminist post-structural lens helps examine the effects of the male-dominated community college culture and give insight to the women who lead within it. This research aimed to discover a better understanding of how discourse and subjectivity are produced. The study documented women community college presidents' perceptions on leading, talking and behaving, including listening to the stories shared to recognize how these women are constrained

or constrain themselves as they lead. This study utilized these data from the stories they shared to examine how women community college presidents experienced these spaces.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Qualitative Research

This study used qualitative research and analysis because it was best suited to understanding participants' experiences from their point of view by documenting their stories and perspectives (Cresswell, 2013, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and understanding the human condition (Bogdan & Bilken, 2010). There is also a history of qualitative research methods being used to study education (Bogdan & Bilken, 2010). Education is a field that can benefit from qualitatively studying the experiences of the individuals, including administrators such as presidents, who participate in and carry out the educational process (Seidman, 2013).

My interest was in understanding how women community college presidents described their experience and navigated their leadership within the male-dominated context of community colleges. Exploring how these women community college presidents created meaning from their experience can offer insight into their ongoing leadership as well as impact future women community college presidents. A qualitative methodological approach was an important ideological facet of feminist post-structural framework (Bogdan & Bilken, 2010). A quantitative approach would not generate the appropriate data to understand this phenomenon.

Qualitative research allows the benefit of getting a deeper breadth of understanding from the detailed experiences of a few individuals (Bernard, 2000; Cresswell, 2016). By documenting the perspectives of women community college presidents, we can understand their perspective and how they create meaning from their experiences. It was necessary to document how women perceive and describe their experience to understand how the male-dominated context of community colleges affects women presidents' leadership. It also allowed for a more complex understanding of the topic and context from multiple women's voices.

Qualitative researchers study phenomenon in order to make sense of the meaning participants bring to their lived experiences (Cresswell 2013, 2016; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). The research questions of this study attempted to understand coping strategies, perspectives, and have women community college presidents describe their experiences as the top executive in the workplace. Each participant was given an opportunity to share her experience from her point of view (Cresswell, 2013, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Each constructed meaning from their role as president and described the impact this had on their lives in their own voice. As a result, there was greater understanding of how women community college presidents make sense of their lives as well as define and interpret their experience.

This type of research also can illustrate the perspective of underrepresented individuals and those who have not been studied (Bhattacharya, 2017; Cresswell, 2013, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The phenomenon being explored was how women community college presidents navigate their leadership and describe their experience as leaders within community colleges. As described in the literature review, most of the research on presidents has focused on men. Since there are few women community college presidents, the research also highlighted their underrepresented voice. By listening to and understanding how women construct their narrative within a male-dominated context, we can better understand what they experience as community college leaders.

Finally, the purpose of this study was to create an in-depth of understanding about women community college presidents and not breadth of knowledge for generalizations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Scholars advocate for the value of incorporating qualitative approaches to study the glass ceiling (Patton & Haynes, 2014). Wolgemuth et al. (2003) recommended designing studies using qualitative research methods to study women in

community colleges to better understand depth and understanding of their experiences. Uncovering the detailed aspects and dynamics of women community college presidents could not be discovered outside of qualitative methods. By collecting and analyzing the women community college presidents' perspectives of their leadership experience, we can add to the understanding about women in these roles.

In summary, the lived experiences of women community college presidents were phenomena that needed to be explored but could not be measured quantitatively. Qualitative research has the potential to provide a complex understanding in a way that gives a voice to these underrepresented women leaders. It created meaning of their experiences from their own points of view. It provided more insight to how women community college presidents navigate and perceive their identity in the male-dominated community college structure in a rich and holistic way.

Researcher Positionality

Researchers bring their own culture, experience, and background to the study (Cresswell, 2013, 2016). It is important to be self-aware and reflexive about how the researcher conceptualizes and influences the study. Both my philosophical position and my life experience or frame of reference, impacts my perspective on this topic. A researcher's philosophy influences how research questions and problems are shaped and what assumptions are made about a study (Cresswell, 2013).

An assumption (Cresswell, 2013), also known as a paradigm, is a "loose collection of logically related assumptions, concepts, or propositions that orient thinking and research" (Bogdan & Bilken, 2010, p. 22). As previously described, my theoretical framework is rooted in post-structural feminism that emphasizes an individual narrative over a single grand narrative or

truth (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The post-structural purpose was to deconstruct, interpret, and question assumptions about reality. Therefore, the paradigm that informed this study was postmodernism.

I approached this research from a postmodern stance and the ontological perspective that there are multiple realities that are "political and constructed among the lines of race, class and gender or some combination" (Cresswell, 2016, p. 8). Postmodernism values the subjective and multiple meanings brought by different individuals. This perspective advances the values of the researcher and the participants for empowerment and change. From an epistemological perspective, knowledge is known through the subjective experience of people. From an axiological perspective that reflects the value-laden nature of research, there is an importance on both the researcher and participant under this paradigm as well as an acknowledgement of the influence of ideology and power.

My life experience also contributed to the vantage point of my research. I am a White, heterosexual woman who is bilingual in English and Spanish and has lived in El Paso, Texas, along the border of the United States, Mexico, and New Mexico for more than 30 years. As a woman who is currently in and has held high-level administrative positions in and out of academia, I have experienced the effects of gendered spaces and double standards throughout my career. For example, I have experienced stereotypes, bias, and harassment because of my gender. I have had to work harder and have had to prove myself more than my male colleagues. This impacted me by making me more aware of the inequity that exists for women and other marginalized groups. Therefore, I have an interest in studying the impact of gender inequality in organizations, and this interest transferred with me to higher education. Having moved up through the ranks to an administrative position in a community college as an associate vice

president, I am interested in the experiences other women have and documenting how they navigate within this male-dominated environment.

Setting

As previously discussed, this research focused on community colleges since women are more likely to be in administrative positions, including the presidency in comparison with four-year colleges and universities (Eddy, 2009). Additionally, community colleges enroll a larger percentage of diverse students from non-traditional, low-income, and minority backgrounds than four-year colleges and universities. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2018), in 2015 to 2016, there were 1,579 community colleges. From this, 910 were public institutions and the remaining 669 were private. Since most students attend public community colleges, this research focused on public two-year institutions. Since the community college structure, funding, and group of students served vary by state, this research focused on women community college presidents from the same state for consistency.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2018a), the two states with the largest number of public community colleges were California followed by Texas. This research focused on Texas because of its large number of public community colleges and its anticipated growth in student population. There is greater like-to-like comparison by focusing on one state since Texas community colleges are funded the same way, have similar governance systems, and face similar challenges. Texas has 50 community colleges (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board [THECB], 2021). However, some of these colleges also grant baccalaureate degrees. For consistency and similarity, this study focused on the 48 community colleges that offer exclusively two-year degrees. As listed in the Texas Association of Community Colleges' (TACC, 2019) directory, of these 48 colleges, there are only 10 women presidents, which is only

about 20%, and this percentage lags behind the national average of 36% (ACE, 2017; TACC, 2019; THECB, 2021).

Participant Selection

Texas public community colleges were identified by using directory lists published by the THECB and the TACC. The THECB is the state organization that provides leadership and coordination for Texas higher education. The TACC is an advocacy organization for Texas' public community college member districts and works with legislators and other decision-makers to promote the advancement of community colleges. The directory lists from these two organizations provided the most comprehensive and detailed listing of all public two-year institutions in Texas, including contact information for presidents.

Key to understanding the lived experiences of participants was discovering their perspectives. Interviewing was a mode of inquiry that contributed to the knowledge of participants' experiences by learning about their lived experience (Seidman, 2013). Participant stories become a way of knowing and telling those stories and is part of the meaning making process. Specifically recruiting individuals who can provide insight to the topic of a study is known as purposeful sampling (Cresswell, 2016).

Participants were selected by purposeful sampling with the criteria that participants be a currently employed permanent (not interim) president of a two-year community college within the State of Texas and be a woman. Additionally, since this study was focusing on community colleges with an emphasis on two-year degrees and certificates, community colleges offering baccalaureate degrees were not included. As previously defined, for the purpose of this study, the title of president was being used to categorize the highest ranked leader of the community college who ran the college district, not just an individual campus, and reported to the board of

trustees. The 10 women community college presidents leading two-year community college districts in Texas as listed in the TACC and THECB directories as published in July of 2019 were contacted via postal letter, email, and phone calls and were invited to participate in the study (Appendix A). Eight of the 10 women community college presidents agreed to participate, and ultimately seven completed the interview. The proposal for this research was approved in December of 2019, and the IRB was approved in January of 2020. Some women community college presidents were contacted in the Spring of 2020 via email and letter (Appendix A), initial contacting was halted, and data collection was delayed until the Spring of 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. To facilitate outreach and scheduling, the women presidents' administrative assistants were copied on the communication. Women community college presidents who were interested in participating were provided additional information, including an informed consent document.

Data Collection

My intent as a researcher was to understand the meaning women community college presidents make of their experiences. Therefore, interviewing was an appropriate manner of inquiry (Patton, 1989; Seidman, 2013). The types of research questions I was asking sought to understand women presidents' experiences within the male-dominated community college context. It also sought to describe and gain insight as to how each woman navigated within this setting. Individuals make meaning through language (Seidman, 2013). Consequently, interviewing allowed the participants to tell their own personal narrative. By sharing their stories, women community college presidents gave insight to social and educational issues.

The research was conducted using semi-structured interviews. This type of interview was in-depth, and participants answered open-ended questions and were used to collect rich,

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descriptive data (Bernard, 2000; Cresswell, 2013, 2016; Merriam & Tissdell, 2016; Seidman, 2013). Questions were developed with the goal of getting descriptive and robust responses that led to better understanding the phenomena. The questions were used as a guiding framework for an interactive conversation in which the participants were able to lead the direction of the interview. This allowed the participants an opportunity to share their unique knowledge and understanding of the topic. Various types of questions were used flexibly in order to gain understanding on a variety of areas including experience and behavior, feelings, opinions and values, knowledge, and background. The goal was to create an interview that felt like a personal encounter so that participants felt comfortable sharing rich information.

