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Women Community College Student Leaders:  
A Phenomenological Study of Leadership Identity Development

by  
Sherry N. Simkins

A dissertation  
submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education in the Department of School Psychology and Educational Leadership  
Idaho State University  
Spring 2022

To the Graduate Faculty:

The members of the committee appointed to examine the dissertation of Sherry N. Simkins find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

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RE: Study Number IRB-FY2022-22: Community College Student Women Leaders

Dear Ms. Simkins:

Thank you for your responses to a previous review of the study listed above. These responses are eligible for expedited review under OHRP (DHHS) and FDA guidelines. This is to confirm that I have approved your application.

Notify the HSC of any adverse events. Serious, unexpected adverse events must be reported in writing within 10 business days.

You may conduct your study as described in your application effective immediately. This study is not subject to renewal under current OHRP (DHHS) guidelines.

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if you have any questions or require further information.

Sincerely,

Ralph Baergen, PhD, MPH, CIP

Human Subjects Chair

## **Dedication**

To my children, Kennedy and Jett, my biggest supporters and the world's future leaders. Thank you for bolstering me forward and enduring my evening classes and weekend paper writing. May you find value in education, always lead in a way that lifts others, and never give up on your dreams. To my husband and eternal companion, Henry-Scott, for his undying encouragement, support, love, and listening ear. You push me to be more than I ever thought possible. This degree is ours, together. To my parents, Gerald and Janelle, for raising me with a love of learning.

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Lastly, thank you to the eight women student leaders for their time and eagerness to candidly share their experiences. This research would not be possible without them. I hope this report is written in a way that honor's their experiences. They are each making the world a better place.

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Women Community College Student Leaders:  
A Phenomenological Study of Leadership Identity Development  
Dissertation Abstract—Idaho State University (2022)

While women have made great strides in leadership and academia over the last several decades, women continue to lag behind men in executive leadership positions. In universities, women students are vastly underrepresented in executive leadership roles; however, at community colleges the trends are reversed as women are actively taking on executive leadership positions. Previous research has explored the experiences of women university student leaders, while no attention has been given to the experiences of women community college student leaders.

This qualitative, phenomenological research study sought to answer the central research question, “What are women community college student leaders’ experiences?” Leadership Identity Development theory (Komives et al., 2005) with a feminist lens provided a framework for this study. Through data collected from a two-part interview process this study sought to illuminate the experiences of eight woman students in executive leadership positions at a community college.

The findings revealed that the women were motivated by previous leadership experience, encouragement from others, and a strong personal commitment. Further the findings suggested women employees and peers were particularly influential developmental influences along with growth opportunities that built self-efficacy. Executive leadership experience helped the women gain skills, changed their views of gender and leadership, as well as their views of self. In addition, the findings showed the women engaged as transformational leaders that have

cultivated a growth mindset. Finally, the findings suggested the women's leadership identity development was impacted by trying to balance their multiple roles, the charged political atmosphere, and gender discrimination. Despite obstacles, the women found active strategies for overcoming barriers. This study provides important implications for theory and community college practitioners.

Keywords: community college women, growth mindset, leadership identity development, role models, student leadership, women's leadership

## **Chapter I: Introduction**

In 2020, the number of women achieving chief executive officer positions at Fortune 500 companies was celebrated for hitting a record high at 7.4% (Hinchliffe, 2020). Despite women becoming the majority of the college-educated workforce, a mere 26.4% of chief executive officers are women and 35.6% of managers are women (Fry, 2019; U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Women are under-represented in leadership in many sectors from academia, business, film, journalism and law, to military, athletics, and non-profits (Allsop et al., 2018; CAWP, 2021; Lennon, 2009). While women leaders fair slightly better in higher education than in other sectors, internationally and nationally, women are underrepresented in senior college leadership (Cheung, 2021; Morley, 2013). In the United States, only 30% of college presidents and 31.5% of college governing board members are women (Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, 2010; Gagliardi et al., 2017). The leadership gap is not just visible for career women, rather it is evident for women students in college.

Despite women students eclipsing men in college aspirations, applications, enrollments, retentions, completions, and grade point averages, women university students are vastly underrepresented in executive leadership positions such as student body president, vice president, or editor within the most prominent extracurricular organizations at universities (AACC, 2019; Conger & Long, 2010; Keohane, 2014; Miller & Kraus, 2004; NCES, 2019; Princeton University, 2011; Ross et al., 2012; Snyder et al., 2019). The lack of women college students in executive leadership is particularly alarming given the large representation of women on college campuses.

A few key studies have explored the representation of women students in executive leadership at Ivy League institutions, research universities, liberal arts colleges, and

comprehensive universities and found that women students are not achieving parity with men in leadership positions (Keohane, 2014; Miller & Kraus, 2004; Princeton University, 2011). At comprehensive universities, Miller and Kraus (2004) reported that 28.6% of presidents and vice presidents were women, making them vastly under-represented in student government. In a steering committee report on undergraduate women's leadership, Princeton University (2011) found that women were not seeking prominent leadership positions as student government president, student newspaper editor and class presidents at peer institutions and select colleges across the nation. Alternatively, data obtained and analyzed from the American Student Government Association for a three-year period, from 2019 to 2021, showed an average 59% of student body presidents at community colleges are women (ASGA, personal communication, May 8, 2021). This significant difference between institutional types in women students' executive leadership is worthy of further analysis. This study sought to illuminate the experiences of women community college student leaders.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The lack of women in prominent student leadership roles means women's voices, concerns, and platforms are not being equitably represented on campuses. Student leaders are responsible for student agenda setting and play a significant role in providing a student voice to both the administration and trustees (Johnson, 2011). From planning activities, allotting student fees, to issue advocacy, student government leaders are important decision makers on campuses. Likewise, student newspaper editors serve as both a voice and agenda setters for what becomes publicly visible in school media and consequently what is visible to students, faculty, staff, and the community. Both of these leadership roles represent the power of the student voice to make changes in higher education. If men are over-represented in these positions, issues that are



important to women students may never rise to consciousness. When women are under-contributing to decision making, society loses valuable knowledge. In fact, adding women to an executive group is shown to increase the intellectual capacity, creativity and organizational performance (Human Resource Management International Digest, 2017; Liu et al, 2004; Talke et al. 2010; Wolley & Malone, 2016). Including women in groups leads to better decisions as multiple perspectives and diverse experiences result in stronger, more informed solutions (Surna, 2018). Higher education institutions will benefit from having diverse students in executive leadership.

Not only do groups benefit from women in leadership, students also benefit from leadership opportunities in college. Personal benefits such as skill development, self-efficacy, and networking will assist student leaders academically, socially, and in their future careers (Christison, 2013; Logue et al., 2005; Romano, 1996; Rucks, 2018). Seemiller and Murray (2013) found that student leaders develop leadership competencies such as self-awareness, reasoning, interpersonal skills, group dynamics, civic responsibility, communication, strategic planning, and personal leadership behaviors. Early opportunities for women's leadership are important for increasing their motivation to lead (Rucks, 2018). Further, student engagement in politics early in life can lead to future political ambitions (Lawless & Fox, 2013). As such, if women students are not in executive leadership positions, they are not gaining the same opportunities and skills as men which can limit the pipeline of prepared and motivated future women leaders. This hermeneutic phenomenological study provided insight on an important segment of women leaders. Understanding the experiences of positive deviant community college women sheds light on strategies for encouraging and supporting women's leadership identity development.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this hermeneutic qualitative phenomenological study was to illuminate the leadership identity development of women community college student leaders so to better support more women's entrance into executive leadership. There were four main goals of this study. The first goal was to understand women community college student leaders' lived experiences in executive positions. By interviewing women community college student leaders, the findings help us better understand the experiences that motivated them to obtain these positions, how they gained self-efficacy and developed their leadership identity, the supports and barriers they encountered in the community college environment, and how their experiences influenced their aspirations for future leadership. Second, understanding their lived experiences reveals the potential of the community college to support women students' leadership. Third, this research provides practical insight for higher education professionals as they seek to develop climates and experiences that are encouraging and supportive of women's leadership identity development. Ultimately, it provides a better understanding of what experiences can increase women's leadership opportunities, as positive deviant women student leaders' experiences are illuminated.

### **Research Questions**

This study was guided by a central research question: What are women community college student leaders' experiences? The study utilized four sub-questions to better understand the women leaders' motivations to lead, leadership identity development at a community college, barriers, supports, and future leadership aspirations. The following sub-questions framed this inquiry:

Q1: What experiences motivate women community college students to pursue leadership positions in student organizations on campus?

Q2: How do women student leaders' experiences at a community college facilitate their leadership identity development?

Q3: What leadership barriers and supports do women community college student leaders experience, if any?

Q4: How do the women students' experiences in community college leadership impact their future leadership aspirations?

### **Significance of the Study**

This study is of significance for enhancing research, theory, and practice. Understanding women community college student leaders' experiences contributes to the body of education and women's leadership research. Women students' leadership experiences have been studied at public and private universities (Emrick, 2006; Keohane, 2014; May, 2009; Princeton University, 2011; Wagoner, 2017). However, there is not any research that focuses solely on women community college students' leadership experiences, and thus there is a clear deficiency (Damell, 2013; Haber-Curran, 2013; Miller & Kraus, 2004; Romano, 1994; Roth, 2003; Rucks, 2018; Sanseviro, 2007; Whitt, 1993; Zimmerman, 2017).

Community colleges are important to study, because unlike universities, they are poised to support women in leadership development due to the large presence of women at all levels of the organization (Townsend & Twombly, 2007). Today, 36% of community college presidents (CEOs) are women, 50% of Chief Academic Officers, and 56% of campus administrators described as "executive/administrative/managerial staff" are women (AACC, 2014; Howard & Gagliardi, 2018; Johnson, 2016). Furthermore, 54% of all faculty at community colleges are

women (AAUP, 2018). More women on campus means women community college students may find it easier to develop mentor relationships as well as find role-models, both of which are critical to women's leadership success (Keohane, 2014; Jackson, 2013; Townsend, 2008). Leaving women community college student leaders un-studied continues to marginalize and dismiss the leadership experiences of these women.

Second, this study has theoretical significance for leadership development. Komives et al.'s (2005) Leadership Identity Development theory with a feminist lens provided a framework for the research. Leadership Identity Development theory (LID) explains the developmental path of students who engage in relational leadership and gain self-efficacy. LID theory emerged through interviews with men and women university student leaders. Applying a feminist lens to LID provides insights into the applicability of current leadership theories specifically to women's developmental experiences. This is important because women's leadership paths can be difficult to navigate and are often different from men's (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Additional scholarship is needed to test the LID theory's applicability to community college women who may have spent less time in collegiate leadership, yet demonstrate positive deviance by achieving an executive leadership position in a relatively short amount of time.

Understanding how this theory aligns and differs from their experiences will further our understanding of leadership identity development in community colleges. In addition, Komives et al. (2005) suggested the need to explore LID with post-collegiate adults to see how they experience the integration/synthesis stage as well as if there are additional stages. This research explored LID with both current women students and women that have recently left their executive position to gain both a perspective of current leaders as well as capture reflections

from alumna. These former leaders helped to reveal women's leadership identity development paths once they leave a leadership position.

Third, this study is of significance for those interested in leadership development and programming at the community college level. It provides insights into supports and barriers of women's leadership development experiences. Understanding the perspectives and strategies of women that defy trends and travel through the leadership labyrinth is useful to staff, faculty, and administrators seeking to develop institutions and climates that are supportive of women student leaders. Further, the potential of community colleges to support women students' leadership development makes this research valuable to prospective women students and parents as they explore colleges and consider opportunities for leadership growth.

### **Overview of the Methodology**

This study utilized a qualitative research methodology. Qualitative research seeks to understand the ways people experience and make meaning of the world (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Specifically, this study relied on a hermeneutic phenomenological research approach. Phenomenology is concerned with the study of lived experiences in relation to a phenomenon, and thus it is a strong fit for exploring women community college students' experiences with leadership (Creswell, 2013; Peoples, 2021).

Through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with eight women community college student leaders, the women's voices and experiences were uncovered and illuminated. Purposeful sampling and maximum variation sampling were utilized to select participants from multiple organizations in visible executive positions or recent executive women leaders that had ended their term within the past two years (Carl & Ravitch, 2016). The women leaders participated in two interviews based on a modified version of Seidman's (2019) three interview

series. The first interview lasted sixty to ninety minutes and the second interview lasted thirty to forty-five minutes. Each interview was recorded and transcribed. The transcriptions were analyzed through multiple readings. From the data, meaning units were developed and grouped into themes (Peoples, 2021). Situated narratives were selected for each theme and finally a general narrative was developed (Peoples, 2021). A more in-depth discussion of the research design and data analysis is provided in Chapter III.

### **Limitations**

Limitations are factors that potentially reduce the study's validity and scope and are beyond the direct influence of the researcher (Peoples, 2021). There are three limitations for this study. First, this research was constrained to data collection during the Fall 2021 semester. For current women student leaders, their full tenure of experiences were not included. By also including women student leaders that have completed their term in the last two years, I sought to mitigate this limitation.

Second, in the 2020-21 and 2021-22 academic years, the research site underwent an investigation by the accrediting body for alleged violations of non-discrimination and academic freedom from members of the governing board. This climate may have impacted the women student leaders that served during this time. As I engaged in the interviews, I paid particular attention to how these events may have impacted the women's leadership experiences and noted this impact so it can be explained in the findings.

Third, subjectivity of the researcher and participants was a limitation. While the researcher's close knowledge of the research site allowed for greater interpretation and understanding of the context of the students' experiences, the study may also have been limited by the researcher's subjectivity. Strategies for engaging in research reflexivity and ensuring

validity are discussed further in Chapter III. In addition, the women leaders' responses were subjective and depended on their ability to adequately recall and explain their past experiences to the researcher.

### **Delimitations**

Delimitations are intentional choices made by the researcher that narrow the scope of the study (Peoples, 2021). There were five delimitations for this study. First, the site selection focused on a single community college. The results of the study are not generalizable to other community colleges but should be transferable to understanding women community college students' leadership. Second, the sample size of eight participants is appropriate for a phenomenological study as the goal is to identify a small group of people that share a phenomenon and collect extensive detail about the essence of the experience until saturation is reached; however, it is important to note that the results are not generalizable to all community colleges nor women student leaders (Creswell, 2013; Peoples, 2021). Third, the women leaders were from multiple student organizations on campus, to provide a broad understanding of the phenomenon of executive women's leadership. The findings are not generalizable to a specific student organization but help us understand more holistically the experiences of women community college student leaders. Fourth, the participants were purposefully delimited to only include the women leaders. Perceptions of the women's leadership from student organization advisors and followers were not represented in this study. The conclusions were drawn from only the perspective of the women student leaders to capture their experiences in the purest form, yet other's perceptions of the women's leadership may have differed greatly. Fifth, because women are underrepresented in prominent executive leadership positions, this study purposely did not

include women leaders of less prominent organizations or women leaders that do not serve in executive roles.

### **Assumptions**

Assumptions are factors that are generally accepted as true by the researcher and can be accepted as true by the reader, but cannot be established as fact. Peoples (2021) suggested that for hermeneutic phenomenological approaches, researchers have an obligation to explain biases in their assumptions and later revise these assumptions if new information is discovered. The following assumptions were made about this research project:

1. Women are capable of effective executive leadership.
2. Women experience leadership differently than men.
3. Community colleges are supportive environments for developing women students' leadership.
4. Due to the under-resourced and disadvantaged nature of many community college students, these women leaders demonstrated positive deviance as they outperformed university and career women in achieving executive leadership positions.
5. The criteria for participant inclusion was adequate and ensured that all of the women leaders experienced executive leadership at a community college.
6. Participants were expected to be transparent and honest in their responses.
7. The women leaders elected to participate because they were motivated by a desire to share their leadership experiences and are not motivated by any other factor.

### **Definition of Terms**

The following definitions are offered to ensure connotative meaning throughout the study. Terms used in this study are as follows:



**Community College:** a not-for-profit two-year institution that is regionally accredited to award associate degrees (Cohen et al., 2014).

**Executive Leadership:** Senior leadership positions that are influential and visible on college campuses. Students in these prominent positions are seen by students, faculty, and administrators and their voices are heard.

**Leadership:** The act of defining or clarifying goals and mobilizing the energies of a group to accomplish its goals (Keohane, 2012).

**Positive Deviants:** Individuals in a group whose trend defying behaviors have allowed them to achieve success and find solutions to problems even though they encounter the same or worse barriers, challenges, and resources as other individuals (Herrington & van de Fliert, 2018).

**Women Student Leaders:** For this study, the term refers to those serving or who have served in executive leadership positions of prominent organizations on campus.

### **Summary**

While women have made substantial strides in achieving equity, they continue to lag behind in executive leadership positions. Women community college student leaders are defying this trend, with more women than men taking on executive leadership roles. This study examined executive women student leaders' lived experiences at a community college. Understanding their motivation to lead, supports, barriers, and future aspirations provides insight into their leadership identity development at a community college. In this chapter, I presented the problem, purpose, and significance of this study. Chapter II reviews the relevant literature and theories framing this study. Chapter III discusses the research paradigm and methodology utilized in this study as well as the research design. Chapter IV shares the research findings. Chapter V presents the

conclusions in relation to research, theory, and practice, as well as provides recommendations for future research.

## **Chapter II: Review of the Literature and Theoretical Framework**

Over the last several decades, women have made substantial progress in obtaining leadership positions; yet, women are highly underrepresented in executive leadership (Allsop et al., 2018; Keohane, 2020). One segment of women that are defying this trend are women community college student leaders. These women are more likely to obtain executive leadership positions than men and their experiences are worthy of further analysis. To frame our understanding of women community college student leaders, this review of the literature will unfold in three parts. First, a review of the state of women in leadership will provide a foundation for understanding the obstacles that impact women's leadership identity development as well as positive recent advancements. Second, because community colleges are a unique sector of American higher education and this study is situated in a community college, the review will explore the relationship between women and community colleges. Third, the literature on women student leaders will be reviewed to situate the women community college leaders' identity development in the current student leadership literature. Exploring these three areas will provide a firm foundation for this study and position its contribution within the current scholarship. After a review of the literature, I will share my own positionality on women students' leadership. Lastly, an overview of the theoretical framework that guides this study, Leadership Identity Development with a feminist theory lens, will be presented.

### **State of Women in Leadership**

Women's leadership has been explored in a variety of ways. Early studies in the 1970s focused on stereotypes and gender roles; whereas, the 1980s and 1990s revealed the barriers to women's leadership in comparison to men's and the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century focused on the costs of discrimination (Diehl et al., 2020). Consequently, the amount of research on

women's leadership is extensive. Through a review of the literature several clear themes emerged. The themes centered on obstacles to leadership as seen in organizational culture, sexism, and self-limitations, and positive advancements for women's leadership through societal shifts, mentoring and role models, and leadership styles.

### **Obstacles to Women's Leadership Development**

While women have made clear advancements, they continue to encounter substantial obstacles that their male counterparts do not face. The majority of research on women's leadership centers on the obstacles they experience. Longman et al. (2018) interviewed 30 current and emerging women leaders and identified three areas of challenge for women: organizational culture and limited opportunities, perceived sexism, and self-perception and leadership identity. These same categories also emerged as main themes in the literature. These three areas will be explored below as organizational culture, sexism, and self-limitations.

#### ***Organizational Culture***

Throughout the last century, several metaphors have been used to describe barriers to women's leadership such as the concrete wall, glass ceiling, glass cliff, leaky pipeline, obstructed pipeline and labyrinth (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Hymowitz & Schelhardt, 1986; Morgenroth et al., 2020; Roth, 2003; Surawicz, 2016). These metaphors are experienced by women as they navigate organizational cultures. Prior to the 1970's, the concrete wall explained absolute barriers that blocked women's advancement through societal norms that prohibited women's entrance into education and the workforce (Eagly & Carli, 2007). In the 1970's, women were no longer blocked from educational and career opportunities, but as they climbed, they hit an invisible barrier or "glass ceiling" which stopped their advancement (Hymowitz & Schelhardt,

1986). The glass ceiling depicts a transparent barrier that is not visibly obvious; yet, those facing the glass ceiling can see the other side and are constrained from reaching it (Boyd, 2008).

Building upon the idea of the glass ceiling, Ryan and Haslam (2005) coined the term the “glass cliff” to explain how organizations often appoint women to a position of leadership when the company is experiencing negative performance. These women leaders are breaking through the glass ceiling only to find themselves on a “glass cliff” or in a precarious situation with a greater likelihood of failure (Morgenroth et al., 2020). This is particularly problematic for women as failure for White men is more likely to be attributed to situational factors; whereas, failure for women and other underrepresented groups is more likely to be attributed to their personal failings and in-capabilities (Morgenroth et al., 2020).

Over the years, as a few women have broken the glass ceiling, there has been greater emphasis on building the pipeline of women’s leadership. The pipeline of women in middle management was sure to lead to more women in executive positions; however, Kellerman and Rhode (2014) suggested the “pipeline has been a pipe dream” (p. 24) that has served to pacify women into believing someday their time will come. Women continue to be underrepresented at every level of the corporate pipeline, but are most underrepresented in the highest levels of executive leadership (McKinsey & Company, 2015). Consequently, the pipeline is often referred to as “leaky” because many women do not move into executive leadership roles. In higher education, the pipeline is not leaking but considered obstructed as women frequently struggle to advance into positions such as full professors or senior administrators (Roth, 2003).

Lastly, and perhaps the most applicable vision of women’s leadership today is the metaphor of the “labyrinth.” Eagly and Carli (2007) recognized the lack of utility around the metaphor of the glass ceiling because it failed to acknowledge strategies and problem-solving

techniques that women engage in to successfully become leaders. They coined the term “labyrinth” and explained “some women some of the time” are achieving executive leadership; yet, these routes may be indirect and are often difficult to navigate (Eagly & Carli, 2007, p. 28). While the metaphors surrounding barriers for women leaders demonstrate women’s increased opportunities over time, from concrete impenetrable walls to a difficult but achievable maze, the metaphors also depict the considerable disadvantages women encounter.

These metaphors continue to resonate with women today as many organizations continue to reinforce male dominated hierarchies making it difficult for women to advance (Acquaro & Stokes, 2016; Heilman, 2001). Acker (1990) was the foundational scholar linking gender and organizations. She saw organizations as gendered due to “advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity” that are reinforced through masculine organizational cultures (Acker, 1990 p. 146).

One way that male hierarchies are reinforced is through hiring practices. Research has shown that hiring managers engage in homosociability, meaning they tend to hire people similar to themselves (Acquaro & Stokes, 2016; Morley & Crossouard, 2016; Sanchez & Lehnert, 2019; Shepherd, 2017). As men historically hold hiring manager roles, this greatly limits women’s abilities to enter organizational leadership. Moreover, when women are hired, they are often held to unequal and higher performance standards (Diehle et al., 2020; Heilman, 2001). Due to gender role congruity involving both what women are like and how women should behave, women encounter evaluations that devalue their performance, deny them credit for their successes, and/or penalize them for competence (Heilman, 2001). This harms women’s leadership aspirations.

Many organizational practices that are considered customary and go unrecognized are harmful to women's progress. In fact, gender bias is the root cause of discrimination of women in organizations (Heilman, 2001; Stamarski & Hing, 2015). Women encounter discrimination in many ways. First, women encounter unbalanced communication such as being interrupted more frequently in meetings or having their ideas validated only after a man repeats them (Diehle et al., 2020). Popular culture has coined these issues as "maninterrupting," and "bropriating" (Bennet, 2015). Regardless of their title, these communication imbalances favor men. Further, women's work is regarded as inferior, even when they produce work identical to a man's work (Heilman, 2001). In addition, they may also encounter a lack of support with limited fiscal or social resources. A lack of support appears in the form of a lack of resources to complete the job, or a lack of acknowledgment and/or salary inequities (Diehle et al., 2020). Socially, it is exclusion from social activities that develop informal networks as well as a lack of mentoring, sponsors and advocates (Diehle et al., 2020). A LeanIn.org and Survey Monkey survey (2019) found that 60% of male managers were uncomfortable mentoring, working alone, and socializing with women. This number increased 32% in one year due to the high visibility of the #MeToo movement and men's fears that spending time with women will look bad (LeanIn.org and Survey Monkey, 2019). Given that men hold the majority of leadership positions, if these men are only willing to mentor men, women are losing valuable support. As will be discussed in greater detail later, mentorship and sponsorship are key to women's advancement into leadership (AAUW, 2016). As organizations maintain these practices there is more turn-over and less job satisfaction for women (Diehl et al., 2020). Consequently, women's paths to leadership are often fraught with barriers.

Based on male dominated organizational hierarchies, traditionally defined roles of men and women, and gender stereotypes, leadership has been and continues to be viewed as a White man's skill (Acquaro & Stokes, 2016; Koenig et al., 2011; Lauzen & Dozier, 2004; Schein, 2001; Sinclair, 2004). One of the most significant challenges for women world-wide is the "think manager-think male phenomenon" (AAUW, 2016; Schein 1973, 1975, 2001) This phenomenon suggests that society associates leadership and management with men which serves to limit women's opportunities for advancement. A "think woman-think follower" bias has also been found (Braun et al., 2017). Traditional stereotypes of male characteristics such as logical, rational, aggressive, decisive, strong, and strategic are often the values of organizations (AAUW, 2016; Morgan, 2006). Whereas stereotypes of female characteristics such as intuitive, emotional, nurturing, and empathetic, do not fit traditional organizational principles and these communal characteristics often lead women to be seen as followers (Braun et al., 2017; Morgan, 2006). These stereotypes link men with leadership and makes it difficult for women to advance. Further, Morgan (2006) identified metaphors or images of organizations. Many traditional images of organizations are masculine such as viewing organizations as machines, brains, and political systems (Morgan, 2006). Metaphors that view organizations as cultures, psychic prisons, or instruments of domination can broaden one's view to understand how organizations can reproduce societal inequities for women.

Sex role stereotypes that suggest men are leaders are harmful to women. Schein (2001) found that while women's attitudes toward women leaders have enhanced over time, managers that are men continue to hold negative views of women leaders. In addition, she reported that male management students in several countries and male corporate managers in the United States view women as less capable of leadership (Schein, 2001). The men rated women as less likely to



have leadership and analytical ability, skill, ambition, competitiveness, and aspirations for responsibility (Schein, 2001). Current research continues to confirm that male management students continue to hold negative views of women as leaders (Busse & Poell, 2020). This bias is more difficult to find in recent survey research as people are less likely to admit negative stereotypes due to social desirability bias (AAUW, 2016; Koenig et al., 2011). When asked about women's leadership, survey respondents typically select answers that are viewed as socially acceptable rather than those that align with their true attitudes and beliefs (Hoffman & Musch, 2018; Setzler, 2019). This bias leads to inaccurate reports of support for women in leadership positions. For example, the Pew Research Center (2015) revealed 80% of Americans believed that men and women are equally suited for executive leadership. However, when social desirability bias was controlled for, almost half of the public believed men are superior to women as leaders (Setzler, 2019). While not always visible, gender stereotypes that connect men with leaders and women with followers still permeate society (Braun et al., 2019).

With these views of women, it is no wonder that organizational cultures serve to reinforce perceptions that women are not suited for leadership. These societal perceptions of leadership as masculine cause women to hold negative views of leadership and consequently depletes their aspirations, well-being, and opportunities (Morley & Crossouard, 2016; Sanchez & Lehnert, 2019). Many have hoped that having a high profile woman like Hillary Clinton run for office would help people to see women as leaders, but research in this area has shown that high profile women running for political office have not changed people's views on women's qualifications for leadership (Kromer & Parry, 2019). Viewing leadership as masculine is problematic in several ways. First, men have better access to engaging in leadership roles and will face fewer challenges to being successful in those roles (Koenig et al., 2011). Second,

stereotyping women contributes to more difficult leadership paths, particularly in obtaining substantial leadership roles (Koenig et al., 2011). Lastly, these challenges are likely to continue for the foreseeable future (Koenig et al., 2011).

### ***Sexism***

While Longman et al. (2018) found perceived sexism to be a challenge for emerging women leaders, I will expound perceived sexism to both real and perceived. Based on my review of the literature, suggesting sexism is only perceived does not represent the literature that indicates women do encounter sexism and harassment (Braddy et al., 2020; Diehl et al., 2020; Folke et al., 2020; Schein, 2001). Women experience sexism through gender role expectations in both overt and covert ways.

