A Qualitative Study of Women's Lived Experiences, Career Aspirations and Motivations at Higher Education Institutions

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DEDICATION

To my family, who support me and believe in me from afar, and to my boys, who I love more than anything.

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Completing my doctorate has been nothing short of extraordinary, frustrating, challenging, and exciting. My life has changed in many ways throughout this four-and-a-half-year journey, and there were several moments when I wanted to quit. However, if there is one thing I have learned from the women who so graciously shared their stories with me for this manuscript, it is that life's storms are inevitable, but perseverance allows us to endure them and emerge stronger on the other side. I persevered, but I could not have done this alone without the support and encouragement of many people.

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Though this journey is complete, the work continues. I hope that one day I will inspire others in the same way the women in this manuscript have inspired me. If I can encourage even one woman to strive for more, to work hard, and to persevere, then this work will have truly been worthwhile.

ABSTRACT

Women remain underrepresented in senior-level administrative leadership at higher education institutions in the United States, especially at doctoral-granting institutions. While existing scholarship has extensively documented the structural, organizational, and personal barriers that impede women's advancement, limited research has examined the motivations, aspirations, and lived experiences of women who do attain senior leadership positions. This qualitative study addresses this gap by exploring the career motivations, leadership aspirations, and lived experiences of women serving in senior administrative roles at public, research-intensive (R1), land-grant institutions in the southeastern United States.

Using a qualitative research design, this study involved semi-structured interviews with women serving in senior administrative leadership roles at selected institutions. The interviews explored how participants described the experiences that motivated their careers, how their lived experiences within higher education institutions influenced their aspirations to pursue senior administrative positions, and how they navigated the barriers and supports encountered throughout their professional journeys.

The findings revealed four themes exploring how women´s career motivations and leadership trajectories were shaped over time. These themes included early career defining moments and career decisions that laid the foundation of their professional trajectories, intrinsic motivators to pursue senior leadership roles, informal professional development opportunities, mentorship and support systems, and a combination of internal, societal and organizational barriers that shaped their career trajectories. Together, these findings highlight the complex interplay between personal identity, institutional context, and external expectations in shaping women's leadership pathways.

Drawing on Deci and Ryan (1985)'s Self-Determination Theory, the findings highlight the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in understanding women's motivation to pursue and sustain senior leadership roles. This study contributes to the literature on women's leadership in higher education by centering strength-based narratives and offering insights that can inform institutional policies, leadership development practices, and strategies aimed at advancing gender equity in senior administrative leadership.

Keywords: women leaders, higher education administration, career aspirations, motivation, self-determination theory, qualitative research.

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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Positions of formal authority across industries have traditionally been held by men but, in recent decades, there has been an increase in the prominence of women in positions of leadership in many fields of practice such as government, businesses, or higher education (Keohane, 2020). The gender gap in executive roles at higher education institutions (HEI), however, is still large, as men in leadership roles at HEI outnumber women, especially at doctoral-granting institutions (Cañas et al., 2019; Ginsberg et al., 2019; Melidona et al., 2023).

The American College President Study is a survey conducted every five years by the American Council on Education, reporting in-depth information about the college presidency and pathways to higher education leadership (Melidona et al., 2023). The most recent edition of the American College President report indicated that women hold 33% of university presidential positions in the U.S., a 10-point increase since previous data were collected in 2006 (Melidona et al., 2023). This gender gap in the presidency has been noted since the American College President Study was first administered in 1986, when only 9.5% of college presidents who responded to the survey were women (Melidona et al., 2023). Dahlvig and Longman (2020) argued that the underrepresentation of women in senior-level leadership roles in HEI is baffling considering that:

> Hundreds of leadership development programs are available at institutional, national, and regional levels, the collaborative and empowering leadership style more typical of women has increasingly been recognized as valued, and the vast majority of universities affirm the importance of eliminating gender bias. (p. 30)

Though there has been a slow increase of women in positions of leadership in the last 40 years, most executive and senior-level leadership positions in HEI are still primarily held by white men (Cañas et al., 2019; Ginsberg et al., 2019; Keohane, 2020; Marshall, 2009). Women are represented in entry and mid-level positions, and progress in women advancing to senior leadership roles at HEI has been slow (Fry, 2022; Matias, 2019; NCES (National Center for Education Statistic), 2023). However, reasons why few women advance to senior-level positions remains unexplored.

The results of the American College President Study reported by Melidona et al. (2023) found that over half of current university presidents will step down from their role within the next five years. According to Melidona et al. (2023), the presidents who planned to step down were considering either retiring, becoming a consultant, or moving to a presidency role at another institution. This creating an opportunity for women to change the image of leadership of HEI. Why is there a gender gap in higher education leadership? Cozza and Hu (2022) summarized the general factors discussed by scholars in the literature, stating that:

> There are few female role models in higher education administration. Role models tend to be men. There are few female role models in higher education administration. Characteristics of women leaders are not associated with strong leadership ability and women are not pushed to pursue leadership positions…Women are less willing to make sacrifices required for leaders than their male counterparts (p. 58).

Much of the literature discussing the lack of representation of women in senior leadership roles focuses on describing the pipeline of available women into leadership roles, identifying external and internal barriers women face when advancing in their careers, and the number of professional development programs available at institutions to encourage women to reach for

leadership roles (Ballenger, 2010; Cañas et al., 2019; Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016; Kellerman & Rhode, 2017). Scholars also discuss how women's lived experiences and organizational biases have resulted in women not being encouraged to pursue opportunities that will lead to senior leadership roles and sometimes choosing to remain in mid-level leadership roles (Jones-Goodwin, 2020; Pal & Jones, 2020; Pasquerella & Clauss-Ehlers, 2017). According to Pasquerella and Clauss-Ehlers (2017), "layers of missed opportunities, family obligations, and small and large slights build up over the years, slowing their career progress compared with men" (p. 9). Jones-Goodwin (2020) identified personal and organizational factors at play negatively impacting women's career aspirations. Additionally, Pal and Jones (2020) mixed-method study found women in mid-level leadership roles were content with their positions and were not interested in moving to senior leadership roles. Balancing family obligations with work responsibilities, not being able to relocate to access a position of higher responsibilities, or feelings the organization's culture and climate does not support their needs can lead to women holding back in their career aspirations (Pal & Jones, 2020).

A growing number of women are assuming senior-level positions, but most assume roles such as director, manager, and coordinator, which are considered low- and mid-level positions (Bonebright et al., 2012; Lepkowski, 2009; Marshall, 2009; Pal & Jones, 2020). Women may be professionally limiting themselves by their choosing and not seeking leadership roles, though researchers have discussed that men and women do not differ in their desire to advance to senior leadership roles in HEI (Burkinshaw & White, 2017; Marshall, 2009). Research remains silent on what motivates women who do advance to senior-level positions (Ginsberg et al., 2019), raising the question of whether most women aspire to senior leadership roles at HEI.

The latest report on the 2023 American College President Study addressed at what age men and women first aspire and apply to be College Presidents (Melidona et al., 2023). Results indicated that women aspired, applied, and were appointed to the role of president later in life than men, raising the question of what prevents women from aspiring to senior leadership roles sooner in life (Melidona et al., 2023). This is the first time such quantitative data on women's aspirations to the presidency at HEI have been collected by this survey. The survey, however, did not address why women aspire and to apply to these roles later in life than men. Research addressing whether women want to seek leadership roles, or if women have different career aspirations is needed.

While there is extensive literature examines the barriers and challenges that discourage women from pursuing senior leadership roles, there is a gap in the research highlighting the positive, strength-based narratives of women who do apply for senior administrative roles. Limited studies explore whether women actively seek leadership positions and the key factors that motivate them to pursue senior leadership opportunities.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the research published in the 21st century describing the pipeline of women in leadership roles, identifying the barriers women face, and the number of professional development programs available at institutions, men at universities outnumber women in upper-level management administration positions (Cañas et al., 2019; Ginsberg et al., 2019). Previous scholars focused their research on identifying the barriers that prevent women from advancing in HEI (Ballenger, 2010; Burkinshaw & White, 2017; Cañas et al., 2019; Diehl, 2014). There is a lack of literature focusing on the motivating factors for women who have been successful in applying and advancing to senior leadership roles. Furthermore, literature addressing whether

women want to seek leadership roles or whether women have different career aspirations is needed. Researchers also need to further identify motivating factors for women to apply for senior leadership roles that can open the door for emerging leaders in HEI (Madsen & Longman, 2020).

Hill et al. (2019) first suggested that the literature would benefit from researching the factors that influence the career paths and leadership aspirations of women administrators in HEI, as scholars have not identified to what extent women apply for senior university administrative roles, and how their lived experiences have influenced their career paths and aspirations. Understanding what motivates women to step into leadership may offer strategies that will lead toward gender parity (Russell, 2021). Jones-Goodwin (2020) also stated that we need to understand why women do not progress to senior leadership roles. Is it a choice or professional or personal circumstances that dictated that career path (Jones-Goodwin, 2020)? Additionally, she stated that there is significant literature describing the career path of women in academia but little about women in the administrative branch of HEI (Jones-Goodwin, 2020).

In addition, scholars researching the lack of women in HEI leadership roles have focused on investigating the unique challenges and opportunities women face within the same State system of institutions (Cañas et al., 2019; Dahlvig & Longman, 2010; Wootton, 2006). This study examined the experiences of women employed at institutions within the Southeastern U.S. that are considered peer institutions, or institutions that are comparable in terms of their academic standing, mission and selectivity.

Dahlvig and Longman (2020) recommended that authors focus less on discussing how male-dominated organizational policies affect women's pipeline into senior leadership roles and begin to understand more what motivates women to enter leadership positions. Cox and

Salsberry (2017) suggested that "researchers need to look through a different lens and consider the motivational factors that influence a woman's decision to pursue and succeed in upper-level administrative positions, particularly in higher education" (p. 4). Following Cox and Salsberry (2017)'s suggestion, this study addressed the motivating factors influencing women's career aspirations and their decisions to apply for senior administrative roles, as well as how those are related to women's lived experiences in HEI.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the career motivations, aspirations and lived experiences of women senior administrative leaders at HEIs. The study followed a qualitative approach to understand how women leaders describe the experiences that initially motivated their careers, how their lived experiences within academic institutions influenced their aspirations to pursue senior administrative positions, and how they navigated the barriers and supports encountered along the way. By examining the personal narratives and professional journeys of women in leadership, this study aimed to contribute to a deeper understanding of the factors that shape women's leadership trajectories in higher education and to inform policies and practices that support gender equity in academic leadership.

In her dissertation, Alexander (2023) found that most research discussing the topic of women in higher education leadership follows a qualitative research design. Building on her findings, this study contributes to the large body of qualitative literature on women in higher education leadership by offering in-depth, narrative insights into the personal and professional experiences that shape their career motivations, aspirations, and advancement.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following three research questions:

1. How do women in senior leadership roles at higher education institutions describe the experiences that motivated their careers?
2. How did the lived experiences of women senior leaders in higher education institutions influence their career aspirations and motivations to apply for senior university administrative roles?
3. How do women in senior leadership roles at higher education institutions describe the barriers and supports they experienced in advancing their careers?

Significance of the Study

The findings of this study contributes to the body of literature in the field of higher education administration by filling the gap identified by Hill et al. (2019) and Dahlvig and Longman (2020) for research relating to women administrator's career paths, leadership aspirations and motivating factors to reach senior leadership roles. This study contributes to the literature on Self-Determination Theory by investigating to what extent women are or are not applying for senior university administrative roles, how their lived experiences have influenced their career paths and aspirations, and how women make career decisions. Results from this study offer an account of the unique experiences of women leaders at HEI in the southeastern U.S., help administrators understand how to encourage women to apply for senior leadership roles, and recognize barriers women may be facing to access those roles. This study also adds to the existing literature on how motivation frameworks understand the motivations of women to apply or not apply to senior administrative leadership roles, and how those motivations may guide women's career aspirations.

Delimitations

This study is delimited to women working at public, R1, land-grant institutions in the southeastern U.S., holding the titles of President, Chancellor, Vice Chancellor, Associate Vice Chancellor, Vice President, or Executive Vice President in administrative departments. Generalizations cannot be made about faculty members, staff or any employee at HEI that identify as male with the similar titles.

Definition of Terms

The following are definitions that will clarify the terms used in this study:

- Research One (R1) Institutions: R1 institutions are defined by the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education as doctoral institutions with very high research activity. These institutions awarded at least 20 research/scholarship doctorates in 2019-20 and reported at least $5 million in total research expenditures in FY20 (Carnegie, 2021).
- Land-grant institution: A land-grant institution is one that has been designated by its state legislature or Congress to receive the benefits of the Morrill Acts of 1862, 1890, and 1994. The original mission of these institutions was to teach agriculture, military tactics, and the mechanic arts, as well as classical studies. There is one land-grant institution in every state and territory of the U.S. (Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities, 2022).
- Southeast United States: For purposes of this study, I used the U.S. Geological Survey's regions of the South Atlantic-Gulf region as aligned with the U.S. Department of Interior Unified Interior Regions. That includes the states of Alabama, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, Puerto Rico, South Carolina, and Tennessee (USGS, 2019).
- Administrative departments: Administrative departments are those whose role and responsibility is to manage and oversee institutional operations. The names of the positions, divisions, and departments are usually available on an institution's website and their organizational chart. In general, administrative departments include administration and finances, academic affairs, advancement, communications and marketing, enrollment management/admissions, and student services and campus life (Bowles, 2022).

- Administrative senior leadership roles: Campus senior leadership roles include the titles of President, Chancellor, Vice Chancellor, Associate Vice Chancellor, Vice President, or Executive Vice President in administrative departments.

Organization of the Study

This study follows a traditional five-chapter dissertation format. Chapter 1 introduces the study, along with the statement of the problem and the purpose of the study. I also outline the research questions that will guide this study. Chapter 1 also includes the definition of terms, the significance of the study, and delimitations. Chapter 2 examines the pertinent literature seeking to provide a foundation regarding gender inequality in higher education leadership, the barriers women face when advancing their careers, a discussion on the career aspirations of women, and the factors that motivate, or hinder women to apply for senior administrative roles. Chapter 3 discusses the methodology used in this qualitative study, and will outline the research design, and the data analysis procedures. In addition, the chapter will include the selection of participants, data collection, and the analysis procedure. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of the role of the researcher, ethical considerations, and the methods of verification. Chapter 4 discusses the findings of the study from analysis the qualitative data. The dissertation closes with Chapter 5, where the research is discussed, implications are suggested, and recommendations for future research are included.

CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter 1 provides an overview of this study's purpose, research question, and significance. This chapter will present relevant literature providing a foundation regarding the lived experiences of women in HEI, the barriers women face when advancing their careers, and the factors that motivate or hinder women from applying for senior administrative roles. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do women in senior leadership roles at higher education institutions describe the experiences that motivated their careers?
2. How did the lived experiences of women senior leaders in higher education institutions influence their career aspirations and motivations to apply for senior university administrative roles?
3. How do women in senior leadership roles at higher education institutions describe the barriers and supports they experienced in advancing their careers?

This chapter begins with a summary of the search process in this review of the literature. I will then provide relevant research discussing gender inequality in higher education leadership. That section is followed by an overview of the pipeline myth, which is a foundation of what the research identifies as the overall theories of why women have failed to reach leadership roles in HEI at the same rate as men. That section is followed by a discussion of literature examining barriers that have caused the pipeline to fail, using Diehl and Dzubinski (2016)'s classification of barriers as macro, meso, and micro barriers. That discussion is followed by outlining research describing the influence of internal barriers and other factors on the career aspirations of women in HEI. The last section centers on what the literature has identified as motivators and strategies women have used to overcome barriers, focusing on defining what leadership is, and mentoring

and support networks. Lastly, I will provide a background of the theoretical framework that will lead this study, describe Ryan and Deci (2000) self-determination theory, and describe how it relates to the study outlined in this proposal.

The Search Process

A diverse body of databases was accessed during the search process for literature in this study using keywords such as *women leadership in higher education institutions, self-determination theory, women leaders, barriers for women in higher education leadership, career aspirations of women in higher education institutions, motivations of women leaders in higher education institutions,* among others. Google Scholar and databases maintained by the University of Tennessee's Library catalog were used to obtain peer-reviewed articles, dissertations, and books related to the research outlined in this proposal. Several dissertations were also reviewed when relevant. In addition, three alerts were created on Google Scholars using the following three sentences: *career aspirations of women in higher education, women leadership in higher education institutions, and motivation for women leaders in higher education*. These Google alerts delivered recently published peer-reviewed articles containing those words to my Outlook Inbox.

I built a reference list using EndNote software that was installed on my personal computer. EndNote software is available to all students, faculty, and staff at the University of Tennessee. EndNote stores all accounts in the cloud, which provided an instant backup to my reference list in case of computer failure. EndNote was also used as a citation manager during the writing process, as it reduces the chance of incorrectly referencing a source, missing a source in the reference list, or listing a source in the reference list that was not used in the text.

Articles related to my research published by foreign universities were examined for relevance and used at times; however, I focused the literature review on U.S.-based publications. As articles were read, I followed a snowball approach to gathering additional sources by searching for citations from other scholars in peer-reviewed articles and books. Specific searches for those articles were conducted using Google Scholar and the University of Tennessee library and explored when relevant. Common headings from published dissertations were collected and used as headings in this literature review.

Gender Inequality in Higher Education Leadership

As discussed in Chapter 1, the most recent edition of the American College President Study indicated that women hold 33% of university presidents in the U.S., a 10-point increase since the previous survey was collected in 2006, a gender gap that has been noted since the American College President Study was first administered in 1986, when only 9.5% of college presidents who responded to the survey were women (Melidona et al., 2023). Despite the efforts towards diversity in the 21st century, for many decades, the profile of a typical college president had been the same; that is, "a married, graying white man with a doctoral degree – is how little it has changed over the last 20 years" (June, 2007, p. 1). Johnson (2017) data also indicated a lack of women in other senior leadership roles in HEI, such as deans, chief academic officers, board members, and chairs. The current gender gap in presidents at HEI is significant considering that 58% of total undergraduate enrollment in 2023 at U.S HEIs were women and, since the 1980s, women have earned more bachelor's degrees than men (Dahlvig & Longman, 2020; Fry, 2022; Matias, 2019). The increased participation in education by women in the U.S. has not resulted in a higher representation in senior leadership roles (Rodriguez-Farrar & Jack, 2022).

A key question guiding this work is: What is the path to reach senior administration roles at HEI? Wessel and Keim (1994) conducted a study that looked at the career path of college presidents at private, doctoral-granting institutions in the U.S., and found that close to 70% of college presidents followed the academic career path, beginning as faculty and progressing through department chair, dean, etc., while 30% followed the administrative path, with no or minimal academic experience. Birnbaum and Umbach (2001) conducted a similar study surveying 2,297 college presidents who participated in the American Council on Education Survey in 1995. Their findings concluded that 66% of college presidents had followed the academic track to upper administrative roles. Rodriguez-Farrar and Jack (2022) found that women are more likely than men to follow the traditional academic path to upper administrative roles. However, while women begin their careers in HEI in greater numbers than their male counterparts, in 2023, only 33% of full-professor positions in the U.S. were held by women (Palmer, 2023). “Women are less likely than men to attain the rank of full professor” (Pasquerella & Clauss-Ehlers, 2017, p. 8). Considering that the most common path to senior administrative roles at HEI in the U.S. is to follow the traditional path through the faculty track, women are missing out on career opportunities (Birnbaum & Umbach, 2001; Rodriguez-Farrar & Jack, 2022; Wessel & Keim, 1994). Women start their careers in academia following an interest in teaching and research and are “usually satisfied with staying as professor and not looking for leadership roles” (Cozza & Hu, 2022, p. 58). Women enjoy the academic focus of their role as faculty and are turned off by the high demands and responsibilities to move on to administrative positions. The combination of less women reaching full professor roles, which is often a requirement to serve a department head, and their seemingly lack of interest in leadership

roles may be preventing the pipeline of qualified women to embark on the pathway for senior administrative roles through the academic track.

Similarly to women in academia, women working in administrative roles also begin their careers resisting the move into leadership roles (Bornstein, 2008). Women are underrepresented in senior leadership administrative roles and, though a growing number of women are assuming leadership positions, most assume roles such as director, manager, and coordinator, which are considered low- and mid-level management positions (Bornstein, 2008; Jones-Goodwin, 2020; Lepkowski, 2009; Marshall, 2009; Pal & Jones, 2020). Keohane (2020) stated that some authors believe few women want to hold significant, demanding leadership positions, though women have "proven themselves capable of providing strong, visible leadership" (p. 238), and face many obstacles. There is, however, evidence against that belief (Lepkowski, 2009). Women may not be moving from mid-level management positions because they don't find benefit in dealing with the struggles, stress, and political games associated with holding a senior administrative leadership role. Women may be professionally limiting themselves through their own choices of delaying their advancement to higher positions of leadership and remaining in roles that provide them with personal benefit (Jones-Goodwin, 2020; Lepkowski, 2009; Marshall, 2009). In addition, traditional professional standards and expectations of the job could lead women to believe combining a family and a career as a senior leader in HEI is incompatible with the demands of the job, forcing women to choose between career and family (Marshall, 2009). Women also limit themselves by imposter syndrome. Bornstein (2008) explained how fear of failure prevents women from applying for administrative positions until they feel very well prepared. Women often consider the trade-offs between staying in their current roles or trying to advance in their careers, often choosing to remain in their current roles. These choices have

delayed women's advancement to senior administrative leadership roles. Keohane (2020) summarized this by stating, "we cannot know whether women are 'naturally' interested in top leadership posts until they can attain such positions without making personal and family sacrifices radically disproportionate to those faced by men" (p. 236).

Scholars have offered various reasons for why there is a gender gap in higher education leadership. In their research, Pal and Jones (2020) identified barriers such as the existence of "limited opportunities for career growth, competition with other women, higher educational expectations than men peers, family commitments, and a need to establish credibility in their professions through taking on additional responsibilities" (p. 18). As quoted previously, Cozzais and Parnther (2022) summarized the general factors discussed in the literature by stating that:

> There are few female role models in higher education administration. Role models tend to be men. There are few female role models in higher education administration. Characteristics of women leaders are not associated with strong leadership ability and women are not pushed to pursue leadership positions…Women are less willing to make sacrifices required for leaders than their male counterparts (p. 58).

Lastly, Alexander (2023) dissertation included a systematic review of the literature on articles answering the question "why do women continue to be in the minority of academic, administrative leadership roles in the United States?" (p. 46). She identified 74 articles addressing this topic with general themes such as: "barriers and obstacles (work and family balance, gender discrimination, organizational bias), leadership styles, leadership pipeline, mentoring, tokenism, and leadership development programs" (Alexander, 2023, p. 46). Women value institutions that foster a culture and climate that acknowledges their needs, provides them

with the professional development necessary to advance in their careers, and supports a work-life balance that prevents them from choosing between their families or their careers.

Scholars have discussed the perception of women's leadership abilities. People have assumed women are incapable of leadership, yet women have often proven themselves to be capable of leading in both formal and informal situations, and "throughout human history, leadership has been closely associated with masculinity" (Keohane, 2014, p. 43). Cozza and Hu (2022) addressed the difference in leadership styles between men and women, stating that the gender gap in higher education exists because characteristics of women leaders are not associated with having a strong leadership ability and women aren't encouraged to seek senior leadership positions. The perception of women lacking leadership abilities traces back to traditional early leadership theories, which were based on a hierarchical approach through top-down decisions, defined leadership as the basis of stereotypically masculine qualities, and did not address the differences in how men and women lead (Eagly, 2007; Oakley, 2000). Researchers resisted making statements that men and women could have different leadership styles (Fine, 2009; Weyer, 2007). Within the context of those traditional approaches to leadership, female leaders in the workplace were faced with showing traits stereotyped and expected of women such as kindness, concern, and collaborative nature, and traits society associates with men such as confidence, aggressiveness, and self-direction (Eagly, 2013). This traditional view of top-down leadership, however, is no longer able to explain the complex environments of today's workplace which have shifted away from the traditional view of a single leader of the team and a group of followers' team-based approach, to sharing decision-making, and giving more attention to building relationships and accomplishing tasks (Longman & Madsen, 2014; Serban & Roberts, 2016). Women leaders are underrepresented in leadership and

senior management positions despite the research indicating that women and men don't differ in their ability to lead (Cozza, 2022). Women's slow ascent to leadership positions may have contributed to the shift in the practice of leadership.

Though men and women don't differ in their ability to lead, they differ in the way they lead. Feminist theorists state that women lead differently than men, and, since the masculine style of leadership is still perceived as ideal, women still have difficulties in gaining leadership positions because they have to fit their leadership style into the accepted models instead of being able to develop their own styles (Cozza & Hu, 2022; Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016).

When describing the literature identifying what specific leadership theories apply to the research of women leaders in HEI, Lowe and Gardner (2000) stated that scholars have focused on the comparison of leadership styles between men and women through the lens of either transactional or transformational leadership theories. According to Cozza (2022) and Eagly et al., (2003), women tend to follow a transformational leadership style, while men are prone to transactional leadership In their qualitative study, Ferris and Waldron (2022) found that women in senior leadership roles identified building personal relationships, being collaborative, and following a consensus rather than a top-down leadership approach as leaders. Part of the relationship-building approach to leadership, mentoring has been defined as a way to "pay it forward" (Ferris & Waldron, 2022, p. 85). An increase in the number of women in leadership positions has influenced a shift in the trend of leadership theory favoring a transformational, collaborative model that is more relational than hierarchical. In addition to the difference in leadership styles, HEIs have traditionally been hierarchical and patriarchal organizations that make it difficult to advance into senior administrative roles (Cozza, 2022; Pal & Jones, 2020). To

succeed, Cozza and Hu (2022) found that women are not treated equally to men in HEI, and feel they need to be kind, nurturing, assertive, and continue to transform the work environment.

Organizations could address the challenges faced by women to advance in their careers. For example, Ginsberg et al. (2019) suggested a series of broad organizational changes such as addressing the recruitment, retention, and promotion practices that can create advancement opportunities for women, such as mentoring opportunities, improving home-work balance, and investing in campus daycares. They mentioned institutions should consider auditing their hiring process and adopt processes that attract and support diverse candidates to senior leadership positions (Ginsberg et al., 2019). Once the candidate is hired, the focus of the institution should shift to retention by establishing initiatives that encourage women to remain and advance within their institutions, such as mentoring practices, professional development programs, and developing new promotion structures and policies (Ginsberg et al., 2019). Among the new policies that would encourage the recruitment and retention of women at HEI, Ginsberg et al. (2019) highlighted the importance of focusing on pay equity and factors that lead to early career success such as the ability of maintaining work-life balance by adopting flexible schedules, or the investment on a campus childcare.

The importance of mentoring has received also attention in the literature. Keohane (2020), for example, highlighted the importance of mentoring and encouraging women to compete for roles. She also argued that women are ready to take on senior leadership roles, but questions if their followers can see gender as irrelevant to who is in charge (Keohane, 2020). Melidona et al. (2023) stated that HEIs need to invest in women-specific leadership development programs that address male-normed organizational policies and implement policies that support gender equity. Overall, institutions should focus their efforts of how their culture, climate and

organizational practices disadvantage women and adapt those organizational practices to encourage women to apply, remain and advance to leadership positions in HEI.

To further understand some of the challenges faced by women to reach leadership roles, the following two sections will expand on two of the general themes identified by Alexander (2023) and commonly discussed in the literature as to why women continue to be in the minority of administrative senior leadership roles: the leadership pipeline, or pipeline theory, and the barriers women face when advancing in their careers.

The Leadership Pipeline Myth

White (2005) stated that, for thirty years, the effort to improve the status of women in higher education focused on researching the "so-called pipeline theory" (p. 22). The pipeline theory suggests that, given the larger number of women in undergraduate and graduate students, over time, the larger number of women at the lower levels of the professions will yield larger numbers of women at the higher ranks (Kellerman & Rhode, 2014; White, 2005). The theory applies to all professions, and it presumes that:

- Women and men of the same qualifications will ascend to the top at the same rate.
- The absence of gender bias and gender stereotypes will not impede women's progress.
- Organizational systems and structures work as well for women as they do for men, even though women still do far more domestic work than their male counterparts.
- Women's equal representation is just a matter of time (Kellerman & Rhode, 2014).