It was my preference to have face-to-face interviews to make the strongest connection and interaction with the participants; but because of the COVID-19 pandemic, that was not possible. Consequently, these semi-structured interviews with participants were held via a telephone or video conference, based on the participant's preference. Prior to all interviews, participants were asked to fill out a very brief questionnaire for the first five to seven minutes of the interview that asked about their educational and career background, academic or other leadership training, and other non-identifiable demographic information (Appendix B). This allowed participants a few moments to focus, reflect on their experience, as well as give the interviewer a starting point for discussion. Then, participants took part in the semi-structured interview (Table 5.1) that had some guiding questions (Appendix C). Interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' permission using a hand-held device and transcribed. Even for interviews conducted with video, only audio was recorded. Each woman president was asked to participate in one 60- to 90-minute interview with an average length of 84 minutes. Data collection began in the Spring of 2020 after the dissertation proposal but was temporarily put on

hold due to the pandemic. A modified IRB was approved, and data collection resumed in the

Spring of 2021 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 5.1

Semi-Structured Interview

Interview Protocol	Related Research Question
Can you tell me a little more about this timeline, are there particular events that influenced why you aspired to reach your current professional role?	1 & 3
If you were to write a memoir about how you became a woman president, how would you describe yourself and characterize yourself as a leader?	2
How would you describe your greatest challenge in your role as a woman president and how do you manage that?	2
Describe how gender expectations ever impacted your actions or behavior?	2
What is your greatest professional challenge and how do you manage it?	1
Is being a woman helpful or a challenge in your current role? Why?	2
Based on your role as a woman president, how would you describe the good, bad and the ugly of your position?	1
How has your gender impacted your leadership?	2 & 3
Do you think you have it easier or harder than your male counterparts and why?	1 & 2
Can you think of a time that you modified your behavior or leadership because of others' expectations because you are a woman?	2 & 3
How does being a woman impact how you interact with others?	2
If you knew then, what you know now, what advice would you give yourself?	1 & 3
Why have you remained in the role of a community college president?	1
Do you plan to continue in this role? What would make you want to leave your current role?	1
How do you balance your professional and personal responsibilities?	3
Describe the future you would like to see for aspiring women Presidents?	1 & 3
What will it take to make that vision a reality?	2
Is there anything else you would like to share or that I haven't asked?	1, 2, & 3

Data were transcribed, analyzed, and coded. I was committed to ensuring the privacy and confidentiality of the participants to the extent allowed by law. The only document that had the participant's actual name was the informed consent form that was stored separately from data collected. Data collected from the background questionnaire and interviews were stored using a pseudonym. Due to their high-profile positions and public visibility, women community college presidents are a vulnerable population. To protect the participant's privacy, interviews were scheduled at the time and location of their choice. To ensure participants were not pressured to share sensitive information or did not have to disclose anything they were uncomfortable with, they could stop the interview for any reason, at any time, or they could choose to skip any question.

Protecting the confidentiality of participants was an important component of this study. Given the sensitivity of interviewing women community college presidents who were candidly sharing insight to their experiences, I recognized the necessity for the highest levels of human subject protections. Since there are very few women community college presidents, even with using pseudonyms, sharing too much identifying information would potentially allow for identification of the participants. As a result, I elected to not offer the kind of rich description often typical in qualitative research, like the names of the institutions or geographical locations. Furthermore, in presenting narrative data, I intentionally avoided providing personal identifiers such as participants' position/title, race/ethnicity, age, and other identifying information. Although the research does not provide such details, I am hopeful that the data provided in aggregate form will be useful for enhancing readers' understanding of the experience of women community college presidents.

Data Analysis

The data analysis took place throughout and after data collection. Data analysis began by preparing the data for data analysis by audio recording the actual interview and taking notes during and after interviews. The audio-recorded files were transcribed. I also wrote memos after the interview to facilitate analytical thinking and ensure reflexivity. Then, the interview transcriptions and notes were reviewed in order to get a general understanding of the data. Once the transcribed text had been reviewed and I had a general understanding of the data, I began coding the transcribed text to make sense of it. The data were analyzed to break it down into codes, themes, and dimensions (Cresswell, 2016; Saldaña, 2016).

The coding process involved reading the interview passages and assigning an initial code to those passages. Then, the initial coding and analytical memos were reviewed. After that initial process, I used the strategy of "lean coding" as described by Cresswell (2016, p. 175) to come up with multiple codes. The coding process allowed me to analyze the text and reconstruct it in a meaningful way. These codes were then categorized and re-organized into themes. The themes helped develop interpretations for the data. From there, themes led to larger dimensions to inform the discussion.

In order to transition from data collection to analysis, the qualitative data from the interview transcripts were coded to establish a critical link between data and to create meaningful explanation. Based on the small scale of the study as well as to maintain more control and ownership of the work (Saldaña, 2016), I elected to do manual coding. Short phrases were assigned to the data in each transcript. These codes symbolically assigned a "summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 4).

This coding was done in order to identify patterns, categorize the data, and capture the essence of the transcript data.

For the first coding, I did an initial notation of words and sentences that stood out as meaningful. Data were transcribed and initially hand-coded using an open coding and focused coding approach (Saldaña, 2016). Open coding resulted in the following categories itemized in Table 6.1.

During the second level coding, I looked more carefully at each of the categories from the initial coding and created subcategories that illustrated the participant's experiences. I looked for patterns in order to solidify observations into meaning by grouping together similar data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Since patterns demonstrate repetitiveness and importance, they contribute to the trustworthiness of the data. Although multiple subcategories emerged, only those mentioned by more than half the participants were included. However, significant differences of experiences were also noted, considered, and mentioned when the difference illustrated an observation of significance. Next, the codes were synthesized into categories to move toward a consolidated meaning.

During the data collection and coding, I relied on analytic memos to reflect on the process. The analytic memos were utilized to maintain reflections on observations on the participants and phenomenon being studied so that I could write and think more deeply. The memos also helped me maintain self-reflexivity as well as challenge assumptions, identify researcher bias, and serve as an intellectual space to better understand the data. I made notes of observations, patterns, trends, and concepts in these memos. From the codes, categorizing, and analytic reflection, I then identified common themes for analysis.

Table 6.1

Themes

Theme	Sub-Categories	Definition	Illustrative Quotes
Reaching the Top	Pathways, mentors, 'presidential push,' motivations, and resiliency	How women community college presidents describe their career trajectory and influences.	"I think he helped push me to do more than I probably had the confidence to do and forced me out of my comfort zone." "If I'm ever going to make the difference that I want to make and not be frustrated because I have no control over what these students are dealing with, I'm going to have to be a college president."
Woman in a Man's World	Otherness, gender bias, double standards, stereotypes	Descriptions of marginalization and otherness.	"Don't get me wrong, being a woman in a man's world isn't easy. By the time I assumed the presidency, I felt I experienced fewer microaggressions. There were not as many challenges to my authority. I'm not sure if this is a result of my title, more comfort in my own skin, or a combination of both?'" "I have walked that walk of being the only one and feeling alone…" "If you're a woman, you're weaker, you're more emotional, you're not as mentally tough as the man. These are stereotypes women face."
Working Harder Than Males	Proving capability, overcoming stereotypes and representing women	How women community college presidents describe modifying their behavior in the male-dominated community college.	"…men start out with this automatic credibility—it's assumed, women on the other hand have to prove it." "I learned early on that I always had to, I would say work harder. I spent longer hours. I took work home. I felt like that's what I had to do to prove myself."
Navigating Otherness	Workarounds, defying the male norm, positivity, communication and transparency, balance, authenticity, and embracing a feminine style	Descriptions of how women community college presidents strategize and cope in order to maneuver the experience of otherness within the male-dominated community college.	"It is difficult for women to find their groove sometimes; it was for me." "I tried to replicate that style, but it didn't work. I was uncomfortable and it showed. I learned the hard way that I just had to be me."

Through the analysis of these interviews, four coalescing themes as well as multiple

subthemes were identified. The main themes were (a) *Reaching the Top,* with subthemes of

pathways, mentors, the 'presidential push,' motivations, and resiliency; (b) *A Woman in a Man's*

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World, with otherness, gender bias, double standards, and stereotypes as subthemes; (c) *Working Harder Than Males,* with subthemes of proving capability, overcoming stereotypes, and representing women; and (d) *Navigating Otherness,* with subthemes of workarounds, defying the male norm, positivity, communication and transparency, making it happen, authenticity, and embracing feminine traits.

To maintain trustworthiness (Cresswell, 2016; Lincoln, 1995; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Seidman, 2013) and to ensure the greatest authenticity of data, I took steps to ensure internal consistency and to maintain research rigor. A significant amount of time was given to create a clear research design and context to discover meaning as lived and perceived by the participants. Additionally, to enhance the trustworthiness of interpretations, I conducted member-checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). During each interview, I paraphrased and summarized participants' responses and inquired about the accuracy of interpretations. This gave the participants an opportunity to clarify any misunderstandings or confirm the preliminary interpretation. The collaboration with participants via member-checks ensured that researcher interpretations aligned with participants' narratives and meanings. I examined my own reflexivity throughout the process to ensure consciousness of how her own background and experiences shaped the interpretation of the data.

In a qualitative study, interpretation of qualitative findings and themes can be considered a limitation. My perspective as a woman community college administrator could influence the interpretive findings. The coding format used was subjective and another researcher may ask similar questions but could have a different interpretation of the findings. I took steps to reduce bias and to provide as much validity to the findings as possible. Examples of this included listening carefully and not interrupting participants. During the interview, interpretations were

checked by restating ideas and asking participants to clarify their comments. I also coded during

the transcribing process, followed by primary and secondary coding. I also maintained a

reflective journal and wrote analytic memos. The analytic memos written throughout the data

collection, interview, and analysis process helped ensure research reflexivity and trustworthiness.

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter presents the findings from seven individual interviews conducted with women community college presidents. As explained in more detail in the previous chapter, the narrative data presented in this discussion had limited personal identifiers that was done intentionally to maintain the highest levels of human subject protections for this study. The chapter is organized in four sections. The first section describes the women community college presidents' backgrounds and rise to the top to put their comments in context. The next three sections are based around the three research questions:

Research Questions

1. How do women community college presidents describe their experience in male-dominated community colleges?

2. How do gender identity and gender expectations of women impact the behavior of women community college presidents?

3. How do women community college presidents navigate their role within male-dominated community colleges?

The first section of this chapter begins with a general overview of how the participants reached the top including a brief summary of their background, generational and contextual differences that impact their perception, their path, and motivations, as well as some of the key commonalities of their experience. The next section explores the first research question that attempts to understand the women presidents' own perceptions of their experience within the male-dominated community college, while the third section focuses on research question two about how women describe the impact of gender identity and expectations on their behavior. The

fourth section explains how women community college presidents navigate this male-dominated environment.

Section 1: Reaching the Top

Of the 10 women community college presidents meeting the criteria, eight agreed to be interviewed. Ultimately, seven completed the interviews. One cancelled due to an emergency and was not able to reschedule. All the others filled out the pre-interview questionnaire and participated in an interview. The interviews resulted in rich data about the women's experiences. This section gives an overview of the participants to better understand the context of their experience and the influences on their rise to becoming top leaders in their respective community colleges.

Duration in Role and Community College Setting

The longest serving president had been in her position 28 years, and the shortest had been a president for two years, with an average length of service amongst the group of about 10 years. The seven participants came from across the state and represented rural, suburban, and urban community colleges with student enrollments ranging in size from around 3,000 students to around 15,000. Six of the women responded in the introductory questionnaire that they identified as White, only one identified as a woman of color.

Ages and Generational Differences

The participants interviewed spanned in age from their 30s to their 70s with two under the age of 50, three in their 60s and two in their 70s. How they described gender and their experience was often influenced by the generation when they entered the workforce. The participants who entered the workforce in the 1960s described significant differences between today's experience in the workplace versus the time they began their careers. One striking

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example of this change was Madeline, who talked about working in the 70s and 80s and described significant changes in the workplace from then until now. She described how early in her career, women, regardless of their position were referred to as Mrs. along with their husband's last name: "I wasn't allowed to have my own name in the college directory. Women had to fight to get their own name. Many younger women won't experience that."