Masculine views of leadership, as described earlier, not only impact organizational cultures but lead to sexism. A large portion of the sexism women leaders encounter stems from gender role congruity (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2001). Eagly and Karau (2002) proposed gender role congruity theory to explain prejudice toward women leaders. Women are bound by descriptive norms or expectations of how women are as well as injunctive norms or expectations about what women ought to do (Eagly & Wood, 2012; Heilman, 2001; Koenig et al., 2011). Society dictates that women are expected to behave communally with interpersonal and service orientations to groups; whereas, men are expected to behave in agentic ways with task and achievement orientations to groups (Eagly, 1987; Heilman, 2001). Gender role congruity happens when a stereotyped individual engages in a role that is seemingly incongruent such as women taking on an agentic role or a man taking on a communal role. Leaders are traditionally seen as agentic which leads to a perceived incongruity and prejudice between the characteristics of women and the requirements of leadership roles (Badura et al., 2018; Eagly & Karau, 2002;

Koenig et al., 2011). Women that meet the expectations of their gender role and behave in a feminine manner are not perceived as meeting their leadership role (Badura et al., 2018; Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001). The reverse is also true. Women who meet the expectations of the leadership role are seen as failing to meet their gender role (Badura et al., 2018; Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001). Consequently, women that want to emerge as leaders need to temper their agentic behaviors with communal behaviors (Schock et al., 2019). The mismatch of social expectations results in negative perceptions and evaluations for women as leaders as well as the likelihood that men will emerge as leaders in groups (Badura et al., 2018; Busse & Poell, 2020; Ratcliff, 2015; Eagly & Karau, 2002). This incongruity leads to both women's potential and actual leadership being judged negatively (Busse & Poell, 2020; Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Garcia-Retamero & Lopez-Zafra, 2006; Heilman, 2001; Ratcliff, 2015).

Gender congruity theory helps to explain why women often encounter a double-bind when it comes to leadership styles that do not conform to gender expectations (Heilman, 2001; Wagoner, 2017). Women that take on more masculine or agentic approaches are referred to negatively such as “bossy,” “pushy,” “battle-ax,” “bitch,” or “ice-queen” (Covert & Konczal, 2015; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2001). For example, when women utilize an agentic leadership style such as being strong, direct, competitive and aggressive they are viewed negatively, but the same style used by a man is not viewed negatively (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Rudman & Glick, 2001; Wagoner, 2017). As such, competent men are seen as merely “noncommunal” whereas competent women are seen as “countercommunal” (Heilman, 2001, p. 66). This limits women's ability to gain leadership support. Women can engage in communal behaviors and be liked or they can engage in agentic behaviors and be respected but not liked

(Rudman & Glick, 2001). Either option leaves women at risk of being disqualified for leadership (Rudman & Glick, 2001). The best way for women to walk this leadership tightrope is to be both nice (communal) and competent (agentic) (Rudman & Glick, 2001; Schock et al., 2019).

Gender role congruency theory may also explain why women engage in communal and participatory leadership. Participatory styles such as transformational leadership styles are more frequently attributed to women's leadership (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Eagly et al., 2003; Matsa & Miller, 2013). Transformational leaders emphasize distributive leadership and democratic principles as they strive to create shared visions that empower and motivate individuals (Yoder, 2001; Eagly et al., 2003). Unfortunately, these styles might be frequently utilized by women as a strategy to negotiate leadership rather than as a choice or preferred style (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001).

Gender role expectations arise from both family roles and occupational roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002). The media reinforces sexist views of leadership and plays a large influence on how women and society view appropriate gender roles and occupations (Davies et al., 2005; Simon & Hoyt, 2013). In television shows, men are often employed in power positions such as doctors, lawyers, politicians and businessmen; whereas, women are more typically portrayed in submissive roles such as homemakers, administrative assistants, prostitutes, and service positions such as flight attendants (Lauzen & Dozier, 2004). Stereotypes are not all bad. When faced with stereotypes, high-efficacy women leaders respond positively through improved performance thus demonstrating resilience; however, low efficacy women leaders, when faced with stereotypes, experience frustration, task difficulties, and lower aspirations (Hoyt & Blasovich, 2007; Fedi & Rollero, 2016). These media portrayals reinforce stereotypes and serve to disadvantage women seeking leadership roles (Lauzen & Dozier, 2004).

A counter to the portrayal of women in the media would be seeing women in everyday life succeed in leadership. While role models are increasing, a lack of women role models harms aspirations, limits women's abilities to see themselves as leaders, and limits their ability to negotiate stereotypical traits and roles (Acquaro & Stokes, 2016). Unfortunately, not all role models are beneficial to women's aspirations. Elite female leaders lower women's leadership aspirations, whereas non-elite female leaders counter stereotypes and can raise fellow women's aspirations (Hoyt & Blascovich, 2007). This may be because women do not want to be viewed critically by others as is common for elite female leaders in the media, because they do not see themselves in an elite leadership role, or because elite leadership violates socialized gender roles. Regardless, the lack of visible women's success stories can make it arduous for women to see a path through the leadership labyrinth (Morley, 2013). Consequently, sexism portrayed in the media and a lack of visible role models impacts women's leadership identity development.

Another threat to women's leadership identity development is both overt and subtle forms of sexism. Benevolent sexism is a form of paternalistic prejudice that on the surface may appear appropriate and kind but serves to reinforce sexist stereotypes and traditional gender roles. In organizations women might be viewed as nurturing, intuitive, compassionate, beautiful and in need of protection and support. While on the surface this appears positive, it limits women to stereotypical roles and reinforces stereotypical beliefs (Rollero & Fedi, 2014). Benevolent sexism harms women's leadership aspirations and is particularly challenging as it is not as obvious as overt sexism and is thus harder to detect and correct (Fedi & Rollero, 2016; Rollero & Fedi, 2014). In addition, women in the workforce may also confront sexual harassment. Sexual harassment is significantly more common for women in leadership than for women employees and is more likely to happen to mid and low-level women in leadership (Folke et al., 2020).

These women were more likely to take action against the harasser, but they were also subject to professional and social consequences for reporting these experiences (Folke et al., 2020). Sexual harassment in organizations is a threat that reinforces gender gaps in income, status, and voice for women (Folke et al., 2020). Women encounter sexism from gender role congruity to benevolent sexism and sexual harassment that reinforces power dynamics, limits their opportunities and aspirations, and harms their leadership identity.

### ***Self-Limitations***

Given the male dominated organizational cultures and sexism that women encounter, it is no surprise that women's self-efficacy, when it comes to leadership, is lower than men's (Kay & Shipman, 2014; McCormick et al., 2002). As undergraduates, women's and men's leadership goals and self-concepts are similar (Zuckerman, 1985). However, additional research shows that undergraduate women are less interested in executive leadership and view executive leadership less favorably than men (Sheppard, 2018). As women progress in their careers their aspirations change. At the start of their careers, women aspire to leadership equally to men, but two years later their leadership aspirations drop from 43% to just 16%; whereas, during this same time there is no change in men's aspirations (Covert & Konczal, 2015; Gadiesh & Coffman, 2015). Experienced women employees are less likely to see themselves fitting the company culture, are less likely to feel their career aspirations are supported by their supervisor, and are less likely to receive encouragement (Gadiesh & Coffman, 2015). Sanchez and Lehnert (2019) support this notion as they found that highly competent women with strong work experience aspire to leadership less than men. In higher education leadership, once women achieve the role of Dean, Heads of School, or Pro-Vice Chancellor, they aspire to leadership in equal measure to men and

readily apply to leadership positions similarly to men (Sheppard, 2018). Unfortunately, many women may never make it to this level in higher education leadership.

Self-efficacy is important as high self-efficacy has been proven to be a strong predictor of willingness to take on leadership roles (Fedi & Rollero, 2016; Rucks, 2018). Women with high self-esteem were more likely to aspire to leadership despite encountering sexism (Fedi & Rollero, 2016). Undergraduate women rate their leadership ability lower than men and see themselves as less likely to obtain a leadership positions (Sheppard, 2018). The less competent that women see themselves leads them to under-estimate their capabilities and not seek leadership roles (Sanchez & Lehnert, 2019; Sheppard, 2018). Unfortunately, it is common for women to engage in self-silencing and self-limiting aspirations (Diehl et al., 2020). Consequently, it is no surprise that men are more likely to take on leadership positions (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Ellinas et al., 2018; Goodwin et al., 2020). It is important for women to gain self-efficacy in order to be motivated to engage in leadership, but gaining leadership self-efficacy can be difficult if women do not have the same opportunities for gaining leadership experience as men.

As women progress in their careers, they increasingly identify gender as a barrier. At the start of their career only 23% of women saw gender as a barrier; whereas 31% saw it as a barrier mid-career, and 40% saw it as a barrier at late career (McKinsey & Company, 2015). Senior-level, late career women believe women have fewer opportunities, are consulted less than men on important decisions and are less likely to be recognized for their contributions (McKinsey & Company, 2015). The disadvantages women experience as they progress in their careers leave them less likely to be satisfied with their careers and less likely to pursue leadership opportunities.

Women's own perceptions and identities can serve as barriers to their aspirations. Gender is a critical part of a women's leadership identity and due to its central role, women actively look for gender biases from others (Davies et al., 2005; Ni & Huo, 2018). For example, negative feedback from a man supervisor may not be perceived as legitimate by a woman employee; rather, women see it as grounded in gender bias and this may curtail their desire for leadership (Ni & Huo, 2018). This can limit women's ability to receive critical feedback and adjust. Ni and Huo (2018) explained that as women attribute negative feedback from men to gender biases, they are less likely to engage in the organization and less likely to seek professional development opportunities, thus creating a self-fulfilling prophecy where women do not seek leadership. If gender bias is perceived in the organization, the women determine that it does not matter how hard they work or what skills or experiences they possess, they will never achieve leadership positions. Alternatively, when women receive feedback, positive or negative from women supervisors, they are more likely to accept critical feedback that will allow them to grow, develop, and maintain their leadership aspirations (Ni & Huo, 2018). Women's leadership aspirations are shown to be higher with women supervisors; whereas, men's leadership aspirations are not impacted by supervisor gender (Fritz & van Knippenberg, 2020). Unfortunately, given the gender gaps in leadership, many women will receive performance evaluations from men supervisors which activates perceived gender biases that may limit women's aspirations.

Another consequence of self-limiting behavior is the "queen bee phenomenon" where women in leadership actively distance themselves from junior women, serving to generate and legitimize inequality (Derks et al., 2016). Derks et al. (2016) suggested that this phenomenon is not a typical feminine response but is found in marginalized groups as a reaction to the



discrimination and threats to social identity that women face in male dominated organizations. For women in leadership, they may lose the positive social and psychological benefits of connecting with other women and for junior women it can inhibit their career ambitions and opportunities (Derks et al., 2016). This phenomenon may make it difficult for women to find mentors and sponsors.

Women's desire for work-life balance also may limit their aspirations (Fritz & van Knippenberg, 2018). Women have less free time on average than men, with men having 30 minutes additional free time each day or 164 more hours of leisure time annually (Mattingly & Bianchi, 2003). As women strive for balance, promotion can become undesirable (Pyke, 2013). Women typically place a greater emphasis than men on being a good spouse and are more likely to encounter less mobility than men as their spouse's career takes precedence (Shepherd, 2017; Sheppard, 2018). These factors can impact women's career aspirations. Alternatively, some evidence indicates that family obligations are not hindering all women's aspirations. Mothers are 15% more interested in becoming top executives than women without children (McKinsey & Company, 2015). Further, men and women with children both cite work-life balance similarly as a reason they would not be interested in taking on an executive position (McKinsey & Company, 2015). While work-life balance desires may limit some women from engaging in leadership, it cannot fully explain the vast leadership inequities in society.

In reviewing the literature on obstacles to women's leadership, it is clear that women encounter greater challenges from male dominated organizational cultures and sexist beliefs about gender role conformity and leadership which result in self-limiting behaviors. The proposed research sheds light on positive deviant women that are developing their leadership identity despite facing obstacles. Engaging in this research provides insights into the cultures at

community colleges to help us better understand if women students encounter the same obstacles as career women but are finding strategies to continue their leadership identity development when others might engage in self-limiting behaviors or if community colleges women students face different obstacles to leadership. Ultimately, by exploring women students that have successfully established a leadership identity, we may learn strategies for helping other women to also overcome challenges and effectively navigate the leadership labyrinth.

### **Advancements for Women's Leadership**

While there are clear obstacles that, at times, may seem unsurmountable for women, there have been promising advancements in women's leadership. In fact, advancements in women's leadership is considered one of the most substantial societal changes over the last several decades, as more women are taking on more visible leadership positions than ever before (Keohane, 2020). While the literature on advancements and supports to women's leadership is relatively small compared to the obstacles, several factors have increased opportunities for women to not only enter the workforce, but to aspire to leadership positions. There have been significant societal shifts, increased mentors and role models, and changing views of leadership styles which are benefiting women.

### ***Societal Shifts***

Recent societal advancements have shifted social expectations for women providing more opportunities for leadership. Developments such as women's entrance into higher education, technological advancements that eased domestic burdens, the suffrage movement where women found a voice, the introduction of birth control, laws and policies that protect women, and the need for two income households, have provided women of today more career and leadership opportunity than women in the past (Keohane, 2020). As women's participation in the labor

market has become more common and financially necessary, it is more socially acceptable than ever before for women to be employed (Keohane, 2020). These changes are leading people to move beyond stereotypical masculine views of leadership to recognize women and leadership as compatible (Keohane, 2020). In addition, these shifts allow women to start their careers early and to have more support with family responsibilities which lead to increased leadership aspirations for women (Pyke, 2020).

### ***Mentors and Role Models***

College women today are encountering a society that is vastly different from the world encountered by women in the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Women now have more role models in leadership than ever before, as women have and continue to break gender barriers in a variety of sectors and hold more elite posts than at any other time in history (Keohane, 2020). Having female role models is shown to improve leadership aspirations and is key to leadership identity development (Beaman et al., 2012; Jackson, 2013; Komives et al., 2005; Townsend, 2008). The more women see leaders similar to themselves succeeding in leadership, the more likely they are to consider and aspire to leadership (Asgari et al., 2012; Keohane 2020).

As more women enter executive leadership, there are more opportunities for women to be mentored by other women. Men and women can both be effective mentors, yet a recent study showed that 53% of women reported that their most helpful mentor was another woman (Flippin, 2017). Research shows that women mentors positively influence women mentee's career choices (Kofeod & McGovney, 2019). Same gendered mentoring, women to women, allows for stronger rapport building, openness, and is perceived as more comfortable by women mentees than different gendered mentoring (Eds-Ellis & Keaster, 2013) Women that are mentored by women are provided leadership development, empowerment, confidence, and important advice on

navigating career paths and barriers (Flippin, 2017; Mitchell, 2018). In addition, mentors, coaches, and sponsors increase leadership aspirations for women (Haber-Curran & Sulpizio, 2017; Longman et al., 2019; Pyke, 2013; Sanchez & Lehnert, 2019). This suggests that college women of today have more supports toward leadership, through mentors and role models, than at any other time in history.

### ***Leadership Styles***

As more women enter leadership, societal views on leadership styles are changing which also signal positive opportunities for women in leadership. Research indicates that gender has no bearing on leadership effectiveness, making women and men both effective leaders (Eagly et al., 1995; Hyde, 2014). It is the assumption of this study that both men and women are capable of good leadership. While both are effective, men and women tend to lead in different ways (Eagly et al., 2003; Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Matsa and Miller, 2013; Radu et al., 2017). Feminine leadership styles are described as such because they are more typically connected with woman's gender roles and are more frequently utilized by women (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001). In studying gender roles' influence on leadership, Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt (2001) and Radu et al., (2017) found that women are more likely to engage in transformational leadership because they are interpersonally oriented and they seek to encourage democratic and participatory decision making. Alternatively, men more consistently engage in transactional and laissez faire leadership styles because they are more task-oriented and autocratic or directive (Eagly, et al., 2003; Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Garcia-Retamero & López-Zafra, 2006; Koenig, et al., 2011; Yoder, 2001; Zbihlejová, 2018). Female managers were more likely than male managers to motivate followers, exude enthusiasm about future goals, mentor and develop followers, provide

consistent and clear communication, as well as reward performance (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Radu et al., 2017). In addition, transformational leadership styles that emphasize collaboration may help women to gain confidence in their leadership ability (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Yoder, 2001).

As traditional masculine leadership practices are giving way to ideals of collaboration, participation, and relationship-building, feminine leadership styles are particularly suited for today's organizational climates and will become even more valuable for both men and women to utilize (Cheung, 2021; Milazzo, 2015; Morgan, 2006; Radu et al., 2017; Yoder, 2001). Feminine styles that emphasize collaboration are aligned with transformation leadership styles (Radu et al., 2017; Taylor, 1994). Transformational leadership styles, while not the ideal for all organizational contexts, are seen as a contemporary means for creating empowering and effective organizations (Eagly et al., 2003; Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Radu et al., 2017; Yoder, 2001). These styles can lead to innovative solutions and growth through utilizing teamwork as a foundational principle and are increasingly important in the competitive landscape of higher education (Chuang, 2021). Further, transformational models are particularly useful for educational environments that rely on collegiality as a core principle (Taylor, 1994). In reviewing 25 years of literature on gender and community college leadership, Eddy and Khwaja (2019) found the trend shifting away from masculine leadership approaches to participatory leadership which is more favorable of women. Women's leadership styles of collaboration and relationship building are seen as strengths in the community college setting (Eddy, 2008; Eddy & Cox, 2008). As noted earlier, some caution with this advancement must be exercised. While feminine leadership styles are gaining legitimacy as desired forms of leadership, women may utilize these styles more by default than by choice (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001).

Unlike women of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the reviewed research demonstrates that today's college student is engaging in a society that provides more opportunities for women to gain an education and advance to a leadership position. In addition, college women today are encountering more role-models and potential mentors than any other generation. Community college women, in particular, are surrounded by women role models, which makes this an important segment of higher education to study. This research looks at the influence of the high percentage of women faculty, staff, and leaders at community colleges on the women students' leadership identity development. Further, unlike traditional views that hold masculine leadership styles as the ideal, feminine leadership styles are being viewed as desirable for today's organizations. This study provides insights to the leadership styles of women community college student leaders and the extent that they feel empowered to select their own leadership style or constrained to fit a gender conforming leadership style. The women student leaders' experiences utilizing a particular style are explored in this research.

### **State of Women in Community Colleges**

Women have a strong foundation and prominent current position within community colleges, so much so that these institutions have been deemed "feminized spaces" (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2017, p. 48). To understand the relationship between community colleges and women, this section provides an overview of the literature surrounding women and the history of community colleges, the representation of women in various roles at these institutions, and the institutional climate for women.

## **Women and the History of Community Colleges**

Due to its mission of open access, community colleges from early on have been referred to as the “People’s College” or “Democracy’s College” for the democratizing role they played in education (Cohen et al., 2014; Meier, 2013, p. 15). Cohen et al. (2014) explained:

...they are truly American, because at their best they represent the United States at its best... They have maintained open channels for individuals, enhancing the social mobility that has characterized America, and they accept the idea that society can be better, just as individuals can better their lot within it (p. 43).

As such, community colleges serve to perpetuate the idea that all individuals should have access to reach their potential, including women.

Compared to four-year colleges and universities, community colleges have a relatively short history with the first junior college, Joliet College, opening in 1901. The goals of these early colleges were to serve growing educational and training demands, to secure stakeholder support and respect, to enhance social progress, and to provide access to higher education for a diverse set of students with diverse needs and goals (Meier, 2013). The Truman Commission Report on Higher Education (1947) placed national emphasis on the role of community colleges and served to shape their mission (Gilbert & Heller, 2013; Vaughan, 1984). The commission’s view of community colleges was that these institutions should have a local/regional scope with local control and be placed in a state system of higher education to serve the goals of communities and states (Truman Commission Report on Higher Education, 1947). These colleges were heralded as a cost-effective way to serve the growing desires for higher education within commuting distance (Gilbert & Heller, 2013). The report suggested two-year colleges should be known as community colleges and by the 1970’s the term junior college was widely replaced by the term community college (Vaughan, 1984). In the early 1960’s, community colleges had three main parts to their missions, open access, comprehensive, and community

oriented (Vaughan, 1984). These aspects would be instrumental in connecting women to higher education. The community college mission was embraced, and community colleges rapidly grew between 1965 and 1972 at the rate of one per week (Cohen et al., 2014). This growth provided access to women who did not want to or could not leave home to attend a university. Today, these institutions serve a variety of needs from transfer and career-technical training to continuing education, remedial education, and community service (Cohen et al., 2014).

From the early inception of community colleges, women and women's rights played a significant role. In the early years, community colleges were most compatible in the western United States where their substantial growth took place. While several factors may have influenced their western growth, one reason is attributed to women's suffrage that took hold in the western states first (Cohen et al., 2014). Not only did community colleges benefit from women's rights activism, but women certainly benefited from community colleges as the women's movement created large increases of women eager to be enrolled in two-year colleges (Solomon, 1985). In addition to supporting community colleges, the Truman Commission Report on Higher Education (1947) called for an end to antifeminism in education and suggested that women had a right to education without discrimination. Further, with the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Title IX of the Higher Education Act women's roles as active participants in higher education were cemented (Gilbert & Heller, 2013; Keohane, 2020).

The open access mission of community colleges has provided significant opportunities for women in higher education (Franco, 2002). Community colleges are considered one of the largest disrupters of higher education as they contributed the most to opening the system for women, minorities, and those with low socioeconomic status (Cohen et al., 2014; Mellow, 2018). Both community colleges and women have a symbiotic, historical relationship in which equality



and opportunities thrived (Frye, 1995). Historically, women who attended college were likely from upper-class families or had academic preparation (Cohen et al., 2014). With community colleges, more women were now afforded the opportunity for education (Solomon, 1985). In the 1970s as the value of educating women became more widespread, community colleges served women of all ages and from various academic backgrounds and income levels including adult women, Vietnam veterans, and parents (Mellow, 2018; Solomon, 1985). In the 1980s and 1990s community colleges served more students of color and in the 2000s these students were joined by increasing numbers of immigrants and returning workers seeking to upskill or reskill (Mellow, 2018).

Through a mission of inclusivity, community colleges have educated America. Musil (2009) called these institutions “the most demographically globalized arena in higher education” (p. 9). These colleges made higher education financially, geographically, and academically accessible to all women. While women entered college for various reasons, from personal to career goals, community colleges provided a unique opportunity for women to gain whatever they desired from higher education (Solomon, 1985). The open access and inclusive mission allowed community colleges to historically bring together diverse women and they continue to do so today.

Women had a large influence on the curriculum of community colleges, and community colleges in turn had a large influence on women (Frye, 1995). Before 1970, women were not visible in leadership positions, except as Deans of Women (Frye, 1995). In the early years of community colleges, Deans of Women were the second most important administrator; yet, these women were not in positions to steer the curriculum (The Pepperdine Conference, 1981). Regardless, due to the varied missions of the community college, the lack of a clear consensus on

the role of community colleges, and increasing enrollments, women students were able to exert considerable influence on the curriculum (Frye, 1995). The first curriculum institutions developed aimed at supporting women's traditional roles such as programs in home economics, health care, secretarial work, marriage and family relations, and teaching; yet, over the years some of these early programs declined as women sought programs designed to enhance their opportunities (Frye, 1995; Townsend & Twombly, 2007). Consequently, women demanded transfer programs so they could continue their education at a university (Frye, 1995). Community colleges, eager for enrollments and growth, responded to women's demands for increased opportunities rather than stifle their aspirations, as was more typical at universities with limited enrollment programs and entrance requirements (Frye, 1995).

Today, women at community colleges can study in both traditional and non-traditional fields. In fact, women community college students of today are being looked to as a solution for meeting the workforce needs in STEM (Colleges Strive, 2014; Jackson & Laanan, 2011; Starobin & Laanan, 2008; Wang & Wickersham, 2018; Xiaodan & Oragus, 2019). In studying STEM students that transfer to four-year institutions, Xiaodan and Ortagus (2019) found that for men that start at a two-year college, their likelihood of completing a 4-year degree in STEM is lower; however, for community college women, starting at a two-year institution does not impact their ability to attain a 4-year STEM degree. Consequently, the authors asserted that community colleges have the potential to close the gender gap in STEM fields for women students. Community colleges opened the door for women of all backgrounds to attend and in 1978, women students became the majority at colleges for the first time in American history (Snyder et al., 2019). Given the history of community colleges and women, the proposed research will

reveal the power, if any, of the community college to influence women students' leadership identity develop.

### **Representation of Women in Community Colleges**

Women have higher representation at all levels of community colleges than at any other higher education institution. Given the power that role models and mentors have to influence women's leadership identity development (Haber-Curran & Sulpizio, 2017; Jackson, 2013; Komives et al., 2005; Longman et al., 2019; Pyke, 2013), it is important to situate this study by exploring the representation of women students, women faculty, and women administrators at community colleges

#### ***Students***

When it comes to student enrollments in college, women are continuing to gain ground as a dominant force. Community colleges have provided a gateway for many women to enter the higher education system. There are 936 public community colleges recognized by the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC, 2021). These institutions serve 41% of all undergraduates, full-time and part-time, in the United States (AACC, 2021). In Fall 2018 there were over 3.1 million women enrolled at public community colleges (Digest for Ed Stats, 2019). This means 39% of women in higher education are enrolled at a community college. In looking more holistically at both two and four-year public colleges, women account for 8.1 million students or 56% (NCES, 2019). Women have gone from desiring gender representation on campus to a strong majority with women comprising 57% of the community college student body (Digest for Ed Stats, 2019).

Community colleges provide significant opportunities for a diverse student body. Community college students are 29% first generation, 15% single parents, 9% non-U.S. citizens,

5% veterans, 20% students with disabilities, and 8% students with prior bachelor's degrees (AACC, 2021). The average age of a community college student is 28 which is significantly higher than the average age of university students (AACC, 2021). Over 1 million mothers, 25% of women community college students, are enrolled at these institutions and 50% of these women are single parents (AAUW, 2017). This may help explain why 67% of women are enrolled part-time (Digest of Ed Stats, 2019). Community colleges are racially diverse institutions. At community colleges, 31% of women are African American/Black or Latina compared to 23% of female undergraduates at public, four-year colleges (St. Rose & Hill, 2013). Community colleges are the primary path to higher education for Hispanics and Native Americans with 53% of Hispanic undergraduates and 56% of Native American undergraduates enrolled at community colleges (AACC, 2021). For students, when looking at all races and ethnicities at community colleges, women of color outnumber men of color across the board (St. Rose & Hill, 2013). The aforementioned gender gap is true for women overall, but is particularly significant for African American community college students, as 63% are women (St. Rose & Hill, 2013). This may be in part due to the low-cost, open enrollment, and local availability of colleges which have allowed women from various backgrounds to fit college into their life (St. Rose & Hill, 2013). Community colleges are centers of diversity and opportunity for women; yet are understudied as sites of equity.

### ***Faculty***

Community college faculty members experience strong parity between men and women in terms of numbers across all professorial ranks, employment status, tenure, and salary. Women make up 54% of all faculty positions at community colleges, compared to 47% at baccalaureate, 45% at Master's and 42% at doctoral institutions (AAUP, 2018). At community colleges, women

hold 50% of Full Professor ranks, 55% of Associate Professor ranks, 56% of Assistant Professor ranks, and 56% of Instructor/Lecturer ranks (AAUP, 2018). The statistics are particularly noteworthy when compared to women at universities, especially in the highest ranks. For example, only 39% of women hold Professor rank at the baccalaureate level, 32% hold Professor rank at the Master's level, and 27% at Doctoral institutions (AAUP, 2018). Community colleges rely heavily on adjuncts with 67% of faculty in part-time faculty roles (NCES, 2019). Interestingly, while women are the majority, they are not vastly overrepresented as adjuncts with women holding 54% of adjuncts positions at community colleges (NCES, 2019). The numbers of women faculty at all ranks demonstrate women have a majority in these institutions and are achieving numerical equality as faculty.

With these numbers, women community college students are more likely to encounter women in the classroom. Solomon (1985) explained that male dominated values are deeply embedded in academia and will be until students can assume a class is just as likely to be taught by either a man or a woman. Based on the numbers at community colleges, Ward and Wolf-Wendel (2017) concluded that these community college undergraduates are encountering “feminized spaces” in academia (p. 48). Perhaps this demonstrates a shift from the historical and traditional male dominated values of higher education.

Despite equal representation, full equity has not been achieved in pay and tenure but the numbers are reasonably comparable. Women faculty at community colleges earn 4 to 7% less pay than men (Townsend, 2008). Some have argued that when variables such as academic discipline, tenure status, and rank are controlled, there are no differences in salary based on gender at community colleges (Perna, 2003). Hagedorn (2009) explained that salary formulas at most community colleges are less biased because they are based on objective criteria such as

length of service and degrees held. In contrast, universities are more apt to rely on market rates per discipline and faculty member's productivity in meeting outcomes such as publishing which can be biased against women (Hagedorn, 2009). In addition, women community college faculty are earning tenure at a rate comparable to men, in that 62% of women are tenured and 68% of men are tenured (Townsend, 2008). At universities just 38.5% of women are tenured.