In the context of higher education, the pipeline theory assumes that a large number of women undergraduates and graduate students would, over time, yield larger numbers of women at the highest academic and administrative ranks because the pool of women available to fill those roles would increase (White, 2005). This, however, has not happened (Longman &

Anderson, 2016; White, 2005). While the number of women at lower-level roles has grown, female administrators often remain in low- and mid-level positions (Bonebright et al., 2012). Sandberg (2015) concurred with previous research stating that "the pipeline that supplies the educated workforce is chock-full of women at the entry-level, but by the time that same pipeline is filling leadership positions, it is overwhelmingly stocked with men" (p. 15).

Before White (2005), Avolio et al. (2004) and Mason and Goulden (2002a) alluded to the concept of the pipeline theory and found that, while gender equality may be the reality for graduating students, it is a different story for faculty and staff. Despite an increase in women earning doctorate degrees, women are overrepresented in the lower, non-managerial ranks of the staff, not in tenure-track faculty ranks (Mason & Goulden, 2002a). Fifteen years later, Kellerman and Rhode (2017) found that women continued to be underrepresented at the highest level of higher education leadership and stated that the "pipeline is a pipe dream" (Kellerman & Rhode, 2017, p. 1). The pipeline has failed across the board for women in all American institutions, especially at high levels of leadership and management (Kellerman & Rhode, 2014; Kellerman & Rhode, 2017; Longman & Anderson, 2016; White, 2005). Mason and Goulden (2002b) discussed two reasons accounting for the failure of the pipeline theory: the glass ceiling theory, and what they described as the "work versus family" conflict.

The term "glass ceiling" was first expressed by Hymowitz and Schellhardt (1986) in an article published in the Wall Street Journal describing an "invisible barrier that blocks [women] from the top jobs" (p. 61). Their article focused on gender inequalities in corporate America and how a third of management positions in the U.S. were filled by women, but the majority had plateaued in positions of little authority and pay (Hymowitz & Schellhardt, 1986). According to Hymowitz and Schellhardt (1986), women have been blocked by male-dominated corporate

traditions, stereotypes, lack of mentors, internal beliefs that women lack the right credentials to be in charge, assumptions that women are distracted by home responsibilities, and the authors' belief that "men at the top feel uncomfortable with women besides them" (p. 61).

The concept of the glass ceiling arose to describe the lack of women in management in corporate America but has been translated to focus on an alleged pattern of discrimination that prevents women from top positions in academia and other professional fields (Ballenger, 2010; Chance, 2022; Ginsberg et al., 2019; Mason & Goulden, 2002b). Ballenger (2010) found that, while women have made progress in senior leadership at HEI, equity has yet to be reached. Oakley (2000) argued that, at the turn of the 21st century, barriers that resulted in the glass ceiling were found in three categories:

- Barriers created by corporate practices such as recruitment, retention, and promotion.
- Behavioral and cultural causes such as stereotyping, tokenism, power, preferred leadership styles, and the male/female relationship dynamics at the office.
- Structural and cultural explanations rooted in feminist theory.

Recent research by Kellerman and Rhode (2017) reiterated the same barriers mentioned by Oakley (2000) as reasons why the pipeline theory has not worked and abled the first two categories outlined above as "meso barriers, which operate at the level of groups and organizations" (p. 191). The meso barriers identified by Oakley (2000) are the same organizational practices Ginsberg et al. (2019) identified as maintaining the gender equality in senior leadership roles at HEI. Throughout the 21st century, HEI have not addressed the organizational barriers identified by the literature that are preventing gender equity in leadership roles.

The second reason Mason and Goulden (2002a) identified why the pipeline theory has failed is the work versus family conflict. The work versus family conflict was built around the belief that the nature of the American workplace is configured around a male career model that forces women to make choices between work and family (Mason & Goulden, 2002a). This school of thought is often described in the literature as the *work-life balance barrier* (Dahlvig, 2013; Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016; Kellerman & Rhode, 2014; Kellerman & Rhode, 2017; Longman & Anderson, 2016; Sandberg, 2015; White, 2005). Creating an environment that supports balancing personal and professional commitments is essential for institutions that want to attract and retain women leaders. The barrier of balancing home and work responsibility, along with the psychological glass ceiling, communication style constraints, conscious unconsciousness, and personalizing, was labeled by Diehl and Dzubinski (2016) as "micro barriers, which operate at the level of the individual" (p. 191), and will be discussed further in the next section.

The following section and subsections focus on what the literature found that barriers caused the pipeline theory to fail. Specifically, I base the discussion on research around the three categories of barriers summarized by Diehl and Dzubinski (2016): societal, organizational, and personal barriers.

Barriers of Women Leaders

A series of barriers and obstacles that prevent women's advancement to senior leadership roles in HEI has been widely discussed by scholars and summarized by Diehl and Dzubinski (2016)'s study on women presidents, provosts, and vice presidents in the mid-Atlantic and women working in religious non-profit organizations. They identified 27 different types of barriers faced by women aspiring to senior leadership roles classified in the macro (societal),

meso (organizational), and micro (individual or personal) levels that impact women advancing to leadership roles (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016). They argued that organizations have been making efforts to increase the number of women in senior leadership roles for decades, but their efforts focus on addressing one barrier at a time, yet women face several barriers at the same time (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016).

The following sections use Diehl and Dzubinski (2016) work as a starting point to discuss what has been identified in the literature as societal, organizational, and individual barriers faced by women aspiring to senior leadership roles.

Societal Barriers

Diehl and Dzubinski (2016) described societal, or macro, barriers as those that operate within society and create challenges for women to be influential leaders, provide their expertise in the workforce, and be taken seriously. These barriers are the result of historical societal perceptions of male-normed forms of leadership that associate leadership with masculinity, are hypercritical of women in the workforce, or assume societal constraints on women's educational and career choices (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016; Keohane, 2014; Weyer, 2007). There are six barriers within this category: "control of women's voices, cultural constraints on women's own choices, gender stereotypes, gender unconsciousness, and leadership perceptions" (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016, p. 188).

The historical context of societal barriers was discussed by Miller (1986), as she observed, the price that is paid by individuals when society considers half the population as dominant, and the other half as subordinate. She described common perceptions that women have a different set of organizational principles "around which their psyches are structured. One of these principles is that they exist to serve other people's needs" (Miller, 1986, p. 62). Miller's

view has persisted in the research throughout the 21st century such as Johnson (2001)'s statement that "men are the cultural standard for humanity" (p. 99), or Collins (2009) summarizing the historic point of view that "a woman's place was in the home, leaving men to run everything that went on outside the front door" (Collins, 2009, p. 5). It is within this assumption of a male-normed context that HEIs have historically functioned (Dahlvig & Longman, 2020). The effect of these stereotypes and beliefs have contributed to women's reluctance to pursue leadership roles of increasing responsibilities.

Research on leadership theories has also perpetuated societal views of leadership as follow male traits. Early leadership theories such as the Great Men Theory ignored women as examples of leaders born with natural gifts to be leaders and were based on a hierarchical approach through top-down decisions, defined leadership as the basis of stereotypically masculine qualities and did not address the differences in how men and women lead (Eagly, 2007; Komives et al., 2013; Oakley, 2000). Social role and expectation states theories are two other leadership theories based on the idea that societal expectations maintain inequalities among genders, and gender is the reason why men and women are allocated different roles in society (Weyer, 2007). Social role theory argues that women and men leaders behave differently because gender roles influence leadership roles in terms of the expectations we hold for each gender (Eagly, 2013). As Eagly (2007) stated:

> In the U.S., women are increasingly praised for having excellent skills for leadership and, in fact, women more than men, manifest leadership styles associated with effective performance as leaders. Nevertheless, more people prefer male than female bosses, and it is more difficult for women than men to become leaders and to succeed in male-dominated leadership roles (p. 1).

Expectation states theory explains that the formation of behavioral hierarchies of influence and esteem among individuals is shaped by status beliefs and is central to the process by which people gain access to positions of leadership (Berger et al., 1972). Ridgeway (2001) described how expectation states theory indicates that gender stereotypes are a powerful barrier to women's achievement of positions of authority, leadership, and power. As Sandberg (2015) stated, "from the moment we are born, boys and girls are treated differently" (p. 19).

When trying to understand society's expectations of what constitutes leadership, researchers have studied how gendered norms and stereotypes have impacted women's aspirations to leadership (Dahlvig & Longman, 2020). Stereotyping refers to "the negative beliefs about one's racial, ethnic, gender or cultural group in the eye of another group and has hindered professional advancement for women in academic leadership" (Chance, 2022, p. 49). Deep-seated beliefs about gender roles can negatively impact women's leadership aspirations and experiences when the traits associated with leaders are different from the traits typically associated with being a woman (Dahlvig & Longman, 2020). Women in HEI are stereotyped in several ways. Scholars have discussed how managers associate desirable managerial traits with men, and less desirable managerial traits with women (Dahlvig & Longman, 2010; Davidson, 2018; Oakley, 2000). Men are often seen as being independent, unemotional, objective, dominant, active, strategic, confident, and skilled in business (Caton, 2007; Oakley, 2000). Women are viewed as nurturing and sensitive and are perceived as not being tough enough to make difficult decisions (Keohane, 2014). Female leaders are stereotyped as being cold, pushy, demanding, and bitchy if they are considered too abrasive in situations where men would be considered assertive (Kellerman & Rhode, 2017). These stereotypes can contribute to women questioning their abilities and being hesitant to pursue leadership roles (Keohane, 2014). Female

leaders in the workplace are faced with choosing to demonstrate traits stereotyped and expected of women, such as kindness, concern, and collaborative nature, or traits society associates with men such as confidence, aggression, and self-direction (Eagly, 2013).

Organizational Barriers

Diehl and Dzubinski (2016) identified 16 organizational, or meso, barriers in their research that symbolize the way the leadership contributions of women are discounted by groups and organizations, limiting women's effectiveness (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016). The 16 organizational barriers listed by Diehl and Dzubinski (2016) include: "devaluing of communal practice, discrimination, exclusion from informal networks, glass cliff, lack of mentoring, lack of sponsorship, lack of support, male gatekeeping, male organizational culture, organizational ambivalence, queen bee effect, salary inequality, tokenism, two-person career structure, unequal standards, and workplace harassment" (p. 190). This group includes the largest number of barriers identified by Diehl and Dzubinski (2016), and have been extensively addressed by the research on the lack of women leaders in HEI.

Scholars have described how organizations have structures and practices that favor men, leading to gendered organizations, as early as the 1970s with Kanter (1977) and Smith et al. (1979)'s work. Kanter (1977) examined how people's experiences at work were shaped by systems that created power imbalances at work. Building on this, Smith et al. (1979) showed how organizations were "grounded in the working worlds and relations of men" (p. 148). Other researchers have explored how organizations are built on male organizational cultures through different perspectives. Acker (1990), for example, studied the theory of gendered organizations and stated that all aspects of organizations from procedures, policies and hierarchies reflect a longstanding tradition of maintaining male advantage in positions of power and retaining gender

inequality at corporate institutions. Martin (2003) explored what a gender-equal work environment would look like if women were to access positions of power in their workplaces. He argued that, even when women reach positions of authority, their ability to change gender inequality would be limited because of the expectation of people in those roles to act a particular way. Lastly, Stainback et al. (2016) further examined Martin (2003)'s suggestions and investigated the potential influence of female leaders at policy-setting decisions and being an agent to changing gender inequality in organizations. They found women in positions of leadership can become agents of change across organizations and can influence the implementation of gender equity policies (Stainback et al., 2016). Women's representation in positions of power can increase the opportunities for mentoring and networking for other women and reduce gender stereotypes about women's abilities to lead organizations. Organizations are gendered as people within the organization reinforce different expectations and inequality between men and women (Ballenger, 2010; Davidson, 2018). Organizational cultures can be gendered in ways that are discouraging to women, such as the competitive mindset of leaders in male-dominated cultures, as well as the expectations of maintaining a 24/7 schedule (Longman & Anderson, 2016).

As it relates to HEI, Niemi (2020) first sentence in her chapter's contribution to *The Wiley Handbook of Gender in Higher Education* said it simply: "Institutions of higher education are gendered workplaces" (p. 315). She described that academic organizations maintain the same gendered structures as other industries and are shaped by sets of assumptions about competence and success built by and for men, which leads to masculinity being the requirement for a life in HEI. HEIs have sustained a male-normed environment and practices in the workplace that do not

favor the leadership approaches women can bring, preventing them from succeeding in reaching senior leadership roles (Ballenger, 2010; Kezar, 2014).

Organizational barriers women face to reach leadership roles lie within the structures and norms of the institution, as women leaders have had to assimilate male-normed cultures that dominate HEI (Dahlvig & Longman, 2020). As Kezar (2014) stated, "for many decades women have had to negotiate their more collaborative and nonhierarchical beliefs and values with the reality of their organizations (p. 118). Caton (2007) previously identified that "as long as HEIs maintain a male-dominated culture and structure, perceptions regarding women's leadership behaviors and characteristics will be viewed through the male lens" (p. 7). If HEI act like corporate organizations, the research indicates that it is possible that, as women are increasing their representation in senior leadership roles at HEI, they can become agents of change, as explained by Stainback et al. (2016), and contribute to reducing gender inequality, reducing gender stereotypes, and influence HEI to adopt policies and procedures that encourage women to advance into roles of increasing responsibilities.

Another organizational barrier identified by Diehl and Dzubinski (2016) is the glass cliff. The concept of the glass cliff was first described Ryan and Haslam (2005) in their study looking at the appointment of male or female board members in Financial Times Stock Exchange 100 Index companies in the United Kingdom. They defined the glass cliff as situations in which "women…leadership appointments are made in problematic organizational circumstances and hence are more precarious" (p. 87). This concept was applied to the advancement of women to senior administrative leadership roles in HEI by Peterson (2016). She found that, as the number of women in administrative leadership roles increases, "these positions decline in status, merit, and prestige, and become more time-consuming and harder to combine with a successful

scholarly career" (p. 112). Peterson (2016) and Diehl and Dzubinski (2016) described how, unlike men, women are often placed in senior leadership roles under conditions when the institutions are facing a time of crisis such as going through an economic, cultural, or political restructuring. The appointment of women to such roles often coincides with heightened organizational risk, increasing the likelihood of failure and leading to women being held responsible for unfavorable outcomes (Ryan & Haslam, 2005). Peterson (2016) found that women accept these risky management positions because they lack the opportunities of being offered more stable ones. Even when given the opportunity to lead, women face greater challenges and scrutiny in those roles. The effects of the glass cliff are linked to organizational barriers for women working in HEI facing unequal standards as women are often held to higher expectations and performance standards than male counterparts to be recognized as competent (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016; Hannum et al., 2015; Kellerman & Rhode, 2017).

Though Diehl and Dzubinski (2016) identified gender stereotyping as a societal barrier, it can also be classified as an organizational barrier as stereotyping can have an impact on how organizations view the qualities of women leaders in comparison to men. As described previously, leadership is commonly associated with male qualities, which can lead to women facing double standards in the workplace (Davidson et al., 2020; Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016). BlackChen (2015) described an example of gender stereotyping in HEIs when women are seen as being more family-oriented and willing to interrupt their careers to procreate and take care of family than their male coworkers. Although both men and women are stereotyped, women are negatively affected by stereotyping (Caton, 2007). Society stereotypes bleed into organizational cultures where women are identified as caretakers of the home and children, and men are identified with the work environment (Ballenger, 2010). This stereotype fuels the work-life

balance struggle mentioned in the literature, which will be further described in the following section of this chapter (Dahlvig, 2013; Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016; Kellerman & Rhode, 2014; 2017; Longman & Anderson, 2016; Mason & Goulden, 2002b; Sandberg, 2015; White, 2005). These assumptions about women's roles can result in women not feeling supported to reach their potential (Chance, 2022). In addition, Ballenger (2010) found that gender bias is found at HEIs as hiring committees don't have diverse representation, which results in job searches favoring males. Women internalize prevailing stereotypes and discount their leadership potential (Kellerman & Rhode, 2014). According to Chance (2022), "negative outcomes of stereotype threat include anxiety and increased use of self-defeating strategies" (p. 49) which disengages women mentally into believing they should be reaching for upper management leadership roles.

Lack of sponsorship is another organizational barrier to women's leadership identified by Diehl and Dzubinski (2016), who defined lack of sponsorship as a lack of an advocate at their institution "who recognizes a woman's capacity and recommends her for a leadership position" (p. 189). They explain that many qualified, competent women lack a sponsor to recommend them for leadership or further promotion. This absence of advocacy often results in women spending more years in limbo compared to their male counterparts. Sponsorship involves influential advocates actively promoting and defending women for leadership opportunities. Without such sponsorship, women may remain under-recognized and under-promoted, even when they possess the necessary qualifications and experience

Another organizational barrier listed by Diehl and Dzubinski (2016) that affects women's advancement into leadership roles at HEI is the exclusion of women from informal networks, which is commonly described in the literature as the good old boy network (Ballenger, 2010; Drury, 2010; Oakley, 2000). The concept of the good old boy network follows Byrne (1971)'s

idea of similarity attraction, which describes the tendency of male managers to mentor or sponsor other men because of their preference to associate with people who are similar to themselves. Oakley (2000) mentioned that this behavior on the part of male leaders is seen as an attempt to preserve the upper ranks as predominately male domain. Ballenger (2010) found women's experiences align with Byrne (1971)'s findings, as women mentioned "the good old boy club is a limited circle where decisions on persons and positions are made" (Ballenger, 2010, p. 10). The concept of the *good old boy club* is widely discussed in literature addressing informal male-dominated networks that influence organizational decisions. Drury (2010)'s findings, for example, agreed with Byrne (1971)'s when discussing how good old boys' networks create disadvantages for women, such as restricted knowledge, being outsiders and unable to form of alliances. Hannum et al. (2015) reiterated that finding, stating that the implications of being excluded from these informal networks mean women are "missing out on opportunities because they aren't part of these networks" (p. 70). Organizational cultures are governed by informal social systems that exclude women as well as less powerful men and preserve most men at the top (Davidson, 2018). Significant organizational power is found within the informal connections among men at upper levels of leadership (Davidson, 2018), and the social exclusion from these networks can limit women's knowledge of inside information, negatively impacting their influence in their HEI (Caton, 2007). In addition, the good old boy network can impact the number of mentors available to women (Ballenger, 2010).

The existence of informal networks in the workplace is a result of tokenism. The concept of tokenism is another organizational barrier outlined by Diehl and Dzubinski (2016) research but initially introduced by Kanter (1977). Kanter (1977) described how the ratio of men to women or women to men in an organization creates an influence on group behavior between the

dominant group (higher proportion) and the token group (lower proportion). Diehl and Dzubinski (2016) specified tokenism exist in an organization with one group as "being in the minority (<15%) gender or race of a proportionally skewed workgroup" (p. 190). Women in upper management roles in HEI are often tokens due to the scarcity of women in senior leadership positions, so often, women leaders find themselves as the only female at their rank, and they usually represent the smaller group of influence (Longman & Lafreniere, 2012; Oakley, 2000). The dominant group tends to define the group's identity, and since men tend to be the dominant group in HEI, this results in the organizational culture of HEI being male-dominated (Jean-Marie & Tickles, 2017; Longman & Anderson, 2016; Oakley, 2000). The prevalence of male-dominated organizational cultures in HEI and the dominance of men at senior level roles in higher education creates an environment where women have to navigate and negotiate the masculine terrain to make their views come across (Jean-Marie & Tickles, 2017). Women in male-dominated work environments often remain out of the loop from decisions and support from their male colleagues (Kellerman & Rhode, 2017). Tokenism can become the foundation for the creation of good old boy networks within the organization.

According to Chance (2022), tokenism stems from discrimination in the workplace and emerges when organizations call for diversity and inclusion by including a limited number of minorities to give an appearance of equality, but there is not a genuine feeling of belonging and equal access to resources. She explained how tokenism can lead to feelings of isolation, loneliness, and alienation, and influences the hiring practices of HEI and is a factor on how good ol boy networks are built (Chance, 2022). Being the token gender also provides women with a lack of access to professional mentoring (Longman & Anderson, 2016). Mentoring has been identified as a key resource in preparing women to advance to senior leadership roles at HEI

(Brown, 2005). Ballenger (2010) discussed that it is difficult for women to rise to senior leadership positions without having an advocate who is already in a leadership position. In organizations where senior leadership roles are dominated by men, women are excluded from these connections (Ballenger, 2010).

In male-dominated organizations, women's entry into leadership roles can be particularly challenging due to feelings of isolation, especially when they are the sole representatives of their gender and experience discomfort or exclusion in certain situations (Chance, 2022; Drury, 2010; Jean-Marie & Tickles, 2017). Being a woman leader was described by Davidson (2018) as a distinct experience that sometimes sets women apart from the organizational culture and narrows their influence. Being the only woman leader also results in a lack of opportunities for mentorship for themselves and others (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016). The lack of a critical mass of women leaders in senior roles at HEI limits the possibilities of advancement and mentorship (Caton, 2007; Hannum et al., 2015). Societal and organizational barriers are not the only barriers women face when advancing in their careers. Women also face personal-level barriers, often bearing an additional burden of responsibility that exceeds what is typically expected of their male counterparts (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016). The following section outlines research into the category of internal barriers.

Internal Barriers

The third group of barriers identified by Diehl and Dzubinski (2016) is known as internal, individual, or micro-level gender-based leadership barriers. According to Diehl and Dzubinski (2016), internal barriers "involve the woman herself, placing an extra burden of responsibility on her shoulder beyond that normally required of male leaders" (p. 191). They identified five barriers in this group: "communication style constraints, conscious unconsciousness,

personalizing, psychological glass ceiling, and work-life conflict" (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016, p. 192). Dahlvig and Longman (2020) expressed that internal barriers provide a better understanding of the inner forces that often prevent women from considering senior leadership roles.

Becoming a leader in any organization takes more than being promoted to a leadership role, learning a new skill, or adapting one's behavior to fit the organization's culture, it also requires an identity shift by internalizing a leadership identity (Ibarra et al., 2013). This step is important to the process of leader development, as when advancing in the ranks of leadership within an organization, there is an increase in viewing leadership through the lens of one's identity and how one sees oneself as a leader (Day & Harrison, 2007). Seeing one as a leader is related to the barrier of the psychological glass ceiling, which Diehl and Dzubinski (2016) defined as the "unwillingness to appear assertive [and] undervaluation of one's own abilities" (p. 192).

Leader identity is related to Bandura (1997)'s theory of self-efficacy, which is concerned with our judgment of personal capabilities. Bandura (1997) stated that "how people behave can often be predicted by the beliefs they hold about their capabilities" (p. 15). Self-efficacy and having a leadership identity can be a barrier to women's advancement into leadership roles if women do not see themselves as leaders or think of the possibility of becoming leaders (Hannum et al., 2015). According to Dahlvig and Longman (2010), women viewing themselves as leaders is a defining moment in a woman's leadership journey. Supporting the importance of self-efficacy and identifying oneself as a leader, M. O'Connor (2018) found that a personal sense of empowerment and confidence such as "knowing oneself, strong personal values and sense of calling, and external confidence builders" (p. 203) are internal drivers that led to career

success. Women's identities as leaders in HEI have been shaped by societal and organizational barriers described previously, ultimately resulting in women not seeing themselves as leaders, and have influenced women's considerations about whether to move into leadership roles (Dahlvig & Longman, 2020; Ibarra et al., 2013). As Keohane (2014) stated, "women internalize stereotypes, which leads them to question their own abilities," reducing their confidence and willingness to lead.

Issues of self-efficacy and identity are associated with imposter syndrome, which occurs when "high-achieving individuals believe themselves inadequate for their own jobs and attribute their success to external causes" (Dahlvig, 2013, p. 100). A lack of confidence can hinder the leadership potential of women. "If leaders lack confidence, they won't be able to perform…and influence others" (BlackChen, 2015, p. 155). Imposter syndrome is a barrier to leadership aspirations more often felt by women than men (Longman & Anderson, 2016; Sandberg, 2015). "Despite being high achievers, even experts in their fields, women can't seem to shake the sense that it's only a matter of time until they're found out for who they really are, impostors with limited skills or abilities" (Sandberg, 2015, p. 28). Women internalize society's expectations of themselves, question their abilities and avoid putting themselves forward for promotion despite being qualified for higher roles (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016; Keohane, 2020). Though women bring competence to leadership roles, sometimes they lack the confidence to convey their leadership capacity (Dahlvig & Longman, 2020). A leader who lacks confidence cannot influence others in their organization (BlackChen, 2015).

Another internal barrier identified by Diehl and Dzubinski (2016) is conscious unconsciousness, which they defined as a "deliberate choice not to notice, be affected by, or challenge the role gender plays in the workplace" (p. 192). Ibarra et al. (2013) discussed this

concept explaining that most women are not aware of having been victims of gender discrimination in the workplace, and "many women have worked hard to take gender out of the equation – to simply be recognized for their skills and talents" (p. 63).

Among all barriers, Keohane (2020) believed the first and most fundamental barrier to women achieving top leadership in any field is that, in most societies, women still hold the primary responsibility for childcare and home duties. Work-life conflict reflects the "challenges [of] balancing professional responsibility with personal or family responsibilities" (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016, p. 192). Work-family balance and the array of pressures on women related to motherhood and balancing their careers and family lives is a common barrier experienced by women interviewed in the literature about their professional experiences (Dahlvig, 2013; Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016; Drury, 2010; Kellerman & Rhode, 2014; Kellerman & Rhode, 2017; Longman & Anderson, 2016; Mason & Goulden, 2002b; Sandberg, 2015). The influence of motherhood in women's careers has been studied since at least the beginning of the 21st century when Mason and Goulden (2002b) asked the question, "Do babies matter?" In their research, they studied family formation and its effects on the career lives of both women and men academics from the time they receive their doctorate until 20 years later and concluded that, yes, babies do matter (Mason & Goulden, 2002b).

Women are surrounded by headlines and stories warning them that they can't be committed to both their families and their careers (Sandberg, 2015). Women are expected to balance personal and family obligations with their work responsibilities, and their careers are often interrupted for pregnancies, childcare, or taking care of their partners or older family members (Hill et al., 2019; Melidona et al., 2023). Women in HEI are also stereotyped as being more "family-oriented" (BlackChen, 2015, p. 154) and more willing to take breaks in their

careers to care for their families. At the same time, few organizations have family-friendly work policies such as affordable childcare, or flexible work schedules (Keohane, 2020). The expectations of those in senior administrative leadership roles are all-consuming and greatly incompatible with raising children and taking care of others.

The issue is not only childbirth, but the continuing childbearing responsibilities that take much of women's time away from work, and the fear that interrupting their careers to have children may have consequences for women's professional development and career goals (BlackChen, 2015). Despite men's increasing assumptions of family responsibilities, women continue to assume a disproportionate burden in the home and often interrupt their careers in favor of their home lives (Kellerman & Rhode, 2017). Women have traditionally carried the burden of childcare and resisted positions that involved working late or frequently traveling (Ferris & Waldron, 2022). This is reflected in the lack of workplace flexibility as women attend to meet professional demands (Drury, 2010). Women are expected to maintain a home, succeed in their role as mothers and/or wives, and, at the same time, take on every project, and volunteer on every committee to succeed (Montas-Hunter, 2012). Long hours and demanding schedules are incompatible with parenting commitments (Dahlvig, 2013). Any serious efforts to expand women's leadership opportunities require a commitment to address work/family conflicts that stand in the way of advancement (Kellerman & Rhode, 2017). Wolfe (2022) pointed out that the literature has found that working women in HEI have mixed feelings about being able to manage the work and mother roles successfully, especially in a campus culture that provides limited leave policies, and a lack of childcare centers. Women currently in senior leadership positions often "make decisions that took into account their family needs. They assumed administrative roles when their children were grown and even when their husbands were retired" (Hill et al.,

2019, p. 191). This has led to women reaching senior administrative and Presidency roles at HEI later in life, as Melidona et al. (2023) found i the most recent survey on American College Presidents. In that report, Melidona et al. (2023) highlighted the need for institutions to support women through their work-life balance and develop formal and informal communities for women leaders where they can share experiences and find support among other women in leadership roles who may also be struggling. The need for organizations to adopt workplace policies that support women balancing their personal and professional lives is a consistent topic in the literature.