The participants whose ages were in their 60s and 70s described distinct differences between then and today. They said the most significant difference was the number of women in the workforce then compared to now. They also mentioned improvements in gender expectations and overall conditions that are more favorable and supportive of women today. They described that women from their generation were not taught to "stand up and stand out front" but say that is changing. They all agreed that as more women enter leadership roles like the presidency and as people get accustomed to women in these positions, the easier it becomes for both the women and the stakeholders being served. All the women expressed that the longer duration they had in their role as women community college presidents, the more comfortable they became, which also made it easier. The responses from the women who were 50 and younger reiterated these observations.

Participants who began their careers in the 1990s or later, often saw gender as less of a hindrance since women leaders, albeit underrepresented, were more commonplace than in the past. The participants under age 50 stated that at times their age was more of a hindrance than their gender. Katherine described being unsure if she was too young to pursue a presidency, but realized she had a wealth of experience to offer the position. Regardless of their age, participants shared that the combination of getting older and gaining more time in their position helped lead

with more ease and familiarity. They also described that with age, they felt less pressure and were less concerned with the opinions of others.

Education and Experience

All the women interviewed had a doctoral degree, previous experience in higher education administration, and all but one had served as faculty in the community college. The majority had previously served in director or vice president roles prior to becoming president. More than half had experience outside of working in community colleges. Some had worked in K-12, others in professional fields like accounting and finance, and two had worked in their own or family-owned businesses. Two had participated in dedicated fellowships to train, recruit, and develop presidents within community colleges. These women were considered trailblazers because more than half of them were the first woman community college presidents to serve at their respective institutions.

The women community college presidents stated they had to be willing to go out of their comfort zone and find the confidence to apply for a presidency. Unanimously, every woman interviewed acknowledged the existence of strong mentors and role models. All participants underscored and provided vivid examples of how mentors made a profound impact in helping them learn and preparing them for their current jobs. They also shared the importance of leadership programs and having a network of support.

Mentors and the "Presidential Push"

Some even credit mentors as directly influencing their decision to apply for the presidency. While most of the participants knew they wanted to work in a community college and sought to advance in higher-level administrative roles, five of the seven did not seek or even consider a presidency until someone else purposefully drove them in that direction. They said

that having mentors, a role model and in many cases, someone specifically suggesting pursuing a presidency helped to move them in that direction. These women described this as the "presidential push" that they said was having someone else who saw their potential encourage them and push them out of their comfort zone to seek a presidency. Most indicated the "push" came from a president who they worked for or from another mentor. Madeline credited a president who was her former boss for giving her the courage to take the next steps: "I think he helped push me to do more than I probably had the confidence to do and forced me out of my comfort zone."

Katherine, who had also aspired to be a high-level administrator, said a fellow director in another higher education-affiliated program pushed her to not only pursue a presidency, but also a doctoral degree in community college leadership.

> She said to me, "I think you would make a really good community college president. You should consider this role, this graduate program." And I told her, "Well, I want to be a higher education administrator; I wasn't thinking of a presidency." But she said, "You should go through that training program for community college presidents." So anyway, we talked a little more about it. And then, she just became my mentor, which is why I think mentors are so important. Because she really not only encouraged me to go in that direction (of pursuing a presidency), but also, she told me specifically what I needed to do to get the varied background. One of the most important things for a college president is understanding what goes on in the college and what goes on in the classroom.

Only two of the seven expressed seeking a presidency on their own. Kimberly, who had worked as faculty before becoming an administrator, described her love for students but how she was becoming frustrated with challenges she saw them facing that she could not control in her current role. She said, "If I'm ever going to make the difference that I want to make and not be frustrated because I have no control over what these students are dealing with, I'm going to have to be a college president."

While most participants acknowledged steadfast support from both men and women alike, one notable difference in the reference to mentors was not all participants felt they received as much support from other women. Two said male mentors were more responsible and impactful as they pursued a presidency, but they also acknowledged they became women community college presidents at a time when few women served in that role. Three participants stated that they did not find other women honestly supportive of other women or building each other up as much as they should. Madeline commented: "It's easy for other women to be jealous of one another. It's not 100%, but many times other women want to be top dog, or they want to be the person recognized."

Katherine said mentors not only helped her through her educational journey and professional path, but also helped her once she became a president. She said a former president remained a

> great mentor and person to bounce off ideas. Like even now that he's retired, I feel like I can still reach out to him and ask him different questions. He is always there, and he was the best example of somebody I think had the biggest heart for student success and always put students first. And so, I try to mirror what he was doing because it was just impressive. I feel like I was fortunate to have a lot of good mentors.

Others credit leadership programs like the Aspen Institute, the ACE Fellows Program, and others with being helpful because of curriculum and knowledge shared, but more importantly for the opportunity to get to know the other individuals with whom you are experiencing the program. The participants described these programs as meaningful leadership experiences that defined and shaped their careers. Katherine described this as the

> ideal networking opportunity. Because we were all in the same boat; we were all kind of going through the process at the exact same time. And, then there's some that got ahead, were presidents a few years before they started the program and so they've been a good help.

Determination and Motivations

While each brought unique experiences and visions to their roles, the seven participants had many commonalities in their personality traits. By the way they expressed themselves and the stories they shared, each of them demonstrated personalities that were confident, resilient, and determined. They were driven, highly motivated, and willing to work hard. These women were confident, self-assured, and believed they had what it takes. They were not easily intimidated and were passionately dedicated to higher education. While they emphasized the importance of being reflective and contemplative, none expressed self-doubt in their decisions or capabilities. If they made a mistake, they were willing to learn from it and move on.

Each of the women described a commitment to their communities, higher education, and making a difference. More than one said that giving back to the community was "in their DNA." Jane who serves as a woman community college president where she was raised said, "I'm just driven to serve and want to coalesce and bring people together. And the president's role is a way to help do that."

The self-motivation and confidence helped them move forward in the male-dominated community college. Leslie described herself as exemplified by what the other women community college presidents were describing, "I've always wanted to set goals and try to reach them, set an exemplary example for others, and try to have a positive influence on friends, colleagues, and students."

Another common thread among the women community college presidents interviewed was that all the participants referenced their passion for students and commitment to the community college mission. Each described deep understanding of the community college's purpose of providing access to and opportunities for higher education along with providing vital

workforce training. Nearly every participant shared a story about how they still find ways to engage with students directly whether they meet with them, attend a school event, or host a student meet and greet. "I wanted to work in a community college, where I know I can make a difference by working with students like me, because I was a first-generation college student," Kimberly said.

Resiliency and Student Centeredness

All the participants said that serving as a woman community college president came with significant stress, responsibility, but also with high rewards. Despite these challenges, the women community college presidents were resilient and steadfast to serving students. All of them commented that making a difference in student lives, increasing educational attainment, and serving their community was what made them happy in their work. Students, their success stories like graduations and other outcomes, were the results to which these women community college presidents were committed. Katherine said,

> I think the good is the decisions you make impact thousands of lives, and it impacts thousands of students, but also their families and their experiences. And so, it's such a rewarding thing to be able to shake students' hands at graduation and see them crossing those milestones because it makes everything worth it. Why you do what you do, and why you work so hard to support students.

They also agreed on the challenges. Whether it be financial shortages, legislative challenges, lawsuits, or personnel issues, they said these were the most difficult parts of their jobs. Overall, the greatest challenge cited by all women was reduction in funding and lack of adequate resources. Madeline said:

> No matter what kind of incentives you have and ways you want to compensate people, support services, and programs for students, the finances make you make choices. And often, you can't do everything you want to do, no matter how hard you try or how bad you want to.

They said the worst situations were when there were situations where things could not be fixed or changed. Lawsuits, personnel issues, and other similar situations were the other parts of the job they said were the most challenging. Kimberly shared,

> There are days that there are situations you just can't fix, you just can't change things, and those are the hardest. Those are days that sometimes I just put my head down on my desk and cry a little bit, then I feel better, get up and go home.

All but one said they would do it all over again; the one who she said would not explained that the personal costs to her health, relationships, and well-being were too great. She described the ability to work effectively and take care of oneself as "mutually exclusive"—both cannot happen simultaneously.

Section 2: RQ 1-How do women community college presidents describe their experience in male-dominated community colleges?

This section describes how women community college presidents described their experience in male-dominated community colleges. In the male-dominated community college, male presidents are the norm, while female presidents become the other. As a result, the resonating theme in describing this experience was in terms of otherness, where the women community college presidents described either being seen as or feeling different. This social construction of the male as the norm forces women community college presidents to alter their behavior and informs the research questions discussed in the next sections. Ultimately, this reality forces them to adapt their behavior and find ways of coping. The participants described experiences of sexism, double standards, and other manifestations of maleness as typical and with otherness pertaining to women. This section discusses how the women community college presidents described their experience in the male-dominated community college in terms of

otherness, including working in a "man's world," gender bias, stereotypes, double standards, and unequal gender expectations.

A "Woman in a Man's World"

While nearly all the women recognized the effects of gender bias, stereotyping, and double standards in the workplace, all were cautious about overattributing this to gender. More than one referenced working in a "man's world." But they also were quick to point out that many of the challenges they faced were not always gender-related, but simply challenges all leaders, both men and women, face in this high-profile and demanding role. Overall, participants indicated feeling the impact of gender less often in their experience as women community college presidents compared with their experiences as they moved up the career ladder. Sandra, who has served as a president for four years, said,

> Don't get me wrong, being a woman in a man's world isn't easy. By the time I assumed the presidency, I felt I experienced fewer microaggressions. There were not as many challenges to my authority. I'm not sure if this is a result of my title, more comfort in my own skin, or a combination of both?

During the beginning of the interviews, participants began sharing their experiences in terms of leading, not on being a woman leader. These women described working hard, being focused on their careers, and making a positive influence on students. They wanted to be recognized as being the best person for the job and as effective presidents, not necessarily as effective women community college presidents. Jane began her career after the peak of the women's liberation movement of which she was not a part. Jane described,

> I mean the inequality for women was still there, so I don't want to dismiss that. I know those other women that had gone before, who had to open doors and all that so it's easier. I'm sure that made it easier for me, but I just always felt like work hard, work hard. I was brought up that way. You work hard and that's how you get opportunity. And that's how I tried to approach it.

However, despite how much they wanted an equal experience and wanted to be seen as the strongest fit for the position, eventually they mentioned scenarios where they felt or were seen as different as the others. Kimberly shared the story of being the only woman at the table, despite being a leader. Her experience exemplified being the other. She said,

> Being a female head is not easy. It wasn't easy when I started out in higher ed. It wasn't easy being the first female president at an institution that was 80 years old. At that point, it was being a woman in a man's profession. When I first became a president, there were few women community college presidents . . . . I think it's feeling like it's a battle all the time.