For many women faculty, working at community colleges is a conscious choice and a preference over four year institutions as these women seek work life balance (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2017; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2007). Women perceived community colleges to be more flexible toward working mothers than other institution types, based on their own experiences either working at a university or in graduate school (Ward & World-Wendel, 2017). In addition, with more of a focus on teaching and less of a focus on research, women wanting to balance career and family saw community colleges as a way to avoid the "publish or perish" dilemma. Because equality is a foundational aspect of community colleges with their open enrollment policies, women faculty are confronted with warmer campus climates and less gender politics than at universities (Hagedorn, 2009; Hagedorn & Laden, 2002) This is attributed to the large presence of women and women administrators, a wide representation from disadvantaged groups, and a general belief that discrimination is not tolerated (Hagedorn, 2009).

### ***Administrators***

In administration, women are not equally represented. Like other sectors, the higher the position the fewer women you will find. However, 37% of women presidents in higher education serve at community colleges (Gagliardi et al., 2017). In 1986, only 10% of community college presidents were women and by 1995, only 20% of community college presidents were women (Cook, 2012; Townsend, 2008). Today, 36% of community college presidents (CEOs) are

women, 54% of Chief Academic Officers, and 59% of managers are women (AACC, 2014; Howard & Gagliardi, 2018; Johnson, 2016; NCES, 2019). When looking at the representation of men's and women's leadership for African Americans, women held 43% of president positions and 61% of executives/administrators/manager leadership positions. (AACC, 2014). Their leadership compared to men's is stronger than any other race of women at community colleges (AACC, 2014).

These numbers are impressive when compared to four-year institutions and national trends. Women comprise 28% of presidents at bachelor's degree institutions, 29% at master's and 22% at doctorate-granting institutions (Gagliardi et al., 2017). In addition, women hold less CAO positions at four-year institutions with 38% of CAO positions at bachelor's degree institutions, 43% at masters, and 26% at doctoral institutions (Johnson, 2016). Women managers at universities are equal to community colleges in that they hold 59% of manager positions and are thus overrepresented in lower leadership positions and underrepresented in executive leadership (NCES, 2019). This finding is similar to other sectors.

Based on these startling statistics, Gangone and Lennon (2014) drew three recommendations for higher education institutions to encourage more women to take on top leadership positions; namely, mentors and sponsorship matter, performance-based hiring matters, and the climate of the institution matters. As mentioned earlier, community colleges large number of women faculty and leaders may explain their ability to replicate some of Gangone and Lennon's (2014) recommendations. Howard and Gagliardi (2018) suggested that the success of women presidents in community college may influence the "pipeline that holds the presidents of the future" (p. 2). Women community college students are likely to witness women

administrators that can serve as inspiring role models for the students' leadership identity development.

### **Climate for Women in Community Colleges**

The community college climate, perhaps influenced by the history, mission of equality and the larger proportion of women at all levels, may be warmer for women than at four-year institutions and has been noted as environments where women are supported and gain confidence (Hagedorn & Laden, 2003; Hagedorn, 2010; Herideen, 1998; Townsend & Twombly, 2007; Solomon, 1985). In studying community college's climate for women, Townsend and Twombly (2007) reviewed the history, demographics, climate, and relationships between men and women. The authors concluded that community colleges are good places for women at all levels, as many women have been able to meet their goals; yet, this may be accidental equity rather than intentional efforts from institutional leadership (Townsend & Twombly, 2007). Similarly, Vaughan (1984) cautioned that the community college does not launch societal trends rather it mirrors them. These higher education opportunities for women in community colleges may be a response to societal shifts, rather than a strategic design of these colleges' missions and institutional plans.

Whether community colleges are intentional and strategic or not, they are diverse institutions that bring together non-traditional, first generation, and traditional young women from various racial, academic, and economic backgrounds. Because these women encounter large numbers of potential mentors and role-models in women faculty, staff, and administrators, the proposed research uncovers the potential power of community colleges to support women students' leadership identity development. The campus climates that women encounter are important for attracting and retaining women faculty and administrators and play an important



role in shaping women students' leadership experiences (Gangone & Lennon, 2014; Haber-Curran, 2013; Kellerman & Rhode, 2014). The literature on the community college campus climate for women students will be reviewed to provide context for this study. The literature revealed both positive and negative aspects of the community college campus climate for women students.

### ***Positives of the Community College Climate for Women Students***

The campus climate at community colleges is largely a positive space for women students (Townsend & Twombly, 2007). Women attend community colleges for a variety of reasons, and many are supported in achieving their goals (Solomon, 1984). The community college climate is a place where diverse students not only learn academically, but find themselves. For low-income women, community colleges provide a narrative that helped them see higher education as necessary to secure good future employment, build self-worth, challenge stereotypes, and create social mobility (Nielsen, 2015). Further, community colleges helped returning women to enter higher education in order to challenge socially constructed gender and age expectations, to redefine themselves, as well as to pursue personal and intellectual dreams, to be role models for their children and grandchildren, to learn, and to be more engaged in the world (Fairchild, 2017; Jimenez & Oliva, 2017; Maddox, 2006). These returning women students were determined to meet their personal and professional goals at a community college as they desired to claim their right to be part of the college educated society (Fairchild, 2017). The current generation of women students that engage in the community college are direct and intentional in how they purposefully use the community college as a portal to higher education (Steinmann et al., 2004). Regardless of their goals, the community college climate helps diverse women gain access and success at community colleges.

Community colleges are potential sites for social justice, as diverse women students show persistence despite barriers (Fairchild, 2017; Nielsen, 2015). Clark (1960) suggested the role of college is to “cool out” underprepared students. College can be a high-risk activity filled with uncertainty for men and women alike (Cox, 2009). Uncertainty can lead to a fear of failure that turns into a self-fulfilling prophecy; however, influenced by the community college climate, low-income women at community colleges defy the odds as their aspirations hold steady despite barriers (Cox, 2009; Nielsen, 2015). Nielsen (2015) found that aspects of the community college such as the open access structure, career connections, and multiple credential pathways, build narratives at community colleges that reinforce women’s own career and self-improvement goals which leads to persistence (Nielsen, 2015). Further, the goals expressed by adult women students and Latina mothers, like low-income women, helped them to commit to college, and consequently, the women demonstrated resiliency and persistence (Fairchild, 2017; Jiménez & Oliva, 2017). In addition, caring community college faculty help returning women students, that are dependent on teacher-student relationships, to see their potential and find a sense of belonging at college (Fairchild, 2017). This makes community colleges important sites of equity for diverse women groups.

An important area for women students is the influence of women as role-models and mentors. Crisp (2010) found that women community college students tend to perceive more mentoring and role model support than men community college students. Exposing community college women to mentors will help students succeed at the community college and exposes them to a variety of leadership styles for their futures (Dalpes, 2012). Further, minority administrators at community colleges have the ability to positively empower minority women students through mentoring (Font, 2017). These women administrators provided coaching,

support, and access to information that helped the minority women students to achieve their academic and professional goals (Font, 2017). Font (2017) noted that both the mentor and mentee benefited from the relationship (Font, 2017). While the research clearly indicates mentors are valuable, it is not clear the extent that community colleges make mentoring an intentional and formal opportunity for staff and students.

While mentoring requires intention and a commitment from women employees, role modeling can take place more freely and can be a powerful influence for women students. A Dutch University study found that women faculty, both older and younger, are inspiring role-models for women students (van Mens-Verhulst et al., 2015). Men faculty members were significantly less likely to be selected as a role-model by women. This suggests that women faculty and institutions play an important role in women students' identity development and can create influence through "a hidden gendered curriculum" (van Mens-Verhulst et al., 2015, p. 1177). This study may not fully reflect community college women's experiences in the United States, where gender equity is championed less than in the Netherlands; nevertheless, it provides insight into the important role that women faculty play in women students' views of themselves.

Aside from being role models, women faculty positively impact women students' college experiences. While men students participate more in the classroom, regardless of factors such as the faculty member's gender, men's representation in the classroom, or the class size, women students' participation scores increased when they had a woman faculty member, even when women students were a clear minority in the course (Opie et al., 2018; Roth, 2003). This finding suggests that women students respond to women faculty as they feel more empowered to break gender stereotypes (Opie et al., 2018). Further, women students are more likely to engage with women faculty than men faculty in out-of-class communication (Nadler & Nadler, 2001). These

communication opportunities set the stage for academic and professional support for women students. Moreover, in community colleges, women students are likely to encounter faculty that are sensitive to students' gender (Townsend & Twombly, 2007). Feeling supported by faculty leads students to have higher academic self-efficacy which can influence retention (Cokely, 2000). Faculty interactions play a significant role in black women's satisfaction at community colleges (Strayhorn & Johnson, 2015). This research further supports the notion that faculty interactions influence the climate for women students at community colleges. Given the large number of women faculty at these institutions, the potential to positively influence the climate for women students is great and worthy of further analysis.

### **Negatives of the Campus Climate for Women**

While community colleges have been deemed as "feminized spaces" due to the large presence of women at all levels and good places for women students, there are several challenges that women students at a community college face (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2017, p. 48). Morris and Daniel (2008) conducted a study that focused exclusively on community college students and climate. The authors reported that women in the study found the climate at community colleges to be chillier than men. In addition, younger students felt it was chillier than older students, students of color found it chillier than White students, and students in traditionally female dominated programs more than students in traditionally male dominated programs (Morris & Daniel, 2008). This study suggests that women will experience the climate at community colleges differently based on their positionality such as age, race and academic discipline.

As discussed previously, the climate overall for women at community colleges appears to be welcoming; however, this climate becomes chillier when considering the research on diverse

women students. Despite community colleges being designed with diverse students in mind, particularly non-traditional students, the research indicates that community colleges fall short in meeting these women's diverse needs. Higher education, including community colleges, is built for the "ideal" student which is a male student with no family obligations (Madden, 2018). Consequently, power and privilege in the community college are maintained through classrooms and experiences that are not designed for women with diverse needs as these women do not fit the traditional "ideal" student mold (Madden, 2018).

One population of students that is particularly impacted is student mothers. The college climate for single-mother students is particularly chilly as these women feel ignored, unwelcome, and viewed as abnormal (Duquaine-Watson, 2007). These perceptions are reinforced through practices, policies, attitudes and interactions with faculty, staff, and other students (Duquaine-Watson, 2007). Many of the researchers that studied diverse community college populations such as Latina student mothers, returning women students, and low-income student mothers, noted the women questioned if they belonged, felt invisible and marginalized (Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Fairchild, 2017; Jiménez & Oliva, 2017; Madden, 2018). Further, returning college women are often motivated by their children's graduations; yet, engaging in college is an act of courage for them as they perceive college as a place for young people (Fairchild, 2017). In addition, single mothers feel "spotlighted" by faculty which served to reinforce stigmas and made the women feel as though they were the "other" (Duquaine-Watson, 2007). Some student mothers felt faculty required them to make their roles as mothers invisible when they were on campus (Madden, 2018). This is particularly difficult, as Latina women often see their roles as mother and student as intertwined and not easily separated (Jiménez & Oliva, 2017). Moreover, student mothers encounter other students that stereotype them as less feminine, more dominant, cold and

arrogant than the mother who discontinued her education (Mottarella et al., 2009). Given the number of mothers at community colleges, these attitudes could create a negative environment for women. This research suggests that for women that do not fit the traditional “ideal” college student, community colleges need to design better supports and resources.

Another segment of women that shed light on the community college campus climate is veterans. Veteran women students will experience difficulties transitioning roles from veteran to student (Heineman, 2017). They may not fit in and they will minimize their interactions with veteran men and younger students. When they seek academic help, they will rely on faculty and staff (Heineman, 2017). A lack of attention to the various needs of diverse women creates institutional climates where needs are not met nor adequately addressed.

Community college women have unique challenges that require additional supports such as childcare, food, and campus safety. For example, one of the largest barriers for community college mothers is child-care (Cerven, 2013; Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Heineman, 2017; Jiménez & Oliva, 2017; Madden, 2018; Miller et al., 2011). Unfortunately, community colleges are less likely to provide child care than universities (Miller et al., 2011). In 2009, 57% of four-year institutions had child care compared to 49% of community colleges (Miller et al., 2011). Moreover, because of the responsibilities and demands for single-parent students, they are more likely to experience mental health difficulties, including suicide (Shenoy et al., 2016). The single parent population is growing at community colleges.

In addition, women community college students are more food insecure than men (Spaid & Gillet-Karam, 2018). The authors found that this is particularly true for minority women, older women (over 20) and single parents. This is the population of women largely served at community colleges. These women are frequently seeking higher education to better their

financial situation and to provide for their families; yet, while they are in school many of them do not have access to sufficient food and financial resources (Spaid & Gillet-Karam, 2018).

Another area of concern for community college women is campus safety. Women, racial minorities, first-generation, and low-income students, again, the populations of many women at community colleges, are at great risk for sexual assault (Potter et al., 2020). Unfortunately, community colleges are less likely than universities to have funding and resources to address sexual assault on their campuses (Potter et al., 2020). Given the mixed research on the community college climate for women, this study provides insight into the climate that women community college student leaders encounter and if it supports their leadership identity development.

The historical relationships between women and community colleges are clear as community colleges provided women opportunities to enter higher education and meet their goals, like no other sector of higher education. This relationship continues to have an influence on women today with community colleges serving large segments of diverse women. These women students are met by a large presence of women faculty and administrators in the community college. Given the influence of mentors and role models on women's leadership identity development, this study illuminates the experiences women community college student leaders have with mentors and role models. In addition, the reviewed research indicates that the climate at community colleges is warmer for women than at four-year universities; however, community colleges are not always able to meet the needs of their diverse student bodies. This study provides insight into how women student leaders experience the community college climate and the impact it has on their leadership identity development.

## **State of Women Students in Leadership**

The vast majority of scholarship on women student leaders is limited to four-year universities (Emrick, 2006; May, 2009; Romano, 1996; Roth, 2003; Wagoner, 2017 Zimmerman, 2017). Researchers have explored women university student leaders' experiences at ivy league, research, public, private religious, liberal arts, and single-sex institutions. To date, there is no research on the experiences of women student leaders at community colleges. Limited research has explored student leaders, both men and women, in community colleges and can provide some insights for the proposed study. Esterhuizen (2007) studied community college student government executive council men and women and found that students gain valuable skills that are beneficial to their development and futures. Alternatively, Sanseviro (2007) paints a less optimistic picture of student involvement at community colleges. While the gender of the student government association participants was not specified, the research on institutional decision making at two-year colleges revealed that the student president's role in institutional decision making at two-year colleges is typically an advisory role and student leaders are often strongly guided to follow the goals of the administration (Sanseviro, 2007).

There is limited research on women community college student leaders. The available research explores women of color student leaders' perceptions of feminism and transfer. Women of color student leaders' relationships with feminism revealed that women of color community college students perceived discrimination and sexism as leaders and were reluctant to identify themselves as "feminists" due to feminisms failure to encompass diverse women such as women of color and lesbians (Jain & Turner, 2011). In addition, women of color student leaders may experience racism and sexism that impacts their self-efficacy and diminishes their perceptions of transfer to a four-year institution (Jain, 2010). While both of these findings give us insight into



how race and gender intersect to influence the perceptions of women student leaders at community colleges, the research does not tell us about their experiences as leaders nor their leadership identity development.

A few researchers have explored women student body presidents' experiences at multiple institution types, including community colleges (Miles, 2008; Polson, 2018). These experiences will be detailed below in the section on women students' leadership development. Unfortunately, both researchers' conclusions are not specific to institution type and thus cannot give us complete insight into community college women's experiences separate from university women.

While women community college student leaders' experiences are invisible in the literature, their four-year university counter-parts have been widely studied. These researchers have made several recommendations for future research that will be met through the proposed study. Additional research is called for to understand the differences in women students' experiences based on institution type (Rucks, 2018; Wagoner, 2017), in elite positions beyond the student body president (Polson, 2018; Romano, 1995) and utilizing different leadership styles (Haber- Curran & Sulpizio, 2017). The reviewed literature indicates that research on women community college student leaders' experiences adds to the body of scholarship on women students' leadership and fills the gaps identified by past research.

### **Women Students' Leadership Development**

Research on women university students' leadership revealed their motivations to lead, how they lead, and the benefits of leadership. Each of these pieces provide insight into women students' leadership identity development.

### ***Motivations to Lead***

What motivates women students to take on executive leadership positions? Several factors influence leader self-perceptions about their leadership potential such as early engagement in high school and college activities, negative experiences with past presidents, personal negative experiences, and exemplary leaders that act as role models (Rucks, 2018; Zimmerman, 2017). Women students' leadership self-efficacy and confidence increases through experiencing leadership, watching others lead, and verbal persuasion (Polson, 2018; Romano, 2016). When women engage in leadership, they see future leadership opportunities as reachable (Emrick, 2006; Polson, 2018). As women students' sense of leadership efficacy increases so does their motivation for greater leadership (Rucks, 2018). This indicates that exposure and participation in leadership may lead to further leadership and suggests that women students' leadership may be an important key to helping women navigate the labyrinth of leadership in their future careers.

In addition to the motivators identified above, women leaders are motivated by selecting organizations where they can make a difference as they seek to enhance the organization and/or help other group members develop (Haber-Curran, 2013; Keohane, 2014; May, 2009; Wagoner, 2017; Zimmerman, 2017). Further, women are motivated to run for student body president not only to make an impact but to enhance social justice and equity, to challenge people's expectations and to counter-sexism (Zimmerman, 2017). Women have separate leadership tracks as they more frequently participate in leadership opportunities in the arts, community service, and sororities, where men are more likely found in student government and fraternities (Roth, 2003). In this way, women are more concerned with high-impact rather than high-visibility or resume building (Shushok, 2017; Wagoner, 2017).

The research clearly indicates that mentors and role models are important for women student leaders' motivation. Peers, former student leaders, faculty, student affairs professionals, coaches, advisors, administration, family, and politicians all serve as role models and mentors to encourage women students' leadership identity development (Romano, 1994, 1996; Rucks, 2018; Wagoner, 2017; Whitt, 1993; Zimmerman, 2017). Exposure to role models is key to increasing women's leadership aspirations and leadership development (Sheppard, 2018; Whitt 1993). Some have suggested that women are not in leadership because they are not interested in politics; however, women are interested in politics, but a lack of women role models is cited as a reason woman do not run for executive office (Miller & Kraus, 2004).

Recognizing the power of women faculty as role models and mentors, Roth (2003) in a Duke University Steering Committee Report aimed to improve the climate for women students, suggested the need to hire additional female faculty as a key step. Alternatively, community colleges are ideal places for women students to be exposed to a variety of people who may serve as potential mentors (Dalpes, 2012). Positive exposure to campus faculty, staff, and administrators helps women student leaders to identify leadership styles that they admire and consequently influences their desire to lead (Rucks; 2018). Further, role models serve to help women students see themselves in leadership positions and increases their confidence in their own abilities (Polson, 2018; Rucks, 2018; Whitt, 1993). For example, having a woman student government faculty advisor was positively associated with having a current woman vice president (Miller & Kraus, 2004). Moreover, mentors that serve in senior roles may also be advocates and change agents for increasing women's leadership opportunities (Haber-Curran & Sulpizio, 2017). Educators need to understand the important function of role models as the college experience is the last opportunity women have to witness women leaders prior to starting

their careers (Sheppard, 2018). This research demonstrates the important linkage that women employees have in motivating women student leaders. These findings suggest that community colleges are uniquely situated to provide women students with exposure to role models at all levels of the institution serving as a counter-narrative to male dominated views of leadership.

Not only do college employees serve as mentors and role models, but peers, past student body presidents, and family also serve key roles as mentors (May, 2009). Peers can be a powerful influence to encouraging initial involvement in student organizations (Romano, 1996). In studying women university students' motivation to lead, Rucks (2017) found that past student body presidents and peers helped to both develop and sustain women's motivation to lead. These peers offered support, encouragement, provided leadership opportunities, helped with election campaigns and provided long-term guidance (Rucks, 2017; Zimmerman, 2017). In addition to peers, family members also influence women student leaders. In studying women university student leaders, mothers and grandmothers were often cited as key family members that serve as inspiring role models (Romano, 1996). This finding suggests that these women student leaders were not bound by gender role congruity and traditional masculine views of leadership but recognized strong women in their own circles of influence.

While women close to the student leaders influence their motivation to lead, women students are also influenced by the national political climate (Polson, 2018). Zimmerman's (2017) study coincided with Hillary Clinton running for president. The women student leaders in her study cited this national political scene and Clinton as a role model and as motivators for them to run for election and to continue running despite losing elections. While high profile women running for office typically lowered women's leadership aspirations, as noted earlier, this research suggests that women students are influenced on a broad scale as they see someone like

them running for the highest office in the United States. Continuing to build women's leadership may be an important step to increasing women students' leadership.

An important part of being an influential role model and mentor is to provide positive sources of validation and words of support for women students (Polson, 2018; Rucks, 2018; Zimmerman, 2018). Young women are less likely than young men to receive encouragement and less likely to have considered running for an elected position (Lawless & Fox, 2013; Zimmerman, 2017). However, they are just as likely as men to respond positively to encouragement to run (Lawless & Fox, 2013; Zimmerman, 2017). Mentors can play important roles in encouraging women to run as well as helping them to consider leadership as something they are capable of doing. Mentors serve to validate the women's emerging sense of their own leadership potential (Rucks, 2018; Zimmerman, 2017). Community college faculty and staff can provide affirmation of diverse women students' leadership potential by identifying many of the skills these women students have learned through trying to navigate college, family life, work, and various other identities and how these life skills align with leadership skills (Dalpes, 2012).

### ***How Women Students Lead***

How do women lead? While not always visible, women do a large proportion of the work in student organizations (Princeton University, 2011). Romano (1994) noted a shift in women students' leadership from task orientation to motivating others, further demonstrating how their leadership evolves over time. This finding is consistent with the leadership styles most utilized by women student leaders. Women's leadership styles are described as collaborative, communal, democratic, non-hierarchical, inclusive, relational, and team oriented (Emrick, 2006; Haber-Curran, 2013; May, 2009; Romano, 1994, 1996; Rucks, 2018; Wagoner, 2017; Whitt, 1993). These styles fit with transformational and servant leadership styles which are more typically

associated with women. While the increasing societal acceptance of these leadership styles can be seen as a success for women, women students may feel limited to feminine styles and should be encouraged to utilize all leadership styles (Haber-Curran & Sulpizio, 2017). This finding echoed the research on women's leadership cited earlier. This study provides further insight into the leadership styles utilized by community college women and their experiences.

### ***Benefits of Leadership***

What benefits does women students' leadership bring? Leadership opportunities in college are an important part of women's leadership development (Haber-Curan & Sulpizio, 2017; Romano, 1996). Participation in leadership provides women opportunities to learn and grow in several areas. These women had enhanced social, political, and career awareness (Miles, 2008; Whitt, 1993). Women student leaders not only gain leadership skills they gain civic responsibility, career preparation, and a variety of skills such as public speaking, interpersonal communication, writing, organizational, and conflict management skills, in addition to increased self-awareness, self-confidence, leadership efficacy and increased leadership aspirations (Cress et al., 2001; Emrick, 2006; Esterhuizen, 2007; Miles, 2008; Polson, 2018; Romano, 1994, 1996; Rucks, 2018; Whitt, 1993). Despite leadership challenges, women leaders demonstrated strength, optimism, tenacity, resilience, persistence, responsibility, and balance (Rucks, 2018; Wagoner, 2017). Engagement in student leadership opportunities is beneficial to the personal and professional development of women students. This study raises awareness of the perceived benefits of community college women students in elite leadership positions.

### ***Barriers to Leadership Development***

There has been a drop over the last 30 years in women students holding executive leadership positions (Haber-Curran, 2017). The trends for women in executive posts at Princeton

were gradually increasing toward parity starting in the 1970's up to the year 2000, and has since reversed (Princeton, 2011). Men are much more likely to hold presidential positions in student government than women and minority students (May, 2009). Miller and Kraus (2004) found that 71.4% of student government presidents were men and 71.4% of vice presidents were men. In addition, research shows undergraduate women are less likely than men to take on top leadership positions and more likely to take on secondary/support roles (Keohane, 2014; Miller & Kraus 2004; Princeton Report, 2011). While all leadership is of value, executive leadership roles create more opportunity for influence making them important positions for women students to make their voices heard. It is clear that women students are encountering challenges that stop them from pursuing elite leadership positions. Women student leaders face multiple challenges with balancing relationships and roles, balancing gendered expectations, and navigating active discrimination (Haber-Curran, 2013; Roth, 2003; Wagoner, 2017).

The women students struggled to balance relational and task behaviors as well as balance their time as a leader, a student, and a friend (Haber-Curran, 2013; Miles, 2008). As these women seek to engage and perform at a high level, they are forced to make sacrifices in their personal lives (Polson, 2018). In addition, the women had to balance several roles such as being professional and fun, authoritative and kind, and leader and friend (Haber-Curran, 2013; Wagoner, 2017). The women felt punished for acting with intelligence, authority, and confidence (Wagoner, 2017). Like professional women leaders, many women students faced a double-bind (Haber-Curran, 2013; Jain & Turner, 2011; Polson, 2018; Wagoner, 2017).

Another challenge specific to women student leaders is gender expectations. Women have identified a perceived need for effortless perfection (Princeton University, 2011; Roth, 2003; Wagoner, 2017). The women leaders felt pressure to be all things, intelligent, talented,

beautiful, fit and popular without any detectable effort (Roth, 2003). Wagoner (2017) explained that the women students' identity is based on a feminine narrative of being perfect, so the women start to fear failure and stop taking chances. Thus, for women students the only way to continue to remain perfect is inaction which can limit women's leadership aspirations and explorations (Roth, 2003; Wagoner, 2017). In addition, gendered expectations can also lead to self-doubt. Women who run for office experience levels of high and low self-esteem which can be challenging as women need to feel qualified in order to run (Zimmerman, 2017). Further, researchers have noted that men are more likely to promote themselves; whereas women are more likely to undersell their accomplishments (Princeton Report, 2011). Self-doubt can be a roadblock for women's leadership as it hinders a woman from considering candidacy, a critical step to becoming an executive leader (Lawless & Fox, 2013; Rucks, 2018).

Some women experience active discrimination. Women perceive higher levels of scrutiny and expectations than men leaders (May, 2009). Often, people unfairly judge the women student leaders' maturity, readiness, and decisions (Wagoner, 2017). Wagoner (2017) noted that this was particularly true as male organization members expressed sexist attitudes toward being led by a woman. In addition, Princeton University (2011) found that women were actively discouraged by peers not to run for elite offices. They were told executive positions should be held by men and less visible posts were more appropriate for women (Princeton University, 2011). Moreover, Zimmerman (2017) reported that women candidates for student body president experienced cyber bullying that attacked the women's credibility on social media platforms. These messages from peers and opponents harm women's leadership aspirations and continue to reinforce leadership as masculine. Further, women of color were stereotyped by administrators, faculty, and students (Romano, 1996). These women were given extra assignments because of their racial



status. In addition, other students of color mis-perceived their intentions and negatively judged their actions as unsupportive of the cultural group's agenda (Romano, 1996). Active forms of discrimination can be difficult for women students to navigate and continue to harm their desires to lead.

It is clear that women student leaders are engaging in leadership identity development as they pursue elite leadership roles. They are motivated to take on additional leadership through active involvement that helps to build their self-efficacy. In addition, women students are highly influenced by mentors and role models that increase the women's motivation to lead. The women student leaders frequently engage in transformational leadership and their leadership provides numerous benefits as they hone a variety of skills. Unfortunately, women do encounter challenges to leadership identity development and many do not pursue elite leadership posts. Further exploring the experiences of community college women that have achieved top leadership enhances our understanding of their motivation to lead, leadership styles, perceived benefits of leadership and challenges. This research provides a broader view of women's leadership identity development as we explore an understudied population.

### **Researcher Positionality**

A phenomenological approach affirms the importance of researchers reflecting upon and explicitly stating their beliefs and assumptions because they are the primary interpreters of the data (Hopkins et al., 2017). I acknowledge the critical role I played in analyzing and interpreting the data and I am critically aware that my experiences, attitudes, and beliefs could impact the research findings. I also recognize the significant responsibility I owe to my participants to ensure that their lived experiences and voices are heard in the purest form. Providing these women a platform to share their story, a story that has been marginalized in the research, was my

primary impetus for engaging in this work. As such, there is value in self-reflection to better understand what is “seen, unseen, and unforeseen” in my assumptions and research as well as to be held accountable to the participants of this study (Milner, 2007, p. 388).