There is an assumed expectation in HEI about a commitment to the job, working long hours, and always being available, and those factors are correlated with productivity and opportunities for promotion. These expectations affect a working parent's ability to balance their responsibilities and can be a factor affecting the choice of applying for senior leadership positions.

As outlined in the previous sections, there is extensive research studying barriers at different levels that prevent women from advancing to leadership positions. The following section outlines research describing the influence of internal barriers and other factors on the career aspirations of women in HEI.

Career Aspirations of Women

The literature describing the career aspirations of women is tightly related to the research describing the obstacles and barriers women face to advance in their careers (Lyness & Grotto, 2018). "Women's careers resemble a labyrinth rather than the traditional ladder acknowledged and rewarded" (Ford, 2016, p. 500). Women who aspire to leadership roles face multilevel societal, organizational, and personal barriers that reflect women's difficulties in reaching senior

leadership administrative roles (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016; Lyness & Grotto, 2018). It is the combination of the barriers women face and women lived experiences that result in women having fewer aspirations to become leaders, especially those working in male-dominated organizations (Arvey et al., 2007; Lyness & Grotto, 2018). The combination of gender stereotypes, male organizational cultures, and lack of self-efficacy cause women to internalize perceptions that men make better leaders, and those perceptions lessen women's leadership aspirations and development (Lyness & Grotto, 2018). Women also experience a lack of formal support and mentoring, encouragement, training, and visibility, resulting in their careers advancing at a slower pace than that of men (Bornstein, 2008). In those environments, internal barriers are key factors to women's career aspirations.

Self-efficacy, for example, was found to be an influential internal factor for women aspiring to leadership positions, as the higher a woman's self-efficacy, the greater the chance she is to aspire to a leadership role (Singer, 1991). As mentioned previously, among all internal barriers, it is the role of work-life conflict and family relationships, however, that has been identified as having the largest influence on the career path and aspirations of women in HEI (Hill et al., 2019; Kuk & Donovan, 2004; Marshall, 2009; Wheat, 2012). Wheat (2012) study contributed to the research by discussing how family relationships influence women's career aspirations. Most women in her study made conscious decisions to hold advancing in their careers until their children were older, or their partners had retired (Wheat, 2012). She discussed women's career aspirations were influenced by the choice to not relocate their families to seek senior leadership roles at other institutions to avoid uprooting their children or impacting their spouse's/partners' careers (Lepkowski, 2009; Marshall, 2009; Wheat, 2012). Her findings were similar to earlier research by Kuk and Donovan (2004), who found that women in senior

administrative roles didn't plan to remain in their current roles and did not aspire to higher levels within the administrative ranks because of the perceived cost to their personal lives. Women viewed those roles as all-consuming, leaving no time or energy for other interests in their lives (Kuk & Donovan, 2004). Recent research by Hill et al. (2019) summarized the many personal factors that have influenced career aspirations such as a work-life balance, the influence of family relationships, such as a women's marital status and the role of male spouse in women's career paths, the influence of age and stage of life, or the influence of childcaring responsibilities on women's ability to relocate for a job to assume a higher-level position at another institutions. Their research supports other scholars' findings that women defer making career advancement to prioritize their families. The role of a senior leader at a HEI is an all-consuming role that can be incompatible or difficult to accomplish while raising children or caring for other family members.

As women's careers are often interrupted by family, spousal/partner, and other family responsibilities, women are slower to reach top-rank leadership positions in HEI (Bornstein, 2008; Hill et al., 2019). As discussed earlier, Wessel and Keim (1994) and Birnbaum and Umbach (2001) found that the most common career path to top-ranked leadership roles at HEI was the academic path, characterized by a faculty appointment followed by a series of administrative positions of increased responsibilities. Authors have also found that women are less likely than men to be promoted to full professor, which is the most common path to reach senior leadership roles in HEI (Birnbaum & Umbach, 2001; Pasquerella & Clauss-Ehlers, 2017). The lack of leadership opportunities for women in the early stages of their careers contributes to the sticky floor, which Harlan and White Berheide (1994) described as keeping women in lower-paying jobs within the institutions that provide limited possibilities of moving upward in the

ranks for the administration. The lack of female role models in top-ranked positions intensifies the problem, preventing women from starting the path to senior leadership positions (Pasquerella & Clauss-Ehlers, 2017). Marshall (2009) indicated the importance of understanding the complexities of how many women administrators manage work, family, and other roles as the number of women working in the administration of HEI continues to increase. This remains relevant, as Melidona et al. (2023) indicated that over 50% of current university presidents in the U.S. will likely retire in the next five years, opening the door for developing new leaders, and presenting an opportunity for women to advance into these roles that have been traditionally occupied by men (Marshall, 2009).

Another factor that affects women's career aspirations to senior leadership roles is that many women don't begin their career aspiring to such roles, and there is a lack of career planning to reach those roles (Cejda, 2008; Dahlvig & Longman, 2010; Lepkowski, 2009; Pasquerella & Clauss-Ehlers, 2017). Lepkowski (2009) identified literature addressing the possibility that women have lower career aspirations than men in HEI. One of those studies is Shultz and Easter (1997)'s survey of 170 faculty members at public HEI in the eastern U.S., which indicated that more women aspired to remain in middle-management administrative positions than men. Later research by Cejda (2008) agreed with those findings. Cejda (2008) conducted a phenomenological study to explore the challenges and experiences of women in the role of Chief Academic Officers in Community Colleges in the U.S. His findings indicated that women with successful career paths in HEI at the top of senior leadership administrative roles often don't start their careers aspiring to hold those positions, but the personal experiences throughout their careers, professional development opportunities available to them, and the networking and mentors helped them along the way were key themes to women's career

aspirations (Cejda, 2008; Lepkowski, 2009). He found a lack of planning and aspiration for women to hold senior administrative leadership roles (Cejda, 2008). Hill and Wheat (2017)'s findings were similar, stating that, not only did women not begin their careers with aspirations to reach senior leadership roles, but their lack of planning also resulted in women missing experiences in career mentorship to help them reach senior leadership roles.

Women who started their careers in HEI in the faculty rank linked their lack of planning in the early stages of their careers to the enjoyment they found in teaching and the research aspects of their jobs (Cozza & Hu, 2022; Hill & Wheat, 2017). Women enjoy the academic focus of their faculty role and are disinterested by the high demands and responsibilities to move on to administrative positions. This lack of women already serving in senior leadership roles who can act as role models for women in their "early careers may help explain why many of the participants [in the Hill and Wheat study] did not aspire to university leadership [at] an earlier point in their career paths" (Hill & Wheat, 2017, p. 2101). The findings from Cejda (2008) and Hill and Wheat (2017) begs the question of why women don't start their careers with the goal of advancing to leadership positions.

Pasquerella and Clauss-Ehlers (2017) also argued that, to aspire to leadership positions, women are held to different standards than men and must operate within a series of expected behaviors and gender biases to be effective in male-dominated organizations. Mason (2009) called it the snow-woman effect, "an accumulation of small and large incidents that marginalize female administrators…and layers of missed opportunity[ies], family obligations, and small and large slights built up over the years, slowing their career progress compared to men" (p. 9). This indicates that some women in HEI begin their careers with no aspirations to senior leadership roles, and their lived experiences fail to encourage them to pursue such opportunities (Jones-

Goodwin, 2020). To reduce the gender gap, organizations must cultivate leadership aspirations and develop organizational practices that encourage women to reach for leadership positions (Lyness & Grotto, 2018). Ford (2016) argued that women's advancement in HEI will require a significant structural change to the traditional career ladder to one where the realities of our current world where women and men are working full-time, gendered cultures are removed, and both men and women have the same opportunities for timely promotions in their careers. The need for HEI to audit their organizational practices and the organization's climate is consistent across the literature discussing women in HEI.

The literature described so far has described the barriers and how those barriers have influenced women's career aspirations in HEI. However, women have been able to advance in their careers and be successful professionally. The following section will examine literature describing what motivates women leaders to overcome barriers described previously to rise to positions of authority and rise to senior administrative leadership roles at their institutions.

Motivations for Women to Lead

Women's lived experiences in HEI have influenced their career aspirations to senior leadership roles, along with their motivations to pursue those roles despite the barriers they encounter along the way (Cejda, 2008). Women are motivated to seek leadership roles for relationship-building reasons, and not self-promoting reasons like salary, power, and status, and out of a desire to make a difference (Madsen & Longman, 2020).

Dahlvig and Longman (2010) contributed to the literature on what motivates women to pursue leadership roles by identifying defining moments and themes during women's leadership journeys that have motivated them to achieve success. Dahlvig and Longman (2010) studied 17 women senior administrators working at a Christian HEI and described three themes. The first

theme referenced the power and influence one person had in their lives that increased their confidence in their careers. Women interviewed by Dahlvig and Longman (2010) expressed "having the courage to take on more significant campus responsibilities because a senior administrator had specifically challenged and encouraged them" (Dahlvig & Longman, 2010, p. 248). Hannum et al. (2015) and M. O'Connor (2018) supported those findings as their studies reported that formal development experiences, encouragement and support, and having a role model are factors that have supported women in their path to leadership roles. Those already in senior leadership roles should understand the significance one moment can have on one's career and provide encouragement for others (Dahlvig & Longman, 2010).

Having the support of one person who encouraged them to pursue leadership roles emphasizes the importance of mentoring as a key resource in preparing women to advance to senior leadership roles at HEI (Ballenger, 2010; Brown, 2005). Women's resilience is supported by building a network of advocates, mentors, and a professional support system (Chance, 2022; M. O'Connor, 2018). Mentoring networks also provide women with supportive environments and tools to help them navigate the gender dynamics of the organization (Caton, 2007; Dahlvig, 2013; Davidson, 2018; Jean-Marie & Tickles, 2017; Longman & Lafreniere, 2012; M. O'Connor, 2018; Montas-Hunter, 2012). Having a person in their lives from whom women can learn, as well as the networking relationship that occurs during leadership programs has been identified as important experiences for women (Longman & Lafreniere, 2012). Drury (2010) found that support from groups and individuals helps remove barriers as it increases the change of support and trust from coworkers, increases recognition in the workplace, reduces feelings of isolation, and overall increases trust and confidence in one's abilities. Talking to and observing women carrying their senior leadership responsibilities has inspired other women to do the same

(Montas-Hunter, 2012). Dahlvig and Longman (2020) discussed that social validation can increase leadership confidence, leading to an increased motivation to reach for senior leadership roles. Women in senior leadership roles emphasize the power of relationships in the leadership journey (Ferris & Waldron, 2022; Madsen & Longman, 2020).

Reframing the idea of what an effective leadership style is, building a leadership identity, and relating the transformational qualities of a leader with their own natural tendencies is the second theme identified by Dahlvig and Longman (2010) that motivated and encouraged the women they interviewed to pursue senior leadership roles. Traditional assumptions of leadership have led to models of transformational leadership evolving in the literature (Bass et al., 2003; Bass et al., 1990; Eagly et al., 2003; Kouzes & Posner, 2007). Eagly et al. (2003) described transformational leaders as having qualities that motivate respect from followers, communicate the values, purpose, and importance of the organization's mission, show optimism about accomplishing such mission, encourage new perspectives to solve problems and complete tasks, and focus on mentoring and developing followers. Female behaviors, such as being collaborative and nurturing, have become more appropriate for manager roles than the stereotypical male predilections for power and control (Dahlvig, 2013). Viewing leadership differently from the traditional hierarchical definitions has empowered women to succeed in leadership roles in HEI (Dahlvig & Longman, 2010; Dahlvig & Longman, 2020). Madsen and Longman (2020) explained the need to reframe the need to pay more attention to the literation that describes process of building a leader identity as opposed to just leadership development. Ibarra et al. (2013) reiterated this process:

> People become leaders by internalizing a leadership identity and developing a sense of purpose. Internalizing a sense of oneself as a leader is an iterative process. A person

> asserts leadership by taking purposeful actions such as convening a meeting to revive a dormant project. Others affirm or resist the action, thus encouraging or discouraging subsequent assertions. These interactions inform the person's sense of self as a leader and communicate how others view his or her fitness for the role (p. 62).

Eagly (2005) discussed the relationship between the experiences of women senior administrative leaders in HEI and reframing traditional concepts of leadership to the concept of authentic leadership. Luthans and Avolio (2003) suggested the concept of authentic leadership as a combination of positive psychology, transformational and ethical leadership, and defined an authentic leader as one who is "confident, hopeful, optimistic, resilient, transparent, moral/ethical, future-oriented, and gives priority to developing associates to be leaders" (Luthans & Avolio, 2003, p. 243). Eagly (2005) found authentic leadership is embraced by women, as women often find it difficult to navigate institutional barriers in a way that they consider to be true to their values. Gardiner and Gardiner (2014) corroborated Eagly (2005) findings and concluded women in senior leadership positions in HEI find that the goal of leading authentically is a challenge, though the women in their study highlighted the importance of building relationships with their followers and focusing on the greater good of the institution.

The last theme identified by Dahlvig and Longman (2010) derived from women feeling compelled to step into a leadership role as a sense of standing up for something and the responsibility to address unfairness in the workplace. Ibarra et al. (2013) also found that women assume leadership roles by internalizing the identity of a leader, fulfilling personal goals that are important to them, and developing a sense of purpose. Focusing on purpose and behaving in a way that advances what they stand for, motivates women to consider who they want to be, what they want their careers to look like, and what they need to do to achieve their goals (Diehl, 2014;

Ibarra et al., 2013). Keohane (2014) findings confirmed Ibarra et al. (2013), as the women in her study discussed that women seek leadership roles to make a difference for a cause that is important to them, and their motivations for leadership include relational responsibility to care for followers, a need to follow one's calling, and the presence of a mentor who encouraged them to reach their professional potential. Gardner et al. (2011) added the motivation to lead followed a concern for gender and social justice. Chance (2022) concluded that women aren't motivated to leadership roles by titles, but by fulfilling and calling. The research indicates that women are motivated by intrinsic factors to become leaders by fulfilling their personal satisfaction and enjoyment, rather than extrinsic factors like power, or rewards.

Diehl (2014), for example, referred to having a sense of one's purpose as having a "meaningful life" (p. 145) and influencing women's abilities to develop resilience to navigate through adversities in their careers. This sense of having a meaningful life, helping others, and taking advantage of opportunities to grow professionally were described as motivations to continue in their leadership paths (Diehl, 2014). M. O'Connor (2018) also found internal drivers as motivators that encouraged women to advance to leadership roles. In her study, she interviewed 12 women in leadership positions at a Christian HEI to understand the process they used to develop their leadership vision. She found internal drivers fueled by self-confidence, knowing oneself, having strong values and a sense of purpose, and external confidence builders that empowered them as key motivators (M. O'Connor, 2018). Chance (2022) also found that internal drivers such as developing and maintaining the resilience to navigate difficult lived experiences, perseverance, and self-confidence have helped women in HEI to improve their professional and personal growth (Chance, 2022). According to Chance (2022), "women have been motivated to be best from their early academics up through their career development" (p.

63). Women are fueled by adversity and resilience to achieve their goals, overcome challenges, and develop personally and professionally.

Theoretical Framework: Self-Determination Theory

Motivation is a core component of what drives human performance and why people decide to do something (Cerasoli et al., 2014). Motivation theories are built under a series of assumptions looking at the factors that influence humans into action (Deci & Ryan, 1985). These theories range from those that view humans as passive, where their behaviors are pushed around by the interaction of psychological drives and environmental stimuli and theories that view humans as active initiators of their own actions driven by intrinsic needs that provide them with the energy needed to act (Deci & Ryan, 1985). People are driven to act by different factors, either because they value an activity, a sense of personal commitment, or interest, or because of strong external forces (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Pinder and Dynan (2008) provided a definition that explains the framework of work motivation as:

> Work motivation is a set of energetic forces that originates both within as well as beyond an individual's being, so to initiate work-related behavior, and to determine its form, direction, intensity, and duration. (p. 11)

According to this definition, motivation is a force of energy that generates action by employees, and that action is guided by both external or internal forces which are controlling how employees will attempt to reach those actions, how hard they'll work for it, and long they'll do it (Meyer et al., 2004; PHAM et al., 2021). Motivational factors are either intrinsic or extrinsic, where extrinsic factors are controlled by either loss or gain (incentives or punishments), while intrinsic factors are controlled by one's enjoyment and personal satisfaction, rather than external rewards (Cerasoli et al., 2014). Intrinsic motivators are derived by one's

interest and enjoyment in doing a particular activity, while extrinsic motivators involve performing an activity to obtain a separate outcome outside of internal satisfaction, such as receiving an award from others (PHAM et al., 2021; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Self-determination theory (SDT) is one motivation theory that provides a framework to understand how leaders in HEI experience both personal and professional success, and how they're motivated by intrinsic and extrinsic factors to reach that success (Nicklin & Segool, 2022). SDT is a valuable approach to understanding how women leaders can experience both professional and personal success by looking at leaders from a perspective that integrates the whole person.

SDT originated by Deci and Ryan (1985)'s research into intrinsic motivators. The theory looked at the degree to which a person's behavior was self-motivated and self-determined, and that self-motivation and self-determination were guided mostly by intrinsic rather than extrinsic factors (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In later research, Deci and Ryan (2008) defined autonomous motivation as being comprised of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivators where people have related the value of performing an activity with their sense of self. In contrast, Deci and Ryan (2008) defined controlled motivation as being controlled by external pressures to think, feel, or behave in specific ways that lead to either punishment or rewards from others. People who are driven by autonomous motivation, feel more independent and have a greater level of satisfaction and persist in their behavior (PHAM et al., 2021).

SDT assumes that everyone has three psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and those needs vary to the extent to which their environment supports or hinders their development (Deci & Ryan, 2000). SDT explains that humans look for learning, growth, social integration, and incorporating new experiences into one's sense of self, and are inherently

motivated by these goals, rather than externally controlled (Ryan, 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2000). At the same time, when these basic needs are not met, people tend to experience frustration, less satisfaction, and success, and it negatively impacts their well-being and performance (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan, 2017).

Ryan and Deci (2000) referred to the need for autonomy as the psychological need to experience self-determination by following one's behavior as one's own as opposed to being controlled by external forces. Slemp et al. (2018) found that, when managers support autonomy in the workplace, well-being and a positive work environment increase, it fosters a climate where individuals are intrinsically motivated to perform. In contrast, when leaders control their employees through a strict leadership style, it results in lower self-determination to perform. As mentioned previously, women who have succeeded in HEI mentioned following one's calling as one mechanism that motivates them to seek senior leadership roles (Dahlvig & Longman, 2010; Ibarra et al., 2013). Transformational leadership, which is associated with women's preferred style of leadership (Cozza, 2022; Eagly et al., 2003), provides a less strict style of leadership that increases women's self-determination. When women are self-motivated in their work environments, they can thrive.

The need for competence refers to the psychological need to feel effective in one's environment and to be able to show and improve one's abilities (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The need for competence is related to the internal barrier of balancing work and family as described by the literature (Hill et al., 2019; Keohane, 2014), as expressing one's abilities and striving to master the ongoing challenge of balancing work, and family and being a leader is a fundamental need (Nicklin & Segool, 2022).

The last need, the need for relatedness, refers to a human's desire to be valued, respected by others, and to have meaningful relationships (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Women's leadership styles are traditionally associated with being relationship-based, and finding mentorship and advocates in the workplace are seen as key strategies for women to thrive in HEI (Nicklin & Segool, 2022).

Northouse (2007) identified three common traits in women who have reached senior leadership roles: intelligence, self-confidence, sociability, integrity, and determination. According to him, "determination is the desire to get the job done and includes characteristics such as initiative, persistence, dominance and drive" Northouse (2007, p. 20). For studying women leaders in HEI, Self-determination theory's concepts relate to women's perception of self-efficacy, authenticity, and leading for 'the good of the organization' or to help others, and women's needs to relate to others through networking and mentoring. When these needs are met, women are more likely to persist, take ownership of their careers, and feel empowered to be more involved in their institution's leadership. SDT has been studied as it relates to what guides people to achieve their long-term goals, and their intrinsic and extrinsic aspirations (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Intrinsic aspirations include life goals such as personal development, while extrinsic aspirations include goals such as wealth or fame (Deci & Ryan, 2008). As mentioned previously, women are motivated to seek leadership roles for reasons of building relationships, which is an intrinsic factor, as opposed to self-promoting, or extrinsic reasons like salary power, and status (Madsen & Longman, 2020). This study applies SDT to examine whether women in senior leadership roles at southeastern U.S. institutions pursue success primarily through intrinsic or extrinsic motivators.

Conclusion

This review of the literature has provided an analysis of the existing research on gender inequality at HEI, a background on the pipeline myth, a summary of the macro, meso, and micro barriers women face in their leadership journey, the career aspirations for women and what motivates women to lead. The literature review described mostly qualitative studies focusing on understanding relating to women administrators' career paths, leadership aspirations, and motivating factors to reach senior leadership roles. The review also showed limited existing literature on how motivation theories can be used as a framework to understand the motivations of women to apply or not apply to senior administrative leadership roles, and how those motivations may guide women's career aspirations.

CHAPTER THREE
METHODS

In Chapter 2, I presented literature discussing the gender inequality in senior leadership roles at HEI, a background on the pipeline myth, a summary of the barriers women face in their leadership journey, as well as a discussion on career aspirations and what motivates women to lead. Guided by the research purpose of this study, I explored how the lived experiences of women leaders in HEI have shaped the career aspirations and motivations of women to pursue senior administrative roles. I begin this chapter with a discussion on the research design, provide a description of the qualitative approach used. This chapter includes a methodology section addressing data sampling, data collection, data analysis and data quality approaches. Finally, a discussion on ethical considerations and a reflexivity statement addressing the researcher's positionality and biases is included.

Research Design and Rationale

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do women in senior leadership roles at higher education institutions describe the experiences that motivated their careers?
2. How did the lived experiences of women senior leaders in higher education institutions influence their career aspirations and motivations to apply for senior university administrative roles?
3. How do women in senior leadership roles at higher education institutions describe the barriers and supports they experienced in advancing their careers?

The methodology of this study followed a basic qualitative research design to explore women's career paths, leadership aspirations, and decisions regarding senior leadership roles in

higher education. In a basic qualitative research study, the researcher is simply not "declaring a particular type of qualitative study, such as a phenomenological, grounded theory, narrative analysis or ethnographic study" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 23). Unlike more narrowly defined qualitative approaches such as phenomenology, grounded theory, or ethnography, a basic qualitative study is concerned with understanding how individuals make sense of their experiences, construct meaning, and interpret the world around them (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This approach is well suited for research questions that focus on "how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 24). Since the focus is not on developing theory, examining a specific cultural group, or capturing life histories, rather on uncovering participants' perspectives and the meanings they assign to their career experiences, the basic qualitative design is most appropriate.

The choice of a qualitative design is further supported by Merriam and Tisdell (2015)'s assertion that "qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (p. 6). In qualitative research, the goal was to explore how individuals construct meaning from their world and the experiences they encounter (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Qualitative research is useful for examining in depth the experiences of a particular population relative to a phenomenon of interest (Fetters, 2019). This work follows a constructivist approach, which recognizes that "there are multiple realities" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 35) and reality is constructed by the experiences of different individuals (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Since this study uncovers the motivations, barriers, and decision-making processes of women serving in

senior leadership roles, qualitative methods allow for a depth of exploration of each woman's unique experience in HEI not achievable with quantitative measures.

As mentioned previously, Alexander (2023) found in her dissertation's systematic review that qualitative research design is commonly used by scholars addressing the topic of the lack of women in senior administrative roles in public, four-year HEI in the U.S. in the 21st century. One purpose of this study was to contribute to the body of literature on the factors that influence the career paths and leadership aspirations of women and explore why women are choosing to seek leadership roles at public, four-year, land-grant HEI in the Southeastern U.S. A qualitative approach allows for an in-depth exploration of women's perspectives and experiences, providing rich insights into the meanings they ascribe to their career and leadership decisions. Qualitative design supports the goal of amplifying participants' voices. Prior research has noted the importance of capturing the lived experiences of women as a group who has traditionally not had access to leadership roles (Eagly, 2005). This qualitative design provides a framework through which the researcher can investigate not only whether women are pursuing leadership roles at public, four-year, land-grant institutions in the Southeastern U.S., but also how they interpret their motivations, barriers, and aspirations in the process.

Merriam and Tisdell (2015) identified four defining characteristics that shape the nature of qualitative research. First, qualitative research is focused on achieving an in-depth understanding of how individuals make sense of their lives. Qualitative research "locates the observer in the world" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 4). Qualitative researchers are informed by a worldview notion that reality is constructed from human experiences and their interactions with others (Fetters, 2019). This involves examining the processes through which meaning is constructed and describing how people interpret their experiences within contexts. Such

emphasis underscores the subjective nature of knowledge and the importance of capturing multiple perspectives (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

In qualitative research, "the researcher serves as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 16). Unlike standardized instruments, the researcher's ability to interact directly with participants allows for adaptability, responsiveness, and a sensitivity to nuance and context (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This active engagement highlights the interpretive role of the researcher, while also requiring reflexivity to account for potential biases that may influence findings. Denzin and Lincoln (2008) described the quality researcher as a "bricoleur that produces a bricolage, that is, a pieced together set of representations that are fitted to the specifics of a complex situation" (p. 11). This perspective highlights the researcher has in shaping knowledge through contextually informed and reflexive interpretation in ways that honors the participant's lived experiences, and maintaining ethical responsibilities.

Qualitative research is also inductive in nature (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), does not follow a particular theory or have a distinctive method or practice (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Rather than beginning with predetermined hypotheses, qualitative studies allow concepts, patterns, and themes to emerge from the data itself. Through this inductive process, theory is grounded in participants' perspectives and experiences, ensuring that findings remain closely tied to lived realities (Charmaz, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Agee (2009) explained many qualitative researchers use a question as the beginning point for their research, and that is followed by a reflective process involved in asking questions that focuses on the *why* and *how* of human interactions. It is that reflective process that underlines the strength of the qualitative

research approach. The ongoing process of questioning is an integral part of understanding how our lives and perspectives unfold.

Finally, qualitative research produces richly descriptive findings. These descriptions go beyond surface-level reporting and often include detailed narratives, thick description, and direct participant quotations that illuminate the complexity of the phenomenon under study (Geertz, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). By highlighting the participants' voices, qualitative research highlights not only what people experience but also how they assign meaning to those experiences. In addition, qualitative research involves the use of a variety of materials such as case studies, personal experiences, introspection, interviews, and others (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008).

Together, these elements demonstrate why qualitative research is well suited to this study, and will allow me to capture the depth of human experience in a way that would be difficult to accomplish through other research designs. The focus on meaning-making, the central role of the researcher, the inductive approach, and the descriptive outcomes align with the study's purpose of exploring women's career paths and leadership aspirations. This approach provides the depth and context needed to understand whether women at public, R1, four-year, land-grant institutions in the Southeastern U.S. are choosing to pursue senior leadership roles, and how they interpret the motivations and barriers they encounter along these paths.

The purpose of this study was to explore the career aspirations, motivations, and decision-making processes of women in senior leadership roles at public, R1, four-year, land-grant institutions in the Southeastern U.S. The study used semi-structured interview protocol outlined in Appendix D to generate rich, descriptive data from the participant's personal stories and context. In a semi-structure interview, questions are flexibly worded or there is a mix of

structured questions aimed at gathering specific information from the participants, and flexible questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Semi-structured interviews allow for flexibility, enabling participants to share insights in their own words while providing the researcher with the opportunity to probe for deeper understanding (Creswell & Poth, 2016). These narratives provided insight into how women perceive their professional journeys, the barriers and supports they encounter, and the ways they interpret leadership opportunities. Data collection was followed by data analysis, which followed an inductive process in which patterns and themes are drawn from the data rather than imposed by a preexisting framework (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The approach is shown in Figure 1. Findings will be reported in Chapter 4.