The participants noted their feelings of being different than the status quo. This was something they felt and was also something they said individuals within their institutions had to get accustomed to experiencing. Madeline said, "I was accepted, but I was a woman in a man's world."

Only two women indicated that they did not think gender affected their presidency and experience significantly. In both those cases, the women said they were not the first woman president at the institution and said there were already a significant number of women in executive positions at their respective institutions. They were also the youngest women in the group. However, as they shared more details of their experiences, all but one gave examples of how gender stereotypes and double standards remained omnipresent forces that they had almost naturally learned to contend with, even though they may not consider it on a daily basis.

They described scenarios within the context of male-dominated community colleges, where typically there are more "older males" in leadership roles, especially in workforce and financial divisions. For example, Katherine shared,

> I don't think I have many challenges because I am a woman president, while there are definitely a lot more male CEOs in all of the different functions that I go to. But I haven't seen a challenge with it, except being surrounded by male CEOs. I think it's about

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developing relationships early on. But I do think there should be more women in roles like this.

Madeline had similar sentiments. She said she mainly focuses on her concern for others, doing the best job she can, and said "she's never been leading the women's right's movement" but even she acknowledges that receiving "the right recognition for who you are as an equal is still sometimes still a challenge."

Jane who has served as a woman community college president for more than two decades became a president in her late 30s.

> I know I was seen as different because I was a woman. But I will say this, it was real important to me at a very early point that it wasn't about me getting the job because I was a woman. It was about me getting the job because I was the best person for the job. I didn't want it to be about me being a female.

More than half of the interview participants were the first women community college presidents at their institutions. These women entered the position at a time when there were very few women in leadership roles, which they say is the biggest change between then and now. She and others who were the first to hold this role described having no other female colleagues to talk to or to be mentored by. More than one described having to navigate 'the good old boys club' where other leaders or stakeholders were not used to seeing or including women leaders.

Another described how women are at an unfair advantage because of increased responsibilities in household and childrearing roles. In her final comments as the interview was wrapping up, one woman participant who originally said gender was not an issue mentioned that in the future it was important women had a sense of belonging. She acknowledged that she did not always feel like she belonged since there are more males than females.

One frequently mentioned double standard faced by women was appearance. Multiple participants described being judged by what they were wearing, rather than their message or the

task at hand. Nearly all mentioned how at some point they were judged on how they looked or what they were wearing—by both men and women—on everything from wardrobe choice, makeup, or even how they sounded. Participants described how this added pressure, and they wished attention would be focused on their skills, message, and accomplishments rather than how they looked. They also commented that men do not face this same level of scrutiny.

> Sandra described, "One of my most disappointing moments happened just two years ago. After nine months of working with community stakeholders, employees, and students to create a new strategic plan for the next five years for our college, I presented this vision. Mind you, this was months of tedious work, collaboration, and negotiation. After a detailed presentation to a group of community stakeholders, legislators, and other leaders, the floor was opened to questions. To my dismay, my heart sank when I heard the first question prefaced with, "That is an amazing suit, and you look fabulous." I was shocked, horrified and angered. A male president would have never gotten that question. But all too often, women are judged by their appearance before they are judged by their message and actions.

Others gave examples of being introduced based on appearance rather than on skills or achievements. One president described speaking at the conference where the men were introduced by their accomplishments, but when it came to her, she was only introduced as "the beautiful and stylish president."

The women community college presidents provided many examples of how leadership is inherently expected to be male, in multiple described scenarios where the males were introduced by their title of "Dr." but they were not. They recognized that this may not have been done maliciously but shared these experiences to illustrate that these biases still exist, even if others are oblivious to them. They also told stories of being with males and how other individuals usually thought that the male in the group was the president, not the woman.

Another example of living in a man's world was the challenge women face more than men in family and household responsibility. All the presidents described the significant responsibility and workload of being president as a struggle for both men and women. However,

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most described a significant imbalance and difference in the ways women and men have to balance professional and personal responsibilities. Of the seven participants, two were divorced, five were married, and five had children. They each indicated that this job could take a toll on their personal relationships, and one even acknowledged that the job was a contributing factor to her divorce. Kimberly described the public scrutiny and questions she received during her divorce was attention a man would not have faced. She believed this was a double standard and that she was treated very differently than a man would have been.

The women community college presidents collectively said that in pursuing and maintaining a career of this stature, having a supportive spouse or partner was important. One participant who did not have children said this made it easier on her career path as well as serving as a president. When it came to raising a family, participants with children said it was more tenuous for women who excelled to the presidency when their children were young. Only two participants raised children during their presidency. The others obtained the position once their children were older. While they recognized that each person's circumstances were different, most agreed that familial responsibilities were unequally divided between men and women. Even participants who said they had supportive spouses, including those without children in the home, still expressed that they managed more household tasks than their male spouses. Leslie said,

> I have walked that walk of being the only one and feeling alone, all of the challenges that women have with family and children. I try to be there for women if they need me or if I can be of assistance.

Madeline said,

> I've noticed from my own experience and talking with other women over the years that having a supportive spouse is really critical for women in this position. For me, I was able to do more, work longer hours, and focus on the job. I've been able to go to all of the events which people who have a family may be unable to do.

Madeline and the other participants were keenly aware of the significant time commitment of being a president and how for women, balancing home and work responsibilities is an ongoing challenge. Nearly all agreed that men do not experience this responsibility the way men do.

Section 3: RQ 2-How do gender identity and gender expectations of women impact the behavior of women community college presidents?

The prevailing sense of otherness illustrated by the women community college presidents in Section 1 influenced their behavior. Each of the women provided examples of how otherness exemplified by stereotypes, gender bias, and expectations influenced their behavior. For example, they described situations where they had to be cognizant of and modify their behavior due to these perceptions. If they were too nice, they were perceived as weak, or if they were too assertive, they were perceived as bossy. One described this double bind as difficult because while she saw herself as kind and soft-hearted, she felt this gender expectation from others forced her to show she was tough and strong in order to be taken seriously. One participant described that she struggled with leading because she was trying to mimic the leadership style of a male president she admired. Sandra said,

> He was funny, charismatic, and focused on the tasks at hand in a very top-down manner. I tried to replicate that style, but it didn't work. I was uncomfortable and it showed. I learned the hard way that I just had to be me.

Working Harder Than Male Counterparts

As a result of stereotypes, gendered expectations, and double standards, most of the women said they had to work harder than their male counterparts. All the participants except one said they most definitely felt like they needed to work harder than men. The others expressed facing this challenge as they were advancing in their career as well as even after they ascended to

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the presidency. Each expressed examples of their efforts to work hard to prove themselves, establish themselves as leaders, while building credibility and respect. The participants described having to work harder to gain trust and show their capabilities more as a result of stereotypes and gender expectations. Many talked about how women are not perceived as natural leaders and assumed to be leaders like men. They described working harder to be accepted and seen as leaders. Kimberly described that there is always the underlying assumption that women are less capable as leaders: "If you're a woman, you're weaker, you're more emotional, you're not as mentally tough as the man. These are stereotypes women face."

Nearly all the women community college presidents provided an example where they felt they had to put in additional effort to earn respect and be recognized as a leader in order to overcome these gender expectations. Sandra described that when men enter a leadership role, especially one as a president, people inherently accept them as a leader.

> I think it's probably harder for women, just because people aren't always used to us being in top positions. While it's changing slowly, you got to make sure you can command respect of others, and they recognize you as the leader. Don't get me wrong, all leaders must do this, but men start out with this automatic credibility—it's assumed, women on the other hand have to prove it.

Being in previous high-level positions and the only woman at the table, Kimberly described how she quickly learned while climbing the career ladder that she was going to have to work harder than her male counterparts to gain respect and prove herself. If she did not volunteer for a task, it would be given to a man on the team before her, because the men were considered the capable leaders. "I learned early on that I always had to, I would say work harder. I spent longer hours. I took work home. I felt like that's what I had to do to prove myself." While she said she learned significantly from that extra work, she also recognized at the time she was doing it to be accepted, to gain credibility, and what allowed her to advance her way to the presidency.

Proving Capability

Not only did the women have to work harder to demonstrate their ability to be community college presidents, but they also felt they had to find ways to make people comfortable with their ability to lead in ways that men did not. They said men had to focus less on making others comfortable or proving their leadership ability since the expectation was that men automatically were credible, skilled leaders. The women who were the first women to serve as community college presidents at their institution had to adapt to their new roles but also had to work harder to get others to believe in them and see them as capable leaders. Jane said many people were scared of or uncertain about leadership by a woman, "I had to show people that it could work, that my way could work" as part of proving herself as a leader, something she says a man would not have to do. Sandra did not notice men having to work to the same extent: "my outcomes show that women can lead, my decisions and style work, but unlike a man, I'm not automatically considered a leader until I prove that."

Kimberly was the first woman president at her community college. She said it was not something most people at her college, male or female, and others in the community expected.

> I was the first female president. I don't know that the college faculty and staff, or even the board then were ready for a woman president. But I got through it somehow. It just took them getting used to having a female. I think their ideas of what a female president, how they would be different from the male presidents I had worked with, came out sometimes. They didn't expect a woman was going to be as intelligent or as good of a leader as a male.

The participants also described other examples of how gender expectations shape perceptions. Gender assumptions are perceptions women community college presidents must be aware of and maneuver on a daily basis. Madeline said that as a woman,

> you have to assert yourself as a leader; men don't really have to do that. But you have to do it in a way that does not make you come across as a witch or something because people are critical when women assert authority or strong positions.

Many described scenarios where their attributes did not fit into the male-dominated view of leadership. Jane described a situation where she had to prove that even though she was nice, she was still a competent leader: "sometimes people misinterpret mildness or kindness for weakness, but that is not the case. You can be mild and really strong."

The women also felt like they had less room for error. They described that since men are perceived as inherent leaders, others are less critical and skeptical of their decisions and actions. The women community college presidents felt, especially initially, they received more scrutiny and skepticism than males. Most of them explained that "women don't get any slack" so they felt they had to be very careful to not make a mistake as they felt like they would be judged harder than their male counterparts. Aligned with pressure to not make a mistake was the added pressure women felt to be successful women community college presidents. They described a sense of responsibility to do well to exemplify that the gender as a whole was capable, effective, and strong as leaders that they say is something men do not have to do. Leslie said, "I always wanted to set a good example, I wanted to be a credit to womanhood so to speak. I didn't want to fail, and I wanted to be a good representative for all women."

Section 4: RQ3-How do women community college presidents navigate their role within male-dominated community colleges?

Informed by the responses to questions explored in the previous sections, this last section discusses how living in a man's world not only impacts how women community college presidents behave but also highlights the coping strategies they use to navigate this role successfully. From finding workarounds, to defying male norms, being positive and communicating with transparency, striving for balance, and embracing authenticity, the women community college presidents navigated the male-dominated community college.

Working as others in a man's world, the women community college presidents were aware of both their differences but also the unique vantage point. They saw this as an asset and recognized it as an opportunity to navigate their role. The women community college presidents described how women bring a different perspective to anything, just as men do. The difference the participants described is that the woman's perspective is not readily accepted. However, the participants interviewed embraced the differences and used it to their advantage to navigate the labyrinth.