I am a White, middle-class woman. I am currently serving as a Dean of Instruction at a community college. Blackmore (1995) asserted:

The lens of privilege ... requires women in leadership to consider their position, to better understand how and why they came to be in that position and how they can use that position to challenge and transform exclusive images of leadership into more inclusive ones (p. 35).

As such, I feel obligated to reflect on my own leadership journey and opportunities to support images of leadership that embrace diversity and are inclusive of all people, men and women. To understand my positionality, I must dissect my identity as a leader and a person. I have not always seen myself as a leader. From my early youth, I was selected for various leadership roles in religious and educational settings. Like many of the women in this study, I was engaged in leadership throughout college. I was captain of the debate team, co-president of the honor’s society, and ultimately graduate student body president. Like many women, I have struggled to see myself as a leader. I have lacked confidence to take on leadership roles throughout my life and in my career and have greatly benefited from supportive mentors and family that recognized my leadership potential when I failed to recognize it in myself. By engaging in this research, the participants have helped me discover and re-discover my own leadership identity development journey.

Through serving in my professional role as a Division Chair and now Dean, I have finally come to recognize my own leadership ability, an identity that has developed over several decades. Working at a community college, surrounded by role-models, mentors, and supportive colleagues, was pivotal to my leadership identity development. It is my assumption that

community colleges are unique institutions that are well situated to support women's leadership development. With this recognition, I am also keenly aware that the women student leaders' experiences may both support and challenge this assumption. I am confident in my ability to represent the women as I am most interested in understanding the current experiences of these women students and the ways that institutions can support women's leadership so to encourage them to continue to pursue leadership well beyond their time in the academy. Through better understanding women community college students' experiences, we support women's leadership aspirations and perhaps influence the number of women in leadership positions. Enhancing gender parity in leadership is key to creating a society that is equitable, inclusive, and productive.

In reflecting upon my identity, I recognize the need to interrogate privileged aspects of my class and race. Being middle-class, I have more resources available to me than women from lower-socioeconomic backgrounds. In high school, I took a few courses from local community colleges, but most of my collegiate experience was at a university. I am a first-generation college student, so I have some common ground with many community college students. However, I do not have direct experience as a student leader at a community college nor experience working with women leaders at community colleges. As a White person, my leadership experiences, at first glance, resemble a privileged pipeline in which one position has led to another; however, with a deeper lens I am stuck in a "labyrinth" like many other women. Even as a White woman in a warmer institutional climate, I have been subject to sexism, biases, and discrimination that have hindered my aspirations. I feel constrained to leadership styles that are more feminine so to avoid the double-bind. I have been discouraged from advancing into higher levels of leadership by peers and I have seen my ideas validated only after they are repeated by a man. These experiences are why I am passionate about the advancement of women's leadership.

The oppression of women is a fundamental form that transcends race, class, age, and culture. Higher education institutions often serve to reinforce hegemonic power structures (David, 2015; Diamini & Adams, 2014; Tresler-Golden, 2018). One does not have to look far to see practices that are not hospitable to women's growth from inequitable hiring, promotion, and tenure practices to cultures that stifle and limit women's leadership potential. In fact, pursuing women as my dissertation topic carries risks for my future employment opportunities. As I seek to elevate the voices of women, some may wrongly see this as discriminatory against men. While I am supportive of both men and women's leadership, I recognize the sharp inequities for women that limit their opportunities. Pursuing this line of research is a career risk I am willing to take if it influences change for women's leadership.

My current role as a community college Professor and administrator situates me in a position of power over my participants. Throughout the interview process, I worked to establish common ground by sharing my own leadership experiences. Building trust and rapport with the participants was key to encouraging honest responses without fear of judgment. I believe my position as a woman allowed the women students to feel comfortable and supported. Ultimately, as a researcher engaged in phenomenological work, I committed to engage in the recursive exercise of revising biases and assumptions I bring to the work, based on the process of uncovering new insights from the participants (Gadamer, 2004). In addition, I engaged my participants in a review of the transcripts and findings to ensure I met my primary goal of giving voice to the women's experiences in my study, a group of women that has a unique experience worthy of being heard.

## **Theoretical Frameworks**

This study relied on Komives et al. (2005) Leadership Identity Development Theory (LID) with a feminist theory lens (Allan, 2011; Harding, 1993; Tong, 2009) for understanding the lived experiences of women community college student leaders.

### **Leadership Identity Development**

To understand the complex process of leadership identity creation, Komives et al. (2005) engaged in grounded theory research. The in-depth interviews with university student leaders that utilize relational leadership styles revealed how leadership identity develops through college student involvement. Of the thirteen participants, five were women, eight of the students were White and five were students of color. In addition, two of the students were sophomores, nine were seniors, and two were recent graduates. While all of the participants had different leadership experiences, the authors discovered that they engaged in the leadership process in similar ways as they came to see leadership as part of their social identity. The author's identified that students' leadership identity developed in six stages, namely: deepening self-awareness, exploration/engagement, leader identification, leadership differentiation, generativity, and integration/synthesis (Komives et al., 2005, Komives et al., 2006). Each stage ends with a transition that leads into the next stage. Leadership identity development is not linear, students can move forward and backward through the stages.

The first stage, Awareness, is when students recognize leadership is happening around them from their homes and schools to national politics (Komives et al., 2005). In this stage, people do not see themselves as leaders as leadership is viewed externally. Students typically transition to the next stage as they want to be involved in organizations and/or as adults encourage them to be involved.

In stage two, Exploration/Engagement, the students start to be involved in various groups and activities (Komives et al., 2005). They begin to develop interpersonal skills, confidence, and recognize others engaging in leadership, although they are often not in a leadership role. They actively observe adult and peers modeling leadership. They transition as they narrow their interests, want to do more in the organization, and start to recognize their leadership potential. Adults and peers are important influences for helping students recognize their leadership potential (Komives et al., 2006).

In stage three, Leader Identification, the students take on various leadership roles and test different leadership styles. In this stage, the students experiment with leadership as part of their identity and then are actively immersed in leadership. For the students, leadership is positional and task oriented. It is defined by the role of leaders and followers. Leaders have ultimate responsibility for the organization and are needed to get things done. Followers are expected to do what the leader wants. As students recognize the participatory nature of leadership they transition to stage four.

In stage four, Leadership Differentiated, students' views of leadership evolve (Komives et al., 2005). They recognize group dynamics and shared power. They view leadership as a process and something that could be enacted by any member of the group, not just the positional leader. The students recognized the responsibility to engage in leadership that encourages participation as they became less individualistic and more communal. Adults and peers in this stage served as meaning-makers to help the students understand their experiences. The students transition to the next stage as they recognize the need to coach others.

In stage five, Generativity, the students are concerned with serving, developing, and mentoring other group members (Komives et al., 2005). They develop a passion for involvement.

They become less concerned about the organization's activities and more concerned about developing the organization's future leaders. They transition as they recognize they will soon move on to new roles.

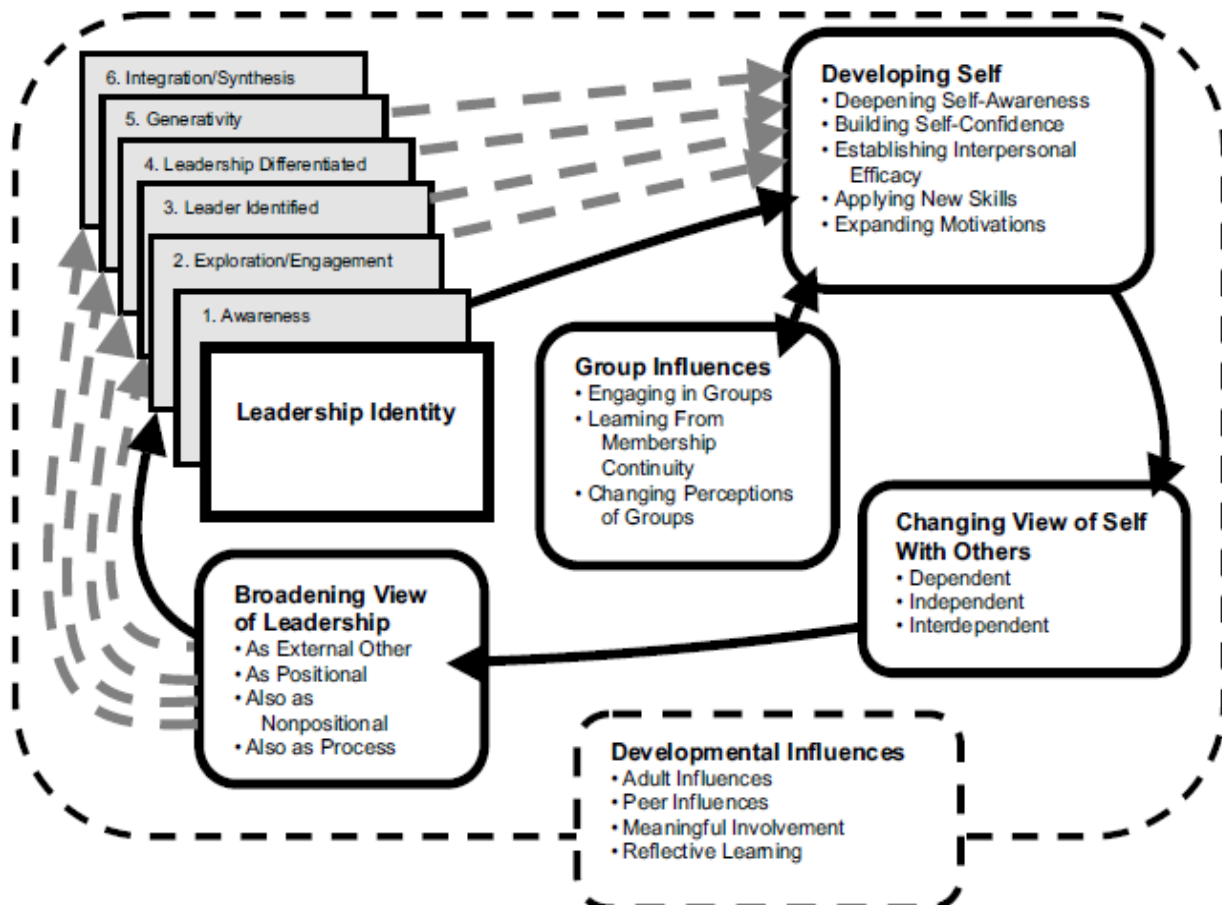
In the last stage, Integration/Synthesis, the students see themselves as leaders and engage in leadership daily (Komives et al., 2005). Leadership is now a part of their social identity. They develop self-efficacy to engage in leadership in a variety of contexts with or without formal leadership roles. In addition, they can now recognize the complexity of leadership and see it as a life-long learning process.

In addition to the six stages, Komives et al. (2005) identified five influences on leadership identity development that happen throughout each stage (see Figure 2.1). These are a broadening view of leadership, developing self, group influences, changing view of self with others, and developmental influences (Komives et al., 2005). Broadening views of leadership explain how students move from leadership being external to them, to positional, and then non-positional as they recognize everyone can be a leader. Developing self demonstrates how students increase skills, which leads to increased interpersonal efficacy, self-confidence and self-awareness. Developing self has connections to women's leadership as leadership experiences increase their motivation to lead and self-efficacy (Polson, 2018). Group influences are seen as students engage in groups and develop changing views of the group from a place to gather with friends to organizations with purposes and roles. Changing view of self with others shows how in the first two stages the students are dependent on others such as adults and peers. In stage three they become independent as they take on formal leadership and in stage four through six they recognize their interdependence as leadership comes from all levels of the group (Komives et al., 2006). Lastly, peers, adults, meaningful involvement, and reflective learning were identified as

important developmental influences on students' LID. Given the representation of women at all levels of the community college, the identification of adults and peers as influences on leadership development suggests that community colleges may be a unique setting for developing women students' leadership identity.

**Figure 2.1**

*Leadership Identity Development Stages, Influences, and Cycles (Komives et al., 2005, p. 599)*





The LID has been applied to research on college athletes, students of color at selective liberal arts colleges (Beatty, 2014), women in undergraduate computing (Blaney, 2018), peer tutoring (Crandall, 2017), college athletes (Hall, 2015), community college millennials (Hughes, 2014), and university women student government association presidents (Damell, 2013). The research demonstrates that student identities such as being a woman, a student of color, or a millennial, were integral aspects that shaped their leadership identities. For example, women in undergraduate computing were confronted with stereotypes and sexism that harmed their leadership confidence (Blaney, 2018). Likewise, students of color at selective liberal arts colleges leadership identity development was shaped by their life histories and they were particularly influenced by opportunities to engage in social justice as a counter to racism and microaggressions (Beatty, 2014). Similarly, Millennials, were influenced by generational traits such as desire for high achievement, parental involvement, and community orientation (Hughes, 2014). For them, adults highly influenced their leadership development and the millennials saw leadership connected to their future ability to be successful (Hughes, 2014). These studies demonstrate the impact of one's gender, racial, or generational positionality on leadership identity development.

Some of the research focused on the stages of development and found that students reached different stages of LID (Damell, 2013; Hughes, 2014). Engaging in leadership opportunities predicted the millennials' leadership stage, with the more experienced students reaching higher stages (Hughes, 2014). In studying university women student government association presidents, Damell (2013) also found that while they followed the LID stages, the women leaders reached different stages depending on their development. Utilizing LID as a framework for this study will provide insight into the stages of LID that women community

college student leaders reach as well as how their identity as women changes their leadership development.

In addition, Damell (2013) found a potential seventh stage by including women who had graduated nine to fifteen years earlier and were now in the career field. She identified this stage as “reassessment” (p. 164). The women entered a period of reassessing their leadership identity due to how gender was now impacting them and their leadership opportunities. This caused them to reevaluate their leadership capacity. Interestingly, gender expectations were not as prevalent for them during their time as student government association president. This finding mirrors the research on women’s leadership aspirations declining throughout their careers as gender becomes a larger barrier (Covert & Konczal, 2015; Gadish & Coffman, 2015; McKinsey & Company, 2015). Incorporating recent women graduates into this study, provides an opportunity to further explore if women community college student alumna also experience a potential reassessment stage.

LID has been utilized as a practical tool for professionals. For example, athletes can benefit from the intentional use of LID to help staff assess athletes’ LID stage, to teach the athletes about LID, and to provide opportunities for reflection and mentoring (Hall, 2015). For tutors, higher levels of training coincided with higher stages of leadership identity development (Crandall, 2017). In these ways, LID can be a useful tool for assessing students’ development.

Because this study aims to uncover the experiences of women community college student leaders, Leadership Identity Development provides an appropriate lens for understanding their complex leadership paths and the influences to their leadership. This research reveals the extent to which community college women come to see leadership as part of their social identity. It also allows us to understand their stage of development and how that coincides with their future

leadership aspirations. LID will be utilized throughout this study. It provides a framework for understanding the literature on women's leadership as well as a lens for data analysis and interpreting the findings. Understanding women community college students' leadership development, in both how it aligns to the LID theory and perhaps differs from the LID theory, has the potential to provide important contributions to the fields of education and leadership.

As can be seen from the additional research that utilized LID, students' unique identities and backgrounds shape the experiences that influence their leadership development. The literature throughout this chapter highlights that gender shapes women's leadership as it is a central part of a woman's identity. Because LID was developed with both men and women students and the proposed study focuses solely on the experiences of women student leaders, feminist theory will provide an additional lens. Feminist theory requires that we center oppressed voices which allows for assumptions and underinformed views of reality to be challenged. Studying women community college student leaders' identity development through the lens of feminism will give voice to an understudied population.

### **Feminist Theory**

Feminist theory attempts to understand, explain, and uncover the conditions of women's lives (Kolmar & Bartowski, 2005). While often misunderstood as "anti-man," hooks (2000) described feminism as "a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression" (p. viii). Feminism was started with the goal of creating equality for White women, but has since grown to recognize oppression based on race, class, ability, age, and sexual orientation (Allan, 2011). As such, feminist theory is concerned with examining and explaining hegemonic power structures to achieve equity and inclusion in society for all peoples (Tong, 2009). At its core is the significance of giving voice to others, particularly the oppressed, overlooked, or

disadvantaged. Feminist theory provides a lens for critically examining women's leadership and the gender assumptions that underly women's leadership. Further, it is particularly applicable for examining community colleges which are often marginalized in higher education research as they are considered less prestigious than other higher education institutions (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2017).

While there are various strands of feminist theory with key differences, there are basic tenets of feminism that are common to all strands. Allan (2011) identified three universal principles of feminism: (1) sex and gender inequalities remain and are embedded in society through interactions, behavior, cultures, institutions, and norms, (2) inequalities are a result of social relations and are not constituted by nature, and (3) inequality should be discarded through social transformation.

This research aligns with the goals of fourth wave feminism and feminist standpoint theory. Fueled by social media, the current fourth wave of feminism, resurrects the basic principles of liberal feminism with a renewed push for women's rights and women's empowerment (Rampton, 2015). Issues such as violence against women, unrealistic body expectations, gender constraints around femininity and masculinity, the lack of women in leadership, and workplace discrimination and harassment are all key areas of mobilization for fourth wave feminists (Peroni & Rodak, 2020). Unlike liberal feminism, this wave of feminism recognizes the intersectionality of diverse peoples and seeks to create equity by being inclusive of all marginalized perspectives.

In addition, feminist standpoint theory is useful to this study as it privileges women's perspectives, views and knowledge. Harding (1993) explained, all knowledge is "socially situated" (p. 56). Because women's and men's social positions differ, due to gender norms that

dictate power relations, women can provide a significant and unique standpoint by which dominant cultures and assumptions can be understood and critiqued (Grenz, 2014; Harding, 1993; Wood, 2012). Centering women's voices and other overlooked groups can make visible the invisible (McClish & Bacon, 2002). Feminist standpoint theory calls on researchers to privilege marginalized voices in the construction of knowledge.

A feminist perspective that centers women's experiences by placing value on the knowledge of women was the most appropriate approach for this research. In early leadership research, Irby and Brown (1995) recognized that management and leadership theories were heavily male dominated and called for leadership theories to be reevaluated and revalued to include feminist perspectives. The LID was developed through interviews with both men and women student leaders. Applying a feminist lens will ensure aspects of leadership development that are not found in traditional male dominated views of leadership are surfaced and given voice. Women's leadership development should not be defined by men's leadership experiences and thus the distinct experiences of women can stand on their own merit. Contrasting men and women often sets men's leadership as the standard and women's as the "other" and serves to reinforces dominant gender assumptions. Likewise, community college women should not be constrained to the knowledge we have of university women. Given the different positionality of community college women, their voices too deserve to be centered as places of knowledge production. Centering community college women's voices allows us to make visible their experiences and uncover new knowledge about women's leadership from those that are breaking gender barriers. A feminist theory lens is influential to the development of all aspects of this study.

## **Summary**

The review of the literature captured the state of women's leadership, the state of women in community colleges, and the state of women students' leadership. The research revealed that women encounter challenges from masculine organizational cultures to both overt and covert forms of sexism that often lead to self-limitations. While these barriers are significant, recent societal advancements continue to signal positive opportunities for women's leadership. There are more women than ever before in leadership positions which is leading to more mentors and role models as well as a recognition that feminine leadership styles have value for today's organizations. Exploring the literature on the state of women in community colleges demonstrated that community colleges and women have a connected history in which both have benefited. Further, the climate for women at community college is largely deemed positive due to the representation of women at all levels from students to faculty and administration. However, the climate for diverse populations such as student mothers and women veteran's signals a need for improvement. Lastly, the literature on the state of women student leaders sheds light on their leadership identity development. These university women were motivated to lead through opportunities to experience leadership and the powerful influences of role models and mentors that provide validation. They typically led in transformational ways and their leadership led to a variety of benefits both personal and professional. Unfortunately, these women also encounter barriers to their leadership from balancing roles to gender expectations and active discrimination. These barriers may help explain why women university students are underrepresented in executive leadership positions.

The literature reviewed in this chapter reveals a gap in understanding the unique experiences of women community college student leaders. This study will uncover their

leadership identity development with a focus on their motivations to lead, barriers and influences in leadership as well as their future aspirations. This void limits our understanding of the experiences of diverse women who have successfully achieved executive leadership as well the potential of the community college environment to be a site of equity for women students' leadership. Ultimately, there is extensive literature on women's leadership, yet the lack of progress suggests the importance of continuing to understand positive deviant women's leadership so to find strategies for encouraging women to achieve and succeed at the executive level.

### **Chapter III: Methodology**

As women continue to lag behind men in executive leadership positions in many sectors, it is important to understand the experiences of women community college students that are defying the trends and achieving executive leadership (Lennon, 2009). Women community college student leaders have been widely ignored in the scholarship on women's leadership; yet, community colleges serve 39% of women students at public institutions (NCES, 2019). This study sought to illuminate women community college student leaders' lived experiences in executive positions and to discover the ability, if any, of the community college to support women students' leadership development. Because leadership identity development is a process that occurs over time and through engaging in leadership experiences, leadership identity development theory provides a theoretical framework for engaging in this hermeneutic qualitative phenomenological research (Komives et al., 2005). Feminist theory will provide an additional lens for understanding how women develop their leadership identity.

This chapter discusses the research design and rationale for engaging in phenomenological research as well as the role of the researcher in a hermeneutic phenomenology study. The specific methodological design will be presented including the participants, research site, impacting conditions, instruments, procedures, and data collection. In addition, the chapter will cover the data analysis steps as well as address threats to validity and reliability and ethical concerns.

#### **Design and Rationale**

This study was guided by a central research question: What are women community college student leaders' experiences? The study utilized four sub-questions to better understand the women leaders' motivations to lead, leadership identity development at a community college,



barriers, supports, and future leadership aspirations. The following sub-questions framed this inquiry:

Q1: What experiences motivate women community college students to take on top leadership positions in student organizations on campus?

Q2: How do women student leaders' experiences at a community college facilitate their leadership identity development?

Q3: What leadership barriers and supports do women community college student leaders experience, if any?

Q4: How do the women students' experiences in community college leadership impact their future leadership aspirations?

To answer these questions, a qualitative research approach was utilized. The broad goal of qualitative research is to discover and understand the ways people experience the world (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). There are four philosophical assumptions that guide qualitative researchers; namely: ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative researchers view ontology, or the nature of reality, as having multiple perspectives (Creswell, 2013). Individuals experience the same phenomenon differently and thus multiple perspectives are collected and analyzed to co-create reality and provide a deeper understanding. I believe knowledge is individually situated and as we center marginalized voices we can shed dominant taken for granted assumptions of reality.

Epistemologically, knowledge is viewed as subjective and the relationship between the participants and the researcher is purposely reduced (Creswell, 2013). Reducing the distance allows the researcher to see and understand the participants' situated experiences with the phenomenon. My position in relation to the women leaders provides me greater insights into

their lived experiences. The axiological assumption, or the study of values, suggests that knowledge is value-laden and that biases exist. The researcher must make their values explicit in the study and recognize that the findings are a subjective interpretation of the participants' experiences. Throughout the research my biases are stated and explored.

Methodological assumptions are that the research topic should be studied inductively, in context, and with an emerging design (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative researchers seek to understand something from the ground up and recognize the need to adjust research or interview questions as the data is collected. Where quantitative research attempts to objectively measure a hypothesis to answer what is happening, qualitative research attempts to subjectively explore the complexity and depth of a situation to understand the meaning individuals ascribe to a problem. Because women's leadership is complex, a qualitative approach is appropriate to trying to illuminate women's leadership identity development.

My epistemological orientation to qualitative research aligns with the social constructivist worldview or interpretive framework. Social constructivism focuses on the collaborative nature of learning with and from others to expand knowledge. Constructivism strives to interpret and understand individual experiences with the recognition that truth is subjective and there are multiple realities (Lather, 2006). As such, the goal of social constructivism is to uncover the participant views and interpret the meaning they make of their experiences to better understand the world (Creswell, 2013). Understanding women's experiences is most compatible with the qualitative constructivist research paradigm. I sought to understand and interpret multiple individual experiences in a rich manner so to better expand our understanding of women's experiences in executive leadership roles. The researcher, as interpreter, and the participants collaborated to construct what people see and learn from the women's experiences.

To understand the women students' lived experiences, I employed a phenomenological methodology. Phenomenology is well aligned to this project because at its core is the purpose of understanding the essence of participants' lived experiences with a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). For this study, the phenomenon is women community college students' leadership development. Phenomenology is an alternative to objective, quantitative truth and is an appropriate methodology for educational researchers because it allows for the exploration of educational issues from the perspective of those most closely involved (Hopkins et al., 2017). Van Manen and Adams (2010) explained, "A phenomenological attitude constitutes a fascination with the uniqueness...It is pursued through attempts to awaken the experience as we live it" (p. 644). Lived experiences are understood through the process of reflection which leads to meaning making by the participants, researcher and reader. As such, phenomenology relies heavily on interviews as a primary method of data collection (Creswell, 2013; Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

All main methodologies were reviewed for their fit with illuminating the experiences of women community college student leaders. Narrative research was considered, but because it typically explores the life of an individual it did not allow for understanding multiple women's experiences about a single phenomenon. A key component of phenomenology is to explore several individual's unique experiences (Hopkins et al., 2017). A case study methodology was also considered, but it stops at developing in-depth description; whereas phenomenology moves beyond description to create understanding and find meaning (Creswell, 2013; Seidman, 2019). Grounded theory was not applicable because the study of women community college student leaders is new and little is known about their experiences. Likewise, ethnography is not an appropriate method because the focus of the research is not on the culture of community college

student organizations. Ultimately, phenomenology provides the most appropriate method for elevating the voices and experiences of women community college student leaders.

### **Phenomenology**

Edmund Husserl is credited with the philosophical founding of phenomenology and is seen as the father of phenomenology (Peoples, 2021). Martin Heidegger, a student of Husserl, is the other main phenomenological philosopher (Peoples, 2021). He diverged from Husserl and created what is known as hermeneutic phenomenology (Peoples, 2021). One of the main differences in their approaches to phenomenology involves the role of the researcher. Husserl believed that the researcher should bracket or as Husserl called it “*epoche*” their experience with the phenomenon to ensure they get the purist view, unadulterated by their own lenses (Husserl, 1913). Alternatively, Heidegger asserted that it was impossible and undesirable for the researcher to remove their preconceptions and assumptions from the research (Heidegger, 1962; Husserl, 1913). Instead, Heidegger proposed the hermeneutic circle which is a revisionary process the researcher engages in to understand the phenomenon (Gadamer, 2004). This requires the researcher to critically state their personal biases on the subject and then revise these biases based on the process of uncovering new insights from the participants (Gadamer, 2004).

Engaging in this form of research requires balancing tensions. Hopkins et al. (2017) explored philosophical approaches in phenomenological research to provide a framework to help researchers navigate positionality. The framework explores three tensions, namely: the tension between considering each story and the collective understanding, bracketing experience and reflexivity, and rich description and interpretation (Hopkins et al., 2017). Rather than align with one tension or another, it is important for researchers to engage in a “*dance*,” where the researcher cycles between the tensions and develops an emerging understanding (Hopkins et al.,

2017, p. 24). Through this balance between tensions, the researcher moves from the whole to the parts and back and forth with different lenses in a non-linear, spiral shape as new understanding and meaning is uncovered (Peoples, 2021). This approach resonated with my views of wanting to give voice to the women's experiences, while recognizing I carry my own perspectives that can provide valuable initial insight and context into the women's experiences.

Some worry that a researcher will cling to their past knowledge; however, a person truly trying to understand a phenomenon will actively look for new insights that either confirm or disconfirm their previous beliefs until a new awareness is reached (Gadamer, 2004). If at the end of the study, the researcher has only confirmed their own beliefs, bias overtook the work or the research design was inappropriate (Peoples, 2021). Hermeneutic phenomenology is consistent with being reflexive as it recognizes the ability to adapt and change beliefs based on new information. This resonates with my beliefs on education and research. For me, the goal of this research was to construct new lenses or ways of knowing and seeing women's leadership in hopes to support more women to achieve leadership positions. To fully set aside my knowledge of women's leadership and community colleges would be a disservice to the research and may even lack appropriate interpretation. Consequently, I relied on the hermeneutic phenomenological approach when conducting this study.