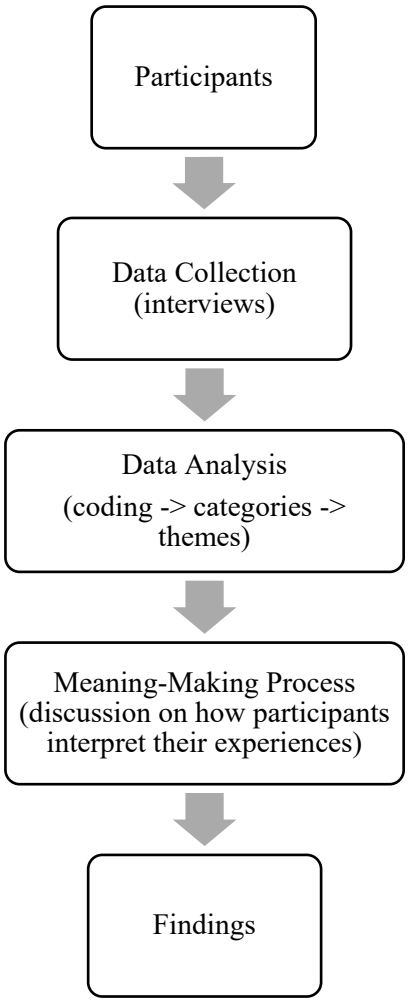


Figure 1

Basic Qualitative Research Process Diagram

Site and Participants

Research Site

Six R1, land-grant, public institutions in the Southeast U.S. are the sites for this study. For purposes of this study, I used the U.S. Geological Survey's definition of the Southeast region of the U.S., which includes the states of Alabama, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, Puerto Rico, South Carolina, and Tennessee (USGS, 2019). Public universities were chosen because of the transparency required in providing public information on their organizational structures,

allowing me to identify the title, name, gender, and contact information for participants in this study.

Research One (R1) institution are doctoral institutions that awarded at least 50 research/scholarship doctoral degrees in 2025 and reported at least $50 million in total research expenditures in FY23 (Carnegie, 2021). A land-grant institution has been designated by its state legislature or Congress to receive the benefits of the Morrill Acts of 1862, 1890, and 1994. The original mission of land-grant institutions was to teach agriculture, military tactics, and the mechanical arts, as well as classical studies. There is one land-grant institution in every state and territory of the U.S. (Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities, 2022). Campus profiles of the institutions in this study are detailed in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Campus Profile During the 2024-2025 Academic Year

Campus	Total Faculty and Staff	% Male Employees	% Female Employees
University of the West	9,207	46	54
University of the Sky	6,639	46	54
University of the East	10,291	47	53
University of the North	10,896	48	52
University of the South	33,774	45	55
University of Oz	11,968	58	42

Participants

Participants in this study included women holding senior leadership roles in administrative departments working full-time at the six institutions noted in the previous section. Administrative departments are those whose role and responsibility is to manage and oversee institutional operations (Bowles, 2022). The names of the positions, divisions, and departments were available on each institution's website and their organizational chart. In general, administrative departments include administration and finances, academic affairs, advancement,

communications and marketing, enrollment management/admissions, and student services and campus life (Bowles, 2022).

To better understand the current state of women in senior administrative leadership roles at public, R1, land-grant, public institutions in the southeastern U.S., I explored the websites of the institutions and administrative departments targeted in this study looking for organizational charts of the institution's senior leadership. During that exploration, I gathered a list of senior leaders who were women, their names, titles, and the departments where they worked. The purpose of this exercise was to identify the total number of women holding senior university administrative roles at the institutions in this study to establish the potential participant pool for recruitment via email. In addition, I aimed to identify the nomenclature each institution uses to classify the titles of senior leaders, as well as to understand the administrative units and departments that are part of each institution. As part of this exercise, I identified the following titles for senior leaders in administrative departments: President, Chancellor, Senior Vice President, Vice President, Associate Vice President, Assistant Vice President, Chief of 'X' (with 'X' being the name of a department), Vice Provost, Vice Chancellor, Senior Associate Vice Chancellor, Associate Vice Chancellor, Assistant Vice Chancellor, Associate Chief Information Officer, or Chief Information Officer. Women holding those titles at the six targeted institutions were the selection criteria for this study. During this exploration, I created a confidential spreadsheet accessible only to me of all candidates that met the criteria. I identified the total population of women in this study is N=98. Table 2 indicates the number of women in each role at the six targeted institutions.

Table 2

Study Participant's Profiles

Role at University	Total Number of Females in Role
President/Chancellor	1
Senior Vice President	3
Vice President	14
Associate Vice President	21
Assistant Vice President	20
Senior Associate Vice Chancellor	4
Vice Chancellor	7
Associate Vice Chancellor	10
Assistant Vice Chancellor	11
Chief Information Officer	1
Associate CIO	2
Chief of 'X' (with 'X' being the name of a department)	3
Vice Provost	1

The study followed a purposeful sampling approach. Participants were recruited via email, targeting the total population of women identified in senior administrative positions across the selected universities identified in Table 2. The initial recruitment communication explaining the study and inviting participation can be found in Appendix A. At the time of initial recruitment, an Institutional Research Board (IRB) approved consent form was emailed to all participants to sign electronically before data collection took place (Appendix C). Women were asked to sign the form before participating in the study.

A common question in qualitative research is determining the right number of participants to interview. Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommended sampling until the point of saturation is reached. "If the purpose is to maximize information, the sampling is terminated when no new information is forthcoming from new sampled units" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 202). Saturation in purposive sampling is the general rule in this type of sampling, and it occurs when adding more participants does not provide additional information to be used in the study

(Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). My goal for this study was to interview between 12-15 women. Fourteen women from five out of the six institutions volunteer to participate in this study, sent a signed consent letter, and scheduled one-on-one interviews. No women from the University of the Sky were recruited for this study. To maintain anonymity, women who agreed to be interviewed were assigned with a pseudonym to be used in this study. Pseudonyms were accessible only to me.

Data Collection

The data collection technique for this basic qualitative study comprised of semi-structured interviews conducted over Microsoft Teams, and lasting between 35 to 45 minutes. In semi-structured interviews, the interview is guided by a list of questions determined ahead of time, but there is also flexibility for the researcher to ask follow-up questions, as needed, to further explore the participant's responses (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The process of using previously prepared questions follows the basic elements of a semi-structured interview (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The interview protocol is available in Appendix D.

Permission was requested from my institution's IRB to perform the study, and data was not collected until the study was approved. The interview protocol included 11 open-ended questions (Appendix D). Questions one through 10 focused on the career aspirations, career trajectories, motivations, leadership philosophy, career opportunities, and perceived barriers and support throughout the participant's professional experience. The first question in the interview asked participants to describe their current senior leadership role and their path to reach that position. The interview then continued with asking participants to share any key experiences, people of turning points in their career that have influenced their decision to take on their senior leadership roles. Following question included, "What motivated you to pursue leadership in

higher education," sharing challenges faced through their leadership journey and how participants responded to those challenges, and describe "What aspects of your lived experience in higher education shaped your view of leadership or your readiness to lead". Question 11 was an open-ended closing question that provided space for participants to add insights that may address any of the three research questions, ensuring no key experience was missed. Interview consent forms approved by IRB (Appendix C) were shared with participants, electronically signed and returned to the researcher before the interview process began. During each interview, all the women were asked a series of predetermined questions, with follow-up questions, as needed, to further explore their responses. Participants were asked to consent to audio record the interview before the start of the recording session. Interviews were recorded using Microsoft Teams' inherent recording capabilities. Transcripts from the interviews were generated by the auto-captioning function of Microsoft Teams and saved to a One-Drive cloud-based storage drive. During the interview, participants were informed verbally that their name, their institutions, and their responses would remain confidential. Table 3 provides information on how interview questions relate to each research question.

Table 3

Research Questions Related to Interview Questions

	Research Question	Interview Question
1.	How do women in leadership roles at higher education institutions describe their experiences that motivated their careers?	Q1. Q2, Q4, Q5
2.	How did women lived experiences in higher education institutions influence their career aspirations and motivations to apply for senior university administrative roles?	Q2, Q3, Q6
3.	How do women in senior leadership roles at higher education institutions describe the barriers and supports they experienced in advancing their careers?	Q7, Q8, Q9, Q10

While I was conducting the interviews, I also maintained a personal reflection journal accessible only to me. I used this journal to document my personal thoughts, observations, insights, and other relevant information that could be relevant as I begin the data analysis.

Personal Reflection Journal and Codebook

During the data collection process, I kept a journal where I documented my observations about responses and participant behaviors or attitudes. The journal also served as a codebook that pairs real names with pseudonyms. These thoughts are incorporated into the analysis process.

Data Analysis

Interviews

Data analysis consists of the process of consolidating and interpreting the data collected during the interview process, making sense and interpreting the information provided by the participants with the goal of answering the research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The purpose of this process is to identify how the information gathered during the data collection answers the research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Following data collection, I exported each transcript created by Microsoft Teams to a Microsoft Word document (.doc) and edited the content for accuracy and grammatical errors. The word document was sent to each participant to ensure accuracy through member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The interviews were then analyzed using inductive and descriptive-focused coding, which refers to summarizing the participant's events, settings, behaviors or experiences in a few words or a short passage (Saldaña, 2016). The inductive process begins with small, detailed pieces of information that eventually come together on tentative groups of categories (Seidman, 2006). This format of data analysis involves a process of reading the data and allowing codes, categories, patterns, and themes to emerge (Vanover et al., 2021).

Transcripts gathered from interviews were analyzed and manually coded. Data was analyzed in two phases, once looking for patterns and themes that answered each research question, and once for themes that fit within the lens of the theoretical framework of this study. There were several steps in the qualitative analysis. Appendix E shows the code table used in this study. First, I read each interview transcript to understand the experiences described during the interviews highlighting significant words and statements related to the research question creating codes in the data. I used In Vivo coding by capturing the actual words of the participants that revealed thematic patterns in the data (Saldaña, 2016). The In Vivo process starts by reading each transcript multiple times to identify words, expressions, or short statements that appear conceptually significant to this study. Phrases were highlighted as codes. After completing In Vivo coding, I summarized the participant's statements using my own words to condense the data while retaining the original meaning of the participant's experience. Moving from In Vivo codes allowed me to create consistent language in the codes while remaining grounded in the original data.

In the next step, I examined the researcher-developed codes across all transcripts which then were grouped into categories, noting how many women mentioned the same categories. Categories are conceptual elements that span several similar codes in the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Categories are higher-level elements that encompassed multiple, conceptually related codes and helped organize the data into meaningful clusters. Codes that reflected similar ideas, experiences, or meanings were grouped together to form broader analytic categories. Finally, I grouped the categories into themes that represent the findings of this study. Themes are patterns of data that are clustered, or units of meaning (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), that capture the essence of what the data revealed to help explain the phenomenon under study (Merriam, 2002).

Themes were constructed by examining how categories related to one another and by identifying central concepts that explain patterns within the data. Theme development was an iterative process that involved revisiting the codes, and categories to ensure that the themes were firmly grounded in the data and accurately reflected participants' perspectives. NVivo software was used to collect, organize, and analyze the qualitative data gathered in this study.

The first research question explored how participants described the personal and professional experiences that motivated their careers. Interview data were analyzed for accounts of key moments, influential people, formative experiences, and specific motivators that shaped participants' career trajectories. The second research question examined how participants' lived experiences, including professional interactions, institutional culture, and personal identity, influenced their career aspirations and motivations to pursue senior leadership roles. Interview data were analyzed for codes capturing how participants' experiences within higher education contributed to their sense of readiness and drive to seek senior positions. The third research question focused on both the barriers (structural, cultural, or personal) and the support mechanisms that shaped participants' career advancement. Interview data were analyzed for examples of formal and informal support systems, as well as the systemic barriers participants faced throughout their careers.

Ethical Safeguards

Creswell and Poth (2016) discussed the importance of considering what ethical issues may occur during a study, planning on how to address those issues, and how ethical issues can occur at various stages in the process. According to Creswell and Poth (2016), ethical considerations are guided by considering three principles: "respect for persons, concern for welfare and justice" (Creswell & Poth, 2016, p. 54). Several types of ethical issues identified by

Creswell and Poth (2016) were described within the context of qualitative design. Additionally, Cain et al. (2019) identified four themes regarding ethics during the data analysis: "ethics defined by an IRB, data quality as a measure of ethics, ethics as defined by theory, and social justice-minded ethics" (Cain et al., 2019, p. 6).

To address respect for people, all participants will be described generically to reduce the possibility of identifying them. Participant's specific names and departments where they work will not be identified. Concern for welfare means protecting each participant's contribution, as well as ensuring participants will not be put at risk during the study, while concern for justice means that all participants will be treated fairly and equitably. Concern for welfare will be maintained by ensuring participants understand the research and purpose, maintaining data confidentiality using informed consents forms, and providing resources or support if participants experience harm.

I gathered approval from the university's IRB for the study, and informed consent form was provided to each participant before interviews began. Participants were free to withdraw from the study at any point during the process, in which case, recordings and transcriptions associated with those participants will be deleted.

As the study began, it was important to consider the participants' cultural, religious, or other differences that need to be respected throughout the study and ensure participation is voluntary. When analyzing data, I will report different perspectives as presented through the interview process and findings that may contradict my point of view. The reporting of the findings is honest, and I did not disclose information that may harm any participants.

Method of Verification

Lincoln and Guba (1985) initially addressed the need to rename the traditional concept of validity and reliability within quantitative research, into concepts appropriate for qualitative studies as, overall, qualitative researchers view the concept of validity as being unclear and ambiguous (Dellinger & Leech, 2007). Lincoln and Guba (1985) coined terms commonly used in qualitative researchers as credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, or trustworthiness, to address the question of validity in qualitative data. The basic question behind the concept of validity is "how can an inquirer, persuade his or her audiences (including self), that the findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to, worth tracking account of?" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 290).

Internal Validity

Within the context of validity in the paradigm of qualitative research, Merriam and Tisdell (2015) separated validity into two components, internal validity, and external validity. Internal validity asks the question of how research findings match reality, while external validity, or transferability, deals with whether the findings of a study can be generalized to other situations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Creswell and Clark (2017) stated the importance of using multiple data sources to establish internal validity through triangulation. Triangulation involves using different sources of data as a way of removing bias due to using a specific data collection method (Maxwell, 2012). In this study, detailed data was collected during the interviews recording Microsoft Teams interviews to transcribe the interviews using the exact words of the participants. I also maintained the anonymity of the participants by using pseudonyms. Trustworthiness was built by asking each participant to complete informed consent forms.

Overall, validity of the findings in this study was done through four different forms: 1) member checking by asking the participants of the interviews for feedback on whether the categories and themes derived from their responses are accurate, 2) providing rich descriptions in the narrative of the findings, and 3) external audit, which involves using peer review from someone else to review the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

External Validity

External validity, or transferability, deals with whether the findings of a study can be generalized to other situations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Given the small sample size, the findings of this study should not be assumed to be generalizable to individuals who may share similar identities or lived experiences as the participants. Additionally, the study's defined geographic boundaries further limit the applicability of the findings to those situated within the participants' specific regional contexts. External validity can be established by collecting rich data descriptions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). By offering thorough accounts of the research context, participant characteristics, setting, and the conditions under which the data were generated, researchers enable readers to determine the extent to which the findings may be applicable to other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

To support transferability, I provided rich and detailed descriptions of the study's context, participant's characteristics, and the institutional settings in which the participant's experiences were situated. This included outlining the professional backgrounds of participants, the organizational roles they hold, and the characteristics of their higher education environments. The findings presented in Chapter 4 incorporates thick description by using quotes and narrative details from the interviews that captured the complexity and nuance of participants lived experiences.

Dependability

Lincoln and Guba (1985) defined dependability as the extent to which a study's findings are consistent and repeatable across researchers. This can be established through an audit trail that provides a transparent record of the decisions made through the data collection and data analysis processes. During this study, I maintained a folder structure on a One Drive password-protected account accessible only to me. This folder includes all interview transcripts, spreadsheets and codebooks with participant's information, dates when participants were contacted and interviews took place, NVivo files with codes, as well as links to any related document.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the degree to which the findings of a qualitative study are shaped by the participants' experiences and the data, rather than by researcher bias, motivations, or assumptions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To establish confirmability, I engaged in reflexive journaling to examine my assumptions, monitor potential influences on the analytic process, and enhance transparency in the development of themes in the study. Journaling and reflection occurred continuously throughout the data collection and data analysis processes. This process was used repeatedly during analysis when participants shared stories or experiences that closely aligned with my own leadership development and professional experiences. These moments of reflexivity were documented and intentionally considered during coding to ensure that codes, categories, and interpretations remained grounded in participants' language rather than my own perspectives. This ongoing awareness supported efforts to bracket assumptions and mitigate the influence of personal biases during analysis.

In addition, I also maintained an audit trail that included raw data, analytic memos, coding decisions, and reflections on my positionality throughout the research process. This documentation allowed for an external review of how interpretations were formed and ensured that conclusions were grounded in the data.

Positionality

I identify as a cisgender, single-parent, white-European, Latina woman currently working in a middle-management role at an administrative department at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. I recognize I bring my own bias and perspective to this study. For this study, I am focusing on how women perceive their lived experiences and career path aspirations to senior leadership roles at R1, public, land-grant institutions in the U.S. This study is a reflection of my own curiosity about women's careers, what decisions women make at different points in their lives that take them down one path or another, and how their lived experiences affect those decisions. Though my role at this university during the last 11 years has been my only professional position in a higher education institution, my interest in this topic is inspired by experiences during a 25-year professional career. During the entirety of those 25 years, I have often been the only woman at the table, and always the only Latina woman at the table. I have never had a female supervisor or mentor, and, except for Chancellor Plowman, all roles above mine in every organizational chart at every job I have ever had has always been held by a male. My lived experiences and career aspirations throughout my career will parallel the experiences of the participants in this study and may influence my opinions during the data collection and analysis process.

As a critical researcher, one needs to "consider whether one is an insider or outsider affecting the research process" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I understand I will have my own

opinions and biases regarding the current position of women in senior leadership roles my institutions, and what lived experiences the participants I interview may describe during my research. Controlling the potential for bias to affect my research was important. To control bias, I engaged in constant self-awareness and critical reflection as I recognized that my own beliefs and experiences may influence my judgement throughout this study. I regularly questioned my assumptions and considered alternative interpretations to the information presented. I seek to provide answers to my research questions through the participant's view and not make predictions and assumptions from my own experiences.

While researchers are often encouraged to control for biases, Huber et al. (2023) explained how Chicana Feminist Epistemology challenges the notion of neutral research, prioritizing the lived experiences and knowledge of researchers and participants, particularly those from marginalized communities, as crucial to scholarly inquiry. Bernal (1998) used the term cultural intuition to describe the individual perspective and awareness scholars bring to their research process drawing from their personal, professional and academic experiences. This concept is applied to the unique perspectives and insights that researchers, particularly those from marginalized or underrepresented groups, bring to the research process, drawing on their personal, collective, and historical experiences. This process can inform both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. My position as a women leader in a male-dominated work environment has provided me with a particular perspective gained from my professional experience and personal knowledge that I can draw upon in this study.

Philosophical Worldview

Reflecting on the personal experiences that have influenced my values and my current approach to research, I can identify the influences of constructivism on how I further my knowledge about the world. From this perspective, knowledge emerges through interactions between the researcher and participants, emphasizing multiple interpretations of experiences and the meanings individuals assign to their lives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). In this worldview, context is critical: people's perceptions, behaviors, and experiences are understood as embedded within cultural, social, and institutional environments. Consequently, qualitative research prioritizes understanding phenomena from the participants' perspectives, recognizing that truths are co-constructed and may vary across individuals and settings. The researcher serves as an active instrument in the study, engaging reflexively to interpret data while acknowledging potential biases, and seeks to generate rich, nuanced insights rather than generalizable laws or predictions (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Much of the literature on women's leadership in higher education follows a basic qualitative or phenomenological approach to understanding the lived experiences of women in their workplace. Previous research consistently outlines the lack of women in senior leadership roles in HEI; it describes how women seem to plateau their careers in middle management roles and identifies the barriers that have become roadblocks to advancement. Women's stories in the existing literature are similar. It is my belief that there is no single objective reality when it comes to understanding women's experiences within their institutions. A qualitative approach aligned with my view that knowledge is socially constructed and context-dependent, emerging through the meanings that individuals assign to their experiences. Rather than seeking to measure or quantify experiences, qualitative research prioritizes exploring the depth, complexity, and

richness of participants' perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Through methods such as semi-structured interviews, the goal was to understand how women interpret their professional journeys, navigate barriers, and make sense of leadership opportunities within their institutional contexts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This approach values multiple realities and interpretations, emphasizing co-constructed knowledge between researchers and participants rather than universal truths.

Conclusion

This basic qualitative study comprised of semi-structure interview protocol based on understanding how women in senior leadership roles at public, R1, land-grant, public institutions in the southeastern U.S describe their lived experiences and how those lived experiences influenced their career aspirations and motivations to apply for senior university administrative roles. A constructivist worldview will be applied to this study using Deci and Ryan (2000)'s Self-Determination theory. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Transcripts were coded and analyzed for themes. Findings are reported in Chapter 4 of this study, while discussion, implications, and recommendations will be discussed in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 4
FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore how women senior administrative leaders at public, research intensive (R1), four-year, land-grant institutions in the Southeastern U.S. described their experiences that motivated their careers, how their lived experiences influenced their career aspirations to pursue positions in senior administrative roles, and how they navigated the barriers and supports encountered along the way. This study is guided by the following three research questions:

1. How do women in senior leadership roles at higher education institutions describe the experiences that motivated their careers?
2. How did the lived experiences of women senior leaders in higher education institutions influence their career aspirations and motivations to apply for senior university administrative roles?
3. How do women in senior leadership roles at higher education institutions describe the barriers and supports they experienced in advancing their careers?

The study followed a basic qualitative design. Purposeful sampling was used to identify women in senior administrative leadership roles at public, R1, four-year, land-grant institutions in the Southeastern U.S. I conducted individual, semi-structured interviews through Teams lasting between 35-45 minutes with 14 participants. After data collection, data were analyzed using descriptive coding to identify initial codes, which were then grouped into categories and themes. Four major themes were identified, along with two subthemes within each theme. This chapter begins with a discussion of the limitations of this study, followed by an in-depth discussion of each theme and subtheme.

Limitations of this Study

There were several limitations associated with this study. First, this study focused only on five public, R1, four-year, land-grant institutions in the southeastern U.S. Because the study is restricted to institutions in the southeastern U.S, the findings may not reflect the experiences of women senior leaders in other regions with different political climates, cultural norms, or institutional histories. Additionally, findings may also not be transferred to private institutions, community colleges, research-intensive universities outside the land-grant system, such as institutions that sustain substantial level of externally funded research activity despite the absence of land-grant designation externally. Findings may also not be transferred to non-research-intensive institutions, or minority-serving institutions, such as institutions engaging in high research activities,

Only participants who volunteered to participate are included in this study. There was no purposive sampling, which may have limited the inclusion of perspectives from other women in senior administrative roles at the same institutions who may have had different experiences.

Another limitation is that this study did not explicitly examine women's intersectional identities, and the interview protocol did not include questions addressing the experiences of women leaders from diverse racial, ethnic, or other identity groups. As a result, these perspectives are not represented in the findings, limiting the study's ability to capture intersectional dimensions of leadership experiences.

Last, the study relies on interview-based narratives that capture women's voices and lived experiences. While these accounts reflect participants' interpretations of their experiences, they are shaped by memory and reflection over time, which may influence how experiences are understood and narrated rather than detract from their meaning.

Research Participants

Fourteen women senior leaders volunteered to share their professional experiences, career aspirations and motivations, and an account of the barriers and supports systems they encountered along the way. Participants in this study worked in their current roles between one to nine years and have been employed at their current institutions between four and 26 years. Nine participants relocated HEIs along their professional journey, and only two of the 14 participants have spent their entire professional careers working at one HEI. Participants volunteered to participate in this study by answering a recruitment email sent by me (Appendix A). All participants were assigned a pseudonym to protect their identity. Table 4 provides additional information about each participant including their institution, their role at their institution, the number of years at their current role, the number of years employed at their current institution, and total number of years working in higher education.

Table 4

Participant's Demographics

Name (pseudonym)	Role at University	University (pseudonym)	Number of Years in Current Role	Number of Years Employee at Current University	Number of Years Working in Higher Education
Alice	Associate Vice President	University of the South	3	4	26
Harriet	Assistant Vice President	University of the West	2	26	31
Sabrina	Vice Chancellor	University of the North	5	15	15
Alex	Associate Vice Chancellor	University of the East	3	14	14
Jules	Associate Vice Chancellor	University of the North	1	9	25
Daphne	Assistant Vice Chancellor	University of the North	7	7	17
Cleo	Assistant Vice Chancellor	University of the North	3	3	11
Charlie	Associate CIO	University of Oz	6	10	10
Poppy	Assistant Vice Chancellor	University of the East	6	6	6
Rachel	Senior Vice President	University of the West	9	9	28
Lucille	Assistance Vice Chancellor	University of the North	1	6	6
Henrietta	Associate Vice President	University of the West	4	15	20
Nora	Vice President	University of the West	4	4	20
Emily	Associate Vice Chancellor	University of the North	4	8	20

Findings

Four major themes emerged from the data analysis; each theme also includes subthemes. The first theme is Motivation Rooted in Identity, Purpose and Foundations, which has three subthemes: Turning Points on the Road to Leadership in Higher Education, Motivating Factors Influencing Women's Leadership, and Personal Values and Institutional Mission. The second theme is titled Leadership Growth Through Learning, Development and Support Systems. This subtheme has two subthemes: Building the Leadership Toolkit and The Power of People. The third theme in the findings is Work-Life Realities and Internalized Challenges Influence Career Decisions. There are two subthemes under theme three including Family Does Matter and Fighting the Inner Battles. Lastly, theme four is Systemic Barriers Shape Women's Leadership Trajectories, which includes two subthemes: Challenging Society's Norms and Expectations, and Barriers Built Into the System. Each theme will be discussed in depth in the following sections including the theme's title, and quotes from the participants as evidence for the themes. Quotes were gathered from the audio-recorded interviews. Themes and subthemes that emerged from the interviews are outlined in Table 5 and discussed in this chapter.

Table 5

Themes, Subthemes and Descriptions

Theme	Subtheme	Description
Theme 1: Motivation Rooted in Identity, Purpose and Foundations	1. Turning Points on the Road to Leadership in Higher Education	Participants described moments that influenced their early careers, and choices they have made along the way.
	2. Motivating Factors Influencing Women's Leadership	Participants shared their motivations to lead and pursue senior leadership roles.
	3. Personal Values and Institutional Mission	Participants shared how career decisions were made to align their values with the mission of their institution.
Theme 2: Leadership Growth Through Learning, Development and Support Systems	1. Building the Leadership Toolkit	Lived experiences, opportunities and support systems have helped women learn the skills needed to become senior leaders.
	2. The Power of People	Participants discussed the importance of developing a support system of mentors and advocates and giving back by mentoring others.
Theme 3: Work-Life Realities and Internalized Challenges Influence Career Decisions	1. Family Does Matter	Participants described making decisions to balance their careers and their family responsibilities.
	2. Fighting the Inner Battles	Participants described confronting internal barriers, such as imposter syndrome, and persevering throughout their careers.
Theme 4: Systemic barriers Shaped Women's Leadership Trajectories	1. Challenging Society's Norms and Expectations	Women senior leaders noted that they often must manage societal expectations regarding appropriate leadership behavior in the workplace
	2. Barriers Built Into the System	Participants noted their awareness of workplace inequalities and the influence of organizational cultures throughout their careers.