The "Workaround"

The women interviewed never let adversity stop them and often found creative solutions to achieving a goal. Another way they navigated the system of male-dominated community colleges and expected norms was by the "workaround." The idea of breaking through the system and working around the stereotype or challenge was referenced. One woman president acknowledged that sometimes certain individuals simply are not ready for a woman to be in charge and explained alternate ways of navigating that situation. Madeline explained,

> Well, I know at the end what I want. I know how to get there, but sometimes an individual can be an obstacle. I know he means well, but he doesn't like a woman telling him what to do. So, I have to work through making him understand the issue, guide him but let him think he made the decision. It's frustrating, but I'm willing to work around those challenges for the good of the whole.

Defying the Male Norm

At times, women described directly addressing or resisting in order to navigate the male-dominated context in which they were leading. Instead of submitting to the gendered expectation, they defied, confronted, or rejected the expected behavior. The majority said they typically only directly and confrontationally addressed sexist behavior when it was blatant,

disrespectful, repeated, or it was something they wanted to ensure never happened again. When

that happens, Madeline said,

> I think you have to stand up for who you are. For women, even today, we still get
> marginalized very easily. We are put under scrutiny and have to deal with things men
> never do. When that happens, say something. Stop it and address it.

Multiple participants shared being the target of inappropriate advances or comments.

Most of the presidents said they navigated this situation by directly addressing it when it

happened or trying to avoid the situation all together. Kimberly said she was astutely mindful of

being "very, very professional and always being very careful to not put myself in a position

where someone could say something or attempt to do something inappropriate." One president

recounted directly addressing an inappropriate advance by calling it out as inappropriate and

asking the individual to refrain from the behavior.

The women generally agreed that ignoring, deflecting, or not acknowledging the bias had

better outcomes. One president described how anytime she addressed behavior directly, it

typically made the situation worse and created more problems. However, this does not always

stop the behavior and some women community college presidents described that it affects how

they interact. After talking about examples of receiving inappropriate comments as woman,

Kimberly changed the way she interacts with people:

> Because of that, I'm very serious with people. I'm very guarded. I'm probably too serious
> sometimes and people don't see the other side of me because that's what I learned. I had
> to keep the respect and let people know I'm a leader, this is serious business, and I'm a
> professional.

Ultimately, the women all relayed stories of being focused on the work they were doing

rather than peripheral distractions. Louise said,

> We are treated differently from time to time, but if you go on like you are deserving,
> excel at your work, and demonstrate you have earned your place, you teach them that you
> are a professional and that you expect to be treated that way—they will.

Each of the women described scenarios and ways they navigated this bias. They generally agreed that focusing on the primary goal and remaining student focused were the best ways to move forward and not distract from the task at hand.

Positivity, Communication, and Transparency

Each of the women said a powerful tool to navigate the male-dominated community college was by building strong relationships, communication, and transparency. They all emphasized the importance of being kind, understanding others, and treating others in a way to create mutual respect.

Women community college presidents also described navigating the male-dominated context of community colleges by maintaining a positive outlook and building relationships. Most of the women described having high expectations for each day and emphasized the importance of staying focused on the goals and not the negativity. They made it a habit to have a mindset where even negative situations were viewed as a learning experience. As Leslie described, "I didn't look at it through the prism of being difficult. I looked at it through the prism of being different."

"Making it Happen": Balancing Work and Family Roles

A prevailing idea from the interviews was that more so than their male counterparts, "women have to make it happen." The women community college presidents described situations where they have experienced themselves, seen with their peers, with their employees, and with their students' situations where women say, "everything falls on me," especially when it comes to family responsibilities. As Louise articulated, "as long as women have the babies, we are going to be considered the ones who have to care for them and that goes through no matter what role you play."

Louise who is divorced and whose children are grown, said,

> I go home, sit on the couch with a laptop, and fall asleep with it and do that every day. I think every president probably falls victim to that. But, if I had a family that was pressing, that would be much more difficult, because you need to give attention to them as well. I think a lot of relationships suffer when you are in a higher-level position, because so much of your time has to be given towards this. And that's part of why the pay is what it is because there are those that are paying you a premium for giving so much of yourself to the position.

Only two women community college presidents said they raised a child while she was a president. They both described the importance of having involved and supportive spouses but said it was challenging to balance the roles. The others either did not have children or their children were grown. Sandra who does not have children said that was a conscience choice since she knew she wanted to focus on her career. She also said she has a supportive spouse but also bears more of the load at home. Those who entered their presidency as older adults with grown children said it became less of an issue. They said that entering that level of their career once their children were late teens or adults was beneficial since they did not feel pressure to divide their attention between their children and work. Louise added

> but if a young woman, say you have a woman president who is still of childbearing age, I think that could be an issue. As much as you want to think there is equality, women bear the burden; it goes just by virtue of how we are made.

Three women community college presidents also said that being family-oriented and understanding the challenge families face, influenced their leadership. They described taking a "family first" approach to leadership where they try to create an environment that is supportive of parents and families. Jane said being

> family-oriented is really important. I feel like if we're going to be in education, we know how important it is for families, parents to be involved in a children's education. And so, modeling it as an institution because that helps bring those young people up.

Ultimately, finding effective ways to balance professional roles was a key way that women community college presidents navigated the male-dominated community college. They also placed significant emphasis on health and well-being. All the women shared it was critical to devote time to personal wellness in order to manage the responsibility and stress of serving as a community college president. Each alluded to the fact that the job could be all-consuming. Kimberly said, "having something you can do, even if it's for a couple of hours to just completely take you away, get your mind off things is important." Each of the presidents provided examples of how they achieve that balance. Whether it be making time for friends or family, watching a TV program, or reading a book, having a glass of wine, meditation and prayer, yoga or other exercise, visiting a vacation home, or other activity, all the women community college presidents emphasized the importance of taking time away from work.

Another strategy used to navigate the male-dominated community college, was establishing a support network both in personal relationships and in professional circles. In addition to the importance of having mentors and role models, previously discussed, the participants also described the benefits of having a solid support network. Each described the benefit of having a supportive board. Many described the value of having a network of other presidents to reach out to, share ideas with, and from which to get feedback. They said this network of support was critical to their success. Each described how being in the presidential role could be lonely, stressful, and that everyone was looking at them for direction and decisions. Sandra and Louise described it like "drinking water from a fire house." Louise said,

> It's a lot at once. Sometimes it's a situation you have never faced or it's a difficult decision or you just aren't sure you are doing the right thing. Having a network of support of peers, other presidents is so vital and helpful. It helps frame professional decisions but also provides personal support.

Participants acknowledged that developing these networks of peers, both male and female, helped them navigate the male-dominated community college and to have a camaraderie with peers cannot take place at their community colleges. Some said they grew this network by being part of state and national community college organizations, including the American Association of Community Colleges. Louise described it well:

> Through these organizations, you go to a couple of events, and you've met a ton of people, including other presidents. What I loved about this was, I can pick up the phone and call someone in another state, I can pick up the phone, call somebody in another city, "How are you guys doing this?" That's a wonderful thing to be able to network with all those people.

The value of networking and peer support for the women leaders was stated throughout each of the participant interviews. Just as role models and mentors were critical for these women to advance to the community college presidency, they also described that a support network was just as vital once they became presidents.

"Finding the Groove": Embracing Authenticity

Each of the participants described the need to find their own voice and the right way to be themselves. Madeline said, "It is difficult for women to find their groove sometimes; it was for me." Each of the women described stylistic differences between the way women and men lead. Jane said that it was a challenge leading as a woman since others did not expect that. She described others were not used to being directed by a woman or the different style in which women lead. Originally, she tried to mimic the style of the male leaders she admired and who had mentored her. However, she says she quickly discovered that was unnatural and ineffective. After unsuccessfully trying to implement their ways, she said,

> It hit me. I thought, "No, it's not working, I can't pull that off. That's not who I am, the authenticity of it because the students are going to know, people are going to know that. I'm not saying their way (male leaders) wouldn't have worked for them, but it wouldn't work for me because I couldn't pull it off that way. And so, it's helping people

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understand that there's more than one way to handle a situation and that my way could work, too.

However, the downside is that gender perceptions and expectations sometimes do not allow women community colleges to act in a way where they are most natural and comfortable, Kimberly shared, "It's a rarity that I can be my authentic self." This sentiment was echoed by the other women as well. Some described taking longer to find their style while others like Sandra, who said she found her voice early on, said "Be confident, be willing to stand up for what you believe. I learned quickly I need to be me, and I'm comfortable with that. We're not all going to be alike."

Knowing and leading with authenticity helped the women embrace their own personal styles. As discussed in the literature review, studies have shown that women have unique leadership traits that are beneficial to organizations. Some of these traits include being empathetic, listening, mothering, or nurturing, intuitive, and supportive. The women interviewed said that in recent years, more interest is being placed on the way women think and lead. They agree that embracing these traits are having positive outcomes for an institution's employees and students. Each of them also equates leadership with leveraging knowledge and the power of the position in order to make a difference for others, not just at their respective colleges but in the community as well. Three specifically described themselves as servant leaders and most of the others described a similar style.

Most of the women described a nurturing leadership style. Jane described this as "women thinking more family oriented" and that women try to understand people, their motivations, and both their professional and personal needs. Kimberly described that as a woman, more people are apt to come to her and confide in her, including both students and employees. She says this trust helps people open up and helps her lead.

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I think gender, that's where you almost take on a motherly role, the mother in you can come out with students, even if they're close to you in age, you can still fill that role. I think students like that. I have students that I've sat down in the office before, and I've said, "Now I'm gonna talk to you like your mama would." I always tell them, "I want for you, what I want for my own children." I think being a female, being a mother makes a difference in leadership. It allows the students to feel more comfortable because they sense the instinct you are trying to mother them.

Louise described something similar, "When I first got here, I used to say, 'I'm like your mom away from home. You need something, come see me.' Now I still say that, but I'm like, 'I'm your grandma away from home.'"

Louise describes her ability to nurture and her role as a mother help her interact with students as a president. She says people have told her, including male administrators, that when she walks in the door, the demeanor changes. She says, "students become different, they become softer, they become more willing to listen, because as a woman, I bring that aura of 'I really care about you. What can I do for you?' Where a man is more direct, in many instances being a woman helps."

All the women community college presidents said they thought it was advantageous for women to be in leadership positions because by nature of being a woman, they felt they brought value to the role that a man cannot. Louise said,

A lot of men look at things in black and white; I think we (women) look in terms of gray, so we can see those areas and maybe be more in tune to different problems, or more inventive and creative about how to come up with a solution. So, I think women are in general really good at that. We're good at dealing with emotional people. I think a woman can be more empathetic than a man, and I think that comes across to our students. I know a lot of women are not warm and fuzzy, but I think if there are a lot of women who have had families, especially, they can relate to kids a bit more.