Phenomenology is frequently used in psychology and education research and is appropriate for studying leadership (Block, 2014; Creswell, 2013; Sutherland & Cameron, 2015). Leadership is a complex phenomenon that is found in the lived experience (Block, 2014; Sutherland & Cameron, 2014). Due to leadership's dynamic, multi-faceted and perplexing nature, quantitative research has fallen short in providing a holistic understanding of leadership, whereas phenomenological inquiry allows leadership to be understood as a complex lived

experience (Sutherland & Cameron, 2015). Utilizing a phenomenological methodology creates space for bringing new voices, such as women community college students, into leadership scholarship which both democratizes and conceptualizes leadership in new ways (Sutherland & Cameron, 2015). Exploring diverse leadership experiences through phenomenology helps us to better understand the effect of leadership on both leaders and followers (Gardiner, 2017).

In addition to phenomenology being a strong fit for leadership research, this methodology aligns with feminist theory and the study of women's experiences. Feminist phenomenology aligns feminist theory with phenomenological practices (Gardiner, 2018). Engaging in feminist phenomenology can reveal how inequalities and structural issues impact gender and leadership (Gardiner, 2018). Kruks (2014) and Gardiner (2018) explored various feminist scholars to argue that phenomenological paradigms are connected to feminist theory and provide valuable tools for understanding women's experiences. Some of the first phenomenological scholars asserted the value of experience; however, this was often the White, masculine experience.

Alternatively, feminist scholars such as Simone de Beauvoir and Marion Young can be viewed as giving voice to women's experiences (Kruks, 2014; Gardiner, 2018). Through engaging the lived experience of various women, Beauvoir moved from individual experiences to commonalities of experience that are found in social structures and practices (Kruks, 2014). Beauvoir is critiqued for the "erasure of women of color" and while these voices are missing in her work, there is a universal woman's experience that resonates with readers and allows them to identify with the world portrayed, as well as discover similarities and differences from their own lived experiences (Kruks, 2014, p. 83). Black feminist scholars have recognized the value of intersectionality, the interconnected nature of gender and race, in research (Cooper, 2017; Crenshaw, 1989; hooks, 1981). Hancock (2007) described a key assumption of intersectionality

as the recognition that multiple categories such as race, gender, and class, converge in societal problems and individual's experiences and should be attended to simultaneously in research rather than in isolation. Being cognizant of the critique against Beauvoir and recognizing that the women's race and other salient identities will impact their leadership development, I encouraged the women leaders to discuss how race and other identities beyond gender intersected to impact their leadership experiences.

Marion Young, recognized phenomenology as an "invitation to conversation" where women's diverse voices create understanding (Kruks, 2014, p. 86). I view engaging in phenomenological research as an invitation to uncover the experiences of an understudied and marginalized group of women student leaders. While their experiences in leadership identity development are not universal, I too hope that their experiences resonate, in transformative ways, for other women and with both education and leadership scholars and practitioners.

### **Researcher Role**

As noted earlier, the role of the researcher is viewed differently depending on if one is using hermeneutic phenomenology or transcendental phenomenology. Because this study relied on hermeneutic phenomenology it is important to make my personal biases explicit (Peoples, 2021). My full positionality statement in Chapter 2 attempts to make visible the biases that inform my work. In brief, I am a woman faculty member and administrator. I have spent most of my time in academia serving as a division chair at a community college. Recently, I took on the role of Dean of Instruction. My role as a woman leader at a community college provides an initial impetus for engaging in this research as well as a bias. It is my assumption that the community college environment is a supportive climate for women students' leadership identity development. Further, being a woman leader myself, I believe women experience leadership

differently from men and their journey involves both barriers and supports. The hermeneutic circle requires the researcher to state their biases, engage in the research with the participants, and revisit their biases throughout the research process (Peoples, 2021). As such the researcher is continually revising their assumptions by looking through their biases and adapting their understanding based on the new knowledge and awareness they are gaining (Gadamer, 2004).

To ensure the voices of the participants are elevated, I engaged in reflective journaling. Writing is a basic principle of engaging in phenomenological work as it allows the researcher to more deeply and meaningfully engage and understand the participants (Hopkins et al., 2017). I first wrote down my biases and for-conceptions of women community college student leaders' experiences to clarify what was already known and unknown. This allowed me to keep my biases at the forefront of the research. As I interviewed the women student leaders and analyzed the data, I continued to journal. I frequently returned to review and revise my assumptions based on the new awareness of the phenomenon. Reflection and writing enable the researcher to more clearly make visible the invisible (Hopkins et al., 2017). In this process of hermeneutic phenomenological analysis, I acted as both observer and participant (Peoples, 2021).

In addition to understanding how biases can influence the research, it is important for the researcher to minimize power dynamics in relation to the subjects and build rapport. Because we are part of the same campus community, I had knowledge of many of the participants, but had only personally interacted with two of the participants prior to engaging in the research. One of the participants served on a search committee that I chaired. The other participant interviewed me for a story in the student newspaper. While these contexts provided temporary positions of power between me and the participants, I have not taught, supervised or advised any of the



women student leaders. The minimal interactions between me and the participants, prior to engaging in the research, did not impact the results of this study.

I recognize my position on campus as an administrator and faculty member creates a power dynamic with the women students I interviewed. Throughout the research, I utilized several feminist research strategies to reduce the power dynamics so that the participants were not deterred from sharing their experiences (Oakley, 1981). First, I shared several aspects of my own leadership identity and journey to build a reciprocal relationship with the women leaders and to establish rapport. In addition, by sharing experiences at the same college, I was able to more easily build rapport with the women leaders. Second, I worked to cultivate considerate and respectful relationships with each woman leader before, during, and after the research. I paid particular attention to my communication with each leader to ensure it was thoughtful and considerate. This included nonverbal communication as well. For example, I met each woman in a neutral location rather than my office to avoid power dynamics. Further, I made sure they understood the intent of my research. In addition, I allowed the women an opportunity to provide feedback on the, participant vignettes, transcripts and findings prior to them being shared. This demonstrated the value I placed on their feedback as well as the joint relationship that exists between researcher and participant. One participant provided a correction to the vignette, but the women did not provide corrections to the transcripts nor findings. Many of the participants thanked me for the opportunity to participate in the research and some shared that reflecting on their leadership experiences was beneficial and cathartic.

### **Participants**

The participants for this study were both current and former women community college student leaders in visible executive positions. The former women leaders ended their executive

leadership terms within the last two years, so their experiences were recent. These two populations were selected to capture the experiences of current women and the reflections of women that have completed their leadership terms. An equal number of current women leaders and recent alumna were interviewed to ensure a balance was provided to both perspectives. In addition, because the research aim was to discover the experiences of women in executive positions, women were only selected if they serve(d) at senior levels of the organization such as president, vice president, or editor. Romano (1996) and Wagoner (2017) each provided criteria for selecting visible student organizations. Adapted from their criteria, to be considered for this research an organization needed to have membership of both men and women and meet one of the following criteria:

1. Visible in campus media
2. Access to college administrators
3. High alumni involvement
4. Sponsor large student activities
5. Substantial budgets or college assets
6. Allocate funding to other organizations

Purposeful sampling was utilized to ensure that the women were executive leaders in visible campus organizations (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Student services staff at the research site were engaged in identifying the organizations that meet two of the above criteria and women in executive leadership roles. To ensure privacy, the specific student organizations will not be named. In addition, maximum variation sampling was used to select women from four different student organizations (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). This approach revealed commonalities among the women leaders as well as ensured that voice was given to understanding diverse perspectives (Creswell, 2013; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Limiting it to one particular organization would not provide a holistic and representative view of the phenomenon under study.

At the center of this study were eight women student leaders. A small number of participants is appropriate for a phenomenological study as the goal is not to generalize, rather to identify a small group of people that share a phenomenon and collect extensive detail about the essence of the experience (Creswell, 2013). In addition, the number of participants was dependent on reaching saturation of the information and the availability and willingness of women to participate. In phenomenological studies, saturation, when no new information is being discovered, is the goal to determining sample size, rather than relying on a specific number of interviews (Peoples, 2021). After conducting interviews with six participants, there was partial saturation. By adding two more participants, there was clear saturation in the data and no additional participants were necessary.

### **Participant Demographics**

Of the eight women community college student leaders in executive roles, half of the women were former leader and were in executive roles between 2019-2021 and half of the women were current leaders. In order to provide privacy to the participants, each woman leader chose a pseudonym (see Table 3.1). In addition, their specific student organization and roles will be referred to in the findings as “student organization” and “leadership role” or “executive position.” The average participant age was 23, with a range from 18 to 34 years old. Six of the women identified as White with two women identifying as bi-racial. Given that 77% of the student population at this college is White, 1% American Indian, 1% Asian, 1% Black, 7% Hispanic/Latino and only 4% of students have two or more races, it is encouraging to see women students of color in executive leadership roles (NCES, 2021). The women are declared in a variety of programs. Two of the women were non-traditional students, three of the women were homeschooled, and one woman was an international student.

At the time of the interviews, the women leaders had completed an average of two years of college. The majority of the women, six, considered themselves to be low-income. Outside of their leadership roles, three of the women worked full-time and one worked part-time. Half of the women were first generation college students, meaning neither of their parents had earned a four-year degree. Given their status as low-income and first generation, most of the women leaders can qualify as demonstrating positive deviance, meaning they have found strategies for successful entrance into executive leadership despite encountering barriers and challenges that are equal or worse than other individuals (Herrington & van de Fliert, 2018). This does not imply a deficit mindset, as one will see in the findings, these women's backgrounds and life experience may play an important role in their leadership development.

**Table 3.1: Participant Demographics**

Name	Age	Race	Low-Income	First Generation	Years of College Completed	Academic Program	College Status	Employment Status
<b>Alyssa</b>	18	White			2	General Studies	Full-time	Full-time
<b>Amanda</b>	34	White	x		4	Pre-Nursing	Part-time	Not Employed
<b>Annie</b>	19	White	x		2	Business and Photography	Full-time	Not Employed
<b>Elaina</b>	22	Asian & White	x	x	2	Journalism	Full-time	Full-time
<b>J</b>	20	White	x	x	2	Business Management	Full-time	Part-time
<b>Molly</b>	23	White	x	x	4	Political Science and Journalism	Full-time	Not Employed
<b>Polly</b>	30	White	x	x	2	Business	Part-time	Full-time
<b>Returning Hunter</b>	19	American Indian & White	x		1	Journalism	Full-time	Not Employed
Note: Reference Table 3.1 to Appendix B								

## **Participant Vignettes**

Each woman leader is a unique individual with her own story that is shaped by her background and life experiences. This section provides a brief introduction to each of the participants. The vignettes will provide context to the participants' experiences and the findings that cannot be captured in the previous demographic table (see Table 3.1).

### ***Alyssa***

Alyssa, a White woman, is the oldest of four siblings and the only girl in her family. Her leadership journey started in her family, because she is the oldest child and grandchild. Her brothers and cousins looked to her as an example, role model, and mentor. Her family moved a lot while she was growing up. During high school she completed a number of dual credit courses and CLEP exams and was highly successful academically. When she was 16, her family decided to move again, so she graduated high school early. She was very shy prior to college and hated talking to people. She grew up in a family of strong, highly educated women leaders that influenced her desire to become a leader. She chose to attend the Pacific Northwest Community College because a close family friend is an administrator at the college. She had no formal leadership experience prior to attending college, but decided to give leadership a try with the encouragement of her mother and aunt. Alyssa is younger than the average college student, so her age had an impact on her leadership perceptions and experiences. She served a year in a leadership position for a student organization prior to taking on her executive position.

### ***Amanda***

Amanda, a White woman, was homeschooled, but admits she was supposed to be self-taught but was not given any materials to learn. Despite these challenges she earned her GED at age 17. Her parents were relatively absent most of her childhood. They wanted her to be socialized so she participated in 4H horseshows, gymnastics, karate, and soccer. Because her

homelife was difficult, she never felt like she could authentically connect with others at these activities. She took on an adult role as a caretaker for her younger sister at age 11. Her Mom, who was her best friend, died when Amanda was 20 years old. She decided to attend college as a non-traditional student when she moved to the area to be the caretaker for her ailing in-laws. She started college in remedial courses, but has maintained a 4.0 throughout her four years of college and was recently accepted into the competitive entry nursing program. She did gain some leadership experience prior to college through being put in various management roles at work, but shared that she never sought leadership until college. Her first leadership experience at college was her executive leadership role in a student organization.

### ***Annie***

Annie is an international student from Eastern Europe. Growing up she attended three different schools, a government school, Christian school, and Jewish school. Switching schools gave her an interesting perspective and diverse viewpoints. She enjoyed participating in choir, art and Pathfinders, but she was a shy and self-conscious as a child and teenager. She had some leadership experiences leading events through Pathfinders, a scouting organization focused on outdoorsmanship and service. At the age of 14, she started volunteering in the United States during her summers. At 17 years old, she moved to the United States from her home country. She volunteered in the Pacific Northwest area, when she started searching for a college to attend and soon found the local community college. Upon touring the college, she was able to meet a couple of faculty members and sit in on their classes. The faculty's interest in her success was the reason she chose the Pacific Northwest Community College. Her first semester of college, she joined three clubs and her participation grew from there. She served in her executive role

during her last year of college. Leadership has helped her view herself as an extrovert. She recently moved out of state to attend a four-year university.

### ***Elaina***

Elaina, a bi-racial Asian/White woman, is the second oldest of four siblings. Her race is not a salient part of her leadership identity as she shared that she does not really think about race and does not view herself as different from others on campus even though she is a minority. Elaina's childhood caused her to grow up quickly. Her mother passed away when she was twelve years old and her father was absent during her childhood due to his grief. Consequently, Elaina and her older sister took on the parental role for her siblings. She started working full-time at the age of 13 so she could provide for her own needs. In this way, she often felt like she related better to her friends' mothers than to children her own age. Growing up, she was heavily involved in 4H, a youth development program. She is a self-described over-achiever and actively took on leadership roles and responsibilities in the 4H organization. Elaina was homeschooled and never went to high school. She decided to enroll in a few classes at the branch of the local community college because she liked writing and music, but she did not understand the college system such as credits and degree requirements. Once she started attending courses her desire to actively engage on campus grew. She became involved in several student organizations prior to serving in her executive leadership role. At the time of the interview, Elaina had stopped out of school a few credits short of her associate's degree and was working full-time.

### ***J***

J, a White woman, has two brothers and is the middle child. Being the only girl in her family, she became accustomed to doing things on her own, if no one wanted to join her. This was often the case and her parents fostered her independence. For example, she shared that she is

a picky eater and grew up cooking her own food. She had bad hearing throughout her childhood and wore hearing aids until her first year of college. She ran for leadership positions in her first two years of high school, but was not elected. This impacted her confidence in taking on top leadership roles. As a junior and senior in high school, she was elected as student council secretary and treasurer. She was also frequently captain of her sports teams. J came to the community college for soccer, but after her first semester she stopped competing in soccer. From her first weeks on campus, she was involved in student leadership and by the time she graduated she was involved in numerous clubs and student organizations. After graduating, she transferred to a four-year university to continue her education.

### ***Molly***

Molly, a White woman, was homeschooled and had to motivate herself to earn her GED. Growing up she enjoyed reading and found inspiration in books and TV characters. Her mother was her primary role model and mentor, prior to her attending college. She chose this community college because her grandfather and other family members had also attended the local college; however, none of them completed their degrees. Consequently, Molly is a first-generation college student. Going to college was not something she was sure if she wanted to do as academics were very draining for her. She had no leadership experience prior to college, but as a freshman in college, her mother pushed her to get involved, so she joined several clubs and even started a club on campus. Molly is an introvert and experienced anxiety in social settings such as running meetings. Despite this anxiety, she continued to pursue leadership throughout her four years at the college. Her leadership journey was sequential as she gradually took on higher leadership positions in the student organization and gained the confidence to lead at the



executive level. The community college revived her love for learning and she graduated college with a 4.0. She transferred to a four-year institution and is continuing to pursue her education.

### ***Polly***

Polly is a White, nontraditional student. Growing up she attended a private high school where she excelled academically and has always enjoyed learning. She never participated in any leadership in high school because she was shy and afraid of failing. After graduating high school, she attended the local community college, earned a certificate, and gained full-time time employment as a pharmacy technician. Ten years later and after a difficult divorce, she decided to return to college for a second degree and as a way to become financially secure. Her second time in college has become a process of self-discovery as she plans to take full advantage of the college experience. Upon returning, she joined a student organization and learned that they needed officers. Polly recognized this as an opportunity to advance her skills and took on the executive position which is her first leadership experience in college. She sees her role, as a non-traditional student, as a role-model and mentor for younger students. She appreciates the flexibility of online classes as she continued to work a full-time job while attending school.

### ***Returning Hunter***

Returning Hunter, a biracial American Indian and White woman, is the youngest of twelve siblings. Being surrounded by older siblings caused her to mature more quickly than other children her age. She sees being a Native woman as a strong part of her identity and she is shaped by experiences of discrimination, particularly the experiences of her six older sisters that were victims of prejudice as Native women leaders in their career fields. She has worked to overcome being very shy, a speech impediment, and anxiety. During her junior and senior year of high school, Returning Hunter was an executive leader of a club. Returning Hunter is paying

for her college education herself and chose the Pacific Northwest Community College as a way to save money and a good way to start college during the unpredictability of COVID 19.

Growing up off the reservation, she sees her role as privileged and as an opportunity to help other Native women and children. When she came to Pacific Northwest Community College she got involved in a student organization and the following year she took on the executive leadership position. Serving in this role has helped her gain confidence.

### **Research Site**

The site for this study was a small, public community college in the northwestern United States. Throughout the study, the college will be referred to as “Pacific Northwest Community College.” The institution offers certificates and associates degrees in both transfer and career technical programs. The college meets the Carnegie classification for high transfer-mixed traditional/nontraditional. The employee mix is 58% women and 42% men with a faculty representation of 48% women and 52% men (Human Resources, personal communication, November 9, 2020). This site was selected due to accessibility for the researcher. In addition, finding an institution with a traditional/nontraditional mix was important to ensuring there were women students of various backgrounds represented at the institution. The high representation of women as employees and faculty is typical of most community colleges and given the research aims, made this an ideal institution (Townsend & Twombly, 2007).

### **Impacting Conditions**

The participants may have been negatively influenced by both personal and organizational conditions that could have impacted the women student leaders’ experiences. On a personal level, these women were all leaders during the COVID pandemic. Some of the women leaders experienced the first part of COVID and the college’s move to fully online instruction.

Others experienced the college's return to face to face, on-campus instruction, with varying levels of disease mitigation restrictions. This experience undoubtedly influenced the women's ability to engage in various activities and changed the way they connected with their teams and other organizational members. In addition, it may have influenced the way they experienced the college climate and atmosphere compared to pre-pandemic students and leaders.

Organizational conditions that influenced the women's leadership experiences were the relations with the college's board of trustees. This college is controlled by a locally elected board. During the women's leadership terms, relations between the board majority and college leadership deteriorated. The board chair was accused of assaulting an employee and student. Just prior to the interviews, the board fired the college president for no cause which resulted in a change in college leadership and a high level of distress for college employees and students. Many of the women shared concerns about the situation between the board and administration and the impact on their own leadership as students. As a researcher, I was careful not to lead the women to discuss the political climate. For those that chose to share concerns, I was careful not to attribute judgment but to listen openly to their position.

### **Instrumentation**

Consistent with phenomenological research, this study relied on interviews as the data source for this study. I utilized in-depth phenomenological interviews as the data collection method. Selecting the appropriate research method is dependent upon the research goals (Seidman, 2019). In-depth semi structured interviewing is the primary means for understanding the lived experience of people (Seidman, 2019). Because the goal of this phenomenological research was to understand the lived experience of women community college student leaders, interviewing was the optimal choice. There are several reasons to engage in interviews as a data

collection instrument, such as the ability to powerfully explore educational issues through understanding experiences from the lens of those directly involved and because it affirms the importance of the participant while recognizing the value of community and collaboration (Seidman, 2019). I utilized a modified version of Seidman's (2019) three-interview series in which each participant engaged in two in-depth semi-structured interviews. Semi-structure interviews ensured the key aspects of the study were covered while allowing for other relevant information to naturally emerge (Peoples, 2021). The rationale for a modified approach to the three-interview series will be discussed in the next section.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

After the student organizations and women were identified, these women leaders received an introductory recruitment email inviting them to participate (see Appendix A). The participants were advised of possible threats and potential benefits of participation. Eight women leaders responded to this email. Prior to the interviews, the women were asked to complete a brief questionnaire that provided demographic information (see Appendix B). To ensure confidentiality, the names of participants and any identifying markers were removed from the data. Each participant selected a pseudonym. I am the only person that knows the identities of the participants. A document listing the pseudonym and women leaders' names was stored in a folder on a password protected laptop that can only be accessed by the researcher.

Once the women were selected a modified three-interview series was employed (Seidman, 2019). Seidman's three-interview series is grounded in phenomenological themes (Seidman, 2019). The three-interview series is designed as a process to allow the researcher and participant to explore the participant's past and present experiences, to understand the context, and to generate and reflect on the meaning the participant ascribes to the phenomenon (Seidman,

2019). In the traditional three-interview series, the first interview is an opportunity for the participant to share about their past up to the present by reconstructing their experiences that led to their engagement in the phenomenon under study. The second interview engages the participant in reconstructing their present lived experiences. Lived experiences or our actions and observations are often the everyday events that we do not normally take time to reflect upon (Seidman, 2019). The second interview prompts the participant to reflect on and share their lived experiences. The third interview asks participants to reflect on the meaning of the experiences they shared in interview one and interview two. Seidman (2019) shared, “The question of meaning is one of the most important questions we can ask of ourselves and each other” (p. 23). The researcher’s goal is to engage the participant in focused, thoughtful, reflection and meaning making (Seidman, 2019). This reflective practice allows the participant to examine their experiences and creates a space for them to better understand their journey with the phenomenon.

While the three-interview series has benefits, Seidman (2019) recognized that there are alternatives to the structure. Modifications can be made to fit the goals of the research and participants (Seidman, 2019). For this research, the three-interview series was modified into two interviews (see Appendix D). Interviews one and two were combined into one in-depth semi-structured interview in which the student leader was asked to reflect on her past all the way through her present experiences with leadership identity development at a community college. A second interview or follow-up interview was conducted to engage the participant in thoughtful reflection on their leadership identity development from the experiences shared in the first interview. The second interview allowed the researcher to clarify any misunderstood or incomplete data from the preliminary interview and/or gain additional information after

reflection and engaging in initial data analysis. The modification was selected as it may have been difficult to commit each participant to three in-depth interviews due to the nature of the participants being college students, juggling multiple roles, and the impacts of COVID-19. A two-interview process was a more appropriate and respectful use of the women leaders' time while still meeting the goals of the three-interview series, research study and ensuring adequate data to answer the research questions were collected.

The first interviews lasted sixty to ninety minutes and the second interviews lasted thirty to forty-five minutes. This amount of time allowed the participants to share the depth of their experiences without being a burden (Seidman, 2019). Due to researcher constraints, the interviews took place during the Fall semester. Interviews for current women leaders occurred a few months into their leadership roles to capture their experiences early on in the leadership process. Former women leaders were interviewed early in the Fall semester so that the women were not too removed from their leadership experiences. Seidman (2019) recommended that the multiple interviews for each participant be spaced three days to one week apart. This recommendation was followed for most of the women. This spacing allowed for continuity between interview one and two yet also time for reflection. Due to scheduling conflicts, two of the women's second interviews were conducted longer than one week apart with a maximum distance of less than three weeks.

When possible, the interviews were conducted in person and all interviews were recorded via Zoom. Zoom was an ideal platform as it provided for video recording and rough transcription. I worked with each participant to determine a comfortable, private, non-power laden environment for the interviews. I met the majority of women on campus in a mutually agreeable location that allowed for confidentiality. For one interview, I travelled two hours away

to conduct an in-person interview with woman leader on the campus of her transfer institution. After the interviews were conducted, I reviewed and edited the transcription to ensure accuracy and formatting. The interviews and transcripts were stored on my password protected Box account, where I was the only person with access to the data.

### **Data Analysis**

The results of the interviews were transcribed and analyzed through multiple data readings to identify general narratives. General narratives are significant themes that speak to the phenomenon and research questions (Peoples, 2012). The researcher coded the interviews using the coding software DeDoose. Peoples (2021) provides six steps for engaging in phenomenological data analysis. These steps were followed for the data analysis of the transcripts.

First, I engaged in an unstructured reading. This initial unstructured reading is an important first step that oriented and immersed the researcher to the participants complete story (Peoples, 2021; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). During this first reading irrelevant information was deleted to provide a clean transcript for analysis. For example, filler-words like “um” and “uh” were removed. The second step was to read the transcript and establish preliminary meaning units. First level descriptive coding revealed 139 codes or meaning units. A meaning unit is an important piece of the data that reveals a characteristic or attribute of the phenomenon being studied (Peoples, 2021). The third step was to take the preliminary meaning units and develop them into final meaning units or themes for each interview question (Peoples, 2021). Ultimately, second level pattern coding developed five themes.

Once the themes were identified, the fourth step in the data analysis process was to identify situated narratives through capturing direct quotes from the participants’ experiences

and organizing the quotations thematically for each research question (Peoples, 2021). The fifth step was to create general narratives that united each participant's accounts into a cohesive narrative that captured all of the participants salient meanings of their leadership experiences. These narratives utilized the words "most" for describing a saturated theme, "many" for describing a theme that was applicable to 50% of the participants, and "some" for themes that were unsaturated but relevant (Peoples, 2021). The final step in the phenomenological data analysis was to unite the major themes into a cohesive general description (Peoples, 2021). While the general descriptions primarily focused on the themes that are applicable to "most" or "many" of the participants lived experiences, I also engaged in connecting strategies rather than patterns to represent the women's experience as a coherent whole.

Because the hermeneutic circle, is grounded in the researcher modifying their understanding and continually revising their assumptions based on new understandings of the phenomenon, journaling and a second interview were key processes to data analysis (Gadamer, 2004). As was mentioned earlier, I engaged in journaling as a process prior to the interviews and throughout the data analysis steps to directly engage my biases and focus on the data of the participants' lived experiences. Before interviewing the participants, I journaled about assumptions and expected results. These assumptions were reviewed during each data analysis step and revised throughout the process as new understanding of the phenomenon was illuminated. In addition, as noted earlier, the second interview allowed me to clarify preconceptions from early data analysis and make revisions based on participant feedback.

### **Validity and Reliability**

Validity in qualitative research is a process and approach for ensuring that the research authentically reflects the participants' experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Various strategies



were utilized to ensure the validity and trustworthiness of the results. First, as has been mentioned throughout this chapter, I explained my bias and assumptions about the research by engaging in journaling prior to data collection and throughout the data collection and analysis processes (Hopkins et al., 2017; Peoples, 2021). Second, I engaged in member checking (Peoples, 2021). Participant vignettes, transcripts and results of the study were provided to the women student leaders. The participants were asked to review the transcript for accuracy and provide feedback on the interpretation. None of the women leaders provided corrections to the transcripts or findings. Third, I reported the results with rich descriptions and participant quotations that illustrated the themes (Peoples, 2021). Rich descriptions helped the reader to understand the context and complexity of the women's experiences as described by the general descriptions. Lastly, I engaged in triangulation by cross validating the interviews and findings with member checking feedback and my own journaling. This triangulation increased the reliability of the findings.

### **Ethics**

Two important institutional review board (IRB) considerations in conducting qualitative research are informed consent and confidentiality (Peoples, 2021). Prior to engaging in the research, I gained the written informed consent from each of the participants (see Appendix C). The participants were provided the informed consent form that advised them of the research goals, their rights as a voluntary participant, confidentiality, process, and timeline at least one day prior to the interviews. For in person interviews, the participants were informed about the research and provided a copy of the written consent form to date and sign. For Zoom only interviews, participants were informed about the research and provided a consent form via email. A reply email with the participants' consent was obtained.

Participants have an expected right to privacy (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Their names and the institution were kept confidential. At the first interview, the participants selected a pseudonym. This pseudonym was utilized in the saving and storing of documents, data analysis, and the written dissertation. In addition, as part of maintaining privacy, I have not referenced the specific student organization in the findings or specific information that might reveal the students' identity. Transcripts were saved on my password-protected Box account, a secure cloud-based document management system. Once saved, the original recording was deleted. My journaling of biases and any notes taken during the interviews are also stored in Box.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I have shared the research design and rationale, the important role of the researcher, the data collection and analysis methods, as well as strategies for ensuring validity and ethics were maintained. Through engaging the participants in two in-depth interviews, this qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study provides insights into women community college student leaders' experiences. Phenomenology is an appropriate fit for studying leadership from a feminist perspective. At the core of phenomenology is the desire to understand the lived experience (Creswell, 2013). This research allows us to better understand how the women leaders' lived experiences influenced their leadership identity development, motivations, supports, barriers, and aspirations.