This study was framed by Deci and Ryan (1985)'s Self-determination theory (SDT). SDT originated by Deci and Ryan (1985)'s research into intrinsic motivators and looked at the degree to which a person's behavior is self-motivated and self-determined, and that self-motivation and

self-determination are guided in large part by intrinsic rather than extrinsic factors (Ryan & Deci, 2000). SDT assumes that everyone has three psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and those needs vary to the extent to which their environment supports or hinders their development (Deci & Ryan, 2000). SDT explains that humans look for learning, growth, social integration, and incorporating new experiences into one's sense of self, and are inherently motivated by these goals, rather than externally controlled (Ryan, 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2000). At the same time, when these basic needs are not met, people tend to experience frustration, less satisfaction, and success, and it negatively impacts their well-being and performance (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan, 2017). Throughout the findings, women senior leaders described how their lived experiences have motivated their careers and career aspirations. Drawing on Deci and Ryan (1985)'s SDT, women's leadership motivations were understood as being driven primarily by internal factors, such as staying aligned with their values, developing the competencies required for future roles, and building relationships with mentors who advocated for and supported them throughout their journeys.

Theme 1: Motivation Rooted in Identity, Purpose and Foundations

The careers of women senior leaders who participated in this study were shaped by early career defining moments and career decisions that laid the foundation of their professional trajectories. The subthemes describe how participants were influenced by early childhood or adolescence experiences that enabled them to build a leadership identity as early as middle school. Other participants highlighted early career opportunities that allowed them to build the skills needed to progress in their fields. Participants also emphasized their internal motivations to lead, focused on purpose and behaved in a way that advances what they stand for. These

experiences demonstrate that leadership development was not a linear process, but emerged over time through formative experiences, intentional career choices and an evolving sense of purpose.

Turning Points on the Road to Leadership in Higher Education

As shown in Table 4, most of the women senior leaders in this study did not start their careers working at HEIs, as only two of the 14 participants have spent their entire careers working at HEIs. The other 12 participants began their careers working in either a private organization, a K-12 school, or at a state government office. Despite starting in other sectors, participants in this study have built long-term careers at HEI, with 12 participants who reported working in the higher education space for over 10 years after shifting their careers to the higher education field and ultimately reaching senior administrative leadership positions. Despite their professional success, half of the participants in this study admitted a lack of intentional career planning to reach their roles. Harriet, who has worked in the higher education space for 31 years, 26 of them at her current HEI, is one example of a women senior leader who admitted not planning her career by stating that:

> I've had some enjoyable, I think, unexpected experiences in administration. It was not something I planned to do. I bet you'll hear that from a lot of people that you talk with. You know, it wasn't part of my development plan for my career.

Jules shared a similar experience as Harriet, noting that she had not actively sought to advance to roles of higher responsibility, but has experienced promotions within her roles. She shared, “I've never chosen to move up, but I have been fortunate to be promoted each time versus choosing that new role.” Jules explained her career began at another public, land-grant institution before relocating to her current HEI, where she advanced through her department until reaching her position as Associate Vice Chancellor. Norah and Sabrina also recounted not having a career

plan, nor having initial aspirations to reach a particular role. Nora reflected starting her career 20 years ago without initially knowing her job could become a long-term career path, explaining: “I didn’t know it was a real career, so I kind of fell into it and didn’t have aspirations from the get-go to reach my role.” Sabrina’s professional journey also lacked any career planning as she “never aspired to be a leader or had any career plan.” Regardless, she has worked at several HEIs for 15 years, has held three similar roles to her current role as Vice Chancellor at the University of the North, and explained that “I've had some great opportunities just kind of in [my field].” Charlie has also experienced internal promotions in her professional career. She began her career working at a K-12 school and transitioned to her current HEI ten years ago. She shared that “I have not interviewed, even though I have progressed through the ranks, though I did interview for the job that I'm currently in right now.” These experiences highlight how internal promotions facilitated career advancement rather than intentional, predefined career goals.

In contrast to the experiences above, Poppy was the only participant who mentioned the importance of having a career plan but remained flexible with that plan by stating that “it is important to think through a plan. Even if you change your plan along the way, have a plan and a path and commit to it.” Her perspective is a contrasting approach to career planning by making intentional choices while remaining flexible.

Despite the absence of intentional career planning, all participants in this study have been able to advance through advancement opportunities that have been provided to them. Participants’ advancement into senior leadership roles ultimately emerged through career opportunities, experiences, recognition by their institutions, and remaining flexible, rather than long-term career planning. Their career trajectories were not shaped by defined plans but by

being open to professional growth. Poppy, for example, reflected on the impact that participating in a fellowship after finishing her education had in her career by sharing the following:

> What this fellowship did was basically give me an opportunity to move through these functional areas a lot quicker, give me exposure and set me up to be able to have what I would consider a much more well-rounded foundation in [my field] and have really more understanding of how all these things fit together, which positioned me to be able to get a director position earlier in my career.

That fellowship provided Poppy with the skills and confidence early in her career to take on roles of increasing responsibility while working for a state office, before transitioning to her current HEI where she holds the role of Assistant Vice Chancellor. Similarly, Alex, who, like Charlie, shifted from working with students in K-12 to her current HEI 14 years ago, discussed how early career opportunities have helped her advance through roles and give her the confidence needed to take on roles. She shared, "I think it's important when the opportunities come to be open to them…those opportunities definitely helped to build to where I am, and it gave me the confidence to say I can do that." These stories reflect how advancement emerged not from intentional career planning, but from embracing opportunities, and the confidence gained through professional growth.

While these narratives indicate an absence of a formal career plan, which did not pose a challenge for women advancing to senior leadership roles, participants described taking advantage of advancement opportunities and developing a sense of themselves as leaders from an early age. Early leadership identity was described by one third of the participants, who indicated their identity as leaders surfaced during their middle school or high school years through involvement in school organizations, or by being part of athletic teams. Emily is a self-

identified Black leader whose entire professional career has developed at different HEI and has held her current role of Associate Vice Chancellor for four years. She reflected on her early childhood leadership development by stating, “leader development and leadership didn't necessarily start in a professional role. And a lot of ways for me, it dates back as far as high school. I was our class president and was just really, super involved.” Cleo described a similar experience:

> Even when I think back to when I was in middle school, right, like I was the basketball captain. I was the high school captain. I served; I got involved in many things. I've always been motivated to serve in a leadership capacity.

Echoing this early sense of leadership identity, Charlie shared that being raised to believe she could accomplish anything she set her mind to influence her perspective on leadership early in her childhood:

> I was the president of my senior class. I was told from the time I was very little by my parents that I could literally do anything I wanted to do. I think that somehow that sort of got baked into the way I think about myself and how I move about in the world.

These stories narrate how the participant’s careers did not depend on intentional career planning and were rooted in developing a leadership identity early in life, and career opportunities. Unplanned career progression emerged as a shared pattern rather than an exception, suggesting that advancement was shaped more by responsiveness to opportunity than by deliberate long-term planning. Even with a lack of career planning, participants identified themselves as leaders despite clearly defined career goals. Participants also shared the internal motivators that influenced their career aspirations, and how those motivators evolved as they advanced in their professional trajectories, as described in the next subtheme.

Motivational Factors Influencing Women's Leadership

This subtheme emerged from participants' reflection on what initially motivated them to lead, to pursue leadership in higher education, and whether that motivation has changed throughout their careers. Within this theme, participants discussed being internally motivated by a desire to help others, working with students, achieving professional goals, as well as their self-drive and sense of achievement to advance to their current roles.

Most participants reported that their motivators to pursue leadership roles have remained constant throughout their leadership journey. Only Daphne and Charlie admitted that their initial motivations for pursuing leadership roles in an HEI were financially driven, but both described their motivations shifted as their careers advanced. Daphne has worked in the higher education field since completing her graduate education and is now an Assistant Vice Chancellor at the University of the North. She admitted her career was initially driven by a combination of external and internal motivators; however, her focus has shifted to the internal motivator of developing her staff. She shared the following:

> I was right out of graduate school, and I was ready to go, and I wanted to earn a paycheck, and I wanted to give back…But my motivation [now] is really focused on developing my staff and helping them grow and work together.

Personal finances and financial stability also served as an extrinsic motivator for Charlie early in her career. She explained how her motivation to work in higher education evolved over time by sharing that:

> When I started, I just wanted to put food on the table...I was the sole breadwinner. And so, for me, it was about financial stability. And then, once I got kind of into this path, I thought, hey, this is something I can be really good at. Like I can do this. And so, as I

> was given more opportunities, my motivations changed…when I think about what it is about my career and my job and why I show up every day, there are a couple of things, I want to do a good job, [and] there's the reputation of the organization I work for.

While Daphne and Charlie's stories indicated extrinsic motivators influenced their early careers, both admitted their motivations shifted towards intrinsic sources. Intrinsic motivators and a strong internal drive to advance in their professional careers were highlighted by every woman senior leader in this study. Participants described themselves as being self-driven and as achievers, emphasized setting high standards for themselves, and being committed to their professional growth. Alice reflected this mindset of self-drive when stating, "I have pretty strong expectations." Her self-drive and sense of accomplishment resulted in a 26-year career at several HEIs before relocating to her current HEI four years ago from an R1, private institution. Similarly, Jules described her motivation by explaining, "I'm very self-driven. I'm very self-motivated. I also don't ever want to think somebody could do that better than me because I feel like sometimes, I could do that just as well as that person, if not better." Emily echoed those sentiments of self-drive and personal achievement by sharing how she encourages both herself and her staff to show up every day by sharing the following:

> Really thrive off energy and synergy and excellence. I'd say often my team probably dreams about me saying excellence is the standard. Be great. How are we going to the next level? How are you contributing to your own next level experience and taking this unit in the university to the next level?

Participants' stories demonstrate a strong growth mindset and a commitment to professional and personal development, as reflected in their desire for continuous learning. Charlie described how a growth mindset informs her professional development and leadership approach by sharing: "the

more that I've learned about the business of higher education, the better able I am able to have meaningful conversations with those business owners." Similarly, Poppy explained that her leadership journey was motivated by a desire for continuous learning by sharing that "my approach is just to try to learn and grow from every opportunity and figure out how to how to navigate that…I'm motivated by the opportunity to learn and grow and see things move to the next level." Emily echoed this perspective noting, "I have a teachable spirit. I'm open, I don't ever want to be the smartest person in the room." Anecdotally, two of the participants shared that they were also working on similar PhD programs at their own institutions, further illustrating their commitment to ongoing learning and development.

Job satisfaction was also highlighted as an intrinsic motivating factor for women in this study to pursue and remain in their current leadership roles. Participants described job satisfaction as rooted in a sense of fulfillment, purpose, and their perceived impact in their institutions. Sabrina, who has held three similar roles at different HEIs, reflected how meaningful her work is to her despite the challenges, by stating:

> I love my job. Like, yes, do I have frustrating days because some things are illogical…many days are like that. But I feel fortunate to have the opportunity to influence a university that I think it has created many great outcomes for the State…or the nation or the world, depending on what view you choose to take. That fills my heart with joy, and that's a huge privilege.

Cleo also shared how satisfaction in her current senior leadership role influences her decision to remain at her institution. After working at several HEIs since completing her undergraduate studies, she described how a strong sense of achievement motivated her to continually seek new opportunities. After relocating to her current HEI three years ago following challenges at her

former institution, Cleo explained that this role represents a turning point in her career, noting that “this is now the first time in my career that I'm not thinking about what's next. I think that I'm at a position where I feel like I'm fulfilled.” Job satisfaction, rooted in fulfillment and purpose, played a role in the participants’ decisions to remain at their current leadership positions.

Another prominent factor influencing women senior leaders’ decisions to pursue and remain in leadership positions was the desire to help others, a motivation expressed by almost every participant in this study. This feeling was described by Alice, who shared “I am looking to grow the leaders of the future,” or Lucille, who finds that “one thing that is just so important and to me [is] the way that I lead my team and provide leadership across the organization that I support...what motivates me is helping people.” Lucille transitioned from a private organization to her current HEI six years ago and described modeling her leadership approach on her current supervisor’s practices of supporting and valuing her staff. Harriet also stated that “I see a lot of what I do is helping other people reach goals that they have. And sometimes, it's that collective feeling of, we did this, that really can feel great.” Alex’s thoughts also deepen the importance of helping others as she moved across her own leadership journey. She described her leadership approach as:

> My goal is to make things better than I found them. What do you see in your next job? How can I help you get? Of course I don't want people to leave, but how do I help you get there? I don't believe you hold people back.

Alex’s reflection highlights the importance of helping others through her leadership journey by fostering growth in her staff. Building on this idea, Poppy shared how her female identity influenced her motivation to help others as she noted:

> I want to feel like I'm helping somebody improve their situation, get to that next space, find that thing that motivates and moves them, and you know, connecting these dots. I want to help. I'm the helper and I do think that being a female contributes to that because I play that role in so many ways.

When asked what motivated them to pursue leadership in higher education, participants also highlighted how supporting students' success is central to their leadership roles and a key motivator in their careers. Both Alice and Henrietta, for example, stated that "I love working with the students." Alex expanded that thought by sharing:

> The key is students. And people say that it's really cliche, but it's true for me. Everything I've done was about students and student success. That's the core of who I am, being an educator, a teacher, a leader. A motivator, that's just the core of who I am. And the audience has changed, from K-12 to Community College to HBCU, now research one land grant. But the mission and passion are the same.

Overall, participant's narratives illustrate that, while extrinsic motivators such as financial stability influenced some women's early careers, the continued pursuit for senior administrative roles were mostly driven by intrinsic factors. Women senior leaders described their internal drive as fueled by helping and supporting others, commitment to professional growth, and job satisfaction. These intrinsic motivations appear central to both leadership persistence and satisfaction among women senior leaders. The next subtheme will discuss how aligning personal values with the HEI where participants work was an also an influential internal motivator.

Personal Values and Institutional Mission

This subtheme centers on the role of personal values and aligning those values with their workplace had in shaping the participant's decision and career trajectories. Almost every participant emphasized that their personal values have played a role in guiding their leadership decisions and career paths. Participants also mentioned aligning their personal values as a reason for leaving a corporate role or for switching HEIs. Harriet, for example, expressed how a shift in values at her previous non-higher education job was a catalyst to shifting her career to higher education:

> At some point [my previous employer] moved toward a business model that was more about making money and profit than it was about taking care of people. And for me, that my values were like, 'this is not what I want'. So that's what took me out of that and had me revisit where I wanted to go.

Lucille's shift from a corporate position to an HEI was also prompted by a realization of what motivated her and where her values were as stating that "I think what motivated me so much about this job that I was missing when I was in corporate, I struggled with maybe not even really understanding it, but at my core, like what motivates me is helping people." Cleo also chose to pursue leadership roles at other institutions when leadership changes at a previous job no longer aligned with her values:

> After serving in that space for two years, there were leadership changes at the university that just didn't necessarily align with my values and struggled a lot from the leaders who I was supposed to be looking up to and so had made the determination at that point it was time for me to leave the institution.

These decisions highlighted how alignment with personal values has influenced the career choices of some of the participants. Along with this alignment, almost every participant described believing in the mission of higher education as a reason why they began working in higher education, and what motivates them to remain in the field. Aligning personal values with the mission and culture of their institutions not only reinforced their sense of purpose but also strengthened their motivation to lead and remain in higher education. Alice, who has spent 26 years in higher education, reflected: “I didn't see the same kind of public service that I do see in higher education.” She also expressed how she “firmly believe[s] in the mission of higher education.” Jules also emphasized her belief in the mission of higher education by saying the following:

> Being in higher education also is a big motivator. I believe in the mission of higher education like you're saying. So, I believe in that. Leaving higher education always feels a little bit like, do I really want to do that? Would I want to do that?

Poppy also credited the campus environment with supporting her professional growth as she expressed how she “love[s] the university environment. It's something about that, that spirit of learning. I like to learn. I like new things. I like growth, and I feel like there's an energy on campus that supports that and nurtures that.” Rachel and Emily shared being motivated by the mission of higher education, specifically, the mission of land grant institutions. Rachel’s commitment to land-grants has resulted in a 28-year career in HEI working at one community college and two land-grant institutions in different states. She has been in her current role at the University of the West for nine years and explained, “I came from an agriculture family, land grants, very important to me. And so, then I absolutely pursued that path. I'm here and don't

intend to leave until I retire." Emily also described a long-term commitment to land grant institutions, noting:

> I like to call myself a land grant baby. I am three times alumni of this university. All my experiences professionally and educationally have been at land grant universities. I believe that land grants democratize higher education in terms of access.

Emily elaborated on the importance of land grants providing access to higher education when discussing representation as another motivator for pursuing senior leadership at a HEI. She described a sense of responsibility in her role in supporting students and staff from historically underrepresented racial groups and noted "representation matters. Support and advocacy matters. Removing barriers matter. So, thinking about equitable access, equitable opportunities. The ways in which we don't just open doors, but we remove barriers." Emily's reflection emphasized representation as a motivator for her leadership. Building on this commitment, Alex also highlighted the responsibility of supporting the success of underrepresented students:

> I love to see all students thrive, but I definitely enjoy seeing students that may need a little bit more support that make them traditionally marginalized, underrepresented, under resourced, succeed and to be that example for them. That's important to me.

For some participants, their racial and gender identities informed their commitment to leadership and expanding opportunity, visibility, and belonging within higher education. Daphne is another participant who discussed the importance of representation when asked if her female identity had influenced the career aspirations and motivations in her careers by sharing the following:

> My identity is a huge part of who I am and I'm very mindful of it. Sometimes being the only female at the table or in the decision-making process, I'm very aware of that and I'm

> aware that I need to be [at that table] and I need to represent, and I need to think about the way that I am maybe holding myself.

Building on the importance of finding institutions that align with one's values, Cleo described being intentional about the institutions where she pursued roles to advance in her career. After experiencing challenges working at a regional size institution, her career priorities shifted to pursuing roles at an R1, large, public institution. She described her decisions by stating:

> After serving in [my previous role] for two years, there were leadership changes at the university that just didn't necessarily align with my values and struggled a lot from the leaders who I was supposed to be looking up to and so had made the determination at that point that it was time for me to leave the institution...This was a no-brainer move…as I knew I wanted to be back at it in an R1 space, public institution space, larger institution space.

Overall, participants' motivations to pursue and remain in senior leadership roles are founded in internal motivators that include helping both students and staff, an interest in continuous professional growth, and aligning their careers with personal values and the mission of their institutions. These motivators have remained constant throughout the careers of almost every participant in this study. Two participants initially entered leadership in higher education out of financial necessity, but their motivations changed over time toward fulfillment, making an impact and a commitment to the mission of higher education. The rest of the participants described being intrinsically motivated by the same factors throughout their careers, which included helping others in their workplace, supporting students in their academic experiences, achieving their personal and professional goals, and pursuing careers at institutions with missions that aligned with their personal values.

Theme 2: Leadership Growth Through Learning, Development and Support Systems

The next theme that emerged from the interviews is *Leadership Growth Through Learning, Development and Support Systems,* which captures how the participants lived experiences, opportunities and support networks have contributed to them learning the skills needed to become senior leaders. Within this theme, most participants emphasized how informal professional opportunities have helped them develop skills, gain visibility and expand their leadership skills. Participants also described the importance of embracing challenges and learning from both adversity and positive experiences to build their leadership toolkit. In addition, women in this study discussed how mentors, informal networks and support systems provided guidance, encouragement and access to opportunities. The participants accounts reflect how relationships were instrumental in fostering their growth as leaders.

Building the Leadership Toolkit

The first subtheme that emerged is *Building the Leadership Toolkit,* which highlights how participants developed the knowledge and skills needed to reach senior leadership roles. Participants were asked what aspects of their lived experiences shaped their readiness to lead, and whether any formal or informal systems helped them advance in their careers. Only Sabrina mentioned taking advantage of a formal executive development that was instrumental in her professional growth. That training, however, was provided by a non-higher education organization where she worked before transitioning to an HEI. She admitted that "universities are not so good at that formal training." All other participants stated that their HEIs have not offered them any formal professional training that helped them develop the skills to become senior leaders. Despite this, 13 out of 14 participants described being presented with informal

professional growth opportunities that led them to advance in their careers to reach their current roles. Through these experiences and guidance from mentors, participants learned and refined the leadership skills necessary to progress into senior roles.

The influence of informal professional growth opportunities helped Alice advance in her career, who said, “I had a number of really wonderful opportunities through [a former institution]”, and Rachel, who stated that “I've had some, lucky, lucky breaks.” Nora was also promoted throughout her career through opportunities given to her by a former supervisor. When discussing her mentor’s influence, she reflected:

> I worked with her for 14 years and really, I would say I gained more and more responsibility, higher titles, all of that over those 14 years. I never had to apply for one of those jobs. She was very generous in terms of giving me opportunities.

Similarly, Cleo also benefited from internal promotions and the influence of mentors before reaching her current senior leadership role nothing that, “I definitely benefited from the ability to be internally promoted into most of my positions and, I would say that that is because of the belief of at least one, if not more people at that university.” Poppy expressed the same sentiment of how “each opportunity prepared me for the next.” Overall, participants’ advancement was influenced by internal opportunities and the confidence places in them by their leaders.

Along with having the opportunities to advance in their professions through internal promotions and the influence of mentors, career mobility has been common among the participants as nine participants reported switching HEIs throughout the career trajectories. That mobility was often intentional. Participants reflected on how they intentionally worked on building the skills to be able to advance to the next role and sometimes searched for opportunities at other HEIs. Rachel, for example, described intentionally seeking roles at

different institutions to acquire the skills that would prepare her for the role she aimed for. She explained that the experience at one institution "truly prepared me [for] when the big schools called because I had…reporting to me…all of the key areas that would one day be under my division." Similarly, Emily engaged in intentionally acquiring the skills needed to advance professionally by expressing how she "just continued to try to think about the skill sets that I have built through the years now, through the decades and how I can position myself in ways to advance." Alex also noted how each role throughout her career has prepared her with a variety of skills that led her to being able to apply to her current position as Associate Vice Chancellor at the University of the East. She described the journey that when she "saw [the] job I'm currently in; it was a culmination of everything I had either done directly or supervised…all of those [previous] roles led me to where I am now as a senior administrator."

Half of the participants described that building the skills needed to advance to the next role often meant taking on challenges or responsibilities outside the scope of their role and being curious about how their roles impacted the larger mission of their HEIs. Alice is an example of a senior leader who used her self-drive and confidence to expand her skills to take on challenges, noting that "I have always been the kind of person that, when an opportunity comes, I'll take it. It's almost like it's a challenge to do that." Alex also described how "for me, it's always about the next level, the next challenge." Taking on responsibilities when they came her way was also key in Charlie's professional development as she shared:

> I was hired just as an entry level [job] to work on this implementation…and, over time, I was given more opportunities because I was able to handle and learn. So, I didn't necessarily apply for these additional responsibilities. I just took them on. You have to work hard, and you have to be open to opportunities. I mean, know yourself and know

> what your strengths are, but within that space, be open because there may be an opportunity that comes along that you quite honestly have never crossed your mind.

Similarly, when asked what advice she would give to women aspiring to having a senior administrative role, Poppy's advice to women was:

> Talk to people. Be aware of what opportunities are out there. Don't limit yourself… it's important for people that are aspiring to higher roles to talk to other people who are in higher roles and ask them exactly this. How would you do it? What did you do? Figure out what that means for you and how you want to pursue things, be open to opportunities… Sometimes those opportunities are priceless because what you can learn by participating in that project or on that team, who you may meet by participating in that. Who sees your work from you participating in that? All those things can have valuable impacts.

Sabrina also credited her career progress to using a similar approach to Alex and Poppy to taking on challenges in her career to build competence and grow professionally. She shared:

> I was always willing to, and I still am, and maybe that's just part of my personality, I was always willing to do things that were outside of my lane. And I was always willing to do things where it wasn't my responsibility. I would lean into things that largely weren't really in my lane. I like to see how all the pieces in an organization fit together optimally to deliver new outcomes. That's always been important to me and that made it easy for me to lean into things that weren't really in my lane but helped me understand the organization better or think about better outcomes for the organization.

This approach helped her understand her organization better, broadened her perspective, and strengthened her ability to think strategically. The importance of learning how organizational

systems function as a means of career development was also echoed by Nora, who leveraged strategic thinking to advance her career across four HEIs. She shared:

> I've learned enough to be dangerous on the technical front to hopefully ask the right questions. I think it's just that connective tissue is the best way to really learn about other areas, that variety of it and how you put those pieces of the puzzle together in your own mind to grow your career.

These stories illustrate that leadership development is an ongoing process shaped by curiosity, initiative, and openness to new challenges.

Participants also highlighted how learning through experiences, rather than formal training, played a critical role in building the competencies and confidence required to advance into senior leadership roles. Teaching moments often came through challenging situations. Henrietta, for example, reflected on her experiences working with challenging supervisors throughout her 20-year career in higher education, including 15 at the University of the West where she is now an Associate Vice President. She described how those experiences shaped her leadership style by sharing the following:

> I have worked for some really great people but also have worked for a lot of really terrible people. Somebody taught me that you learn as much from the people you don't want to work for as from the ones you do want to work for…One of the vice presidents I worked for was just an unkind person. During my one-on-one meetings, he would never look at me. He would just type on his computer the whole time and sometimes ask questions and sometimes not. So, when I got done, I'd just get up and leave. [Now] I definitely treat people though I want to be treated, and I value direct feedback. I think feedback is love and seeing, trying to encourage people.

Henrietta's experience is an example of how challenging situations can serve as learning opportunities to shape one's leadership values and behaviors. Alex echoed this sentiment by reflecting on a similar challenging experience with a former supervisor, describing how it strengthened her resilience and leadership approach:

> I've had a bad boss. He was actually terrible. Awful. It was horrible, we were literally anxious coming to work. We never knew what he would say. He was just disrespectful, inappropriate, and rude. It was bad. And so he ended up firing a lot of people in a short time. And it was awful… I'm to the point now, nothing rattles me. Like I've seen everything. So, I figure it out, you get it done, you have the conversation with the people that you need to come up with a resolution. You just got to keep it moving.

Emily's experience with challenging situations contributed to the development of resilience. She described the importance of using those moments of adversity to bounce back by encouraging others to "continue to be resilient and bounce back at all costs, regardless of the challenges, regardless of the obstacles." Rather than seeing adversity as a barrier, she framed difficult moments as opportunities. Daphne has also experienced adversity at several HEIs in her career and has turned those negative moments into teaching experiences. She shared that "in my career I've dealt with a lot of challenging matters, and, because of that, I feel like that's impacted my approach to helping [my team]. I think those tough experiences have allowed me to be a better resource." Similarly to Emily and Daphne, learning from adversity has also been a tool for Cleo for developing her leadership skills, resilience, and turning challenging situations into opportunities to grow. She shared lessons learned after working in a toxic environment at a previous institution:

> My mental health had gotten so bad because of the workplace environment that I was in there, I was just trying to get out…I did not feel like I had the support that I needed to navigate some of those situations…Because of some of those experiences, I think I've also learned along the way the importance of having transparent conversations with staff and not letting frustrations get to a point where they would boil over as well as making sure to document when needed to be documented.

Together, these narratives show how adversity can be viewed not as a barrier, but as a formative influence to inform leadership practices.

The combination of lived experiences, including learning through informal professional development, intentional skill development, taking on challenges and learning from adversity contributed to the participants' development of their own leadership style. When asked how their lived experiences have shaped their current leadership style and how women senior leaders lead their team, the consensus was that participants were influenced by leading with empathy and a collaborative approach. Harriet's leadership approach showed this emphasis on empathy and collaboration. She described learning to lead by understanding how to work with individuals who hold different perspectives and how those perspectives contribute to the institution's mission:

> I work with a lot of people that have a lot of knowledge, and you learn pretty quickly that you don't know everything. And people who think they know everything usually don't come across very positively. So you have to figure out, how do I work with a lot of really smart people? …I have a style where I try to really listen to the different perspectives and get others to hear each other and then start to get the group to figure out what's most important to us. And sometimes it takes a while, but it's really in the end you get a better

> product…I've learned more about my style and how to work well with people that have styles like mine and not like mine and really the value of that.