By embracing their differences and seeing value in the perspectives they have as women are examples of how they navigated the male-dominated community college context. Leslie described

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Women just approach things a little differently than men do, sometimes less assertively or aggressively, and sometimes in a more gentle or perhaps motherly, or supportive role. Whereas sometimes men can be a little more alpha, they can be more assertive, more demanding, with the expectation that they're the boss and what they say goes.

The women agreed that the challenges men and women have as leaders are similar, but the way the challenges were addressed are different. All the participants described the importance of believing in others, forming a collaborative team that works on common goals, and creating a sense of belonging.

Women community college presidents navigate by being nurturing. Louise, who was a single parent, said,

I can relate to their problems. I am probably more attuned to that need than a man would be just by the nature of being a mother and knowing what they are going through. I always tell people when they are on their death bed, they're not going to say "I wish I worked longer." They are going to wish they had more time with their family, so family comes first. We'll make it work. I think that's probably it's a little different as a woman than as a man. I hate to admit that.

The participants described using empathy, valuing differences, and relying on their intuition to navigate the male-dominated community college. The women community college presidents described listening to others, being inclusive, and aware of their thoughts and ideas, as well as being available when needed by others. Kimberly stated,

I'm always listening and trying to be a good sounding board for that other person. Building that relationship, developing respect to where they know if they need something, they can always count on me to be there, to help with whatever they need . . . .When you develop that respect to where if they ask you for something, if they need help with something, you do whatever you can to help them solve the problem or achieve something.

The women community college presidents said they are in tune with their students and staff. Madeline says building confidence and being open helps her communication and relationships: "often people tend to trust me, and they'll ask for my advice."

They felt they were more sensitive to others' needs than their male counterparts. Louise described this as

> We can read more into things. Even when I go to meetings, I can pick up things that are being said or the intention behind the words and what not, where some of my male colleagues are like "I didn't get that at all." Because they were taking everything at face value where a woman, I think, uses intuition a little bit more and that goes over a lot of men's heads. So, I think a woman . . . I think it's sharper for us. I think we see things a little more clearly.

Kimberly stated:

> I think women are more intuitive and more observant than men. I think women tend to read body language better, they look into people's eyes and just get that intuitive feeling that something may be wrong, or this person may need someone to listen to them.

Most of the women community college presidents described listening to gather information, prioritizing, and triaging in order to achieve the best outcomes possible. They valued input from others. They said that sometimes taking this time to listen, process, and reflect made others think they were indecisive or ineffective as leaders. However, they indicated that taking the time to make informed decisions helped them make better decisions that resulted in better outcomes. Jane said,

> I'm slow to make a decision, but when I'm ready to make it, I make it. But before I get there, I do a lot of thinking. Because what I learned is if you go fast, then you have to go slow. And when you've gone fast, then you have to go slow and you're cleaning up a mess. And so, I've found it's best to go slow to go fast.

Listening is another strategy women used to navigate the male-dominated community college. The importance of being reflective and gathering information from multiple individuals was something each of the women found important, both for results and also to maintain strong relationships. Louise also said she pays attention to all viewpoints: "If someone has different ideas, it's okay, I want to hear all their ideas because that's why we have administration groups so you can make a decision with more heads. But the buck stops here."

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All the women said they would do it all over again if they had the chance. Overall, they said their work had been rewarding, fulfilling, and that they feel like they have had a powerful impact on student lives. Only one said she would chart her course differently. While she says in her career and for her students, college, and community, she has accomplished a great deal, she says the personal costs took a significant toll. She says the progress she made cost her health and relationships. From her perspective, the ability to work effectively and take care of oneself are mutually exclusive. She urged women considering this career path to prioritize health and well-being and to be present for activities and milestones with their children and not to miss important moments.

Kimberly summarized it well:

I think the key for women leaders is balance. Make sure you have that balance in your life. I think oftentimes we know we need balance but don't take the time or know how to take the time to make sure we have balance. But for anybody aspiring to this role, just make sure you find that balance and keep that balance throughout.

Each of the women were proud of the differences and impact they made as community college presidents. They described the value and benefit to their students as an institution they brought as a result of their perspectives as women. They agreed that they would like to see a future for a woman president to be no different than for a male president. They hoped that the stereotypes would completely go away and that a woman coming into the president's office would be treated with the same respect and expectations that they would a male president.

Chapter 5: Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Gender inequality is an ongoing challenge in community colleges as evidenced by women remaining underrepresented as community college presidents (Betchtold, 2008; Eddy & Cox, 2008; Gill, 2013). The need for more diverse leadership, including women, at the highest level of the community college is significant. With anticipated retirements combined and an overall shortage of candidates in the pipeline to the presidency (American Association of Community Colleges, 2012: Brown, 2014; Bumpus, 2014; De Los Santos, 2014; Truheart, 2014; Wyner, 2014), understanding how women perceive their experiences as community college presidents is critical. This research provided critical insight to the experience of women community college presidents described along with the strategies they used to be successful in their roles. These findings added to the body of knowledge and experience providing insight to future generations of community college presidents.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify how women community college presidents described their experiences, how they navigated their role in male-dominated community colleges, and how identity and gender expectations impacted their behavior. The data were analyzed using a feminist post-structural lens to explain how women have come to know themselves and the effects of the male-dominated community college on their behavior. This chapter briefly summarizes the findings of the study as related to the research questions, discusses the limitations of the study, and presents implications and recommendations for research and practice. Finally, the chapter concludes with a look to the future for women community college presidents.

Summary of Findings

Seven women community college presidents from the State of Texas participated in this study. The longest serving president had been in her position 28 years and the shortest a president for two years, with an average length of about 10 years. These women led in different types of community colleges, including rural, suburban, and urban with student enrollments ranging in size from around 3,000 to up to around 15,000 students. The women community college presidents were generous and forthcoming in sharing their backgrounds, experiences, challenges, and insights as well as their vision for future women in this role.

Through the analysis of these interviews, four coalescing themes as well as multiple subthemes were identified. The main themes were (a) *Reaching the Top,* with subthemes of pathways, mentors, the 'presidential push,' motivations, and resiliency; (b) *A Woman in a Man's World* with otherness, gender bias, double standards, and stereotypes as subthemes; (c) *Working Harder Than Males,* with subthemes of proving capability, overcoming stereotypes, and representing women; and (d) *Navigating Otherness,* with subthemes of workarounds, defying the male norm, positivity, communication and transparency, making it happen, authenticity, and embracing feminine traits.

The findings reinforce a view of gender that is very essentialized. These women community college presidents described being focused on their careers, working hard, and being driven by their desire to transform student lives. They wanted to be recognized as the best qualified candidate for the job and as effective community college presidents, although they hesitated to be labeled by gender. Even though the women community college presidents interviewed appeared eager to dismiss gender, their narrative often reinforced very static, stereotypical views of women. Although they are rejecting some of the discourses and seek to

distance themselves from those stereotypes, they are also unintentionally reproducing and reinforcing the status quo. Despite wanting to establish their own experiences, to varying degrees, they are reproducing these inherent discourses of gender oppression.

Women Community College Presidents Must Navigate a Man's World

One of the main findings of this study was that women presidents continue to work in gendered community colleges where being male is the norm and women are the other. This experience of otherness, whether real or perceived, is indicative of the male-dominated community college context with regard to gender. The women community college presidents interviewed for this study reinforced previous research that women continue to work in community colleges that are defined by male norms and stereotypes (Amey & Twombly, 1992; DiCroce, 1995; Eddy 2005; Eddy & Cox, 2008; Glazer-Raymo, 1999; Tedrow & Rhoads, 1999). Based on the description of the women community college presidents interviewed, community colleges continue to fit the description of a gendered organization, since patterns of behavior demonstrate clear distinctions between the masculine and feminine (Acker, 1992). The prevailing theme for this question is being a *Woman in a Man's World* because the women community college presidents describe working in the male-dominated community college in terms of otherness.

In each of the interviews, the women community college presidents described being seen as or feeling different. The women recognized that many of the challenges they faced were leader-related, not necessarily gender-related, though most acknowledged the significance of gender. Nearly all expressed they wanted to be cautious of overattributing gender bias to their experience, but ultimately, they all shared scenarios where they had experienced sexism or double standards. Every woman provided some sort of story that illustrated how masculinity was

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the norm and otherness pertained to women in the community college setting. This illustrated

that community colleges remain gendered environments as described in previous research

(Acker, 1990; Caton, 2007, Twombly, 1995). More than one woman community college

president described being a "woman in a man's world." This reinforced the idea that women

were positioned in situations where normality was granted to men and otherness to women

(Broido & Manning, 2002). Even women who said they felt that gender did not affect their

experience significantly eventually mentioned a situation that illustrated an engendered and

male-dominated community college.

      The women community college presidents said that they experienced more blatant sexism

and microaggressions as they moved up the career ladder but less once they assumed the

presidency. It was difficult to determine whether this was because gender bias decreased the

higher a woman moved up in her career or if the women had simply learned to ignore or better

navigate this otherness. The women community college presidents appeared so accustomed to

this omnipresent male-dominated context, that it had become almost a natural force with which

to contend. The women were also adamant that they wanted to be viewed not as women

presidents, but as competent leaders who were the best people for the job.

      Women community college presidents older than 60 described feeling like they did not

belong more frequently than the younger women and supports the data that while women are

increasing in these roles, they still remain underrepresented (Amey & VanDerLinden, 2002;

Betchtold, 2008; Cook & Young, 2012; Tedrow & Rhoads, 1999; Townsend & Twombly, 1998,

2007). The women who worked in institutions that previously had women presidents and had

more women in leadership positions felt gender was less of an issue. Another notable

observation was women who were older in age and were the first woman community college

president at their respective institutions described more concrete examples of stereotypes, double standards, and having to navigate the "good old boys club" in a time when women leaders were even less common. While the women in their positions longest said the numbers of women community college presidents are increasing, they are still the minority. All the women community college presidents indicated that while more women have entered leadership ranks, there are still not enough women, also reinforcing previous research (Warner & DeFleur, 1993). The ongoing underrepresentation of women in community college presidents enhanced the otherness they felt.

Despite being the top leaders at their institutions, the women community college presidents interviewed still experienced double standards, gender bias as well as challenges balancing personal and professional roles, as found in previous research (Tedrow & Rhoads, 1999; Vaughan, 1986, 1989). One of the most frequently described double standards described by multiple participants was being judged by their appearance rather than their message. The women community college presidents stated that this scrutiny came from both men and women and included everything from wardrobe choice, makeup, or even how they sounded. They said this was pressure men did not face and wanted attention focused on their skills, message, and accomplishments. Other double standards they described were being introduced by an adjective such as "the beautiful and stylish" rather than with the respect of their title and professional accomplishments as the men were introduced. They recognized this may not have been done maliciously, but they shared the experience to illustrate that biases existed, even if others were oblivious to them. Some women indicated that they faced public comments and scrutiny related to their personal lives that men in similar situations did not have to endure. This adds to the

pressure women community college presidents have in order to be accepted and fit in within the male-dominated community college.