## **Chapter IV: Findings**

Despite outpacing men in applications, enrollments, and degree completions at all levels of higher education, women students continue to lag behind men in executive leadership roles at universities (AACC, 2019; Conger & Long, 2010; Miller & Kraus, 2004; Princeton University, 2011; Ross et al., 2012; Snyder et al., 2019). Interestingly, data obtained and analyzed from the American Student Government Association shows that at community colleges women students are more likely to take on top leadership posts than men (ASGA, personal communication, May 8, 2021), but little is known about their experiences. This study examined the experiences of women community college student leaders that have demonstrated positive deviance by obtaining executive leadership positions on campus. Through a phenomenological design, Chapter IV will center the voices of eight women student leaders in executive roles to better understand their motivations, leadership identity development, barriers, supports, and aspirations. This chapter will unfold with the findings which will be presented in themes or situated narratives with quotes from the participants to ground and illustrate the themes.

### **Findings**

Leadership Identity Development Theory (Komives et al., 2005) with a feminist theory lens (Allan, 2011; Harding, 1993; Tong, 2009) guided the data collection and analysis process and provided a framework for interpreting the data. Coding is the process of assigning meaning to portions of text (Saldaña, 2013). Through first level descriptive coding and second level pattern coding, the interviews with the women student leaders illuminated five main themes: (a) motivational influences, (b) developmental influences, (c) developing self, (d) view of self with others, and (e) leadership barriers. In addition, these five themes are supported by thirteen sub themes that illustrate the women's leadership identity development.

## **Motivational Influences**

The first theme that was generated from coding the data was motivational influences. These are the catalysts that led the women to pursue executive leadership. Given that women in many sectors are not achieving equality in executive leadership roles, this theme is important to revealing the community college women's motivations to lead. Within this theme, three sub-themes emerged: (a) previous leadership experiences, (b) encouragement from others, and (c) personal commitment.

### ***Previous Leadership Experiences***

Early college leadership experiences motivated many of the women to seek executive leadership opportunities and helped the women to feel confident that they were prepared for the next step of leadership. For these women, having previous leadership experience was pivotal to their development. In addition, the experiences in their executive role were the main factor that contributed to their aspirations for future leadership. Engaging in leadership was a key motivator for these women.

Interestingly, many of the women did not have high school leadership experience as previous research on women student leaders indicates is common (Zimmerman, 2017). In fact, only two women were leaders in high school. Many of the women's leadership experiences started in college and were the beginning to their leadership journey, as the women gained leadership skills through involvement in college student organizations and non-executive leadership prior to taking on an executive position. Alyssa's first leadership role was in college. She reflected:

Honestly, it was kind of the gateway to executive leadership. Because I was an officer before this and it was my first step into leadership, overall. It opened my eyes to what I could do with leadership and my experience.

Having experience and feeling qualified were two factors that helped the women see moving into executive leadership as logical. Elaina reflected on the ease of taking on an executive position:

I was the most experienced and everyone expected me to be the one to step into the role.... I guess it went naturally because I was the most qualified at that point ... I don't like doing something unless I know what I am doing. If I am leading, I have to know what I am doing.

Experience helped the women develop the skills and self-confidence to comfortably pursue the executive leadership post.

Leadership experiences provided opportunities for exploration and involvement that increased their desires for additional leadership. Annie got involved in multiple college student organizations starting her very first semester on campus. She explained, "Then as I pushed myself to take on those roles and positions, I got in the habit of wanting more. I want to try this, try this, and this." Komives et al. (2005) identified Exploration/Engagement as stage two of Leadership Identity Development Theory. In this stage, students explore a variety of organizations and then become more committed to a single organization. In this study, the community college women did not experience the Exploration/Engagement stage in the same way. They did not narrow their interests like the university students in Komives et al.'s (2005) research. Four of the women remained committed to multiple student organizations during their executive leadership role or decided to join additional organizations during their executive term.

Regardless, early leadership experiences in student organizations increased the women's desire for engagement in the organization which led many of the women to their executive positions.

Similar to how experience motivated them to pursue executive leadership, the women felt that their experience in executive leadership increased their desires for future leadership. Most of the women are committed to pursuing leadership in their future. Molly's executive leadership position has helped her consider running for politics in her future:

I think that it has gotten me to really actually consider if I want to go into politics. You have to be pretty comfortable with yourself and your convictions to do that, so I think that it's gotten me more ready. I'm not ready to do that, right now. It'll take some more time for me to get more experience, but it's become more of a possibility to me than it was three years ago.

J also felt that her executive experience provided her insight that will benefit her in the future as she aspires to a non-profit board position or city council:

The college kind of gave me just a little bit more of a scope of how the community works. ... I know that it'll be even a larger scale city wise or whatever I'm looking at, but that kind of gave me a look into the bigger differences you can make.

Leadership experiences expanded the women's view of themselves and their ability to contribute to society. Their previous experiences propelled them to pursue their executive positions and experiences in their executive posts have increased their future leadership aspirations. As such, experience in organizations and leadership were important for the women students' development.

Alternatively, it is important to note that some of the women's first college leadership role was their executive position. These women skipped the Exploration/Engagement stage altogether. The community college environment provided them the opportunity to immediately

engage at the executive leadership level. This suggests that, for some women, experience was not a strong motivator and other factors, as described below, may have influenced their motivation to lead.

### ***Encouragement from Others***

Gaining experience through involvement is one factor that motivated many of the women, yet seven of the women were motivated to lead through encouragement from others. Given that many of the women leaders identified as introverts, this encouragement was key to their leadership journey. The women received encouragement to lead from women in their families, student organization advisors, and fellow student leaders.

Some of the women received encouragement from the women in their families that helped build their desire for leadership. Mothers were influential in shaping the women's views of leadership as well as providing encouragement. Many of the women identified their mothers as their earliest recollection of leaders and leadership. Some of these mothers were leaders in their careers, but others demonstrated leadership in their homes. Regardless, mothers were a key motivational influence as they provided encouragement for many of the women. While Molly ultimately had to find the motivation for executive leadership within herself, her mother played an important influential role in her leadership development. She explained:

My mom definitely got me started. And then she was always just pushing me to do everything, because, why not. That's kind of how it's always been. She's done everything she can to get me to this point.

Having their mothers identify their leadership potential motivated the women to pursue leadership.

In addition, other women in their families were also identified by some of the student leaders as key motivational influences. These influencers recognized gender as a salient part of leadership. Alyssa shared how she received encouragement from her mother and aunt:

Growing up I didn't really see a whole lot of women leaders. ... Influences from woman leaders, [my mom and aunt], were like, "Hey we need more of this for your younger girl cousins... They need to be able to look up to somebody and be able to be like you. You can do this too. You can do anything."

The women in her family helped her recognize being a woman as a part of her leadership identity as they saw her potential as a leader and role model for other women. Both race and gender were influential for Returning Hunter's leadership identity. Returning Hunter received important encouragement from one of her sisters that helped shape her motivations. She told her, "Don't ever stop doing what you want, because someone of the opposite gender or race tells you that you can't do it." These key women relatives served as important role models and mentors for the women student leaders throughout their leadership journey. They guided the women to see their potential as a woman leader and demonstrate the influence women have in their families to support the leadership identity construction of daughters, nieces, and sisters.

Aside from support from women in their families, most of the women received encouragement from their student organization advisors. Perhaps because of the high turnover in leadership at a two-year college, the advisors, both men and women, actively recruited the women. This influenced the women toward executive leadership. Returning Hunter described how her advisor singled her out to lead:



Well, they found out I have a lot of experience and past experiences. We need a leader so the advisor is like, “We need a leader.” He would just look at me. “An executive leader.”

And just stare at me. I was nervous, I can’t say I wasn’t, but it felt right.

When advisors identified the women as suited for the position, the women felt validated and motivated. For Annie, receiving encouragement and words of affirmation about her abilities boosted her leadership confidence. Annie expressed, “I felt a lot of motivation from other people complimenting me ... my advisors saying, ‘I love how you are representing and how you talked in this meeting.’” These simple gestures from adults increased the women’s motivations.

In addition to advisors’ encouragement, most of the women leaders received direct encouragement from fellow students that were the current student leaders or members of the organization. Peer encouragement was a large motivating factor for the women. Amanda was invited to join an executive meeting because she was thinking of applying for an officer position and had no intentions of seeking the executive leadership role. At the end of the meeting, she had the opportunity to talk with the current executive woman leader who she greatly admired. She explained:

I sat in on a meeting and that was my first real insider glimpse of leadership on campus. [The woman student executive leader] was very, very strong. She was a strong, independent, intimidating woman. Her eye contact was piercing. She was asking me questions, but I didn’t realize she was vetting me. ... Then I got an email from the advisor saying that the woman student leader really wanted me to step in and fill her shoes. I was so intimidated by that role, honestly, I almost said no, but I was also really flattered and thought, “Okay, she must have seen something in me that reflected something in her that she thought I would be right for it. Let’s give it a shot!”

Due to affirmation from the student leader, Amanda saw her own potential for executive leadership. This was a pivotal moment for her decision to take on the executive leadership role instead of the officer's position.

Alyssa reflected on touring campus for the first time. During this tour she got the opportunity to meet with a current woman student leader:

I talked to her and she was so nice and she kind of sat down and explained to me like, "This is what we do. We'd really like for you to join. You don't have to have leadership [experience] you just have to have a will to do something and see a change you need to make in campus." I was kind of really interested in that just because I've never experienced anything like that and I knew I could do it.

This demonstrates the importance of introducing women to leadership opportunities early in their college or even pre-college career as well as the importance of providing early encouragement and women student role models.

Returning Hunter was not necessarily influenced by the previous leader, but found encouragement from a fellow student in the organization that helped her overcome her fears:

I was super scared. I was like, "Do I have someone with me? I can't just do this alone by myself. [The fellow student] told me that she'd become a leader as well, so she helped me and that took the pressure off me as well. That was the biggest push for me really was just knowing that I'm not the only one on the top and there's people with me that would keep all of us balanced together. I didn't want to be on the top by myself.

Her experience demonstrates the relational aspect of leadership and the fear of isolation that can come with executive leadership. The encouragement of the student leaders affirmed for the women that they were capable, needed, and would be supported. In thinking about how higher

education could encourage more women to participate, Annie shared the importance of being invited and encouraged to pursue executive leadership from people on campus such as fellow students, faculty, and staff. She explained, “We try to invite through social media emails, but when you know the person, and you’re seeing them, and you can trust them. That helps and it motivates.” As the women received encouragement from trusted individuals it affirmed their inner sense of self and their own leadership capabilities. Encouragement is a pivotal motivational influence. While external factors such as encouragement and previous leadership experiences were key motivational influences, all of the women talked about an internal drive that motivated them toward executive leadership.

### ***Personal Commitment***

The women’s personal commitment motivated them to pursue executive leadership positions. Self-determination is a person’s internal drive to make choices, set goals, and control their own life (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Key assumptions of self-determination are that humans have an innate need for growth and people desire to exercise independence (Ryan & Deci, 2020). The women in this study demonstrated self-determination through their personal commitment to make a positive impact and their desire for personal development.

Most of the women discussed changes they wanted to bring through their leadership. This was a motivating factor for many of the women. Molly desired to improve the student organization itself due to a lack of involvement from the prior executive leader. Molly describes him as “playing a very passive role.” She explained her desires for change:

I wanted to get more people engaged and I wanted to provide more direction to what people were doing. ... There were a lot of people who just weren’t getting the support or

didn't know what to do, but then would be told in meetings you're not doing enough. ... I didn't feel that was beneficial to the organization itself.

Amanda desired to make a broader change for homeless students on campus. She shared, "The idea of being in a position where I could actually do things that were actually real things that were going to make a difference was very intriguing to me." Returning Hunter's desire to make a change was on a much broader scale as she was hoping to inspire change for American Indians' leadership:

It's the 21st century, so why not have an American Indian in a leadership position and hopefully influence others to join as well. To be like, "You know what? If she can do it, why can't I do it?" It has impacted a lot of things in my life, being American Indian, and for the worst and for the best really, but it's just been mainly things growing up. I never saw an American Indian in a leadership position and that really impacted me to be like, "I'll become a leader then."

While each of the women were motivated to bring different changes on different scales, from organizational and campus to societal, the desire to make an impact through their leadership was motivational for them.

In addition to the desire to make a change, most of the women explained how leadership fit into the goals they had created for themselves. Their desire to pursue executive leadership was about a personal commitment to achieving their goals. Polly's executive student leadership position was her first leadership experience. She believed her determination to meet her goals influenced her:

It was right after I turned 30, I just had this revelation of okay, you're holding yourself back for no reason. If you want more, if you want better, you're going to have to go out

there and take it and take these opportunities. ... Toward the end of the last semester they had stated that they were looking for officers for the coming semester. I just started thinking of it as a way of realizing this is an opportunity for me to work toward my ultimate goal.

Similarly, when asked who influenced her desire to lead, Returning Hunter explained her future vision for herself was her main motivator:

It sounds bad, but kind of future me influenced me. I don't know who she is yet, but knowing that you'll have to start somewhere in leadership. You can't start as the biggest CEO. You start at small little places and we build up.

As the women wanted more for themselves, they recognized leadership roles as a path to achieving their goals. J shared that her experiences as a woman leader pushed her to want to achieve more:

Set your goal as high as it can be. That's why I took more risks than I would have because I set my goal higher for myself and I learned more. I learned so much more than I would have if I didn't go for the position my freshman year.

The women's internal motivation for taking on leadership demonstrated their desires for growth. Most of the women saw this as an opportunity for learning, developing, and contributing.

### ***Motivational Influences Summary***

This theme focused on the women student's motivations to lead. The women were motivated to pursue executive leadership positions through having previous leadership experience, encouragement from others, and a personal commitment. Providing women with opportunities for exploration and leadership experiences helps them to gain confidence, skills, and most importantly desire. Further, their executive leadership experience supported their future

leadership aspirations. In addition, encouragement from trusted individuals such as women in their families, student organization advisors, and peers helped the women to see their potential. Both experience and encouragement fueled the women's inner drive leading to a personal commitment to achieve their goals and make a positive impact. Understanding what motivated these women leaders is crucial to finding ways to support more women to pursue executive leadership positions. With a clearer picture of what motivated the women to lead, we will further explore what sustained the women's leadership identity development once they were in an executive position.

### **Developmental Influences**

Developmental influences are factors that nurtured, supported, and encouraged the women leaders. Komives et al., (2005) identified adults, peers, meaningful involvement, and reflective learning as key developmental influences for student's leadership identity development. Once the women entered executive leadership positions, they shared experiences of receiving support from various people on campus. While both men and women influenced the student leaders, the data revealed that women on campus were primary supports for the women leaders. Women employees were role models and mentors that influenced the women's development. Further, women peers were identified as important sources of support and community. In addition, the women's leadership identity was shaped through growth opportunities that built self-efficacy. The sub-themes for developmental influences are (a) women's influence and (b) growth opportunities that built self-efficacy.

### ***Women's Influence***

Given the large numbers of women at all levels of the community college, faculty, staff, administration, and students (Townsend & Twombly, 2007), it is not surprising to find that

women on campus had a crucial influence on the women student leaders' development. In shaping the interview questions, I intentionally did not ask the women student leaders to reflect specifically on how women on campus had influenced them. I wanted to see if the student leaders identified women as role models and mentors organically. If the women mentioned having the support of women, I asked them to elaborate so to illuminate this connection. Most of the women actively identified women on campus as important mentors and role models. This was such a salient narrative for the women, it is worthy of further discussion.

### **Women Employees.**

The large presence of women employees on campus is an important developmental influence for the women students. Returning Hunter explained how women faculty were inspirational:

The community college itself has a lot of women here in women professor positions. My first semester, I only had one male professor. ... To me it just means that as a woman, they did it. They just became a professor. They became an administrating power or in administration. To me it just shows that if a woman, that woman, can do this, I can do it and women after me can do it. It is kind of the domino effect.

Women faculty helped the women students to see themselves in leadership. Likewise, Polly also expressed the importance of having women on campus:

For me there's a level of comfort, knowing that there are women leaders on campus to reach out to and who can maybe understand a struggle that I'm going through or just be able to identify from maybe a gender standpoint some things that I might be going through. It's empowering seeing all of the women leaders that they have on campus and

they're all so passionate about their students. They're all passionate about being a leader on campus.

The women in this study placed a high value on being surrounded by women faculty, administrators, and advisors. Interestingly, the women students did not distinguish between women in formal administrative leadership roles and women professors or advisors. The women students saw women faculty and staff as campus leaders, even if they did not have a formal leadership title. This suggests that women employees at many levels can be role models that inspire, provide a sense of comfort, and empower women students.

In addition, women employees were an important line of communication for the women leaders. Annie expressed an important communication dynamic that suggests women on campus are a pivotal support for women students. She reflected, “It's easier for me, for some reason, to talk with women because I feel I have a support from them, even though I don't know them. They're there to support me.” Likewise, Returning Hunter was thankful to have been around a lot of women on campus and built stronger relationships with women professors. She believed higher education institutions should have more women on campus:

I think that as a woman myself, I rarely ever approach male professors for advice. I always find that one woman and just latch on to her. That's kind of what I do. I think a lot of women do that because you know, we don't know the women's trauma. ... I think, having more women on the faculty and more women around in general, will build a safer environment for women.

Similarly, when questioned if her support comes from men or women J reflected, “Men and women, but a lot of women too just because they can approach me easier, I think. As far as that goes.” She felt the women would be more comfortable talking to her. She believed it was



“maybe because they were also leaders when they were in college and had similarities.” These perceived similarities with women employees on campus may make it easier for women to seek the guidance and support that is necessary to navigate leadership challenges.

The women on campus were more than important role models, they actively mentored and provided guidance to the women student leaders. Annie felt supported by men and women faculty, but shared how she particularly found guidance from the women:

I love how I heard a lot of women [faculty] say, “Don’t put too much on your plate.”

They would just rationalize. “It’s about you. We still want you to be part of the community and participate in leadership. We want you to work hard and want you to produce the product, but just think about yourself and your own mental health and take care of herself.” It did actually change my viewpoint.

This guidance from fellow women helped Annie to prioritize her mental health which encouraged her to develop work life balance as part of her leadership. In addition, Alyssa also shared how she had found guidance from women to overcome a leadership barrier:

I’ve been surrounded by a lot of women leaders so they’ve kind of talked to me about certain things. “This is what is easiest to do in these situations.” Or, “This is how you can get around these certain things that might discourage you from actually doing stuff.”

From providing important guidance to encouragement and empowerment, the women on campus were part of shaping the student leaders’ identity development.

### **Women Peers.**

Like women employees, fellow women students on campus were also important developmental influences for the women student leaders. Peers helped the women find a sense of community which furthered their commitment to their student organization and leadership. Many

of the women found support in their women peers. Elaina was supported by her fellow women student leaders in multiple organizations that she was involved with. She stated:

I was close to a lot of the girls on there, and so we supported each other. I guess same with the other student organization because the prior leader, she and I were good friends and so we were each other's support group. Then she moved on to a transfer institution. We're still friends and we'll still support each other.

Most of the women's friendships with their student organization groups sustained them during their leadership and beyond. Molly shared how having someone to collaborate with supported her. "My other officer was really great. She just wanted to help in any way that she could. She wanted to be in a team which was really great for me, because I believe in collaboration." Since most of the women self-described as relational leaders, finding support from peers was important to their leadership style and development. Peer support also helped the women see that they can be leaders. Alyssa shared a time she is most proud of and how her fellow students helped her see her leadership potential:

I'd say being in the leadership position and being able to be a leader to my fellow officers and be like, "Please, you can come to me." Being that type of leader to them, which I don't necessarily see myself as, but they see me as which makes it easier to kind of be a leader to them.

Many of the positive experiences with peer relationships were with other women students.

Forming these friendships and bonds helped the women find enjoyment in leadership.

Recognizing the important role of women role models and mentors on campus, some of the women believed higher education institutions should ensure women are visible to students. In

reflecting on what higher education institutions can do to encourage more women students to pursue executive leadership positions, Amanda expressed:

Elect more women leaders and just see what's to be seen as far as that. ... If I were to come here and walk into a situation and I was already interested in leadership on campus and I saw these female leaders in position just kicking butt, heck yeah. That's going to encourage me to be like, "Wow, that's so cool. I want to be like her. I'm going to do it."

Seeing women from all levels of the institution serve as role models and receiving mentoring from women enhanced the women student leaders' development. Women employees and peers were not only inspirational to the women student leaders, but they were also aspirational. This sub-theme described the impact of women on campus, both employees and peers. In addition to being surrounded by women, the women leaders had opportunities for growth that built their self-efficacy.

### ***Growth Opportunities that Built Self-Efficacy***

While women employees were a substantial developmental influence, employees, both men and women played key roles in providing growth opportunities that built the self-efficacy of the women in this study (Bandura, 1997). The data revealed three experiences that supported the women's self-efficacy and led to leadership identity development: being treated like equals, demonstrations of trust, and empowerment.

Most of the women shared experiences of feeling like equals with campus administrators. This sense of equality supported their leadership identity. Elaina described her experience interacting with administrators and the importance of feeling like an equal with the administration:

If they had looked down on me as a student that would have changed everything, because it'd be like, "Oh, I am just a student here." I am just a student, but because they actually looked at you like you had a role. ... It wasn't like I was on a different level. To me, we were on the same level. I really appreciated that.

This demonstration of respect boosted the women's self-efficacy. Having others see her as a leader and someone with a valuable perspective reinforced her leadership self-efficacy.

Returning Hunter expressed these same sentiments when interacting with the administration.

"They don't make me feel I'm not in an executive leadership power as a student." J shared a meaningful experience at a community dinner that also validated her role, exposed her to community leaders, and connected her to the college Vice President as a woman role model:

That was really neat because you sat around a lot of individuals that paid to go to that and luckily, we got ours covered. I felt we were a part of their leadership. I don't know how to explain it, because everyone there just seemed to be part of the Chamber of Commerce or the Rotary Club, so it was really neat to sit next to those individuals. I sat by the college Vice President at that dinner. I still remember very well because she's also an awesome, strong woman that I always looked up to and so to sit next to them and listen to their conversations and be part of those conversations. It also just kind of meant a lot.

Opportunities to be treated like professionals and equals provided the women in this study a glimpse into career level leadership and made them feel valued.

Not only did the women feel like equals, but faculty, staff, and especially the student organization advisors placed a lot of trust in the women leaders. This boosted their confidence and their sense of capability as a leader. Trust was a strong theme for Elaina. She reflected on the importance of the advisor demonstrating trust in her to lead the organization:

I think one thing in the student organization that was nice was the advisor always really stepped back. It was just the students are leading and so it really gave me confidence because I'm actually in charge. If he had taken charge, it would have been different, because when someone does take charge, I kind of shut down just because I don't want to overstep them. ... If somebody asked him something he is like, "Hey, talk to your leader. They're the ones in charge." So that's really like, "Oh yeah. I'm in charge here." I think that was really helpful for boosting confidence.

The advisors provided the women the space to exercise leadership without interference. This gave the women an opportunity for growth that ultimately built their leadership confidence. By demonstrating trust in the women's capabilities, the women came to trust their own leadership abilities.

One of the primary ways that employees supported the women leaders was through empowerment. Employees on campus provided guidance to the women that empowered them to make decisions, use their voice, and reach their potential. One example of this is the encouragement the women received to use their voice. Annie felt empowered to use her voice because of her advisor:

She's my support, because I've worked with her pretty close. It was very helpful and it's still helpful when I work with her and asked her opinion on resolutions that we write or when we would have executive meetings. I want to hear her opinion as an older person. She has more experience. And when we finish I love how she's still, "This is for your discussion. You still have your choice and you still have a voice. This is my opinion."

The women appreciated the opportunity to seek guidance from adults on campus, particularly employees that reinforced the women's autonomy and capability. Molly expressed how the community college environment presented opportunities to receive encouragement from faculty:

Any administrative faculty that I would work with would really be like, "This is awesome. You just need to tell yourself you can do it. We're behind you." I feel that was probably very special to community colleges, because in a big university there's a lot more that's happening. In the community colleges you can be more close knit.

These interactions encouraged and supported the women to lead and make decisions. As they made decisions their self-efficacy grew.

Perhaps one of the greatest ways interactions with employees provided empowerment to many of the women was to help them see their potential. Amanda expressed how being a leader and receiving support has impacted how she views herself. She reflected, "Being validated, empowered. Kind of confirming those little things I see of myself in my peripheral vision. Confirming that sort of shadow self that I don't always feel. That's always in me." These supporters helped the women see their leadership potential and confirmed their inner sense of their own abilities. Meaningful interactions involving equality, trust, and empowerment helped the women to grow, gain self-efficacy and become empowered leaders.

### ***Developmental Influences Summary***

This theme revealed the developmental influences that supported the women students once they were in their executive role. The student leaders were influenced by women at all levels on campus from employees to peers. Women employees were pivotal role models and mentors that provided guidance, comfort, and inspiration to the student leaders. This echoes what the literature says about mentors and role models being critical to women's leadership success

(Haber-Curran & Sulpizio, 2017; Longman et al., 2019). Women peers on campus were also an important support network that helped the women feel a sense of community and aided in their ability to see themselves as a leader. Further, meaningful interactions with employees on campus demonstrated trust and equality and provided opportunities for growth which led to empowerment and furthered the women's leadership self-efficacy. Surrounding these women student leaders with multiple influential people, especially other women, undoubtedly enhanced their leadership identity development. Engaging in leadership in a supportive environment influenced the women's views of self.

### **Developing Self**

As the women engaged in executive leadership, they saw changes in themselves that impacted their leadership identity. Komives et al. (2005) identified developing self as a process of personal growth and deepening self-awareness in leadership identity development. Through leadership involvement, the women student's sense of self changed. The theme of developing self had three subthemes: (a) developing skills, (b) views of gender and leadership, and (c) changing views of self as a leader.

### ***Developing Skills***

For the women student leaders, executive leadership helped them gain knowledge and develop a variety of skills such as enhanced communication and networking that led to self-discovery and confidence. Developing stronger communication skills was pivotal for most of these women, particularly because many of the women were introverts or described themselves as "shy" growing up. Returning Hunter noticed her communication anxiety has decreased through serving in her executive role:

I'm getting more comfortable talking to people. I used to be a very shy person. ... With my experiences with the student organization, it genuinely helped me. I feel who I was before I joined the student organization is no longer who I am. ... But it really helped me grow as an individual. It's allowed me to just do what I need to do, and don't let my fear like, "What do I say or do?" control me.

Likewise, Allyssa shared how her executive position has given her confidence to have a voice:

The student services staff member has kind of helped me talk to people and reach people in different ways that I didn't think that I could. ... They invited me to come speak with students for six weeks. I never thought that I could do something like that. They allowed me to actually have the power to do that. I actually can speak to this group of people and I can reach these people.

Opportunities to confront their communication apprehension helped the women to gain confidence. The women recognized this skill development as something that will benefit them in all aspects of their lives. Greater communication skills were just one of the primary areas of development for the women.

In addition to developing strong communication skills, many of the women also gained networking skills. J described relationship development and networking skills as some of the most important skills she's gained from her position and something she has taken with her to her transfer institution:

Being a business student, networking with people is huge. I think that's one that I took away from that position that I couldn't ask more of. Getting to know the college President and Vice President and the President's Cabinet and a lot of other leaders on campus meant so much. Even not being at the college now, I've kept those relationships which



means so much more to me than something we ever did in the student organization. I would say that's probably the biggest benefit.

Networking skills are important leadership skills for women students to develop, particularly as they leave academia, enter organizations, and desire to pursue additional leadership opportunities. Their skill development will help them in both their personal and professional lives.

As the above communication and networking excerpts show, for all of the women, their executive leadership built their confidence in themselves and their own capabilities. Molly explained how engaging in leadership helped build her trust in herself. "It's got me to trust myself more and to actually think that I can do things. I don't have to be super special and talented. I also can be special and talented, but it's okay if I'm not." Likewise, Annie's leadership experiences have also taught her she is capable:

Number one is building confidence. The confidence that I can do things. There are days of course when I just want to cry and I'm overwhelmed with things, but overall, it feels like I'm a person that can create something, that can produce something, that can build a community, and I can contribute in my work. My voice is heard.

Annie further explained, "Leadership helped me to look at myself in a different way." As the women gained skills their sense of self changed. Engaging in a path of self-discovery and greater self-awareness was pivotal to the women's developing self. While gaining skills and confidence are key to identity development, the way gender influenced their leadership also brought greater self-awareness.