Echoing Harriet's emphasis on collaboration, Jules and Poppy also identified themselves as collaborative leaders and highlighted the importance of working with others and building relationships to achieve institutional goals. Jules shared:

> I guess my leadership style is a very collaborative style. I have a pretty transparent style, people know I'm going to tell them the real stuff…I think some of what shaped my style was trying to figure out how to get stuff done so that I knew that I needed to really lean into relationships, partnerships, and I think that's really the higher education way is. You can't do anything alone; you have to get other people to come along with you.

Poppy restated the importance of working with others and understanding the individual needs of each staff member to build trust and be successful:

> My philosophy is that we get in the trenches; we'll do it together. I'll support you; you support me. We get through this together. That's how it works. I try to meet people where they are and respond to what they need, knowing that there's not a cookie cutter approach to anybody on my team…I build teams that are people that are energized and excited and empowered to go forward. And I give them that space to do that.

Overall, building the leadership toolkit was described by participants as how experiences, challenges, and mentorship helped them develop strategic thinking, resilience, and decision-making abilities, all of which were applied in the context of working with others. Many emphasized that their motivation to grow as leaders was closely tied to supporting, mentoring, and collaborating with people. The development of their leadership toolkit and their motivation to work and helping others were interconnected, with each reinforcing the other in shaping

effective, people-centered senior leaders. The subtheme of mentorship and support systems is further described in the next section.

The Power of People

The second subtheme that emerged is *The Power of People,* which highlights how support systems, networking and mentoring have been fundamental for the professional growth of women senior leaders in this study. These support systems included people inside and outside the participant's organizations. Nearly every participant discussed how a mentor, colleague or friend has provided guidance in their career through encouragement and serving as sounding boards in difficult times. Overall, participants described how mentors guided them through positive leadership experiences that contributed to their leadership development. The positive influence of mentors was mentioned by Cleo who shared how she "had positive supervisors who've influenced me." Sabrina has equally experienced positive experiences through mentors who have been influencers in the development of her leadership skills. She shared that:

> I have had some excellent mentors and champions… I can probably think of four or five people who really took me under their wings and set me up and gave me candid feedback when I needed it. Some demonstrated for me how I wanted to be as a leader. And sometimes some aspects of their leadership styles didn't resonate with me, and I made conscious choices.

Mentoring emerged in the interviews as a reciprocal process, where participants discussed the importance of both having mentors and serving as mentors themselves. Having mentors throughout their careers have provided guidance and support at critical points in the participant's professional journeys. Equally important has been the role of participants to act as mentors to others as a way to give back, support the development of their staff and reinforce their leadership

style. Alice shared the influence of mentors in her life by noting that "I was just very fortunate with some of the professional mentors that I had around me and just really good friends", and further shared how she uses her position as senior leader at her HEI to help create opportunities for others:

> Now that I'm in a more mature part of my career, I am also looking for other people in our orbit where I can open some doors for them and bring them in on big projects because I benefited from someone who did that for me.

Harriet expressed a similar experience in both having a mentor and being a mentor by sharing that "I had a chance to be mentored by her at key points, and for me it was a big part of why I'm going in the direction I am," and how she has "always enjoyed being a mentor." Mentoring became part of the participant's leadership development by extending their support to the next generation of professionals.

Further examples of the sentiment regarding the importance of having mentors throughout their careers were recurrent across the interviews. Lucille, an Assistant Vice Chancellor at the University of the North, shared how her current supervisor has helped her in her role as noting that "my boss…she's been the most supportive leader that I've ever worked for. She's been a constant champion." Cleo also discussed the importance of having someone in a more senior role that has helped her build confidence and create relationships to quickly advance in her career:

> Knowing that somebody who is in an upper-level leadership role at the university saw potential in me, helped drive me in my desire, but also helped me get promoted along the way because of their influence at the university and because of how they poured into me. I was able to navigate the higher education landscape there effectively to make sure that I

> was creating sustainable relationships throughout the university in order to earn the respect of my colleagues… The amount of leadership style that I think I learned from that leader has influenced my career.

She further explained how these mentors taught her how to be a leader, since "your leadership style is influenced by those who are around you." Emily also shared the influence of a mentor during her first professional opportunity who is now a lifelong friend: "there have been several [mentors], most of which I continue to stay in touch with after decades…Once I graduated, my very first position, my mentor there…was so instrumental…and not just professional guidance and direction, but also personal." Poppy and Sabrina's careers were also influenced by multiple mentors and made similar statements, with Poppy sharing that "there's been a lot of key people along the way. I feel very fortunate on my journey. I've had a lot of great supervisors and mentors along the way, even from the very beginning," and Sabrina noting that "I have had some excellent mentors and champions."

While being mentored by current or former supervisors has played a critical role in leadership development, participants also highlighted the value of informal networks, personal support systems, and the importance of building trustworthy relationships. Informal networking is often developed through personal relationships, peer interactions, and long-standing professional friendships. Some participants, such as Henrietta, have built networks of colleagues within their current institutions. She described building an informal networking group that has helped her have different perspectives when navigating issues. She said this group was a group of women where "it ended up being four of us from all different parts of campus and we would just get together and drink a glass of wine like once a month." Henrietta shared the importance that group had in helping her make different decisions about her personal and professional life:

> A lot of those conversations are about how do you navigate this or how do you navigate that and I've learned we're a very different group…our perspectives on our personal lives are very different, but it's kind of nice to have those different perspectives when you're talking about work, because when you have women in the group that aren't thinking about kids or a husband, it does help you to realize, am I making the right decision for my family or am I making the right decision for my career? And it doesn't matter. It's just good to think about it, but that's an important group.

This informal network functioned as a meaningful support system that complemented formal mentorship by providing diverse perspectives and guidance as Henrietta navigated complex professional and personal decisions. Similarly to Henrietta, Rachel also shared how "your network, your association I think can be very powerful and very strong to help you progress as you grow in your career." Alex's lived experience further illustrates the critical influence of informal support systems as she credited her networks and support systems for helping her find her current senior leadership role and overcome imposter syndrome:

> When I got this job, someone actually texted me the position. I would have missed it. I was like, oh, I can do that job. So that was nice that someone thought enough of me to say this is great, you should go for it, right? Because it kind of affirms I am ready. Somebody sees something in me too, right? Cause that, you know, like I said, that imposter syndrome is real.

Alex's story underscores the role of informal networks in expanding access to leadership opportunities she might otherwise have overlooked. Daphne's career mobility and access to leadership opportunities have also been influenced by a mentor. She mentioned an influential person and friend in her life helped her change positions multiple times in her professional

journey. Daphne described her mentor as being the reason she left her first institution by describing that experience as follows:

> My next job after [my first job after graduating] was 100% impacted by a mentor in my life. She was relocating to a school and knew that my husband and I were there, started talking to me a little bit about my career trajectory and recruited me hard for an interim position. I took it. It was really a leap of faith. I wasn't interested in leaving my institution, like I was happy. I wasn't completely fulfilled. That's a whole other dissertation. But it was because of her. I wanted to work with her. I wanted to learn from her.

Daphne's mentor was also influential in her decision to apply for her current senior administrative job at the University of the North, as her mentor informed her about the opening and encouraged her to apply: "She knew the school was searching and recommended me for the role. I don't know if I would have thought about it if it wasn't on her radar." Daphne's story is another example of how a leadership opportunity may had been overlooked without the support of a mentor.

Informal networks not only provide access to leadership opportunities but also emotional support. Harriet's experience illustrated how these informal networks frequently offer candid advice, emotional support, and opportunities that are not always accessible through formal channels, underscoring the complementary role both forms of networking played in their leadership development. She noted how those relationships helped her conquer feelings of imposter syndrome as: "I realized that if you form those relationships and you aren't afraid to step out there and show people who you are and share your perspective, those feelings go away." Building on Harriet's experience, Poppy has also benefited from people in her informal network

becoming lifelong friends and influencers in her career as sharing that "some of those things turned into lasting friendships, you know, work friendships and others were just isolated incidences that I either bolstered my confidence or exposed me to something different that helped me steer along the way." Together, these stories illustrate the critical role informal networks play in women's leadership development in HEI. These relationships provided access to career opportunities, emotional support and confidence-building that helped participants navigate their careers and strengthen their leadership identities to pursue senior administrative roles.

Another aspect of building relationships that emerged in several interviews was the importance of finding trusted individuals to share challenging situations with. This sentiment emerged when talking with Jules, who shared that "the higher you go in leadership, the less able I feel like you are to be vulnerable. You have to be really careful about who you are authentic with." Similarly, Daphne expressed that "a piece of the puzzle is really thinking about who you trust in your work life and being very mindful about who you share private and challenging situations with." This emphasis on trust highlights how both mentorship and networking function not only as sources of opportunity but also as safe spaces for guidance and support, reinforcing the broader subtheme of *The Power of People.*

Theme 3: Work-Life Realities Influence Career Decisions and Internalized Challenges

The third theme, *Internalized Challenges and Work-Life Realities Influence Career Decisions,* reflects on how challenges associated with managing family responsibilities and internal barriers have shaped participants' career aspirations. Women described balancing professional ambitions with caregiving duties, household responsibilities, and other personal commitments, which often influenced the timing and nature of the opportunities they pursued.

They also discussed internalized doubts, self-expectations, and perceived limitations that affected their confidence in seeking leadership roles or taking on new challenges, as well as how they overcome those internal barriers.

Family Does Matter

This subtheme elaborates on participants' reflection on the influence of family and work-life balance had on their career aspirations and trajectories. Over half of the participants discussed making decisions around family commitments to either their partners or children. Lucille's experience is an example of how her identity as a mom has impacted her career aspirations and influenced her decision to leave a position at a corporate firm and search for opportunities at her current HEI as follows:

> The biggest reason [I transitioned from corporate to higher education] was a work life balance thing. I was at a company that had been acquired by another company, and I was working way too many hours and a little bit a toxic environment. I was also pregnant with my first daughter. It was obvious that it was not going to be a long-term place that I could continue working while transitioning into motherhood. It has definitely impacted my aspirations and my choices, and it's particularly rooted in motherhood. I think I wasn't making those decisions, and I feel very thankful to have found a place where that's the culture across the board. I feel like it's impacted on the decisions that I've made.

Building on Lucille's experience, Henrietta also described making career decisions based on family commitments, as she mentioned leaving a previous HEI because "I have two small daughters, and I wanted my girls to go to public school. The public schools there were not very good, so I've moved to [my current HEI]." These experiences are examples of how family

considerations continue to be central factors in shaping women's career and have influenced career mobilities to find an organization that supported women's roles as caregivers.

These experiences were not isolated. Nearly all participants described navigating work–life balance as mothers, particularly during the early stages of their careers. Many shared their experiences regarding the challenges of balancing work and life, and career planning early in their careers. Both Jules and Rachel, for example, made the choice to pause their careers to raise their families. Rachel expressed how family can impact career decisions as she shared the following:

> I think along the way, your family certainly makes a big impact on your decision. Earlier in my career, my children had been important when I didn't want to take a full eight to five job… I truly believe that your family, no matter what it is, caring for an aging spouse, aging parents, really impacts and I think women a lot more than it does maybe a man's career.

She then described how she chose to enter the workforce again once her children were older by saying:

> My department chair when I was an undergrad asked if I would consider coming and teaching a few classes. I had a young child at the time, three years old. It kind of gave me something to do. The administration [then] offered me a very nice job to move on up. I didn't do that until it aligned with my three-year-old finally being in school full-time. And then I made that jump. By the time [my current HEI] came along, my children were in college. Now my children no longer influenced [my career decisions], and I could do whatever I wanted.

Like Rachel, Jules also decided to briefly leave the workforce when she had her second child but returned to work just a year later. Poppy also described taking a step back in her career when her children were small noting that:

> I had small children. It was very draining, and it got to a point with their ages that I felt like I was always choosing one or the other, wasn't doing both very well. I took a step back, took on a three-quarter job instead of full time.

Poppy also described how the decision to prioritize her family had a negative impact on the perception of a former supervisor who was not supporting a decision to turn down a promotion to prioritize family responsibilities. She reflected on that moment as follows:

> It would have been a big leap, and it would have been a big commitment. I think it would have been a phenomenal opportunity. But that's when my kids were small. I was not sure that it would have been a good fit at the time because they needed a lot, and I was having to maneuver a lot around them and this [job] would have been huge and I would want it to go well. I wanted to do it right. I wanted to make sure we had those structures in place and build the team the way we needed to. So, I turned it down. [My boss] was actually really upset that I turned this down and even when I tried to explain to him that I did not feel like I could do it justice, he basically made a statement that made it very clear that my prioritizing family and personal life over this was a silly choice to make.

Building on those experiences, Alice also shared the struggles of balancing family responsibilities:

> My husband was a faculty member; he was a Chair, now he's a Dean. And so, I'm sure you know that faculty members tend to travel a lot more to conferences and things like

> that. And so particularly, when the kids were little, it was hard because I was actually the one that earned most money, but I also was doing a lot of that work.

Career decisions were also shaped by other family circumstances, such as the need to navigate a dual-career household. Several participants described how their husbands' employment opportunities influenced geographic mobility and, in turn, shaped their own career decisions and trajectories. This was experienced by Alice, who mentioned that "I actually came by this role because my husband relocated here" or Rachel, who stated that "I switched from the corporate world where I was in…for my husband's job." Similarly, Daphne also discussed prioritizing career decisions around a two-career household as she described how:

> The first job that I landed out of grad school was very interesting to me. It was what I thought was my dream job when I was searching, but also, I was doing a dual job search with my now husband. We were trying to figure out this balance of whose career to follow first, like what made the most sense. And then this job I sought out, and my husband and I as a family were at a point in our lives where we were ready to move on, both professionally and personally. He landed the job first and then that kind of dictated where we were relocating as a couple.

These stories illustrate how family considerations guided professional decisions and shaped the career trajectories of the participants, influencing when and where leadership opportunities were pursued, accepted, or declined.

While some narratives indicate the struggles to balance professional growth and family responsibilities as a barrier or constraint in the participant's leadership journey, some participants viewed their decisions to prioritize time with their families as an intentional leadership choice. Women view their intentional choices to prioritize family as examples for their teams to

demonstrate that it is acceptable to set boundaries and value a work–life balance. Nora is an example of one women senior leader who is unapologetic about making time for her family by mentioning that "I had [my children] in my late 30s, and so my daughter has three volleyball games this afternoon and I'm leaving here at 3:45 to go to those and I won't apologize for it." She also mentioned considering applying for other executive roles but assessed the time commitment those roles involve again the time she wants to dedicate to her family. Cleo also stated being influenced to prioritize family over her job by a previous mentor who "was very personable and wanted to get to know the team and everything was very much about work life balance." That leader influenced her own leadership style to being an example to her current team as follows:

> Now as a single mom, I very much try to lead with that in mind, [and] that has also allowed them to see that, like, it's OK, even in this world where we think we have to work these crazy hours, and maybe sometimes we do to get the job done. But there is a way to balance your life in that way. And so I make sure that my staff knows that that's important.

These narratives illustrate that family considerations have played a role in shaping participants' career decisions, often influencing the timing, pace, and direction of their professional trajectories. Rather than viewing these choices as limitations, some participants framed them as intentional and values-driven decisions that reflected their identities, priorities, and leadership philosophies. By navigating dual-career households, caregiving responsibilities, and work–life balance challenges, participants demonstrated agency in defining success on their own terms. Moreover, several women described how prioritizing family became an extension of their leadership practice, modeling healthy boundaries and fostering cultures that normalize balance and well-being. In addition to navigating external work–life realities, participants also described

confronting internal challenges that influenced their confidence, identity, and leadership decisions.

Fighting the Inner Battles

Women senior leaders in this study were asked to share stories on the barriers they encountered when advancing in their careers, and how they navigated those barriers. The subtheme *Fighting the Battles* emerged during the interviews with half of the participants describing how they confronted internal barriers and persevering throughout their careers. Participants reflected on the strategies and internal dialogue they engaged in to build their self-esteem and boost their confidence. Participants were forthcoming about their struggles with imposter syndrome, self-doubt, and being aware how their gender identity as female has impacted the way they present themselves in the workplace. Alice is a participant who expressed how questioning her achievements, and feeling that imposter syndrome does not affect men as much as women:

> Sometimes we're our own worst enemies because we talk ourselves into some of those expectations that others have. There's this constant battle in your head that maybe I'm not that smart, or maybe I'm just in this position for X reasons, or maybe it's because I've got a weird accent and people just find it interesting. You know what I mean? There are all those things that I don't think that men have it the same.

Like Alice, Harriet also reflected on questioning her own competence and expertise, particularly noting that these doubts were intensified during interactions with male colleagues at her institution. She shared her story:

> I was in meetings with a lot of men, and I would sometimes look around and think, well, I'm the only woman in this room. And suddenly it would dawn on me that was the case a

> lot of times… these are all male engineers, and we're going to go around the room and introduce ourselves and they're all going to talk about their engineering expertise. And then there's me and, what exactly will I say? I was just trying to think about how to sound relevant…So a little bit of imposter syndrome that kind of comes up in different ways. Figuring out how to turn that around and say maybe I'm not the impostor, but what do I bring? Am I going to be able to really come across as somebody that they'll respect?

Alex described a similar experience with imposter syndrome when she transitioned from a smaller HEI to her current position at a larger land-grant institution. She noted:

> I performed in a little pond. Am I going to be able to perform in a big ocean? Like, literally, that's how I felt going from [being a] big fish in a small pond to a small fish in a big. So that's how I felt. I felt like I was a big fish on my 8000-student campus. But I was like, Oh my God, like you can't shrink. So you have to fight against imposter syndrome.

She suggested focusing on the small wins and that "you have to remind yourself of the things you've done well" as a strategy to overcome thoughts of imposter syndrome, emphasizing how women rely on resilience and learning from adversity to grow professionally.

Beyond imposter syndrome, participants also reflected on how their identity as female have influenced their career aspirations and their professional journeys. Participants noted that being aware of their gender identity prompted them to being intentional about how they presented themselves at work, their communication styles, leadership approaches and advocating for themselves. Henrietta summarized this thought by stating that "probably the biggest thing I think about [is that] being a female is not an easy part of the work that I do." She elaborated that sentiment with "I spend a lot of time not talking about things that are perceived as girly." Cleo

also mentioned not only identify as female has influenced her career aspirations, but also influences how she intentionally shows up in spaces by noting that:

> I think that as women in this field, we just have to be, unfortunately, way more cognizant of how we're showing up in spaces. In some cases, I have not necessarily done that the best. In other cases, I think I'm learning along the way, through trial and error. I do think that that impacts our day-to-day and how we're showing up in space or what people are saying or the reputation that we are getting on campus.

Sabrina also shared similar experiences of being aware how her female identity and being the gender minority in her workplace has influenced her interactions and the ways she communicates. She shared her thoughts as:

> I've always been any small minority, [and] at times it means I operate differently. I do not show up as most of my colleagues show up in a conversation. I've always recognized both the potential upsides and the downsides of that. I have learned to be strategic about that. I'm not the person who will speak most in a meeting. I think about the impact of listening, assessing and then delivering sort of an overall evaluation of what I've heard and where I think the conversation needs to go, which is not the way most men show up. It tends to be a sort of competition of who gets to speak the most, whose voice is louder. I think [that's] the way males collaborate. I've learned that I cannot do that in the same way; I can't speak as loudly…I've learned how to capitalize on strategic impact is what I would say and that has that has been very effective for me, but it does mean that, I had to be thoughtful about that and recognize how to navigate that, which I'm sure every individual does. I'm sure if you're a man, you're sort of, well, it's in your interest to think

> in the same way. It's just sort of in a minority position; it's a little more important that you're thoughtful about that.

Sabrina's account described her approach to navigating leadership as a woman in male-dominated situations, which included being intentional about how she presents herself and how she expresses her thoughts. Building on these experiences, Alice also reflected on how she often manages her communication style in response to gendered expectations in professional spaces:

> I'm a pretty direct person, partly because of where I grew up and partly because of my chosen profession. I find that particularly when dealing with certain individuals, primarily, older men, I have to temper that a little bit and I find I edit myself. I think that's something that is perhaps something we experience as women.

Despite these internal challenges, participants reframed these struggles as opportunities to grow, as persevering through those moments of doubt emerged a strategy used to address these internal obstacles. Participants demonstrated perseverance by continuing to engage in their professional responsibilities despite self-doubt, while simultaneously drawing on emotional intelligence to recognize, and manage these internal experiences without allowing them to derail their performance or long-term career goals. Sabrina shared learning to overcome barriers as her career progressed:

> Early in my leadership career, I probably felt there were barriers, but I don't think they're unique to being a woman. I think part of your leadership acumen is, as barriers present themselves, you have to think about how you overcome them, and whether that's work life balance.

Emily ended our interview reflecting on her positive approach to perseverance and demonstrated resilience by emphasizing that:

> [Women] are hardworking, kick-butt people. We consistently demonstrate a higher level of leadership satisfaction, so that speaks to who we are, how we are built, what we bring to the table. And all that comes with being an awesome and amazing human being as it relates to leadership. [Sometimes] you can do everything right and have all the credentials and sometimes things still might not work out with your favor. But continue to be resilient and bounce back at all costs, regardless of the challenges, regardless of the obstacles, regardless of the underrepresentation and leadership of the pay gaps and equities. In spite of all of that, the structures, the processes, the procedures, the policy that might seek to keep us on the margins that we could just press through that and adapt and be also amazing and show up in authentic and accountable ways.

Overall, the subtheme *Fighting the Battles* illustrates how participants navigated complex internal challenges throughout their careers. While experiences of imposter syndrome, self-doubt, and the impact of gender identity created hurdles, participants actively developed strategies to persevere and maintain confidence. Awareness of their identity as women shaped not only how they presented themselves in professional settings but also how they made career decisions, communicated, led teams, and advocated for themselves. Across interviews, participants emphasized reframing challenges as opportunities for growth, capitalizing on their unique perspectives, and demonstrating resilience in the face of systemic and personal obstacles.

Theme 4: Systemic Barriers Shape Women's Leadership Trajectories

While the subtheme Fighting the Inner Battles theme focused on women senior leaders' reflection on navigating internal barriers when asked to share stories on any barriers they encountered when advancing in their careers, the final theme, Systemic Barriers Shape Women's Leadership Trajectories shifts to the acknowledgement that societal and organizational barriers

exist and have been present in the participant's career development. Participants, however, have not let these barriers affect their advancement. Within this theme, participants shared organizational culture and workplace inequalities such as stereotyping, discrimination, salary inequality and unequal standards as examples of organizational barriers they have experienced or witnessed.

Challenging Society's Norms and Expectations

Nine participants reflected on how they internalized societal expectations on women's roles within an organization and in their leadership style. Gender stereotyping emerged as the most common societal barrier described by the participants as still prevailing in the workforce. Gender stereotypes were described as expectations on how women should "behave" as leaders, as well as comments made by coworkers. When asked how her identity as a female have influenced her career aspirations, Emily shared her thoughts on society's influence in gender stereotyping as follows:

> I think we have been socialized as it relates to gender, and I would argue, certainly other social identities like race and ethnicity that somehow because you are a woman either you have to wait longer, or women are too emotional… so there are definitely gender-based stereotypes that you are contending with… Women so often have to show up ten times better, running ten times faster, working ten times harder.

Emily's reflection highlights the persistence of gender stereotypes in the workplace. She also shared how she manages these stereotypes by "physically taking up space to ensure that I am seen, I am heard, I am valued." Expanding on Emily's experience, Alex described how the intersection of her race and gender shaped her perception of how others view her professional

qualifications. She reflected on moments questioning whether scrutiny on her leadership were based on her identity as a Black woman or from age-related perceptions:

> There have been times that I've wondered if I was questioned about a decision because I'm a Black Woman or because I appear younger, you know, depending on how my hair looks, I may appear younger. So there are times that I would have been questioned, if I was a man or a white man? I thought that, but I try not to stay there too long.

Alex's perspective adds to the discussion on how intersecting personalities shaped how others question her professional legitimacy. Henrietta shared similar frustrations regarding negative stereotypes and comments made in the workplace about women:

> There's a lot of negative stereotypes about women still. And it's just exhausting. And now that I'm older, like, if I have to hear one more person tell me they think it's funny to tell me a menopause joke. That's not funny.

Building on those narratives, Alice also shared her experience with gender stereotyping by noting that "I think that women get judged on the way they look a lot more, both by other women and by guys." Together, these experiences indicate that internalized societal expectations continue to be present in the workplace and influence how women navigate their professional environments. Alice situated societal expectations on women with working at a HEI located in the South by stating "There are expectations for how women should act more in the South than perhaps there are in the Northeast." Nora shared a similar statement, but noted society norms are shifting:

> I think that there was, particularly in the South, a different dynamic in terms of, maybe how certain people, not everybody and certainly not every man, but how certain people approached women in the workplace. But I think that's changed societally.

While Emily, Alice and Alex described how regional and societal norms shaped expectations for women in the workplace, Rachel reflected on recognizing instances in which she found herself perpetuating stereotypes about her female staff. She described making assumptions about the workloads that employees with children were able to manage in this story:

> I'll look at a new young female who I know has small children at home and I'll think, I can't put one more thing on that woman's plate. Well, I didn't ask her. She needs to be able to tell me that. And I've caught myself doing that. And I thought, no, I need to ask her if she wants to, I will make sure she understands she will never be penalized by her answer, but that I think she's smart. I think she's capable. But I also understand she's got responsibilities at home.

This reflection revealed how ingrained societal expectations about gender roles can be internalized even by those who are affected by similar situations, shaping how individuals interpret others' experiences, assign responsibility, and reproduce norms that ultimately sustain inequitable standards and self-blame.

In addition to gender stereotypes, participants referenced gender bias, and leadership perceptions as other societal barriers encountered at the workplace. Alice, for example, described experiencing gender bias during meetings with colleagues noting her ideas were overlooked until reiterated by a male college. She shared that "we'll say something in a meeting and then a man will say it two minutes later and be like, great idea and I'm sitting there saying, what? I just said the same thing." Emily described similar experiences where she perceived her voice was not being valued or heard when sharing ideas during a meeting, and reiterated the importance of emotional intelligence as sharing:

> Sometimes having ideas that, you know, it's your idea and then the next meeting or workforce group, or whatever the thing might be, a man says it and it's oh, my gosh, that's awesome. Like, hey, I said that at the last meeting that we were here last time that we were here. I do not think those are miss. I think those things are real. That has been my lived experience. It is not a misconception. It is not, oh you must have misunderstood. It is not any of that. I think having a high degree of emotional intelligence when that, when those challenges arise, that's really huge.

Emily's account highlights how gender bias can lead to devaluation on women's contributions to the workplace, requiring women leaders to draw on emotional intelligence and self-regulation to manage these dynamics. Building on Emily's experience, Jules expressed also feeling gender biases and leadership perceptions where leadership is often associated with men. She shared the following thought:

> Sometimes I think being a female can be a barrier. I see other leaders in [my field] that are men and they I know that they aren't working as many hours as I am. I know that they aren't, if I try to reach them after five, I never get a response. They don't respond on weekends or evenings. But if one of our campus partners needs something, they text me at any time and I respond. Have I created that [expectation]? I'm not sure of the answer, but I do think that yes, it's created. But it's also, I also almost feel like it's a societal change that we struggle to get over as women because, in my opinion, men have been favored in positions of leadership for a long time and as much as we keep trying to make changes in that space, there's still a barrier to making some of those changes, being seen as argumentative or being seen as if you speak your mind. Like those kinds of things are

> still, no matter how hard we try, I feel like those are barriers that women have a hard time getting above or over.

Rachel and Poppy also shared experiencing the barrier of leadership perception when feeling that peers believe they are not capable of handling leadership situations. When asked what challenges she had faced in her leadership journey, Rachel expressed the following:

> The biggest challenge I think that I have sometimes is because I'm a woman. Actually, one of the other board members or my president feels like they need to come to my rescue and they jump in too quick and I don't need them to come to my rescue. I'm fine, I can handle it.