Women community college presidents living and working in a man's world continue to experience inequity in family and household responsibility (Tedrow & Rhoads, 1999). The women community college presidents in this study recognized balancing work and personal responsibilities was a challenge for both men and women, but many of them described a significant imbalance between men and women. They said having a supportive spouse or partner was important to be successful as a community college president. Even those with supportive spouses, including those without children in the home, said they managed more household responsibilities than their male partner. Those with children agreed that familial responsibilities were unequally divided between the women and the men, with women carrying the bulk of the load. These revelations make a significant statement about not only the structure and expectations of a community college presidency, but also suggest an environment that is not supportive to leaders who have families.

This study repeatedly reinforced previous studies (Eagly, 2005; Eddy & Cox, 2008; Tedrow & Rhoads, 1999) that woman continue to be positioned as the other in the male-dominated community college. The fact that women community college presidents lead from a position of otherness informs their actions, behavior, and how they must maneuver to successfully navigate this male-dominated environment.

Women Community College Presidents Modify Behavior

The comments of these women community college presidents support previous research that suggests that women are judged by and must often modify their behavior to embody masculine leadership norms and emulate characteristics displayed by men (Eddy & Cox, 2008;

Nidiffer, 2001; Howe-Walsh & Turnbull, 2016). Community college leadership is highly gendered and masculine styles of leadership are the norm (Amey & Twombly, 1992; Eddy, 2009; Eddy & Cox, 2008; Gillet-Karam, 2017; Glazer-Raymo, 1999). The prevailing theme identified by the research was *Working Harder Than Males*. Each of the women community college presidents expressed examples of how they had to prove themselves as capable leaders while building credibility and respect. They recognized all leaders had to do this, but the distinction expressed by these women community college presidents was they were forced to worker harder than men do in order to be taken seriously and perceived as capable. They described how men are inherently accepted as capable leaders, have automatic respect and leadership skills, but as women, most of these community college presidents had to prove it.

This study reinforced studies showing how gender affects perceptions of leadership abilities (Eddy & Cox, 2008; Nidiffer, 2001). Each of the women provided examples of being affected by expectations of leadership that are rooted in stereotypes and expected gender roles. Consistent with Role Congruity Theory, these differences in gender roles ascribed to women compared with men resulted in workplace bias (Eagly & Carli, 2007). While all the women community college presidents were able to overcome this obstacle, each stated they had to be aware of these expectations and sometimes adjusted their behavior because of this workplace bias.

Madden (2001) described that competence is viewed as a masculine trait. This was supported by the women's comments in this study. The women community college presidents described having to prove themselves as strong capable leaders before they could build strong relationships. They described themselves as empathetic, nurturing, and compassionate leaders, which is contrary to the male standard of leadership. The women community college presidents

explained that they had to demonstrate that these traits and their approach were effective. They also had to show that being caring and taking the time to listen was not weak. The women community college presidents interviewed gave examples that illustrated that masculine leadership remains the norm. Each described examples of gender-based leadership barriers they have had to overcome at one point or another in their career. Their descriptions were consistent with the double bind illustrated by Eagly and Carli (2007) and Tedrow and Rhoads (1999) that created a resistance to women's influence and leadership.

This study showed that women presidents are forced to modify their behavior in order to work in a male-dominated community college. Eagly and Carli (2007) explained that women must be more strategic and work harder to navigate the labyrinth. This also illustrates how women simultaneously experience and deny gender as salient for leadership. The women reinscribe the constructs by drawing on essentialized gender identities, even when they in some ways reject them, all the while reproducing the patriarchy. This informed the next research question about how women navigate the male-dominated community college.

Women Community College Presidents Navigate Otherness

This research supported that women presidents are forced to navigate the male-dominated system of community colleges and supports previous research (Eddy & Cox, 2008; Gillet-Karam, 2001; Stout-Stewart, 2005; Vaughan, 1986, 1989; Vaughan et al., 1998). This research provided deeper insight to the ways women community college presidents not only experienced and behaved in the male-dominated community college but also how they navigated within it. This study reinforced previous research (Meister et al., 2017) by demonstrating that women community college presidents continue to have to maneuver and cope within the male-dominated community college.

In this study, each of the women community college presidents described ways they navigated and coped with being the other or as phrased it, "working in a man's world." Each of the women described tactics they used in order to achieve their goals and lead effectively including being honest and listening carefully, building relationships, and cultivating strong teams, remaining student centered and goal oriented, as well as maintaining personal and professional life balance. The most successful women community college presidents learned to embrace differences and used it to their advantage to navigate the male-dominated community college. The women found mentors, entered leadership programs, and established networks and support. They exhibited determination and resiliency while finding ways to work around and defy the male norm.

Since community college leadership has been historically White males (ACE 2007, 2012, 2017), as reflected in the leadership paradigm, it made it hard for women and other minorities to authenticate their leadership (Eddy, 2009). This study reinforced that for women community college presidents to be the successful, they must navigate the male-dominated community college by authenticating their leadership. The women community college presidents described this authenticity as navigating the male-dominated community college by being positive, communicating, and being transparent. They said an important way to cope and move beyond gendered expectations was to build strong relationships, be kind, empathetic, and treat others in a way that creates mutual respect. They tried to avoid negativity, focus on the goals, and have a positive mindset.

The stories shared by the women community college presidents in the study reiterated the fact that community colleges have a structure where women are judged by male models of leadership (Eddy & Cox, 2008). While they are eager to dismiss gender, many of their stories

and how they describe leadership reinforce static, stereotypical views of women. Most of the women community college presidents described initially trying to mimic the style of their male mentors they admired and were well-respected leaders; but many found that was unnatural and ineffective. Some of the women said the expectations of the male-dominated community college made it difficult for them to show their authentic selves and lead in a natural and authentic way. Embracing authenticity was a significant factor for women community college presidents to achieve greater leadership success and establish stronger rapport with others.

When leadership expectations are masculine, leaders who emerge are disproportionately men (Eagly, 2005); this study supported that many individuals within community colleges are accustomed to the status quo of male leadership characteristics. The women presidents in this study shared that expectations to adapt to masculine norms made it challenging to lead. Most said that once they began navigating the male-dominated community college with authenticity, they were able to establish connections and results. However, before they could do so, the women community college presidents needed to prove themselves as competent leaders and also make those they were leading feel comfortable with their style. These stories demonstrate that women community college presidents frequently are forced to assuage the expectations of a male-dominated context in order to obtain support further illustrating and reinscribing the patriarchy.

The women community college presidents essentialized identity by embracing feminine traits such as being nurturing, motherly and empathetic. Listening and getting feedback from others before making decisions were prioritized by most of the women community college presidents. Once the women presidents found their groove, embraced authenticity, and began to see the value of these traits and showed those they were leading the value as well, they were able

to navigate the male-dominated community college more successfully. Most felt that they brought value and perspective to their role as president that men could not. They described women's leadership as being more "in tune," "intuitive," "collaborative," and "creative." They also used listening as a strategy to navigate the male-dominated community college. They each described listening carefully to gather information from multiple individuals from all ranks and roles to not only build relationships but also to make more inclusive decisions. The women community college presidents were contemplative and reflective. Embracing these differences and seeing value in the vantage point they had as women allowed these community college presidents to navigate the male-dominated community college context. This study showed that as more women become community college presidents, authenticating their leadership is critical and has valuable outcomes for the institutions they serve.

This study demonstrated that women community college presidents are not only finding ways to navigate the male-dominated system, but they are also trying to embrace authenticity of their leadership, another example of essentialized gender identity. While nearly all the women expressed the importance of leading in a way that was true and natural, some found it easier than others to be accepted when doing so. Gender oppression gets reproduced as it gets reiterated; the participants say that they are not identifying with that gender discourse, but at the same time, their discourse suggests otherwise. A notable observation was that when women community college presidents lead in a way that is not authentic, this contributed to the reproduction of gender inequality and stereotypes. However, when women community college presidents led authentically, they disrupted traditional gender expectations and challenged the status quo. While women community college presidents cannot bear the responsibility of challenging all bias in an

institution that has been engendered since it began, they felt that finding authenticity seems to be a significant way of making community colleges more gender inclusive.

Implications for Practice

Understanding the experience of these women community college presidents is important for the next generation of leaders, students, and community college leadership programs and for boards of trustees and others engaged in hiring presidents. Knowing how women community college presidents describe their experience, navigate, and behave within the male-dominated community college adds to the understanding about this phenomenon and could reduce existing gender gaps, inform policy and practice, as well as inform career pathways for women. As women become represented proportionally as community college presidents and at all levels of leadership, they will be less likely to be marginalized others and instead have an equal voice and influence, which will result in strong outcomes for the institutions they serve.

This study showed that community colleges must strengthen access to the pipeline to get more women interested and prepared to serve as presidents. It was important to find ways to make the journey and experience more palatable and welcoming. Since the women stated that mentors, both male and female, were critical in their development as well as giving them the "presidential push," it is vital that women continue to have access to mentors, role models, and programs that encourage them to aspire to the highest leadership roles. Women must also have clear paths to and be encouraged to access a variety of administrative roles as well as enrollment in doctoral programs that prepare them for the community college president role. The more women who are in these pipelines will ensure a stronger and more diverse candidate pool for community college presidents. Connecting women with support networks and leadership

programs was also a valuable tool in their journey to navigating the presidency and being successful in that role.

This study offered insight for the development of curriculum and best practices for doctoral or other leadership programs. While many existing doctoral programs as well as leadership programs available through the American Association of Community Colleges, the Aspen Institute, and other organizations are actively recruiting and encouraging more women participants, they must also ensure the content of those programs are taught in a way that values a variety of leadership traits and styles. While there are many programs that offer leadership programs for aspiring community college presidents, it is important that these programs emphasize women's leadership. Doctoral programs and fellowships preparing individuals for community college leadership need to place more emphasis on valuing different styles of leadership to encourage all leaders to lead in a way that aligns with their personality or style. Women community college presidents and all leaders must be able to effectively authenticate their leadership. By creating a culture of leadership that embraces both masculine and feminine approaches, women will be seen as having inherent leadership ability. It is necessary to change the perception that masculine leadership traits are preferential so that feminine leadership traits are recognized and viewed as a strength rather than a weakness. However, to truly move beyond these differences, efforts should be made to delink and discontinue labeling styles of leadership as masculine or feminine. Connecting leadership styles to specific genders further engenders community colleges and reinforces systemic structures that are disadvantageous to both men and women. By exploring these systems of oppression in the curriculum, participants will learn that diverse forms of leadership can be embraced and valued.

Being a community college president also is high-stress, high-profile, and high-responsibility position that can take a toll on a leader's health, personal life, and well-being. Institutions and society need to examine expectations of leaders and consider whether or not they are realistic. The responsibilities of these highest-level executives are increasing and expanding in ways that this job is becoming all-consuming. This presents a problem for all community college presidents. If the role becomes unappealing, this could reduce the pipeline of willing and capable leaders, decrease the diversity of candidates who want to apply, and ultimately shrink a pipeline for community college leadership that is already in crisis. This is especially true for women who often bear more of the load of household and family responsibilities. The challenge of work-life balance is only going to get harder. Community colleges must look at the structures of the president position and consider whether it systemically discriminates against families, particularly women, given societal expectations about gender roles. Balance, wellness, and stress management should be included in programs that prepare future community college presidents. Childcare and other related employee wellness programs should be expanded. Not only will this benefit the top leaders at community colleges, but it will also promote an overall community college culture that emphasizes well-being and balance.