### *Views of Gender and Leadership*

For five of the women, participating in leadership has evolved their views of gender and leadership and what it means to be a woman leader. The other three women leaders did not believe gender was a factor that impacted their leadership perceptions and participating in executive leadership continues to affirm their views that women are effective and capable leaders. Many of the women recognized how traditional gender roles and a lack of women in leadership shaped their perception of leaders. Elaina explained how gender influences her views of leadership:

I feel it does a little bit just because there's been traditional men and women roles for a long time. I don't think in the actual leadership part it does, but I'll be surprised if a college president was a woman. It'd be like, "Oh that's kind of surprising, it's usually a man." ... I don't think it really changes how I feel about their actual role or anything.

As some of the women engage in student leadership their views of leaders begin to change.

Annie was influenced by women's roles in her home country, where she described women in leadership as "rare." As she has served in her executive role her views on women's capability for leadership evolved. She explained:

In the beginning, when I was 12 or 13, I remember the movies about the magazines like Vogue or something. ... There would be a leader and usually a male and so that kind of shaped my understanding. ... But now that I'm not thinking about it, it probably kind of unconsciously changed my opinion that women can be leaders.

Through leadership, Annie recognized women can empower others and be rationale, which has shaped her perceptions of women's leadership beyond stereotypical views portrayed in the

media. Leadership engagement helped some of the women to evolve their perceptions of gender roles from their childhood to recognizing women as leaders.

While society has made significant progress, the lack of women in leadership was noticed by the participants. As a Native woman, Returning Hunter described how gender and race shape her perceptions of leadership:

Growing up, I've never seen an American Indian in a leadership position. ... I think it affects gender, race or anything. It really impacts the person's view of leadership and especially just with women in general. We've never really had a position of leadership to begin with, and so I think it does impact my viewpoint of leadership. Hopefully, a lot of women can say the same thing too. That being in leadership roles, as a woman, is really impactful. It did shape my viewpoints on leadership. It did. When I see a man in a leadership position it's like, "You know a woman can do that."

As the women students engage in leadership, they recognize women are capable and see the benefits that women bring to groups through diverse perspectives. They also start to encounter gender barriers which will be discussed later in this chapter.

Alternatively, some of the women did not believe that gender shaped their leadership. While many of the women recognized barriers that women leaders face, they did not feel their leadership was constrained by their gender. While the women varied on how they believed gender impacted their views of leadership, the women's executive leadership experience continues to inform their views on women's leadership and their view of self.

### ***Changing Views of Self as a Leader***

Serving in leadership changed the views the women had of themselves. The women discussed their views of self as leaders and role models. Interestingly, while all of the women

serve(d) in executive leadership roles, only half of the women saw themselves as leaders.

Komives et al. (2005) described stage three of LID theory, Leader Identified, as a recognition that if one has a title, one is a leader. Even though the women students have executive leadership titles, it is difficult for some of the women to call themselves a leader. It seems that some of the women are constrained by gender role congruity and traditional agentic leadership perceptions; viewing leaders as people who are unwavering in courage, knowledge, and assertiveness (Eagly & Wood, 2012). Polly stated that she did not see herself as a leader because “it’s a person who is always confident in themselves and always knows the right answer and who is an outgoing person.” Molly also expressed that she doesn’t view herself as a leader:

I don’t really have a super solid personal definition of what a leader looks like. I know the President of the United States is a leader. I understand that, but for me leadership can look like a lot of things, so I think for me it’s just I am a person who’s here and I can do it, so I should. I’m really good at fake it until you make it because I don’t necessarily know what I’m doing, I just go along with it. I guess I feel, in a perfect world, a leader is somebody that does actually know what they’re doing.

When some of the women encounter uncertainty it can lead them to not view themselves as a leader, when in reality, most leaders face uncertainty and doubts even if it is not visible to others. Traditional views of leadership continue to permeate how some of the women view themselves.

Alternatively, some of the women do see themselves as leaders. As Annie engaged in her executive role, she came to see her place as a connection between students and faculty. She reflected:

When I got into college, I started communicating with people and getting them involved with things. Then I actually started seeing myself as a leader. I am here as a center of communication between my fellow students and the faculty.

Also, J commented on viewing herself as a leader because “I’m not afraid to use my voice.” The women’s views of themselves could not be isolated to specific student organizations or how long they had served. Women may not readily adopt the title of leader. The women in this study that were more willing to adopt the title of leader saw themselves leading in a variety of contexts, with or without a title. This suggests that viewing oneself as a leader is more than having a title or spending time in a position. For these women, it is a complex part of their identity and developing self.

Interestingly, while some of the women may not view themselves as a leader, all of the women see themselves as important role models and mentors for others. Elaina explained that being a woman leader means “being an example for other women leaders... other women can be like, ‘Oh this person did this so I can do this.’” Many of the student organizations are heavily dominated by women student leaders. Molly shared how, over the time she served in her student organization, she saw more women get involved:

I think the chain [of women student leaders] might just come from actually seeing someone, people like you, that are doing it. Because when I was a leader, it was fairly male dominated. But I was there and I was leading meetings and I feel people could see me everywhere, because I was running around doing a little bit of everything. You see me and then you see our other officers who are women doing things. The woman advisor, started to have a more active presence in the office and that helped and then, when I was

an executive leader, sort of the same thing. You see people who are like you doing it and that just makes it seem more accessible.

These women recognized the crucial role they play in helping other women see leadership as a possibility. As the organizations became dominated with women leaders, other women students were recruited to be involved.

While most of the women saw themselves as a role model for family members or on campus, Returning Hunter views herself as a role model on a broader scale. She explained how being a role model for native children in her community shapes her leadership:

That's your whole role, to protect the people of the tribe. ... Doing what you can to change and help grow the village really has been the biggest impact of leadership.

Knowing some little kid on the reservation had the same dream as I do. I'm achieving it because I'm privileged to have lived off the reservation. [I want to] help more little Native children hopefully get off the reservations and do the same thing and do it better than I did.

Race is a salient part of Returning Hunter's identity that influences her developing self. Aside from Returning Hunter, six of the women were White and one was a biracial Asian/White woman. The other women did not discuss race as part of their leadership identity, even when prompted to consider how other identities such as race impacted their leadership.

### ***Developing Self Summary***

Engaging in leadership led to self-development and greater self-awareness. The women reported gaining a variety of important skills such as enhanced communication and networking skills. As they built their skills, they further developed self-efficacy and self-awareness.

Leadership opportunities for women students are crucial for skill development that can shepherd

them into future leadership positions. Further, serving in their executive roles tended to evolve or reinforce their views that women are capable of leadership. For women's leadership identity development, traditional masculine views of leadership can make it difficult to see oneself as a leader; however, recognizing oneself as a role model for other women demonstrates an evolving view of self as a leader. As role models, the women helped recruit additional women into leadership. Their views of self did not take place in isolation, they are also influenced by their interactions with others as will be seen in the next theme.

### **View of Self with Others**

With an understanding of the women students developing self, it is important to consider how interactions with others impacts their development. Komives et al. (2005) explained that through interactions with their followers, leaders' views of self change and their leadership identity is enhanced. Leaders move from being dependent on others for support and affirmation, to independent as formal leaders, to recognizing their interdependence with others (Komives et al., 2005). Data analysis revealed that the women in this study recognized their interdependence with their fellow student organization members. They were transformational leaders who valued participation and relationships and they lead with a growth mindset. Two subthemes emerged in the data: (a) transformational and (b) growth mindset.

#### ***Transformational Leaders***

Transformational leaders focus on collaboration and participation from group members to propel the organization toward its goals and develop group members (Bass & Riggio, 2006). The women see the interdependent nature of leaders and followers. Returning Hunter shared her vision of leadership. "The followers are almost the feet and the lungs and the heart of the leader. The leader can't be a leader without the followers. Followers can't be a group without the leader.

It's a partnership really.” This interdependence is reflected by the high value placed on participation from group members. When J reflected on the important traits of leadership, she shared this participatory view:

There's so much that needs to go into a leader, but I feel getting an overall consensus of the team is also really important in hearing everybody's side, so that you're not at the end of the day just voicing your own. Because that's not what a leader does. That's an individual person.

Polly also realized the value she places on hearing the voices of her officers as she reflected on what has changed about herself as a leader. She stated, “I have put more importance on engagement from the members of my team. I definitely want to know their opinion. I want to know their ideas and then we can all collaborate on making our goals or completing them.” Their collaborative nature fits transformational leadership styles.

Perhaps influenced by their transformational leadership styles, many of the women recognized what Komives et al. (2005) described as a “broadening view of leadership.” Their views of leadership changed from being purely positional to a non-positional view of leadership. A non-positional view suggests you do not have to be the leader to be a leader (Komives et al., 2005). Many of the women in this study identified that they could be leaders without a title. Molly described a broadening, non-positional view of leaders as she reflected on how serving as an executive leader has changed how she thinks about leadership:

Now I actually believe that anyone can be [a leader]. It's just whether or not you want to be. ... Being a leader can really mean anything, because being President didn't mean that I was the only leader in the group for sure. Sometimes people who are able to be a little more emotionally intelligent can guide the group in terms of that and I think also can



make you a leader, because it's like, “Hey you're thinking of things and maybe we aren't and you're helping us.” I think everyone is a leader in something even if they're not really sure what it is. I think there doesn't need to be a specific title to be a leader.

Their broadening view of leadership helped them recognize that leadership can come from anyone in the group, in various contexts, and at different times.

In addition to being participatory, most of the women placed a high value on building relationships within their organization. Elaina expressed her views on the role of a leader. She stated, “I like to just keep the group bonded, because I feel that's when stuff actually happens.” She further described leadership as “the bandage that is holding everything together.” Leadership in this view was a responsibility to build community and shape the student organizations’ cultures.

Developing others was an important element for the women leaders in this study and the women actively mentored others during their leadership terms. Most of the women spoke about empowering others and felt a sense of responsibility toward mentoring. Polly sees her leadership role, particularly as a non-traditional student as a way to help others:

Also giving other people a sense of empowerment for themselves. I'm on my own path of self-discovery and empowering myself. I think it's really important to give somebody that as well, so that they are more confident in themselves, especially when you are a very young individual.

Similarly, Amanda shared the relationships and mentoring opportunities are what influences her desires for future leadership:

I find it immensely gratifying to build these relationships with people and see success and see them succeed. Hopefully, I think, because of my reassurance and my encouragement

and motivation. ... I've always had those sorts of characteristics and enjoy being that person for people. I was never able to really focus it though until I learned how. That was with the student organization.

Empowering other people to find success demonstrated the women's interconnected view of leaders and followers and became an important aspect of the women's leadership style and identity development.

In addition, mentoring was part of the sense of responsibility the women felt toward their organizations. As J prepared to graduate and transfer institutions, she felt a desire to set the student organizations she was involved with up for success. She explained:

I encouraged a lot of people to take on leadership positions, just because I saw the amount of benefits I gained from it. I wanted other people to experience that as best they could. One of the new woman officers ... texted me one day and she's like, "You inspired me. I ran for the officer position and I got it." I was so, so happy.

Mentoring others became a focus of many of the women's leadership. It demonstrates an advanced level of LID, stage five Generativity (Komives et al., 2005), as the women's focus shifted from planning events and meeting deadlines to developing others. Overall, the women felt their transformational leadership styles were positive and well received by group members. As is evident in the next subtheme, their leadership styles were also influenced by their desires for growth.

### ***Growth Mindset***

These women demonstrated a growth mindset as part of their "changing view of self with others" (Komives, 2005, p. 604). Dweck (2006) found that people's mindsets largely determine their willingness to persevere despite difficulties and ultimately determine success. She explained

that there are two mindsets that people operate with, a fixed or growth mindset. People with fixed mindsets desire to attain perfection and see failure as a personal shortcoming; whereas, a growth mindset is about effort and learning overtime (Dweck, 2006). These women recognized their leadership as a learning opportunity. Amanda expressed, “This was the first school president position I’ve ever been in and everybody knew that. We were all learning together.” Similarly, Molly shared the important trait of leaders having a growth mindset. She stated:

I think overall, you have to be willing to learn. I think, that is the biggest thing, because no one ever knows everything about everything. You need to accept that and I guess just understand we are all people. I don't know if that's a specific trait. You know everyone's a person so people make mistakes. People learn and grow.

Their growth mindset fueled many aspects of their leadership from motivation to lead to their ability to overcome barriers.

People with growth mindsets are more likely to show resilience when faced with obstacles and stereotypes (Dweck, 2006). J demonstrated this as she believed barriers help shape us:

I mean things are going to happen, things are going to come in your way your obstacles or barriers. But I think once you get past those you learn so much more about yourself and who you are as a leader. That can help you long term and, in your future, whether it's in the workplace or in your personal life. I think that you learn from those.

Seeing challenges as learning experiences aligns with the resiliency that comes with a growth mindset. Molly shared that while she would like to see change for women’s leadership, the barriers she experiences as a woman just mean she has to “work harder.” Rather than be discouraged, Molly actively recognized her opportunity to learn and grow through increased

effort. Leadership became something one could learn to do rather than something that was an innate ability. Their growth mindset made leadership seem more accessible.

Perhaps fueled by this growth mindset, most of the women lead from a place of vulnerability. Unlike women university student leaders, who feel the need to engage in “effortless perfection,” these women community college student leaders were not afraid to show their followers that they had imperfections (Roth, 2003; Wagoner, 2017). Amanda explained the importance of vulnerability. “Perfection is not approachable. If you want to have this beautiful, porcelain veneer finish people aren't going to feel comfortable with you. It would be more intimidating than anything.” Polly also reflected on her definition of leadership and the role vulnerability plays. She stated:

I think a big, big aspect of being a leader is that others can feel comfortable coming to you and you're relatable. You're real. You're not perfect, because that's what's going to get people inspired. You are able to be empathetic. You are able to share your experiences and the obstacles in your life that you have had to overcome. People can look at that and say, “Hey, that person is not perfect, but look at where they are. I can be that person. I'm not going to hold myself back because of X, Y or Z.”

When asked if she felt she needed to be perfect, Alyssa said, “Oh gosh no. I certainly feel pressure to do things the right way, but I think that I understand that I'm human and that I am certainly not perfect in any way, but I'm trying my hardest.” She further expressed:

I feel the need to kind of look presentable, but yet again, I am an 18-year-old so sometimes I don't get enough sleep. It's sometimes hard to be presentable and I want to wear sweatpants, so I'll wear sweatpants.

The women's willingness to demonstrate humanity and vulnerability is a strong part of their leadership with their followers, because it allowed them to be relatable and mentor others. Their vulnerable leadership style is unique to this study as it sharply contrasts with the pressures felt by women university student leaders (Roth, 2003; Wagoner, 2017).

### ***View of Self with Others Summary***

The theme View of Self with Others described how the women interacted with their followers and how that, in turn, influenced their leadership identity. Two subthemes emerged in the data that showed the women are transformational leaders that lead with a growth mindset. The women in this study viewed leaders and followers as interconnected which resulted in a desire for collaboration, community building, and mentoring. In addition, the women actively displayed a growth mindset that allowed them to demonstrate resilience and vulnerability to their followers. In this way, leadership became an opportunity for growth and learning. While the women's interactions with others were largely positive, the women did encounter barriers that challenged their leadership.

### **Leadership Barriers**

The growth mindset described above made it difficult for the women to discuss leadership barriers as they often see barriers as learning opportunities. The women did face several barriers during their executive terms. As we consider ways to encourage women to sustain executive leadership roles, it is crucial to recognize the barriers that impede women's leadership identity development. Three sub-themes emerged in the data: (a) finding balance, (b) a charged political climate, and (c) gender discrimination. Despite encountering barriers, the women demonstrated resiliency and a growth mindset as they developed active strategies for overcoming barriers.

## ***Finding Balance***

Most of the women described difficulties balancing their multiple obligations as a barrier to their leadership. These women were trying to balance being a student, being an executive leader, and having a personal life. Most of the women were involved in multiple organizations on campus and many of them were also working. Alyssa explained:

I've had a struggle finding that balance between work, school, and home because I'm a full-time student, but I also have the student organization on top of it. And then the place that I work is very short staffed, so I am considered a part time worker, but I work 30 to 40 hours a week. It's kind of just been difficult being able to separate school and work and then also have time for myself and my family, so it's kind of been a little difficult this year.

For Molly trying to balance being a student and her executive role, which at times she was serving more than 30 hours a week, was “very draining.” She discussed:

It was not always enjoyable. I had little to no free time. ... If I could go back and do it over, knowing what I know now, I guess another thing would be to learn how to manage my time better, so then I could have free time instead of just being like, “Oh I'm done with work and school. I'm going to sleep. See you in six hours, when I have to do it all over again.” It was hard, but I really do think it was worth it.

Most of these women frequently engaged in a delicate balancing act with their various obligations.

Many of the women are involved in multiple organizations on campus. Annie found achieving balance difficult but manageable. She shared, “I'm trying to eliminate some things that are unnecessary. I'm still trying and experimenting with things. It's hard sometimes because I

want to be part of everything.” This desire to take on too much is evident in many of the women’s experiences.

Some of the women did find support in balancing their involvement. Elaina was a full-time student. She worked a full-time job and two other jobs, all off-campus. In addition, she was an executive woman leader and an officer for another student organization on campus. When asked how she did it she shared, “I didn’t sleep very much.” She further reflected on needing to step back from her officer position in a student organization for a week:

I think it was maybe around midterms. I had a ton going on. I didn't do very well on my science test. I was crazy busy at work and then I was also having some relationship issues. I was like, “I can't handle this right now. I’ve got too much going on.” So, I asked for a week off to not do anything student organization related to not go to meetings or anything. It was really hard feeling, “Oh my gosh, she can’t handle this if she asks us for a week off.” I was like, “I need to take this. Because I'm not doing all right now.” ...

Everyone was super supportive.

While many of the women found ways to balance their various roles, they all struggled to achieve the right balance due to their varied responsibilities and their desire to do it all.

Interestingly, while most of the women expressed future desires to lead, some of the women are in a current reassessment period as they seek to find balance. Some of the women are either currently not pursuing leadership opportunities or plan to not pursue leadership during the rest of their time in college. Alyssa is reassessing her leadership in order to prioritize herself:

I wouldn't see [leadership] through the student organization. Honestly, I want to take time for myself that might be a little bit selfish, but I haven't really got to have the college experience because I've been in leadership roles the entire time. When I transfer, I just

want to take a step back and have that I'm a student and I'm not in a leadership role. I want to kind of have that experience for my last two years of college.

Amanda shared her decision to not persist in executive leadership beyond a year even though she was continuing to take courses at the community college:

I felt I wasn't able to give what was needed of me at that time. I wouldn't have been able to give it the energy and commitment that was required of the position. I respected it enough to know that I wasn't there anymore and family life. ... I was getting closer to applying for the nursing program and my mother-in-law got really, really sick and so that obviously was a combination of things. I just couldn't see taking on that commitment. It wasn't fair.

Finding a work life balance is a challenge for many women in a variety of sectors and at all levels of leadership (Fritz & van Knippenberg, 2018; Pyke, 2013). While some of the women student leaders are stepping back, they do intend to pursue leadership at some point in the future.

### ***Charged Political Climate***

The political climate with the Board of Trustees on campus was another difficult barrier for the women to navigate. While this barrier may be unique to this particular college, it was a salient part of many of the women's leadership experience and is worthy of further discussion. When the Board Chair was accused of assaulting an employee and student, many of the women leaders struggled to figure out how to use their voice while also trying to represent all students. J described her experience:

The media reaching out to the student organization and asking for our opinion is really hard, because even when I had friends come ask me about the Board of Trustees Chair, I didn't ever feel I could have my own opinion that I could voice. We were really careful



about that. We tried to do best practices. The advisor and Vice President talked to us about it in our meetings and said make sure when people ask you that you are taking into consideration that you are representing our student organization, and if you do want to voice your opinion then you have to put it on the record that you are not on behalf of the student organization. ... I felt that I just couldn't rightfully say anything on my own. They would associate me with the student organization and I never wanted that. That was probably the hardest barrier. I guess, because I just didn't feel I could say my own stuff most of the time.

Figuring out how to use their voices in a way that represented their organizations was challenging. The women overcame this barrier as they made decisions and courageously owned their decisions, despite public criticism. Molly expressed, "It was kind of scary to have to make that decision and to wonder if that's the right decision and what people are going to think of me... and I had to decide to be okay with that." This was a growth opportunity for the women as they recognized they could not please everyone.

The political climate on campus surrounding the Board of Trustees was particularly challenging for women. Returning Hunter actively attended board meetings and shared how the climate at the meetings left her feeling scared for her safety as a Native woman:

It's more approaching people during the board meetings, just everyone's so riled up... and usually it's the men. It's just very scary approaching them. I get scared to walk home or back to my car. It's very scary.

Fortunately, having her advisor and fellow students attend board meetings with her provided her much needed support. While the Board meetings did not always feel safe, having support from

within her organization created a safe space that continued to support Returning Hunter's development.

Some of the women felt this environment was discouraging for leaders, particularly women. Alyssa explained:

With what happened with the board this last year, it was kind of really discouraging to be a woman leader and most of our student organization was girls. It's hard for us to want to be leaders, especially when it feels it's being looked down on like last year. ... I think it's not even just women. I think it's just discouraging in general for leaders or people who want to be leaders. It's disappointing to see, as a leader, what's happening because it's like you guys are older people that should be kind of setting the tone for the younger leaders, but in this case, the younger leaders feel they're doing more good than you are and so it's just difficult.

When questioned about the board's responsibility to be role models, Alyssa shared, "I would say negative role models as of right now." Negative role models can also motivate women to pursue leadership positions (Rucks, 2018).

Alternatively, while the Board dynamics and the political climate certainly discouraged some of the women student leaders, it interestingly also pushed some of the women to take on executive leadership. Alyssa shared:

Because of stuff like the Board and going and presenting to them can be really discouraging when you hear about stuff that has happened with them. I'd rather I take that on than somebody who doesn't really know the severity of the situation and is going in blindly.

The political climate shaped many of the women's leadership. While negative role models may be discouraging, they also provided an example for how the women wanted their leadership to be different.

### ***Gender Discrimination***

While not all of the women experienced gender discrimination, it is important to include it as a barrier to ensure all aspects of the women's experiences are given voice and uncovered. When asked if they experienced any barriers specific to being a woman, many of the women could not think of any barriers. Amanda shared, "Not even a single one. It was all very positive." Elaina also did not experience any barriers to being a woman leader. She explained, "Because with the two student organizations I'm involved with there was like one guy. There wasn't really much to say on that." The large presence of women in the student organizations certainly helped to mitigate gender discrimination for the women students.

When the women did experience gender discrimination, it was primarily related to communication and a lack of respect. Some of the women shared experiences with gendered communication impacting them. Alyssa shared an experience with not getting a response from a man employee that she felt was because she was a woman:

Last year, it was really hard for me to get a hold of people on campus. It was discouraging because I know that they would have answered if I was a guy. I had a fellow officer who was a guy email them and they emailed back, almost immediately. It took me at least three weeks for them to even get a hold of me. Which included CCing the Vice President into an email. ... The only reason I ever got a response is because our advisor sent him an email saying it was extremely unprofessional of him not to answer my emails.

When asked how she overcame this barrier she shared, “I sat down with a few of the officers, last year. They were like, ‘We’ve had this issue too, but there are ways you can get around it.’ It’s working with different women leaders.” Fellow women students provided her tips and helped her realize she was not alone. This demonstrates the importance of seeking support in other women as a way to overcome gender discrimination.

Molly experienced being talked over and dismissed by fellow men students. She explained:

There were definitely some instances in my presidency where certain individuals of the male variety would speak over me or disregard what I was saying. That was something that was very present that I’m having to contend with in meetings that I was leading because people would just speak over me or just really steamroll me. ... Then in meetings just interrupting me whenever and when we eventually had a facilitated meeting with an advisor present and a couple other student government officers, it was basically like, “No, well you know. I’m sure you see it that way, because you know, maybe it’s a little sensitive for you or it’s a little emotional, but this isn’t how I feel, so I’m sorry that you feel that way.” That felt very much like you’re a woman, just shut up essentially.

This treatment left Molly feeling frustrated and disrespected. She eventually did overcome this barrier as she became “more comfortable with being assertive.” She also shared, “That’s when I started to change and try to remind myself, I deserve to take up space and I deserve to be here.” Reinforcing that helps change my attitude.” Many of the women shared experiences of confronting their barriers through being confident in themselves.

Returning Hunter felt discrimination from community members that would see her performing her executive role. They would make comments like, “What is a woman doing

here?” Or “Why are you the organization’s leader, a woman? What has the world come to?”

Returning Hunter has watched family members confront barriers and that has given her courage to also confront barriers:

Hearing stories of my sisters coming home crying or the history of my mom or my sister’s being discriminated against, for being a woman, even though they were in a leadership power. They were leaders. It really impacted me to show that if my sister and my mom can do it, I can do it. I am my mother's daughter, as well as my father's, so just watching them. Even though, how many times they've been put down and been like you're not a leader, you're a woman or comments like that. They still got up every single time and they were leaders.

While some of the women did experience gender discrimination, they developed strategies for overcoming these situations through finding support in others and actively confronting the barrier.

### ***Leadership Barriers Summary***

The women student leaders’ experiences coalesce around three themes: (a) finding balance, (b) a charged political climate, and (c) gender discrimination. The women leaders were juggling multiple roles, as executive leaders, students, and employees, along with personal and family obligations. Given these multiple obligations, it is not surprising that they struggled at times to find balance. Some of the women did discuss finding support from their student organizations when they needed to re-prioritize. The charged political climate was a challenge for many of the women as they learned to navigate how to use their voice and to be confident in the decisions they made. Lastly, while many of the women could not think of any experiences in how gender impacted their leadership, some of the women did share experiences of gender

discrimination. These women were able to successfully navigate this discrimination as they sought support from others and directly confronted their challenges.

### **Summary**

The experiences of these women community college student leaders illuminated five themes: Motivational Influences, Developmental Influences, Developing Self, View of Self with Others, and Leadership Barriers. These themes provide insight into women students' leadership identity development in a community college environment. Much can be learned from understanding the experiences of women who have successfully navigated executive leadership. In the next chapter, I will discuss how the findings contribute to the greater body of knowledge, enhance our understanding of LID through a feminist theory lens as well as provide recommendations for practice and future research.

## **Chapter V: Summary and Discussion**

The final chapter will begin with a study overview that will include a review of the problem, methodology, and results. This will be followed by a discussion of the findings in relation to each of the research questions. Next, implications for theory and practice will be presented. Lastly, the chapter will conclude with limitations and recommendations for future research.

### **Study Overview**

As previously explained, this study was conducted to illuminate the experiences of women community college student leaders. Women are not visible in executive leadership in many sectors including universities (Allsop et al., 2018; CAWP, 2021; Gagliardi et al., 2017; Lennon, 2009). The lack of women in prominent student leadership roles means women's voices are not being equitably represented on campuses and women are not gaining the leadership skills that will prepare them for and motivate them toward future leadership. Interestingly, women students in community colleges are engaging in executive leadership roles more frequently than men, but little is known about their experiences. Leadership Identity Development Theory (Komives et al., 2005) with a feminist lens (Allan, 2011; Harding, 1993; Tong, 2009) provided a framework for this inquiry.

### **Research Questions**

This study was guided by a central research question: What are women community college student leaders' experiences? The study utilized four sub-questions.

Q1: What experiences motivate women community college students to pursue leadership positions in student organizations on campus?

Q2: How do women student leaders' experiences at a community college facilitate their leadership identity development?

Q3: What leadership barriers and supports do women community college student leaders experience, if any?

Q4: How do the women students' experiences in community college leadership impact their future leadership aspirations?

## **Design**

As detailed in Chapter III, this dissertation utilized hermeneutic phenomenology to understand the experiences of women student leaders. At the heart of the study was the lived experiences of four current and four former women community college student leaders in executive roles. A total of 16 interviews were conducted, two semi-structured interviews with each woman leader. The first interview covered the women's past and present leadership experiences while the second interview provided the women an opportunity to reflect on their lived experiences as community college women student leaders in executive positions. The interviews were transcribed and coded with first level descriptive coding and second level pattern coding to reveal themes (Saldaña, 2016).

## **Findings**

Five main themes were found in the data: Motivational Influences, Developmental Influences, Developing Self, View of Self with Others, and Leadership Barriers. The first theme was Motivational Influences. These women were motivated to engage in executive leadership due to preparation from their previous leadership experiences, encouragement from family, advisors, and peers, and self determination to meet their personal goals and make a difference.



The second theme, Developmental Influences, revealed how women on campus, employees and peers, nurtured the student's leadership identity. Women on campus acted as role models and mentors that provided support, comfort, and encouragement. Women peers provided an important sense of community for the women that helped them overcome barriers. In addition, the women's leadership identity was shaped through growth opportunities that built self-efficacy and helped the women to see their potential.