Her story illustrated how gendered assumptions and expectations about leadership competence can undermine women's authority and autonomy. Similarly, Poppy described experiencing situations in the workplace where the prevailing assumption was that "the woman in the room isn't going to be able to step up and step in."

Societal expectations continue to shape women's experiences, influencing how they are perceived, and how they navigate professional spaces. Participants' reflections revealed that these expectations operate not only through external stereotypes and biases, but also through internalized norms that women may consciously or unconsciously reproduce. While some participants noted progress and shifting societal attitudes, their experiences underscore that expectations related to gender, race, age, and caregiving responsibilities remain embedded in organizational cultures. Participants also described organizational structures and practices that functioned as systemic barriers, which are described in the next subtheme.

Barriers Built into the System

The last subtheme in the finding is *Barriers Built into the System*, which emerged from participants discussing organizational-level barriers they have experienced in their professional journey. Less than half of the participants referenced a barrier at the organizational level, which may indicate organizations have made progress in adapting to the presence of women holding senior leadership roles. The barriers identified included unequal standards, workplace inequities and organizational cultures related to compensation and discrimination.

Unequal standards and workplace inequality were highlighted by four participants. This barrier occurs when women are held to different, often higher, performance standards than men. Daphne and Jules described experiencing unequal standards in the workplace early in their careers. Daphne explained her lived experience by sharing feeling like she was treated differently than her male peers as a reason for switching roles at one point early in her career. Jules also reflected on being treated differently that male coworkers and feeling compelled to work harder and exceed expectations in comparison to her male colleagues. She reflected:

> I will say that there were times early on in my career, I was hired at the same time as two other men, so two men and myself, feeling like I had to compete with them for the attention of my boss and feeling like I knew my work was good, but feeling like I always had to do more, put in more hours, put in more time.

While Daphne and Jules described experiencing unequal standards related to work performance, Cleo highlighted her frustration with unequal standards as it relates to how her behavior is interpreted. She explained being seen as frustrated in certain conversations when she is just being direct with her staff. She reflected on that as:

> If a man had been direct, would we have questioned it in there in his frustrations at all? No, we would have just accepted that he was being direct, and we would have moved on

from it. So, unfortunately, I do think that that impacts our day-to-day and how we're showing up in space or what people are saying or the reputation that we have on campus.

Other examples of workplace inequalities that emerged in the interviews included discrimination, exclusion from opportunities, salary inequalities, and, in some cases, a lack of a terminal degree. These barriers, however, were not prevalent in discussions with the participants. Daphne and Cleo, for example, shared their experiences of discrimination in the workplace. Daphne reflected on experience persistent discrimination in the workplace throughout her career by sharing that "I have dealt with situations where a male supervisor demonstrated favoritism to other males on staff, and the impact that that has is detrimental and quite patronizing. I've experienced that for several years." Cleo also reflected on a similar experience of being discriminated in the workplace by noting that "it is always very eye-opening or frustrating at the same time what men on the team are approached with versus what the women are approached with." Although not widely reported, Daphne and Cleo's stories underscore the continued presence of gendered inequality at HEI.

Being excluded from opportunities is another workplace inequality barrier that was mentioned only by Poppy, who noted "other thing that I would say might be an obstacle again is maybe the opportunities to be in certain spaces." She framed this barrier as how restricting access to spaces where decisions are being made can limit visibility, networking, and professional advancement. While Poppy identified exclusion from certain professional spaces as a barrier, this experience was not widely reflected across participants' narratives. Most women in this study described having access to professional opportunities, mentorship, and support systems that facilitated their advancement, suggesting that exclusion from decision-making spaces was not a prevalent barrier within this sample.

Salary inequality emerged as another organizational barrier experienced only by two participants, Cleo and Emily. Emily reflected on this barrier by sharing:

> One of the big [barriers] is around compensation from early on, even like I said, it's twenty five years ago, always been a thing , like, how is it that me and this guy over here have comparable education, expertise, skill set and so on and still you have a human resources that will see that somebody is earning say, 30% more, I mean, significant amounts, not quarters and dollars, but tens of thousands of dollars and can figure out how to justify that.

Echoing this experience, Cleo's reflected on similar disparities in compensation, noting that, those she often felt personally satisfied, comparison with male colleagues reveal persistent inequities. She described her experience as follows:

> I also question it from a salary perspective sometimes and where am I missing the boat here? When I look and compare, I'm satisfied and so I don't question it, but it is disheartening when you see your male peers moving up the financial ladder quicker than you are.

In addition to unequal standards and salary inequality, two participants also found that not having a terminal degree could prevent them from advancing in their careers if they remained in the HEI space. Henrietta, for example, started her career in HEI with a bachelor's degree, and quickly realized she could not advance without any graduate degrees. That led her to further her education and to complete her doctorate. Poppy, however, has a master's degree and has chosen not to pursue a doctorate. She stated that:

> I realized that, because of that, there are roles and responsibilities that I will never have access to because I didn't take that next step. And so, I just have to make peace with that

> and decide which was more important to me. But I do realize that by not pursuing that…it did automatically limit the roles that I would be considered for the future.

Given that all other participants held terminal degrees, barriers related to the absence of a terminal degree were not widely experienced within this sample.

Lastly, the only barrier related to organizational cultural practices mentioned by any of the participants was competition among women in the workplace. This barrier was only discussed by Alice and Nora, who described environments that fostered scarcity rather than collaboration. Alice, for example, shared:

> I've found women to be difficult as leaders and people who want to stamp on fingers when you're trying to crawl your way up the ladder. I'll see, what I would say is, conniving kind of attitudes sometimes, often from other women…we know what's going on and we know that there's this almost, you know, damsel in distress kind of behavior that's taking place and you're in between a rock and a hard place because, if you point it out, it makes you look like you're being horrible, but at the same time you can see the manipulation that's taking place.

Nora's experienced a similar dynamic with competition among women in her professional journey noting:

> I have observed in my career, the negative kind of word to describe it is the cat fighting, among women. I don't have any time for that. I think it's ridiculous. I can think of two women in my career who I felt like were always in a competition with everybody. It took me a long time, so I was kind of oblivious in both cases. It took me a while to figure out that they were in a race that I wasn't in.

Although some of the organizational barriers outlined in this subtheme were not frequently reported, they underscore that women in senior leadership roles continue to encounter and must navigate organizational challenges that can impede their advancement.

Conclusion

Chapter 4 presented the findings on the qualitative data from interviewing 14 women senior leaders at five public, R1, four-year, land-grant institutions in the Southeastern U.S. A description of each participant including their institution, their role at their institution, the number of years at their current role, the number of years employed at their current institution, and total number of years working in higher education was presented. The participants have spent anywhere from six to 26 years working at a HEI, and between one to nine years in the current senior leadership roles. Chapter 4 explored what motivated participants to begin their professional journey in higher education, what motivates them to pursue and grow in their roles and responsibilities, how they acquired the skills to become leaders in the field, and what societal, organizational, and internal challenges they have faced in their professional journey. These topics were analyzed through four major themes, which each theme also includes two subthemes.

Chapter 5 concludes this study with a discussion of how the findings relate to the three research questions presented in Chapter 1, as well as a discussion on how the findings relate to Deci and Ryan (1985)'s SDT. Chapter 5 also shares implications of this study in both practice and research, recommendations for future research opportunities, limitations, and concluding thoughts.

CHAPTER FIVE
DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how women senior administrative leaders at public, research intensive, four-year, land-grant institutions in the Southeastern U.S. described the experiences that motivated their careers, how their lived experiences influenced their career aspirations to pursue positions in senior administrative roles, and how they navigated the barriers and supports encountered along the way. This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do women in senior leadership roles at higher education institutions describe the experiences that motivated their careers?
2. How did the lived experiences of women senior leaders in higher education institutions influence their career aspirations and motivations to apply for senior university administrative roles?
3. How do women in senior leadership roles at higher education institutions describe the barriers and supports they experienced in advancing their careers?

In this final chapter, I use Deci and Ryan (1985)'s Self-determination Theory (SDT) as a theoretical framework to analyze the findings and guide the discussion on how women leaders described the experiences that motivated their careers, how their lived experiences within academic institutions influenced their aspirations to pursue senior administrative positions, and how they navigated the barriers and supports encountered along the way. I also explore how the findings relate to the three research questions and themes outlined in Chapter 4, and how they apply to the concepts of Deci and Ryan (1985)'s STD. I conclude this chapter by addressing limitations of this basic qualitative study, implications for practitioners and scholars, recommendations for future research, and concluding thoughts.

Discussion of the Findings

As reflected in this study's literature review, scholars have examined the gender inequality in senior administrative roles at HEI in the U.S despise an increase in women's educational achievements and efforts towards diversity in the 21st century (Cañas et al., 2019; Dahlvig & Longman, 2020; Ginsberg et al., 2019; Melidona et al., 2023). When discussing gender inequality in senior administrative roles at HEI, scholars have focused on addressing the leadership pipeline theory, which indicates how the number of women completing undergraduate and graduate degrees and entering the workforce at entry level roles has not translated into equitable representation at senior levels, with female administrators often remaining in low and mid-level positions (Bonebright et al., 2012; Kellerman & Rhode, 2014; White, 2005). Scholars have also identified societal, organizational and internal barriers such as gender stereotypes, leadership perceptions, lack of mentoring, salary inequality, imposter syndrome or work-life balance as factors shaping women's leadership trajectories and career aspirations (Chance, 2022; Dahlvig & Longman, 2020; Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016; Keohane, 2014). While many scholars have contributed to the body of research documenting barriers and gender inequality, fewer have examined the factors that influence the motivations, career aspirations and lived experiences of women who have advanced into senior administrative leadership roles (Hill et al., 2019; Madsen & Longman, 2020). Existing literature that has explored what motivates women to pursue senior administrative roles has focused on identifying defining moments during women's leadership journeys that motivated them to achieve success (Dahlvig & Longman, 2010), the importance of mentoring as a key resource in preparing women to advance to senior leadership roles at HEIs (Ballenger, 2010; Caton, 2007; Dahlvig, 2013), and the importance of developing a leadership identity and a sense of purpose to reach senior leadership roles (Ibarra et al., 2013; Madsen &

Longman, 2020). Scholars have identified that women are motivated by internalizing the identity of being a leader, fulfilling personal goals that are important to them, and developing a sense of purpose (Ibarra et al., 2013). The findings of this study contribute to the body of literature that highlights the motivations, and resilience of women who advance into senior leadership roles. By centering the voices of women who have successfully navigated leadership pathways, this study shifts the focus from examining what prevents women to reach senior leadership roles, to why and how women choose to lead, and how institutions might better support and cultivate future women leaders in higher education.

Throughout this study, I explored how women senior administration leaders' responses aligned to the following three research questions: (1) How do women in senior leadership roles at higher education institutions describe their experiences that motivated their careers? (2) How did the lived experiences of women senior leaders in higher education institutions influenced their career aspirations and motivations to apply for senior university administrative roles? and (3) How do women in senior leadership roles at higher education institutions describe the barriers and supports they experienced in advancing their careers? Findings from this study are discussed below, highlighting each research question in relationship to the themes and subthemes that emerged during the data collection process.

Research Question 1: How do women in senior leadership roles at higher education institutions describe the experiences that motivated their careers?

This study sought to expand the literature regarding women's motivators to pursue senior administrative leadership roles. The findings presented in Chapter 4 provided accounts on how the participants' experiences motivated their career trajectories through forming a leadership identity early in their lives, intrinsic motivators that encouraged them to lead, and professional

experiences throughout their careers. Themes one and two in the findings addressed how findings relate to the first research question.

The first theme, Motivation Rooted in Identity, Purpose and Foundations, described how the careers of women senior leaders in this study were shaped by early career defining moments, and career decisions that built the foundation of their professional trajectories. Women's careers were influenced by early childhood or adolescent experiences that helped them build a leadership identity, a sense of purpose, and foundational life and professional experiences. Participants' narratives of early leadership identity are in contrast with literature that questions women's leadership abilities. Scholars such as Keohane (2014) and Cozza and Hu (2022) addressed that the characteristics of women leaders have historically not been associated with strong leadership skills, that women are believed to lack leadership abilities, and that they have to fit their natural leadership style into the accepted models. Theme one does not explicitly address whether current HEIs define leadership as requiring stereotypically masculine qualities, but it demonstrates that participants in this study perceived themselves as leaders, have built a leadership identity since childhood, and were motivated to grow professionally. This lifelong investment in embracing leadership aligns with Dahlvig and Longman (2010) and Ibarra (2023)'s research, who described how building a leadership identity is a motivator for women to pursue senior leadership roles. Participants' motivation to lead emerged long before holding formal leadership titles, indicating that leadership identity, rather than position, was central to their career motivation.

As described in theme one, most participants did not start their professional careers in higher education. Instead, they were motivated to transition from other fields because of a desire to work in an environment that supported their personal values and purpose. Rather than entering a career in higher education with explicit aspirations for senior leadership, most women

articulated that their motivations evolved through a commitment to service, advocacy, and institutional mission. Participants' decisions to transition into higher education from other fields represented defining motivational moments, as described by Dahlvig and Longman (2010), as women sought careers that aligned more closely with their values, personal circumstances, and desire for meaningful impact. These findings also align with Ibarra et al. (2013)'s research, which found that women assume leadership roles by fulfilling personal goals that are important to them, and focusing on personal purpose, as well as Chance (2022) and Diehl (2014) studies, who outlined the importance of aligning with one's purpose as a motivator for women to seek leadership roles.

Theme one also highlighted how internal motivators have influenced the career trajectories of women to senior leadership roles. Participants described being internally motivated by a desire to help others, working and supporting students, job satisfaction and achieving professional goals through a strong growth mindset, and a commitment to professional and personal development. These internal motivators remained constant throughout the participant's leadership journey, with only two participants indicating they were motivated early in their career by financial gains. These findings align with existing literature suggesting that women are often motivated by values-based and relational factors rather than external reasons like salary, power and status (Ferris & Waldron, 2022; Madsen & Longman, 2020). Similarly, Keohane (2014) and M. O'Connor (2018) found that women seek senior leadership roles to make a difference, helping others, and growing professionally. Participant's emphasis on personal drive, sense of achievement professional growth, and continuous learning further confirms research by M. O'Connor (2018) and Diehl (2014), who outlined internal drivers as key motivators in women's leadership advancement.

The findings in theme one also described participants as being motivated by the mission of the HEI where they work, as some participants were specifically motivated by the mission of land grant institutions. These narratives are consistent with transformational leadership theory, research by Eagly et al. (2003), who discussed the importance of communicating the organization's vision and desire to accomplish that mission as a quality of transformational leaders. Women in this study demonstrated transformational leadership characteristics grounded in purpose, service, and institutional commitment.

Like theme one, theme two, Leadership Growth Through Learning, Development and Support Systems, also supports the first research question by illustrating how women's motivations to seek leadership roles were reinforced by learning opportunities, and mentoring relationships. Participants frequently described that encouragement from supervisors or mentors played a pivotal role in shaping their leadership motivation. This confirms existing literature emphasizing the importance of mentoring and sponsoring women's advancement in higher education leadership (Alexander, 2023; Ballenger, 2010; Keohane, 2020). Ballenger's (2010) research similarly highlighted the influence of mentors in women's professional journey, identifying defining moments and themes during women's leadership journeys that motivated them to achieve success. One theme in her study emphasized the impact of support from one person who encouraged women in her study to pursue leadership roles a key motivator in encouraging women to advance to senior leadership roles (Ballenger, 2010). Consistent with these findings, participants in the current study described how being recognized by others as capable leaders reinforced their confidence and willingness to pursue roles of increased responsibility. This study extends existing literature by demonstrating that mentoring did not merely facilitate career advancement, but also shaped women's leadership identity by

influencing how they perceived themselves as leaders and strengthening their motivation to pursue senior administrative roles. Mentors also provided access to job opportunities that participants would have otherwise missed.

Overall, the findings both confirm and extend the literature reviewed in chapter two. Findings in themes one and two illustrated that women's careers have been motivated by early leadership identity formation, professional experiences and value-driven career decisions that reinforced their sense of readiness to lead. Early professional opportunities and the support and encouragement from mentors played a critical role in strengthening women's motivations to lead and advance in their careers. Participants described career transitions into higher education, moments of professional recognition by supervisors or mentors, and confidence gained through experience as motivating factors that influenced their leadership trajectories. Leadership identity often preceded formal leadership roles, as many participants viewed themselves as leaders long before holding administrative titles, suggesting that motivation was rooted in how participants see themselves and their readiness to lead, rather than positional authority. This study contributes to a new perspective of women senior leaders in HEIs that recognizes motivations to lead as driven by experiences, relationship and purpose, rather than positional ambition.

Research Question 2: How did the lived experiences of women senior leaders in higher education institutions influence their career aspirations and motivations to apply for senior university administrative roles?

The combined findings of' themes one, two, and three addressed research question two by illustrating that women's career aspirations were not shaped by a single decision point to reach a particular role at a HEI but developed over time through lived experiences. Rather than viewing career aspirations as a static moment where participants chose whether to apply or not apply for

particular roles, findings in the three themes touched on how career aspirations were shaped, strengthened or delayed through lived experiences such as career opportunities, mentorship and personal choices. Women's lived experiences within HEIs played a critical role in shaping the timing and nature of their leadership aspirations and have allowed them to develop and strengthen their leadership skills.

Theme one, Motivation Rooted in Identity, Purpose and Foundations, revealed that most women senior administrators in this study did not begin their careers with the explicit goal of reaching a particular role at their HEI, and most did not plan their career. This finding supports existing literature suggesting that women do not initially aspire to senior leadership roles and often lack a career planning to reach those roles (Cejda, 2008; Dahlvig & Longman, 2010; Lepkowski, 2009; Pasquerella & Clauss-Ehlers, 2017). Cejda (2008) further found that women's career aspirations are influenced by personal experiences throughout their careers, professional development opportunities available to them, internal promotions, and networking and mentors who have helped them along the way. His findings are supported by themes one and two, Leadership Growth Through Learning, Development and Support Systems, which captured how the participant's lived experiences, professional opportunities and support network systems have contributed to them learning the skills needed to become senior leaders.

Building on these findings, theme two illustrated how participants advanced despite the absence of career planning. Participants were able to advance in their career journeys through advancement opportunities provided to them. Many of the participants discussed benefiting from internal promotions throughout their careers and applying to their current senior administrative role after building the leadership skills and confidence to take on those roles. This finding differs from Hill and Wheat (2017)'s research, who stated that a lack of career planning has resulted in

women missing experiences in career mentorship to help them reach senior leadership roles. In contrast, senior administrators in this study identified influential mentors who helped their career progression.

Theme two also revealed limited access to professional training opportunities at participants' HEIs that supported the development of senior leadership skills. Instead, participants intentionally worked on their leadership skills to advance to the next role by taking on responsibilities outside their scope of work, thinking strategically about how to be part of their institution's mission, relying on their self-drive and confidence and learning through both positive and negative lived experiences. Ginsberg et al. (2019) addressed how a lack of formal professional development training programs may be promoting gender inequality in senior leadership roles at HEI. Their research suggested organizational changes that could address the challenges faced by women to advance in their careers, included establishing professional development programs. Melidona et al. (2023) also addressed the need for HEIs to invest in women-specific leadership development programs. This study's findings that participants experienced limited access to formal leadership development opportunities at HEI reinforces Ginsberg et al. (2019) and Melidona et al. (2023)'s recommendations that HEI need to invest in professional leadership opportunities.

While themes one and two highlighted access to opportunities and career growth, theme three, Internalized Challenges and Work-Life Realities Influence Career Decisions, reflected on how the lived experiences and challenges associated with managing family responsibilities have shaped participants' career aspirations. Theme three revealed that women balanced professional ambitions with personal commitments and often influenced the timing of the opportunities they pursued. Findings support the literature describing how family

responsibilities have the largest influence on women's career aspirations in HEI (Hill et al., 2019; Marshall, 2009; Wheat, 2012). Scholars have reported that women's career aspirations have been influenced by personal decisions such as choosing not to relocate their families, supporting their spouses' careers, or postponing advancing in their careers until their children were older (Hill et al., 2019; Lepkowski, 2009; Marshall, 2009; Wheat, 2012). Findings discussed under the subtheme Family Does Matter align with the literature, as participants described navigating dual-career households, pausing advancing in their careers or briefly leaving the workforce to raise their children, highlighting the significant influence family commitments had on the participant's career aspirations. Findings also align with Jones-Goodwin (2020), Lepkowski (2009) and Marshall's (2009) assertion that women may be professionally limiting themselves through their own choices of delaying their advancement to higher positions of leadership. Participant narratives also support Melidona et al. (2023)'s report that women aspired, applied and were appointed to the role of president later in life than men as some participants paused or briefly left their careers to fulfill family commitments indicates women take longer to begin senior administrative leadership roles.

In contrast to the Hill et al. (2019) and Wheat (2012)'s studies, which suggested women often choose to not relocate to support their families, theme three revealed that many participants have switched HEI throughout their careers. Participants described these moves as intentional decisions to acquire the skills needed to advance to other roles, or to seek roles at HEIs that aligned with their personal values. Though the findings do not explicitly indicate whether those relocations were always driven by the participant's careers or other family decisions, the narratives indicate relocation has benefited the participants in this study.

While much of the literature has framed the conflict of work-life balance as a barrier or constraint to women advancing in their careers, this study also provides a different perspective to the work-life family conflict. Women's narratives indicated they made intentional choices when leadership opportunities were pursued, accepted, or declined, and viewed their intentional choices to prioritize family as examples for their teams to demonstrate that it is acceptable to set boundaries and value a work–life balance. Participants' decisions to set boundaries emerged as a meaningful motivator that shaped women's leadership identity and career decisions. These intentional choices reinforced women's motivations to lead in ways that are authentic, and aligned with their values, rather than detracting them from their leadership aspirations.

Collectively, the findings across the three themes indicate that the career aspirations to apply for senior administrative roles of the participants in this study did not emerge from specific career intentions to reach particular roles. Instead, career aspirations developed over time through women's lived experiences within their HEI. Career aspirations were shaped by work-life realities, including caregiving responsibilities, and family considerations. Many participants intentionally delayed pursuing senior leadership until they felt personally and professionally prepared, reframing delay as a strategic and values-based decision rather than a lack of ambition. These findings further contribute to a strengths-based understanding of women's leadership aspirations in HEI, highlighting how the pursuit of senior administrative roles is shaped by intentional decisions and career development, and the result of lived experiences.

Research Question 3: How do women senior leadership roles at higher education institutions describe the barriers and supports they experienced in advancing their careers?

Findings in themes two, three and four address research question three, as participants identified a combination of systemic barriers and support systems that shaped their leadership trajectories. Participants' narratives revealed that advancement into senior leadership was not influenced by a single barrier, but a combination of support networks, managing internal challenges, remaining persistent and learning from organizational and societal barriers. The combined findings of the three themes confirm Diehl and Dzubinski (2016) and Lyness and Grotto's (2018) assertion that women who aspire to leadership roles face multilevel societal, organizational, and personal barriers to reach senior leadership administrative roles.

Within theme two, the subtheme The Power of People discussed how support systems, networking and mentoring have been fundamental to participant's professional growth of women senior leaders in this study. Supporting Ballenger (2010), Ginsberg et al. (2019) and Melidona et al. (2023)'s research, nearly every participant emphasized the importance of support systems in their advancement. The importance of mentoring has been well documented in the literature discussing the importance of building personal relationships and support systems by scholars such as Ferris and Waldron (2022) and Keohane (2020). Findings from this study align with the literature, as participants described formal mentoring from previous or current supervisors, mentoring others, and informal professional development opportunities as pivotal in building confidence, increasing visibility, and opening pathways to senior leadership. Notably, participants highlighted the impact of leaders who actively advocated for them and affirmed their readiness for advancement, and the importance for them to act as mentors to others as a way

to give back and support the development of their staff. This finding supports research by Ferris and Waldron (2022), who also addressed how part of women's approach to mentoring is to "pay it forward" (p. 85).

Besides formal mentoring, informal networks such as personal relationships, interactions with peers and building trustworthy relationships have also been critical for the participant's careers. Findings indicate that women in senior leadership roles are looking for trusted individuals they can share challenging situations with and get guidance on how to approach those situations. This aligns with Ballenger (2010) and Keohane (2020) who argued that women's advancement often depends on trusted advocates and relationships, particularly in male-dominated institutions.

Consistent with existing research, theme three, Internalized Challenges and Work-Life Realities Influence Career Decisions, and Systemic Barriers Shape Women's Leadership Trajectories, revealed how participants discussed internalized challenges such as work-life balance, self-doubt, imposter syndrome, and hesitation to self-advocate, which influenced their readiness to pursue senior roles (Dahlvig, 2013; Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016; Melidona et al., 2023; Sandberg, 2015). As mentioned previously, participant's lived experiences and challenges associated with managing family responsibilities have shaped participants' career aspirations and often influenced the timing of the opportunities they pursued. In contrast to literature discussing the work-life balance, participants did not discuss family commitments as a barrier to their careers, but as a decision factor on how they chose to move towards higher levels of responsibility. Participants also demonstrated strategic decision-making and self-awareness, reframing delayed advancement not as lack of ambition but as intentional choices shaped by personal and professional priorities.

Imposter syndrome and self-doubt were reported by participants and aligns with research by Diehl and Dzubinski (2016) into barriers and obstacles that prevent women's advancement to senior leadership roles in HEI. Participants mentioned how imposter syndrome does not affect men as much as women, and feelings of self-doubt were intensified in male-dominated situations such as meetings with colleagues, aligning with assertions by Longman and Anderson (2016) and Sandberg (2015) that imposter syndrome is a barrier to leadership aspirations more often felt by women than men.

Theme three also discussed how participants were often aware of their gender identity and were intentional about how they presented themselves at work, their communication style, leadership approaches and advocating for themselves. While previous literature by Diehl and Dzubinski (2016) and Ibarra et al. (2013) addressed that women often attempt to remove gender from the workplace equation and may not fully recognize how gender dynamics shape professional experiences, participants in this study not only discussed being aware of how gender influences their work environment, but mentioned using these moments as opportunities to grow professional and engaging in emotional intelligence to manage these internal barriers. Their ability to navigate and learn from challenging experiences through resilience and perseverance aligns with findings by Chance (2022), who mentioned that women are fueled by adversity to achieve their goals. Participants focused on learning from experiences and lead with positive perspectives to grow professionally.

The last theme, Systemic Barriers Shape Women's Leadership Trajectories, confirmed that systemic societal and organizational barriers remain embedded in HEI. Participants' accounts of navigating societal barriers included differences in leadership expectations between man and women, and gender stereotypes echo decades of research on gendered organizations

(Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016; Keohane, 2014; Niemi, 2020). Participants highlighted that stereotypes and gender bias prevail in the workforce with assumptions about expectations on how women should behave, or comments made by coworkers, and confirms scholars such as Dahlvig and Longman (2010) or Chance (2022). Participants also referenced leadership perceptions as other societal barriers encountered at the workplace. Importantly, the findings suggest that while individuals recognized facing barriers, participants did note progress and shifting societal attitudes. The experiences discussed in theme four underscored that expectations related to gender, race, age, and caregiving responsibilities remain embedded in organizational cultures.

Theme four also revealed participants experienced organizational barriers such as work inequalities, unequal standards, exclusion from opportunities, and salary inequalities. These barriers were identified by Diehl and Dzubinski (2016) and Niemi (2020), among other scholars. Competition among women was discussed by two participants because of the lack of female representation in senior leadership roles. Diehl and Dzubinski (2016) listed competition among women, or queen bee effect, as an organizational barrier in HEI, but this barrier was not prevalent in this study. Overall, organizational barriers were reported by less than half of the participants, underscoring that, though women in senior leadership roles continue to encounter and navigate organizational challenges that can impede their advancement, progress has been made to reduce the occurrence and influence of these barriers.