Gender-inclusivity needs to be a more visible priority and become a conscious part of decision-making and hiring practices. Leaders must identify and develop internal leaders and provide opportunities for development. Boards of trustees and others in charge of searching and hiring community college presidents must be more inclusive of women. They must expand recruitment practices, ensure job descriptions align with diverse leadership styles, including placing more value on the benefits of feminine leadership traits. Reconceptualizing male-

dominated expectations for leadership and delinking particular styles of leadership to gender will create more equitable community colleges.

Finally, the women community college presidents interviewed offered much advice for women aspiring to become presidents. Learning from their experience could help other women. The participants encouraged women to leave their comfort zones in order to achieve their greatest potential. They encouraged leaders to stay focused on the goal when making leadership decisions and to avoid being distracted by the periphery. They advocated for hiring and building a strong team, communicating honestly, and with transparency. The women community college presidents encouraged aspiring women presidents to know who they are, build relationships, and to take advantage of meaningful leadership experiences. Finally, the most echoed sentiment was for aspiring women community college presidents to find their voice and never lose sight of the impact they have on students and the college.

Implications for Research

While these interviews resulted in robust data to the perspectives of women community college presidents, it was important to gain greater insight by interviewing even more women community college presidents. While nearly 70% of women community college presidents in Texas participated in this study, this was a small number of women overall. This exemplified how underrepresentation by women in these roles made getting data challenging. Therefore, it was important to collect data on as many women as possible. Expanding the number of women community college presidents who share their experiences by increasing the sample size as well as expanding the geographic area of the women community college presidents being studied would result in more comprehensive data.

Race, gender identity, and heterosexism are inherent in leadership at this level. More diversity is needed in future research to better understand the experiences of more women. For example, in this group of women community college presidents, only one identified as a woman of color. Since women of color are even more underrepresented in this highest leadership position (ACE, 2012; Amey & VanDerLinden, 2002; Betchtold, 2008; Cook & Young, 2012; Tedrow & Rhoads, 1999; Townsend & Twombly, 1998, 2007), it is important to identify and include more presidents who are women of color to better understand their experiences and unique perspectives. One woman of color in a study cannot represent the experiences of all women of color. Therefore, including more women of color along with women who meet other diverse profiles would document and allow deeper understanding of all types of women community college presidents. It would also give insight into the similarities and differences in the role experienced by different types of women since the experience of women is not monolithic.

Increasing the sample size of participants and expanding the settings would also allow for a richer comparison of different types of experiences and insight. For example, if there was more research on the experiences of more women presidents from different types of community colleges, including regions and types of colleges, i.e., rural, suburban, and urban, comparisons could be made. This would provide insight about whether women community college presidents describe similar or different experiences based on the region or type of college they serve. Additionally, it would be useful to analyze the types of institutions where women community colleges serve. For example, nationally public community colleges have an average student size of 6,162 students; in Texas, the average is a student size of 7,270, with the largest school size of 73,499 (Community College Review, 2021). It would be important to determine from both a

statewide and national perspective whether or not women community college presidents are serving in all types of institutions as well as whether or not they are serving in the largest institutions proportional to male community college presidents. A national study of women community college presidents would provide more robust data that would be valuable to create a more comprehensive understanding of women serving in this role.

This study analyzed participants' experiences at one point in their career. The gathering of data was limited to what they could share in an interview that averaged about an hour and a half long. This resulted in a summarized snapshot of their experience and perspective. Conducting a longitudinal study of women community presidents throughout their career would provide even more information about their experience. This would allow for opportunities to identify more specific benchmarks along their journey as well as document more clearly changes and approaches to how women community college presidents navigate their roles.

More than one woman in this study expressed that "women are not always supportive of other women as they should be." Some of the women interviewed shared stories of other women being jealous, unsupportive, or feeling threatened of their leadership or career achievements. The women community college presidents described how both men and women reinforced double standards, such as making comments about appearance. This study focused on how women navigate the male-dominated community college. However, if women are navigating both coping with a male-centric environment while at the same time are also managing jealousy or roadblocks from other women, this further complicates their roles. Researching the extent of this woman-to-woman hostility and its impact could be insightful. This would be another valuable area to do further research.

While the majority of participants described facing gender-related challenges, those who said they did not or felt it to be less of a challenge, were in community colleges that had previously had women community college presidents or a significant number of women high-level leaders. This suggested that some community colleges were more accepting of women's leadership. Conducting research on community college culture to identify why some colleges have more affirming and accepting environments for women would be beneficial. Understanding the differences why some community colleges are better prepared for change and are more accepting would help remove barriers and make community college campuses more inclusive.

As long as women remain underrepresented as community college presidents, continuing to explore this topic through the lens of post-structural feminism is critical. Examining women's lived experiences is a valid way to create knowledge. Gender shapes perceptions, institutions, power, and privilege (Lather, 2017), so it is important to keep the social construction of gender at the forefront of future research. The stories of women community college presidents must remain visible despite their existence within a system that sustains inequity. Challenging assumptions of leadership, power and the patriarchy can advance all people, not just women.

Conclusion

Women community college presidents experience a complex reality where they simultaneously experience and deny gender as significant to leadership. Despite wanting to reject some of the discourse and seeking to establish their own experience, they are still experiencing the double bind and accommodating the patriarchy. The power of the patriarchy rests in its capacity for women to reinscribe these constructs by drawing on these essentialized gender identities, even though they simultaneously reject them. By reinscribing this discourse, gender oppression gets reproduced as it gets reiterated. The women community college presidents

interviewed offered a clear vision for the future and much advice for the women aspiring to be presidents. Each of the women were proud of the differences and impact they made as community college presidents. They described the value and benefit to their students, institution, and community because of their perspectives as women. The women community college presidents wanted to see more women in leadership roles, including the presidency. They collectively agreed they would like to see a future for a woman community college president that would be no different than for a male community college president. They hoped that stereotypes and double standards would completely go away. The women community college presidents described a vision for the future where women coming into the president's office would be treated with the same respect, assumed capability, and expectations that they would a male president.

Ultimately, we must strive for a more equitable community college that is even more inclusive of women, including those of color and other diverse backgrounds, from the career pipeline to the highest levels of leadership. Welcoming and valuing the perspectives of all women from different walks of life will make community colleges even stronger, not just for women, but for men and women alike, and most importantly, for communities and all the students who depend on community colleges for access to higher education, workforce training, and economic mobility.

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Appendix A

Participant Recruitment Letter

Dear _____,

You are invited to participate in a qualitative research study being conducted by a doctoral student in the Department of Education at the University of Texas at El Paso. You have been invited to participate since you are a president of a public community college district in Texas. Since women remain underrepresented in president positions, the goal of this study is to better understand the experience of women in these roles.

If you choose to participate in this study, you will fill out a background questionnaire and take part in one audio-recorded 60-90-minute interviews that will be held via phone/video conference at a time and location that is convenient to your schedule. You will be required to sign an informed consent form. You will be given and/or select a pseudonym to protect your identity and you may choose to skip any question or withdraw from the study at any time. All information shared will be kept confidential and secure.

Thank you for your consideration of being a participant in this study. I will be contacting you within two weeks to see if you are willing to participate. If you need any additional information or have any questions, feel free to contact me.

Sincerely,

Keri Moe, MA
Principal Investigator

Appendix B

Interview Protocol: Background Questionnaire

This questionnaire will help the researcher better understand your background as it relates to your experiences in your current role as a woman community college president in Texas. Please do not put your name or your institution's name on this form. You may skip any question you do not wish to answer. You will have 5-7 minutes to complete this questionnaire.

What is your age range?
- ☐ Under 30
- ☐ 30-39
- ☐ 40-49
- ☐ 50-59
- ☐ 60-69
- ☐ 70+

What best describes you?
- ☐ Married
- ☐ Divorced
- ☐ Single
- ☐ Living with a Partner

Do you have children? If so, how many and what are their ages?

How do you self-identify (e.g., gender, ethnicity)?

How many years have you served in your current role?

What position did you have prior to this position?

Have you ever worked outside of higher education?

Create a timeline that highlights your educational and professional experiences as well as the challenges that have shaped your career trajectory. This can be a bulleted list.

Appendix C

Interview Protocol: Sample Questions for Interviews

1. Can you tell me a little more about this timeline, are there particular events that influenced why you aspired to reach your current professional role?
2. If you were to write a memoir about how you became a woman president, how would you describe yourself and characterize yourself as a leader?
3. How would you describe your greatest challenge in your role as a woman president and how do you manage that?
4. Describe how gender expectations ever impacted your actions or behavior?
5. What is your greatest professional challenge and how do you manage it?
6. Is being a woman helpful or a challenge in your current role? Why?
7. Based on your role as a woman president, how would you describe the good, bad and the ugly of your position?
8. How has your gender impacted your leadership?
9. Do you think you have it easier or harder than your male counterparts and why?
10. Can you think of a time that you modified your behavior or leadership because of others' expectations because you are a woman?
11. How does being a woman impact how you interact with others?
12. If you knew then, what you know now, what advice would you give yourself?
13. Why have you remained in the role of a community college president?
14. Do you plan to continue in this role? What would make you want to leave your current role?
15. How do you balance your professional and personal responsibilities?
16. Describe the future you would like to see for aspiring women Presidents?
17. What will it take to make that vision a reality?
18. Is there anything else you would like to share or that I haven't asked?

Examples of clarification questions, to elicit further responses, if needed.
- Would you elaborate on….?
- What do you mean by…?
- How did that make you feel?
- Do you have more to add…?
- Why do you think that happened?

Vita

Keri Moe is proud to live in the Borderplex, a vibrant, cross-cultural community where three states and two nations meet, where she has resided since 1988. She earned her Bachelor of Arts in Organizational Communication and Public Relations with minors in Spanish and Film Studies and a Master of Arts in Communication from the University of Texas at El Paso. She has worked in the non-profit sector, K-12, and eventually transitioned to higher education. She has an extensive background in public relations, marketing, and resource development in both the public and private sector.

Keri Moe is currently the Associate Vice President of External Relations, Communication & Development and is a tenured faculty member in Speech Communication at El Paso Community College. She also teaches in the Communication Department at the University of Texas at El Paso. In 2008, she was a Fulbright-Hays Scholar in Morocco. With nearly 20 years of experience as both a faculty member and an administrator, she understands the complex dynamics of higher education. She is an advocate for achieving equity, access, and inclusiveness so that students are able to fulfill their dreams of graduating, continuing their education, or successfully entering the workforce. In addition to her professional and academic work, Moe serves on the boards of and volunteers with various community organizations. In 2021, she was named a Woman of Impact by the El Paso, Inc. for her work in education and the community.