Collectively, these themes directly address the third research question by illustrating how women senior leaders described both the barriers and supports they experienced while advancing their careers. The findings also align closely with the literature presented in chapter two, particularly research on organizational, societal, and internal barriers, while also extending the

literature by offering positive, strength-based narratives that emphasize women's agency, motivation, and strategic navigation of inequitable systems. The narratives in theme two directly addressed how women senior leaders in this study experienced support through mentoring relationships and informal networks. These supports systems were described as critical to the participant's advancement through encouragement and building the skills to succeed. Theme three captured how internal barriers shaped the participants' leadership decisions. Lastly, theme four addressed organizational and societal barriers, demonstrating how institutional systems have shaped women's leadership trajectories. Women were not held back by these barriers but manage them to build emotional intelligence and persevere in their professional growth.

Discussion of Conceptual Framework

The findings from this study were examined through the lens of Deci and Ryan (1985) SDT's, which indicate that motivation is shaped by the fulfillment of three psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Deci and Ryan (1985) defined the need for autonomy as the need following one's behavior as one's own as opposed to being controlled by external forces. When the need for autonomy is satisfied, motivation to perform is intrinsic. The basic need for competence refers to the internal motivator to feel effective and capable of improving one's abilities, to meet challenges, and achieve outcomes Deci and Ryan (1985). Lastly, the need for relatedness refers to people's need to have meaningful connections to others Deci and Ryan (1985). Participants' narratives in this study reflected the three core components of SDT as discussed below.

Findings from theme one are consistent with research by Ibarra et al. (2013) and Diehl (2014), as well as Deci and Ryan (1985) SDT's psychological need for autonomy. Participants assumed leadership in response to internal motivators and described working at HEI with

missions that align with the participant's personal goals and values. Autonomy was evident in participants' intentional career choices, including decisions to pursue or delay leadership roles based on personal values and life circumstances. Similarly, findings in theme three, Internalized Challenges and Work-Life Realities Influence Career Decisions, further reflected the psychological need for autonomy, as work-life considerations shaped women's autonomy, as women navigated career decisions in ways that balanced professional goals with personal responsibilities. Participants exercised autonomy in making career decisions aligned with their life circumstances while simultaneously seeking opportunities to build competence through professional development and leadership experiences. When institutions supported these needs, women were more likely to pursue senior leadership roles.

The psychological needs for competency and relatedness were evident in the findings discussed in themes two and three. In the subtheme Building the Leadership Toolkit, participants described being motivated to work in an environment that allowed them to improve their skill and abilities, expand their leadership abilities, and gain confidence over time. Competence emerged through the participants' accounts on continuous learning, professional development, and increasing confidence over time, often supported by mentoring and leadership experiences. Findings in theme three also aligned with the psychological need for competence outlined by Deci and Ryan (1985), as experiences of imposter syndrome and self-doubt threatened participants' sense of competence, prompting strategies like perseverance and reflective self-talk to maintain confidence.

Lastly, the psychological need for relatedness emerged in the subtheme The Power of People within theme two. Participants reflected on the importance of forming meaningful relationships in their work environment and finding mentorship. Relatedness was reflected in the

importance of relationships, mentoring networks, and a sense of belonging and support within and across institutions. Conversely, the examples of barriers described by participants in theme four, Systemic Barriers Shape Women 's Leadership Trajectories, can constrain the psychological need for and relatedness, as described by Deci et al. (1985), by creating working environments where women can feel disconnected from colleagues. Stereotypes and unequal treatment can reduce the sense of belonging and support. Organizational inequalities can limit opportunities and shape career trajectory.

From a SDT perspective, participant's career aspirations and motivations reflected intrinsic motivation, driven by internal values and a sense of purpose rather than external rewards or titles. These findings support prior research indicating that women's leadership motivations are frequently connected to having meaningful relationships (Nicklin & Segool, 2022), alignment with personal values (Dahlvig & Longman, 2010), and a sense of accomplishment (Northouse, 2007) rather than extrinsic motivators. Although leadership roles at HEI are structured to fulfill extrinsic motivators such as titles and increased compensation, participant's narrative suggest that motivations to reach those roles are influenced by internal factors. Women internalize personal and professional values rather that titles. From a SDT point of view, institutions that support autonomy, competence, and relatedness create conditions for sustained, self-determined motivation, increasing women's willingness to pursue senior leadership roles. Ultimately, women's leadership motivation in this study was sustained not by external incentives, but by institutional contexts that supported autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Summary of the Discussion

This basic qualitative study explored how 14 women senior administrative leaders at five public, research intensive, four-year, land-grant institutions in the Southeastern U.S. described the experiences that motivated their careers, how their lived experiences influenced their career aspirations to pursue positions in senior administrative roles, and how they navigated the barriers and supports encountered along the way. Using Deci and Ryan's (1985) SDT as a guide, this study examined how women's motivations to lead align SDT's three psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness.

The findings of this study both confirm and extend existing literature on women's leadership in higher education. Consistent with prior research, participants' experiences reflected the continued presence of societal, organizational, and internal barriers that shape women's leadership trajectories (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016; Kellerman & Rhode, 2017). Rather than focusing on the barriers that prevent women to reach senior leadership, this study emphasizes why and how women choose to lead, and how institutions might better support and cultivate future women leaders in higher education. This study also extends the narrative in the current literature by highlighting women's intrinsic motivations, sense of purpose, and support systems to become leaders, which have been less emphasized in the literature. Women in this study reflected developing a leader early in their childhood, being intentional about developing their professional skills, and relying on support systems, resilience and self-drive to progress in their careers. Becoming a senior administrative leader emerged as an ongoing process grounded in deliberately developing the right skills to lead, pursuing growth opportunities, aligning personal values with institutional missions, and contributing to the strategic mission of the institution. Findings also challenge existing literature suggesting women lack inherent leadership abilities

and tend to adjust their leadership style into the leadership models accepted at HEI. Instead, this study contributes to a positive, strength-based perspective of women senior leaders in HEIs that recognizes motivations to lead as driven by experiences, relationship and purpose, rather than positional ambition. The findings offer important implications for how higher education institutions can better support, develop, and sustain future women leaders.

Implications for Practice and Research

Although progress has been slow, women have increased their representation at senior administrative leadership roles at HEI in the U.S. This study centers on the lived experiences of women currently serving in senior administrative roles at public, research intensive, four-year, land-grant institutions in the Southeastern U.S. The findings of this study have several implications for both practitioners and scholars at higher education leaders and institutions looking to increase the representation of women in senior administrative roles. Institutions can adopt strategies to develop women leaders by focusing on understanding women's motivations to lead and invest in leadership development processes. The findings and their implications for research and practice are presented below.

Practitioners

The findings from this study suggest recommendations on how institutions can support women who want to advance in their careers to become senior administrative leaders at a HEI, as well as implications for women who aspire to senior leadership roles. Narratives in the findings showed women have strong leadership skills that have been shaped by their experiences, values and sense of purpose. Through their experiences, women lead using transformational styles through building relationships, collaboration and support. Institutions should recognize the importance of these values and adapt to transformational leadership styles rather than traditional

hierarchical styles. Supervisors and other leaders play a role in shaping the message sent to women aspiring to leadership roles by understanding that leadership is an on-going process, it is acceptable to learn on the job, and different leadership styles are valued.

The findings revealed that HEI have not invested in formal leadership development programs to grow leaders. Institutions should develop leadership programs to teach and encourage women to lead in ways that feels authentic to them, including valuing collaboration, flexibility and mentoring. These programs should be ongoing learning opportunities, rather than one-time workshops, that will support women's need for competence. Additionally, to support women's need for autonomy, women need to have the option to have flexible career paths that will allow them to grow as leaders. Institutions should recognize that leadership aspirations may develop over time and provide multiple, flexible pathways into senior leadership.

Mentorship and building relationships played a critical role in the professional journey of women in this study. Women would benefit by institutions helping them to build strong professional relationships by creating peer groups, leadership circles, structured mentorship programs, or women's networks to help women feel supported and connected. These mentors can provide career advice and guidance but also recommend women for leadership roles and opportunities, helping to open doors to other women. Creating these groups would also be beneficial for women working in male-dominated fields who may feel isolated by being the only woman in the room.

Even though this study focused on motivation, the findings suggest that a combination of societal, organizational and internal barriers still affect women's career paths. Institutions need to consider what they are implicitly telling women about leadership through policies, expectations, and everyday practices. When leadership roles are associated with long hours, constant

availability, and sacrifices to personal life, women become discouraged to aspire to roles of growing responsibility.

The women in this study showed strong motivations and commitment to their careers, but they were also careful in how they progressed in their professional journey until they felt ready, or their family responsibilities allowed them to pursue roles of increasing responsibilities. Institutions should consider offering flexible work options to support work-life balance and set realistic expectations. When senior leaders model these practices, they are examples to others that leadership and work-life can be balanced.

Lastly, this study also provided insights for women who aspire to senior administrative roles in HEI. The women in this study described actions and mindsets that supported their professional growth that may be beneficial for other women navigating similar career paths. First, women may benefit from seeing leadership as a developmental process rather than a position that requires full readiness from the start. Participants often described growing into leadership over time, learning through experience, and developing confidence as their responsibilities increased. Waiting to feel completely prepared may delay advancement, while being open to learning on the job can support leadership growth. Also, being intentional about skill development is an important strategy. Women should actively seek and ask for opportunities and make career goals clear to their supervisors. Women should also lean into building and maintaining relationships with mentors and peers who would help them navigate challenges and sustain motivation. Finally, findings suggest that women should trust their own abilities, develop confidence, reflect on their experiences, and embrace an authentic approach to leadership that reflects their values and personalities.

Together, these implications highlight the shared responsibility of institutions and individuals in supporting women's leadership development and advancing gender equity in senior administrative roles.

Scholars

This study expanded the literature by further exploring the motivations and resilience of women by centering the voices of women who have successfully navigated leadership pathways at public, research intensive, four-year, land-grant institutions in the Southeastern U.S. While existing literature has focused on discussing the barriers to advancement, this study highlights women's motivations and leadership identity development. Future research should continue to use positive, strength-based approaches that focus on why and how women choose to pursue senior leadership roles. Scholars should also further examine the role of intrinsic motivators, sense of purpose and leadership identity development among women in HEI. Researchers may benefit from exploring how women's motivations evolve at different stages in their careers, and how these motivations influence decisions to pursue, delay, or decline senior leadership roles.

Future research should expand the scope of the participants to study women's leadership experiences across different types of institutions, including community colleges, private institutions, minority-serving institutions, and institutions in other geographic regions. Expanding the site and participants under study may reveal how institutional context influences women's leadership motivations and opportunities.

In addition, this study focused on how the participant's identity as female influenced their career motivation and aspirations to senior administrative roles. Further research should expand the scope of the participants to study women's leadership experiences across different types of institutions.

This study also demonstrates the value of using SDT as a theoretical framework to understand women's leadership motivation. Scholars could build on this study by applying SDT to other leadership levels, such as middle-managers, other populations, or other types of institutions. Researchers could also focus on looking at how institutional practices and polices support or undermine the needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness for women leaders.

Collectively, these implications suggest that future research on women's leadership in higher education should move beyond barrier-focused narratives and continue to explore motivation, identity, and institutional context as central components of women's leadership development.

Recommendations for Practice and Research

Throughout this study, women in senior administrative roles reflected on what motivated their careers, and the motivations to advance as senior leaders at their HEI. Their insights provided valuable information to other women who aspire to similar roles, ultimately improving gender inequality at HEI. Building on the implications for practice and research, this section offers specific recommendations for future research on women's leadership aspirations and motivations to senior administrative roles in HEI. The recommendations are grounded in the findings and limitations of this study and aim to guide future researchers in advancing the literature in this area.

Practitioners

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations for practice are offered to support women's advancement into senior administrative leadership roles in HEI. These recommendations address actions that institutions and women can take to create more supportive leadership environments, as well as strategies that may benefit women who aspire to senior

leadership roles. Recommendations focus on leadership development, organizational culture and building support systems that align with women's motivations to become senior leaders.

HEI should recognize the value that women's leadership strengths bring to senior administrative roles. The findings indicate women's leadership are shaped by their lived experiences, values, and sense of purpose. Institutions should create space for leadership approaches that emphasize collaboration, relational practices, and authenticity. Institutions should also invest in formal, ongoing leadership development programs designed to encourage women to become future leaders at their institutions. These programs should be sustained learning opportunities that support skill development over time. Supervisors and senior leaders should reinforce the message that leadership development is an on-going process.

Institutions should also strengthen mentoring, sponsorship and professional networks for women. The findings highlight the importance of relationships in supporting women's leadership advancement, and creating structured mentoring programs, leadership circles and peer groups can help women feel supported and connected.

Finally, women who aspire to senior administrative roles are encouraged to view leadership as a developmental process rather than a position requiring full readiness from the outset. Being intentional about skill development, actively seeking opportunities, building strong mentoring relationships, and embracing authentic leadership styles aligned with personal values may support leadership growth and advancement. The responsibility for growing the next generation of women leaders is a shared responsibility between the institutions and the women.

Scholars

As demonstrated in the findings, scholars are encouraged to shift their focus from examining only the barriers that prevent women to advance to senior leadership roles, to a

strength-based approach to understanding why and how women choose to pursue senior leadership roles. Future research should focus on areas that can continue understanding women's motivations to lead, leadership development, and advancement to senior leadership roles.

Future research should examine women's leadership development across different career stages using longitudinal research designs. Following women over time may provide insight into how leadership identity, motivation, and aspirations evolve and how women make decisions to pursue, delay, or decline senior leadership roles. Scholars should also study the motivations and career aspirations of women to senior leadership roles through other qualitative methods such as narrative inquiry, or case studies, or through quantitative and mixed-methods research designs.

Additional research could expand this study to different participants and different types of institutions such as women leaders from community colleges, private institutions, minority-serving institutions, and institutions in different geographic regions to better understand how context influences leadership motivations and opportunities. Researchers should also examine the role of intersecting identities in shaping women's leadership experiences, and explore how race, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, and family status influence leadership motivations, access to opportunity, and advancement pathways. Lastly, researchers should also apply SDT in additional contexts to further examine its usefulness in higher education leadership research.

These recommendations offer clear directions for future research that can build on this study's findings and further advance scholarship on women's leadership in higher education.

Concluding Thoughts

Throughout this study, I explored the career motivations, aspirations and lived experiences of women senior administrative leaders at five public, research intensive, four-year, land-grant institutions in the Southeastern U.S. By centering the voices of women who have successfully navigated leadership trajectories, this research contributes a strength-based perspective to the literature on women's leadership in higher education, moving beyond deficit narratives and toward understanding purpose, identity, and motivation. This research calls for further understanding why and how women choose to lead, and for HEI to adjust their traditional expectations for career paths to senior administrative leadership roles.

As a middle-manager professional at a public, research intensive, four-year, land-grant institution in the Southeastern U.S, this research validated my own path to leadership and providing insight into how women can continue to grow and succeed in leadership roles. I interviewed 14 women regarding their lived experiences and career motivations, how they felt about their paths, their challenges, decisions they made along their journey, and their support systems. I wanted to better understand the motivations or roadblocks that allowed them to succeed, and to reach their senior leadership roles. Through sharing these stories of women in senior leadership, institutions have a chance to learn from deeply personal stories from women across the Southeastern U.S on how their work environments and challenges affected their lived experiences. For other women, these stories are a glimpse into how women can understand that leadership is not a linear process, but an ongoing effort to challenge ourselves, learn from experiences, being open to opportunities and embracing authentic leadership.

Ibarra et al. (2013) argued that leadership is developed through experience and identity work rather than achieved through position alone. As I interviewed the women in this study, it

became clear that these women made personal, intentional decisions regarding their career paths and their ability to serve in a position where they felt they would make a difference. These women were motivated by making a difference and supporting others, rather than title or salary. Listening to these women share their stories reinforced my belief that leadership is rooted in purpose, service, and intention. Women have the power to shape institutions in meaningful ways. Ultimately, the stories shared in this study remind us that leadership grounded in purpose and service has the power to create lasting changes in higher education.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

RECRUITMENT COMMUNICATION

Subject: Interview of women's motivations and aspirations at higher education institutions in public, R1, land-grant institutions in the Southeastern United States.

Dear Prospective Participant:

My name is Maria Isabel Martinez, and I am a Ph.D. candidate in the Higher Education Administration program at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. I am conducting a research titles "A Qualitative Study of Women's Live Experiences, Career Aspirations and Motivations at Higher Education Institutions" where I am exploring the career experiences of women in senior administrative roles at public, R1, land-grant institutions in the southeastern United States.

As someone who fits this profile, your insights would be incredibly valuable to this study. I would like to invite you to participate in a one-on-one virtual interview via Zoom, lasting approximately 60 minutes. The purpose of the interview is to better understand the challenges and successes women experience in senior leadership in higher education. If you meet the following criteria, I would be honored to include your voice in the study:

- Identify as a woman
- Currently work full-time in a senior administrative role at your institution.

The results of this study will be published in my dissertation. However, no personally identifying information will be included, and all shared information will remain confidential. Pseudonyms will be used in all transcripts and reports to protect your identity. Participation is entirely voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. There are minimal risks associated with this study, primarily the time commitment and the possibility of discomfort when discussing difficult or emotional experiences.

If you agree to participate, please review the attached inform consent form and reply to this email with a brief confirmation such as: "I have read the consent form and agree to participate in the study." This document outlines the purpose of the study, what participation involves, potential risks and benefits, and how your privacy will be protected.

Once I receive your confirmation, I'll follow up to schedule a time that works best for you.

If you have any questions or would like to participate, please feel free to contact me at (352) 256-5447 or mmarti85@utk.edu. You may also contact my committee chair:

- Dr. Pamella Angelle, pangelle@utk.edu,

- Dr. Mary Dueñas, mduenas@utk.edu.

Questions concerning the protection of human participants in research can be addressed by contacting the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chair of the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, at (865) 974-7697, utkirb@utk.edu.

Thank you for considering this invitation. Your voice and experience could make an important contribution to this research.

APPENDIX B

COMMUNICATION TO SCHEDULE INTEVIEW

Subject: Scheduling Your Interview – Women in Senior Higher Ed Leadership Study

Dear _____:

Thank you again for agreeing to participate in the research study for my dissertation titled "A Qualitative Study of Women's Live Experiences, Career Aspirations and Motivations at Higher Education Institutions." I'm excited to include your voice in this important work. By sharing your experience, you will contribute to the understanding of the career paths, leadership experiences, and institutional barriers or supports faced by women in senior administrative roles at public, R1, land-grant institutions. Your stories may help raise awareness of the unique challenges and successes of women in senior administrative roles in higher education.
I would like to schedule your 60-minute Zoom interview at a time that is most convenient for you. Please select a day and time through the following link (_link provided_).

As a reminder, your participation is voluntary, and you may skip any questions or withdraw at any time without penalty.

Should you have any questions about this research or your participation in the study, I can be reached at (352) 256-5447 or mmarti85@utk.edu. You may also reach out to my faculty advisors:

- Dr. Pamella Angelle, pangelle@utk.edu,
- Dr. Mary Dueñas, mduenas@utk.edu.

Questions concerning the protection of human participants in research can be addressed by contacting the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chair of the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, at (865) 974-7697, utkirb@utk.edu.

Thank you in advance for your assistance, and I look forward to talking to you soon

Maria Isabel Martinez, PhD Candidate

University of Tennessee, Knoxville

APPENDIX C

INTERNATIONAL REVIEW (IRB) CONSENT FORM

Consent for Research Participation

Research Study Title: A Qualitative Study of Women's Lived Experiences, Career Aspirations and Motivations at Higher Education Institutions

Researcher(s): Maria Isabel Martinez, PhD Candidate University of Tennessee, Knoxville
Dr. Pamella Angelle, University of Tennessee, Knoxville
Dr. Mary Dueñas, University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Why am I being asked to be in this research study?

We are asking you to be in this research study because of your role and title at your institution matches the criteria of this research as a senior leader with one of the following titles at a public, R1, land-grant, public institutions in the southeastern U.S: President, Chancellor, Senior Vice President, Vice President, Associate Vice President, Assistant Vice President, Chief of [Department or Unit], Vice Provost, Vice Chancellor, Senior Associate Vice Chancellor, Associate Vice Chancellor, Assistant Vice Chancellor, Associate Chief Information Officer, or Chief Information Officer.

What is this research study about?

The purpose of the research study is to explore how women's lived experiences in higher education institutions have influenced and motivated women's career aspirations at public, R1, land-grant institutions in the southeastern U.S. In addition, I will explore how those experiences have influenced women's motivations to apply for senior university administrative roles, as well as the barriers and supports women have experienced when advancing in their careers.

How long will I be in the research study?

If you agree to be in the study, your participation will last for less than 1 hour.

What will happen if I say "Yes, I want to be in this research study"?

If you agree to be in this study, we will ask you to participate in a one-hour Zoom interview at a day and time that is convenient for you. Your participation is entirely voluntary. You may decline to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Your responses will be kept confidential, and no identifying information will be included in the published results

What happens if I say "No, I do not want to be in this research study"?

Being in this study is up to you. You can say no now or leave the study later. Either way, your decision won't affect your employment and your relationship with the researchers or the University of Tennessee.

What happens if I say "Yes" but change my mind later?

Even if you decide to be in the study now, you can change your mind and stop at any time. If you decide to stop before the study is completed, contact the researcher and/or faculty advisors via email to withdraw from the study. Any information already collected will be destroyed and will not be included in the analysis.

Are there any possible risks to me?

It is possible that someone could find out you were in this study or see your study information, but we believe this risk is small because of the procedures we use to protect your information. These procedures are described later in this form.

Are there any benefits to being in this research study?

We do not expect you to benefit from being in this study. Your participation may help us to learn more about the career paths, leadership experiences, and institutional barriers or supports faced by women in senior leadership roles at public, R1, land-grant institutions. We hope the knowledge gained from this study will benefit others in the future.

Who can see or use the information collected for this research study?

We will protect the confidentiality of your information by using a code key linking participant's real names and institutional affiliations to assigned pseudonyms. This code key will be used only for organizational purposes and to ensure accurate tracking of participant information. Code key will be stored separately from all research data, accessible only to me, and deleted after data analysis is done.

If information from this study is published or presented at scientific meetings, your name and other personal information will not be used.

Recorded data will be transcribed using Zoom's transcription services and user data may be used for machine learning for the purposes of testing, tuning, optimizing, validating, or otherwise enhancing the AI tool that powers the service. Please note that Zoom may update their Terms of Service without notifying the investigators or you, which may affect how your data is stored in the future.

We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information or what information came from you. Although it is unlikely, there are times when others may need to see the information we collect about you. These include:

- People at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville oversee research to make sure it is conducted properly.

- Government agencies (such as the Office for Human Research Protections in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services), and others responsible for watching over the safety, effectiveness, and conduct of the research.
- If a law or court requires us to share the information, we would have to follow that law or final court ruling.

What will happen to my information after this study is over?

We will keep your information for possible use in future research. Your name and other directly identifying information will be kept secure and stored separately from the research data collected in this study.
We will not share your research data with other researchers.

Will I be paid for being in this research study?

You will not be paid for being in this study.

Will it cost me anything to be in this research study?

It will not cost you anything to be in this study.

What else do I need to know?

We may need to stop your participation in the study without your consent if you no longer meet the study's eligibility requirements, or the study is stopped for any reason.

Who can answer my questions about this research study?

If you have questions or concerns about this study, or have experienced a research related problem or injury, contact the researchers, Maria Isabel Martinez, **mmarti85@utk.edu** or faculty advisors: Dr. Pamella Angelle, **pangelle@utk.edu**, and Dr. Mary Dueñas, **mduenas@utk.edu**.
For questions or concerns about your rights or to speak with someone other than the research team about the study, please contact:
Institutional Review Board
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville
Phone: 865-974-7697
Email: utkirb@utk.edu

STATEMENT OF CONSENT

I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the chance to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have more questions, I have been told who to contact. By signing this document, I am agreeing to be in this study. I will receive a copy of this document after I sign it.

Name of Adult Participant Signature of Adult Participant Date

Researcher Signature (to be completed at time of informed consent)
I have explained the study to the participant and answered all of his/her questions. I believe that he/she understands the information described in this consent form and freely consents to be in the study.

Name of Research Team Member Signature of Research Team Member
Date

APPENDIX D

SEMI-STRUCTTURE INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. Can you briefly describe your current leadership role and how you came into it?
2. Can you describe key experiences, people, or turning points that influenced your decision to take on a leadership role?
3. What aspects of your lived experience in higher education shaped your view of leadership or your readiness to lead?
4. What motivated you to pursue leadership in higher education?
    - Follow-up questions if not mentioned:
        - Was there a turning point or defining moment in your leadership journey?
        - Did any mentors influence your career aspirations?
5. How have your motivations as a leader changed over time, if at all?
6. How did your identity as a woman (and any other aspects of your identity) influence your career aspirations in higher education?
7. Can you share any challenges you faced in your leadership journey and how you responded to them?
    - Follow-up questions if not mentioned:
        - How did those challenges influence your approach to applying for senior administrative roles within the university, and were there any specific barriers you encountered during that process?
8. What barriers, if any, have you encountered in advancing to senior leadership roles? How did you navigate them?

9. What kinds of support systems—formal or informal—have helped you advance in your career?
10. What advice would you give to women aspiring to senior leadership in higher education?
11. Is there anything else you'd like to share about your leadership journey that we haven't covered?

APPENDIX E

CODEMAP

Final Iteration: Themes

Motivation Rooted in Identity, Purpose and Foundation	Leadership Growth Through Learning, Development and Support Systems	Internalized Challenges and Work-Life Realities Influence Career Decisions
Systemic Barriers Shape Women's Leadership Trajectories		

Second Iteration: Pattern Variables

Adversity	Family Influences	Mentorship	Societal Expectations
Career Alignment	Gender Identity Awareness	Networking	Teaching Moments
Career Influences	Internal Barriers	Organizational Culture	Work-Life
Career Path Decisions	Internal Drive and Motivation	Personal Purpose and Values	Workplace Inequalities
Emotional Intelligence	Leadership Philosophy	Skill Development	

First Iteration: Initial Codes

Achiever	Exclusion from opportunities	Learn from positive experiences	Salary inequalities
Advocating for yourself	Family influence	Learn through adversity	Seeking work-life balance
Align skills for next job	Formal leadership development	Leadership perception	Self-driven
Career mobility	Gender bias	Mentors	Self-reflection
Career shift from another field	Gender identity awareness	Motivated by helping others	Stereotyping
Collaborative learning	Growth mindset	Networks	Student-centered
Communication style constraints	Higher Ed mission	Opportunities to advance	Support system
Competition among women	Imposter syndrome	Organizational politics	Take on challenges
Control of women voices	Institution preference	Overcome doubt	Trustworthy relationships

Defining moments	Intentional choices	Perseverance	
Discrimination	Job satisfaction	Prioritizing mental health	Two-person career household
Early calling to lead	Lack of female representation as leaders	Planned Career	Unequal standards
Early career motivated by money	Lack of mentors	Professional growth opportunities	Unplanned career
Empathy	Lack of terminal degree	Representation	Values and purpose
Evolving motivation		Psychological Glass Ceiling	Wanting to learn more
			Work-life balance

VITA

Maria Isabel Martinez was born and raised in Málaga, Spain. She is the oldest of three daughters and mother to one son. Maria moved to the United States in 1996 to begin her academic pursuits, beginning with earning her Associates of Science degree in Natural Resources Conservation at Vincennes University, Indiana. She then decided to move to a warmer location and continued her education by graduating with a Bachelor of Science degree in Natural Resources Conservation at the University of Florida, where she focused her work on implementing Geographic Information Systems in the field of environmental and civil engineering. After spending nine years working in the private sector, Maria relocated to Knoxville and completed a Masters in Geography from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville while working at Oak Ridge National Laboratory.

Maria currently serves as the Director of Space and Asset Data Management in Facilities Services at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. She strives to use her position to encourage other women to pursue their personal and professional goals while remaining true to themselves.