The third theme, Developing Self, illustrated how the women gained communication and networking skills which led to greater self-discovery and confidence. It also showed how engaging in leadership at a community college shaped the women's views of gender and leadership, as well as changed their views of self and leadership. The women recognized the non-positional nature of leadership and while only half the women saw themselves as a leader, they all recognized their importance of serving as a role model for other women.

The fourth theme, View of Self with Others, demonstrated that most of the women see the interdependent nature of leaders and followers. The women engaged in a transformational leadership style that recognized the importance of relationships, collaboration and mentoring. The women in this study started to adopt a broadening view of leadership that is non-positional. Further, they lead with a growth mindset that allows them to show imperfection and be vulnerable.

The last theme, Leadership Barriers, revealed the challenges that the women student leaders encountered from finding balance, to a charged political climate, and gender discrimination. This theme captured a clear demonstration of the women's resiliency as they actively overcame barriers by utilizing strategies such as seeing barriers as growth opportunities,

directly confronting the barrier, choosing to define themselves, and finding support in others. With a brief study overview, the next section will explore the findings in more detail.

### **Discussion of the Findings**

The findings will be discussed in relation to each research question. How the findings align and diverge from prior research on women university student leaders and women's leadership in general will be explored.

*What experiences motivate women community college students to pursue leadership positions in student organizations on campus?*

These women student leaders were motivated to pursue executive leadership positions by gaining leadership experience, receiving encouragement, and personal commitment. Gaining leadership experience was a pivotal aspect of many of the women's leadership. Zimmerman's (2017) finding that early high school and college experiences influenced women students' desires to lead as student body presidents partially emerged in this study. Previous leadership experience at the college was a key motivating factor for many of the women. As they gained experience in leadership, they developed self-efficacy and executive leadership roles seemed more attainable (Emrick, 2006; Polson, 2018). Exposure and participation in leadership can increase women's aspirations for executive leadership and suggests that women students' leadership in community colleges may be an important key to helping women develop confidence in their leadership ability so that they can navigate the labyrinth of leadership in their future careers.

Surprisingly, for some of the women, their executive leadership position was their first leadership role. They were not involved in entry leadership positions at the college, but instead pursued the executive role without any previous experience. In addition, many of the women did

not have any high school leadership experience, making the women's first entrance into leadership at the community college. This finding is counter to Zimmerman's (2017) research on women university student leaders and demonstrates that the community college experience can be a pivotal starting place for women's entrance into executive leadership regardless of previous experience. As such, community colleges are critical institutions for engaging women students in leadership. Daples (2012) suggested that many of the skills women community college students have developed from facing challenging life circumstances are the same skills taught in student leadership programs. Many of the women in this study encountered difficult life experiences such as the death of a parent, health challenges, divorce, or discrimination that fostered independence, resiliency and their growth mindset prior to college. It seems their life experience coupled with leadership opportunities in the community college environment prepared these women to aspire and pursue executive leadership roles.

While leadership experiences built self-efficacy, for many of the women, other motivational influences were also important. Encouragement from others was an important motivator for the women. Like previous research, these women were motivated by women in their families, advisors, and fellow students (Romano, 1994; Rucks, 2018). Receiving encouragement from others is particularly influential for women pursuing executive leadership posts and serves to validate women's sense of self (Rucks, 2018; Zimmerman, 2017). Having trusted individuals, peers and adults, identify their leadership potential counters self-doubt which is an important motivational factor for women to pursue executive positions (Lawless & Fox, 2013; Rucks, 2018). In addition, Wagoner (2017) and Zimmerman's (2017) finding that women are motivated to make a difference also emerged in the findings. The women wanted to make a difference in the organization, on campus, or in society. In wanting to make a difference, race

emerged as a salient part of one of the women's leadership identities. She was motivated to bring societal change for Native American people. A belief that one can make a positive impact and bring change is a strong motivational factor for the women student leaders.

A finding that was absent in the previous literature was the women's personal commitment which motivated them to pursue executive leadership. The women in this study saw executive leadership as a way to achieve their goals. Roth (2003), found that men and women university student leaders have separate leadership paths with women more frequently engaging in community service and arts organizations and men participating in student government leadership. The women in this study did not have separate leadership tracks than men, as they actively sought executive roles in areas such as student government. These women recognized leadership as something that would be beneficial to their future and set clear goals for themselves. Some even shared that it would look good on resumes and college applications. This finding is counter to the gender constraints that many women feel they have which stop them from setting executive leadership goals or engaging in leadership for resume building (Shushok, 2017; Wagoner, 2017). Many of the women did not feel constrained by gender in their leadership and while they recognized how traditional gender roles shaped their past perceptions, they readily believe that woman can be effective executive leaders. This personal drive was a strong contributing motivator for the women and illustrates their desires for growth. In this way, the community college environment supported the women leaders' development.

*How do women student leaders' experiences at a community college facilitate their leadership identity development?*

One thing is clear, the community college experience does facilitate leadership identity development for women students. Like the student leaders in Komives et al.'s (2005) study, the

women student leaders in this study were at various stages of their leadership identity development (LID). The women mostly transitioned through the stages of LID as outlined in Komives et al. (2005). The largest discrepancy happened in Stage 2: Exploratory/Engagement and Stage 3: Leader Identified.

Stage 2: Exploratory/Engagement is typified by students intentionally engaging in multiple student groups and then narrowing their interests as they pursue executive leadership (Komives et al., 2005). In this study, some of the women continued to explore a variety of groups and did not narrow their interests. In fact, some of the women joined additional student organizations during their executive leadership term. This suggests that at a two-year community college, the women may experience the Exploratory/Engagement stage throughout their time rather than as a transition to a leadership title in Stage 3.

Alternatively, others did not spend time exploring groups, but readily identified the organization they wanted to participate in and pursued executive leadership with very little prior engagement in the group. Even without extensive involvement in the student organization, these women were able to quickly take on an executive leader position. The deviance in Stage 2: Exploratory/Engagement may be the difference in a two-year and four-year college where community college students would have less time to explore organizations prior to executive leadership opportunities.

Another area of the LID model that the women deviated from was Stage 3: Leader Identified. Despite their leadership identity development being in Stages 4-6 of LID, only half of the women considered themselves leaders. Komives et al.'s (2005) model suggested that in Stage 3: Leader Identified students recognize they are a leader if they have the title. These women have executive leadership titles; yet, half of the women still struggled to identify themselves as a

leader. Researchers have identified self-doubt as a prominent roadblock for women pursuing executive leadership (Lawless & Fox, 2013; Rucks, 2018). While their self-doubt did not stop the women in this study from pursuing an executive position, it seems to have inhibited them from internalizing the title of leader as part of their identity. The difficulty of identifying as a leader was evident in the interviews and seems to be due to masculine, traditional views of ideal leadership that continue to permeate what it means to be a leader (AAUW, 2016). Women receive messages about social norms and gendered expectations regarding leadership at young ages and from many sources (Haber-Curran & Sulpizio, 2017). These messages are internalized and despite gaining confidence, deepening self-awareness, and developing skills, women's developing self can be constrained by traditional leadership ideals. While the women struggled to identify as leaders they were able to move into advanced stages of LID from stages 4-6 (Komives et al., 2005).

Most of the women illustrated aspects of Stage 4: Leadership Differentiated. This stage is characterized by an awareness of interdependence between leaders and followers and a resolve to engage in participatory leadership (Komives et al., 2005). The women recognized their interdependence with their fellow officers and organization members. They recognized leadership could come from anyone in the group. Similar to the findings on women university student leaders, most of the women engaged in transformational leadership styles, placing a high value on relationships, motivating followers, collaboration, and participatory decision making (Emrick, 2006; Haber-Curran, 2013; May, 2009). Unlike other women that feel constrained to utilize feminine leadership styles (Haber-Curran & Sulpizio, 2017), the women in this study did not feel constrained by their gender to engage in a transformational leadership style. The women leaders reported actively choosing their leadership style based on what is effective rather than

what is expected. One participant shared why she gravitates toward this style, “I think that's the most successful way to manage an organization.” The women students recognized the value of transformational leadership as a way to gather support, advance the organization, and develop followers. By adopting a relational and collaborative leadership style, the women are not bound by traditional masculine conceptualizations of leadership. Utilizing a feminist lens in this study helped reveal and validate that feminine characteristics, such as collaboration, can be an important part of leadership styles.

Many of the women advanced to Stage 5: Generativity/Synthesis as they became committed to developing the people around them (Komives et al., 2005). Romano (1994) identified a shift in the women leaders as they become less task oriented and more focused on motivating others. Likewise, the women in this study were actively engaged in mentoring, recruiting, motivating, and sustaining their organizations. This focus on relationships versus organizational tasks is also considered a feminine leadership style. For some of the women, this mentoring and recruitment was with other women, which continues to help build a chain of women students in leadership. Further, they recognized their place in being role models for other women. While it was not always apparent to the women, in this way, gender is a salient part of their leadership identity development. Most of the women reported that gender did not impact their leadership; however, they recognized the power women have to influence other women and felt obligated to use their position to bring empowerment to other women. Likewise, race was a salient part of one of the women leader's identity development and she identified as a role model for Native children due to both her gender and race as a Native woman. This highlights the importance of recognizing how race intersects with gender for women leaders.

Some of the women reached the last stage of LID, Stage 6: Integration/Synthesis, where leadership is a part of who they are and they recognize themselves engaging in leadership in diverse contexts with or without a title (Komives et al., 2005). The women know they can be leaders in areas like the classroom and among their friends. Given that women are underrepresented in executive leadership positions in many sectors, a non-positional view of leadership can help women to view leadership as a process rather than as a role or trait. Haber-Curran and Sulpizio (2017) suggested that shifting from positional leadership philosophies to adopt views that anyone can be a leader is essential for women's leadership development and encourages women to engage in leadership without direct authority. Embracing views of leadership that are less power oriented and more inclusive can help women see leadership as a skill set to be developed and help them recognize their ability to influence others and empower change regardless of context.

Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of the women's leadership identity development in the community college environment is the developmental influence of other women on campus. As Daples (2012) suggested, due to the large presence of women on campus, the student leaders readily found important women role models and mentors in faculty, staff, administrators, and student leaders. The climate on campus was warm for these students as some could not think of any negative experiences they had as a woman leader. They felt comfortable connecting with the women on campus and found active support, guidance, and encouragement. The women role models helped the women to see themselves as capable of leadership (Polson, 2018; Rucks, 2018; Whitt, 1993). While I expected this finding, I was pleased to hear many of the women share the important role that men administrators, faculty, staff, advisors, and fellow students played in also encouraging and supporting their leadership development. The women on



campus were important role models and mentors to the student leaders, but men also actively mentored the women student leaders.

*What leadership barriers and supports do women community college student leaders experience, if any?*

The largest barrier experienced by many of the women was balancing their time. Miles (2008) found this to be a challenge for university women as well. Given that half of the women in this study identified as low income and half of the women were working a part-time or full-time job, in addition to going to school and participating in their leadership position, it is not surprising that finding balance was a challenge. Fritz and van Knippenberg (2018) recognized that work-life balance is a challenge for career women that limits their aspirations. The women in this study that struggled to find balance were more likely to step back from leadership to focus more on other aspects of their life. Organizational cultures that are supportive of women's multiple roles and allow for flexibility can help women overcome work-life balance barriers. There was some indication that the community college culture supported some of the women in adjusting their priorities when needed. The women reported receiving support from their advisors and fellow members when they needed to rebalance their priorities. The advisors placed an emphasis on being a student first and prioritizing academics over leadership. For the women that sought support from advisors and organizational members, they received work-life balance encouragement that helped them to prioritize their own mental health and wellbeing.

While previous studies of women university students have noted barriers women experience (Haber-Curran, 2013; Roth, 2003; Wagoner, 2017), previous research on women students has not revealed the active strategies women utilize to overcome their barriers. These women overcame barriers by utilizing strategies such as seeing barriers as growth opportunities,

directly confronting the barrier, choosing to define themselves, and finding support in others. As researchers, it is important to understand the strategies women use to persevere despite challenges. By understanding these strategies, we can support other women to successfully navigate leadership.

These women hesitated to use the term barrier. Most of the women lead with a growth mindset, so they see barriers as challenges and learning opportunities. Dweck (2006) suggested a growth mindset, one in which the person believes their qualities can be grown through effort, is key to taking chances and realizing success. People with fixed mindsets desire to attain perfection; whereas, a growth mindset is about effort and learning overtime (Dweck, 2006). With a growth mindset, the women students may have been more willing to pursue executive leadership and to see it as opportunity to grow and learn. The women in this study were motivated to pursue leadership as an opportunity for personal development. A fixed mindset would make running for an elected leadership office difficult as there is the potential for failure or imperfection. Yet, the women in this study pursued leadership knowing they had a lot to learn. Further, their growth mindsets helped them view challenges as opportunities to learn more about oneself rather than obstacles that inhibited their leadership aspirations.

None of these women felt constrained by gendered expectations to be the ideal woman which is counter to previous research (Wagoner, 2017). Unlike the barrier reported by women university student leaders in past literature (Princeton University, 2011; Roth, 2003; Wagoner, 2017), these women do not feel the need to portray “effortless perfection.” They recognized they were learning and it was okay to be imperfect because they were all learning together. In fact, they rejected the ideal of perfection and preferred to show their followers they were uncertain and struggled at times, because perfection was not authentic nor approachable. The women

sought opportunities to be authentic and share their life experiences and obstacles with their followers, rather than portray perfection. Furthermore, one leader shared that she does not feel pressured to always look perfect, which is a challenge for many women as society often places value on women's appearance (Pew Research Center, 2017). In this way, the women community college student leaders continue to defy gendered leadership constraints and expectations by actively leading with vulnerability. Utilizing a feminist lens highlighted this aspect of the women's leadership. Further, Dweck (2006) asserted that a growth mindset helps people confront stereotypes that pose a threat to their identity. A person with a fixed mindset is more likely to believe a stereotyped message such as women do not do leadership. Thwarting the need for perfection may help women to pursue executive leadership. Moreover, as other students watch these women successfully lead with vulnerability or imperfection, it may make leadership more approachable.

In addition to their growth mindsets, the women demonstrated that they are not constrained to gender stereotypes or a double bind as they actively confront barriers such as gender discrimination in a way that may mean they have to be more assertive. One of the woman leaders shared how she adopted a more assertive style in meetings, due to a man student that was disrespectful and dismissive of her as a leader. Further, acting with assurance in who they are and their decisions was an active strategy they utilized to overcome challenges. Psychologist, Dr. Brene Brown (2015) would define this as acting with courage meaning "whole-heartedly." For her, acting with courage is the willingness to let yourself be seen at the risk of vulnerability and failure. When difficult decisions had to be made, the women recognized they could not please everyone and they learned to own their decisions with confidence.

Lastly, the support the women received from family, administrators, faculty, staff, advisors, and fellow students was a large boost to their ability to overcome barriers. This support propelled them past the charged political climate, discouragement from fellow students, and gender discrimination, when experienced. Adult and peer influences, as noted by Komives et al. (2005), play a pivotal role in helping support the women by serving as role models and mentors. This research builds on our understanding of what adult and peer influences were most important for women students. Women employees and peers were particularly influential in helping the student leaders see their potential as well as serving as sources of comfort, guidance, sense making, and community. Having women administrators, advisors, faculty, and staff, provided opportunities for women students to make connections that sustained their leadership. Women on campus are critical foundations of support for women students, particularly as women were most comfortable seeking guidance from women.

In addition, being treated like equals and having trust instilled in them by both men and women boosted the women's confidence and gave them a sense of empowerment. This finding is counter to Sanseviro (2007) that suggested student relationships and roles in institutional decision making at two-year colleges were merely advisory and they were often expected to assume the administration's goals. In this study, the women student leaders had their own goals and plans for their organizations and felt they were trusted to enact those plans. The women were frequently surprised by the level of trust that employees placed in them. The women felt empowered to find and use their own voice from setting their organization's goals to determining what actions to take during the difficult political climate with the Board. Society does not always value nor encourage the voice of women, so providing these student women the opportunity to

be self-determinative supported their leadership identity development. This empowerment became evident through viewing LID with a feminist lens.

*How do the women students' experiences in community college leadership impact their future leadership aspirations?*

Leadership experience is pivotal for building women's future leadership aspirations (Polson, 2018). The women attributed their future leadership desires to the experience they gained in their executive leadership role. Zimmerman (2017) noted women need to feel qualified in order to pursue leadership. The women's executive leadership experience certainly increased their qualifications and preparation for future leadership as they gained leadership experience and skills that built their confidence and self-efficacy. Gaining practical and professional skills such as networking, strategic planning, budgeting, interpersonal communication, delegating, and conflict resolution, provided the women insights into workplace leadership that made them feel prepared. Having encountered, confronted, and overcome gender discrimination was also noted as a valuable experience by some of the women as they anticipate encountering discrimination in their futures careers. This study confirmed that leadership experience seems to be a strong predictor of future leadership aspirations for women (Emrick, 2006; Polson, 2018).

Most of the women have a desire for future leadership; however, it is important to note that some of the women are not currently pursuing leadership opportunities as they seek to find more balance in their lives. Some of the women sought to reinvest their time and energy in their academics and personal lives and have stepped away from leadership, for the time being. Engaging in executive leadership for women students can come at a sacrifice to one's personal life (Polson, 2018). For these women, their current disengagement seems to be momentary; however, Damell (2013) also noted a reassessment period in alumna that she interviewed. She

noted that gender was not an issue for the majority of women in her study during their presidencies, but 9-15 years later the women confronted gender expectations that were negatively impacting their leadership identity and causing them to reassess their desires for leadership. As the women in this study take a pause, this confirms the view of women's leadership to be more of a labyrinth than a pipeline (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

### **Limitations**

While this study provides important insights into the experiences of women community college student leaders, it did have some limitations. First, the interviews took place during the month of October. For the women students, this timing seemed to work well with the flow of the semester; however, some of the current women leaders had only two months of experience in their role. An interview later in these women's terms may have produced additional insights.

While not the selected design, the study and the women would have benefited from the opportunity to engage in a focus group in addition to the interviews. A focus group would have allowed the researcher to gather additional insight as the women collectively reflected on their experiences. This may have extended our understanding and refined similarities and differences in the women's experiences. It would have also provided a meaningful connection for the women students to each other. Some of the women student leaders commented on their desire to connect with fellow women student leaders to discuss topics specific to women's leadership.

### **Implications**

#### **Implications for Theory**

This study employed Komives et al.'s (2005) Leadership Identity Development Theory with a feminist lens as a framework. Through applying a feminist lens, which centers oppressed voices and critically examines gender inequities, we gained greater insights into women's

leadership and their experiences. This study both compliments and extends Komives et al.'s (2005) Leadership Identity Development Theory. Viewing this theory through the experiences of women community college students helps us further understand women's pathways to and through executive leadership. Implications for the stages of the LID model and influences will be explored.

The deviations in the LID model's Stage 2 and Stage 3, as discussed above, suggest community college women students experience leadership identity development differently. Stage 2: Exploration/Engagement was either absent or prolonged for many of the women student leaders. Community college students, particularly those that are non-traditional, may be less likely to spend time exploring organizations and instead assume an executive role, moving directly to Stage 3: Leader Identified. Alternatively, the traditional aged, women community college student leaders were more likely to engage in multiple organizations and did not narrow their interests as they pursued executive leadership. Traditional community college students may be likely to embrace college as an opportunity to consider their interests and may consequently spend prolonged time in exploring and engaging in multiple organizations even during their executive terms.

Another theoretical implication is that women might not experience Stage 3: Leader Identified, as is outlined in the model. Women may struggle to see themselves as leaders even with an executive role and title; yet the women in this study all embraced their position as role models and mentors for other women. Being identified as a leader and engaging in leadership activities does not thwart masculine societal views of leadership that leave women feeling like they do not fit the label. For women, internalizing the title of leader is an advanced stage of

development that may occur at a much later stage or may not fully occur at all until societal views of leaders can become more inclusive of women.

The LID theory identifies developmental influences such as adults and peers, but does not specifically break these influences into motivational influences and sustaining developmental influences (Komives, 2005). This study specifically revealed what motivates women to pursue executive leadership and what sustains or supports them once they are in an executive position. Women are motivated by past experiences, encouragement from trusted individuals, and a personal commitment to achieve their goals and make a difference. A feminist view of LID would suggest that understanding motivational influences is important to finding ways to encourage women to enter leadership as a counter to gender norms and societal messages that suggest women are not leaders. Once in leadership, women are supported by other women, adults and peers, that serve as role models and mentors. Viewing LID through a feminist standpoint lens revealed the importance of surrounding women students with women as role models and mentors. Seeing people similar to one's own self successfully engaging in leadership is motivational and affirming. Environments with visible women's leadership at all levels support women student's development (Whitt, 1993). In addition, understanding developmental influences shows how women who achieve leadership navigate it and continue to aspire to leadership. By separating these two influences, motivational and developmental, this study provides additional details on the support roles of women, adults and peers.

Komives et al. (2005) does not include barriers and overcoming barriers as part of leadership identity development. Given the literature on masculine organizational cultures, gender discrimination, and the embeddedness of inequality in our society, understanding barriers to development and strategies for overcoming these barriers should be included in women's LID.



By bringing barriers and strategies for overcoming obstacles to light, institutions can actively work to remove systemic barriers for women. Furthermore, this can help women to identify common strategies for overcoming obstacles and successfully serving in leadership roles. As women find a sense of community with other women regarding barriers, these challenges may not seem as insurmountable and their leadership identities can thrive.

Being able to thwart society's constraints of perfectionism seems to be an advanced level of Komives et al.'s (2005) *Developing Self*. When women strive for perfection, it can be difficult for them to take chances that might lead to failure or reveal they are not perfect. The desire for perfection represents a fixed mindset that can limit growth (Dweck, 2006). What women bring to leadership as part of their mindset is influential in both how they lead and how they develop as leaders. LID should recognize the mindset individuals approach leadership with as part of their developing self.

As noted in Chapter IV, some of the women are in a current reassessment period where they are no longer actively involved in leadership and have stepped away from involvement in student organizations all together. The women desired a break from student engagement as they sought balance. Damell (2013) also found a reassessment phase, but for her it was not with recent graduates but those who had been in the career field for many years. LID is intended to capture current college leader's experiences, but little is known about women's LID after they move out of their executive position. There are three possible explanations of what this momentary pause means. First, Komives et al. (2005) noted that students may move back and forth through the stages in a non-linear fashion. It is possible the women are cycling back to an earlier stage; however, because the women are not exploring or engaging in organizations it does not seem likely that they are in an earlier stage.

Alternatively, if the women end their leadership in Stage 6: Integration/Synthesis where leadership can be non-positional and non-contextual, perhaps the women no longer see high involvement as necessary to their ability to have a voice and bring meaningful change. If they can be a leader without a title and in a variety of settings, this momentary disengagement in leadership roles may explain why women's leadership is a labyrinth with twists, turns, and pauses and not a smooth pipeline as one might expect (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Unfortunately, not all of the women that have stepped away from leadership identified aspects of Stage 6, so this explanation does not fully explain the reassessment phenomenon.

Lastly, this reassessment could signal an additional stage for women's leadership development as it does not appear to be a return to an earlier stage and not all of the women expressed a non-positional view of leadership. After women leave executive leadership positions they may spend time reassessing their leadership identity and determine that they prefer to not re-engage in leadership. This reassessment period may indicate that the barrier of seeking a work-life balancing can be a detriment to their leadership paths and while the women reported strong aspirations for additional leadership, taking a break might ultimately serve to derail their leadership aspirations. In addition to these theoretical implications, there are also implications for higher education practitioners.

### **Implications for Practice**

Faculty, staff, advisors, administrators and women on campus serve important roles for women student's leadership identity development. These key individuals need to recognize how they shape women's development through active encouragement to pursue leadership positions. For many of the women, this active encouragement was key, particularly as the women are transitioning from relying on encouragement from their parents to other adults. It is not enough

to announce a position opening and expect women to apply, rather active encouragement from trusted employees and fellow students will likely produce positive results for women's leadership (Rucks, 2018). In addition, advisors can encourage current student leaders to invite their friends to participate. Encouragement can be simple, such as an email, text, or in person conversation that recognizes the woman's potential and suggests she would be a good fit for a leadership position. These small acts help affirm the women's inner sense of self and help them recognize they are capable and needed (Zimmerman, 2018).

Higher education institutions seeking to encourage more women to pursue leadership should surround women students with role models (Whitt, 1993). Some of the women noted seeing women in positions of power as the primary way higher education can promote women students' leadership. Further, both men and women can serve as mentors to women students. Many mentor relationships are informal and develop as the women and employees or peers connect through involvement in student organizations. Intentionally providing students with mentors and compensating employees or peers for their mentoring would build a positive culture of leadership development at institutions. Otherwise, mentoring will only happen for some individuals some of the time. Moreover, some of the women expressed a desire to have more opportunities for networking with fellow women leaders on campus. Creating forums or workshops for women at all levels to engage and support each other provides women students opportunities to seek guidance, gather support, and feel connected in safe spaces (Brue & Brue, 2018).

The findings suggest training in overcoming barriers such as work-life balance and growth mindsets may be beneficial to women students. Because finding balance was the most common barrier for the women and has lasting impacts on their future aspirations, student

organization advisors should actively counsel women student leaders on developing work-life balance that can help them find harmony. Advisors could discuss important topics like time management, mental health, delegating, and prioritizing. Helping women develop strategies for balancing their many obligations would serve both the institution and the students. Additionally, higher education institutions should intentionally cultivate growth mindsets in women students. The different mindsets could be taught in the formal curriculum or in student organizations. As people become aware of the differences in fixed and growth mindsets it can have a profound impact on how they approach stereotypes, competition, and leadership (Dweck, 2006). Trainings in both work-life balance and growth mindsets are important for encouraging and sustaining women's leadership.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

There are several avenues for additional research that can build upon and or confirm these findings. Additional research should consider diverse community college students and settings. Because race emerged as a salient part of one of the participant's leadership identities, it is important for researchers to further explore how race and gender intersect for women students' leadership. Further, researchers should explore women student leaders' experiences in diverse community college settings such as Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Hispanic Serving Institutions, and institution of various sizes. This college has a predominantly White student body and served around 5000 students annually. Some of the women commented on the smaller campus size as a factor that may have influenced their ability to be involved and to connect with employees. Research into diverse student populations and community college campuses will contribute to our body of knowledge on women community college student leaders.

This study focused on women that take on executive leadership roles at community colleges. Additional research should extend the positive deviance approach. Positive deviance research is grounded in the belief that every community has people that defy norms and have found solutions to problems even though they experience the same or worse circumstances as others (Herrington & van de Fliert, 2018). Through studying positive deviance, we can amplify already existing solutions and spread them to others (Tufts University, 2010). The first stage of positive deviance research is completed by this study, which is to identify positive deviant individuals in the community and to identify their strategies for success. Researchers could engage in the second phase of positive deviance research which involves connecting these findings regarding motivation, leadership identity development, and overcoming barriers with women leaders that choose not to pursue executive leadership and those who chose not to pursue leadership roles altogether. Both of these populations could provide further insight into women's leadership identity development and this study's findings. If the strategies women community college student leaders utilize for engaging at the executive level are confirmed as unique to women who engage in executive leadership, these strategies can be amplified to help other women pursue leadership.

Furthermore, because some of the women were entering a reassessment period where they were stepping back from leadership to focus more on themselves, additional research would be beneficial to understand women's experiences 5-10 years after their executive leadership role. How are these women currently engaging in leadership and how have their self-perceptions of their leadership abilities changed over time? It could also confirm if a reassessment period is an additional stage of women's LID.

While there are many factors that constrain women from pursuing executive leadership such as male dominated organizational cultures and discrimination (Acquaro & Stokes, 2016; Koenig et al., 2011), additional research should explore the connection between growth mindsets and women's leadership. It seems from this research that women with growth mindsets might be more willing to engage in executive level leadership. Also, they may be more likely to find success in overcoming barriers and gender stereotypes. Further research could engage the differences and similarities in community college and university women student leader's mindsets, to understand if mindset influences the lack of university women in executive leadership roles or changes how the women experience executive leadership.

Lastly, this study relied on a qualitative methodology so to understand, in rich detail, the lived experiences of women community college student leaders. While this analysis provides depth and context to the findings, additional research could employ a quantitative methodology based on these findings, particularly in relation to motivation to lead and future aspirations. Engaging in quantitative data collection methods would allow for the results to be more generalizable to a larger population of women community college student leaders and further confirm the experiences of the women in this study in relation to various demographics.

### **Conclusion**

Through this dissertation, I provided a detailed analysis of the lived experiences of women community college student leaders. These women were motivated to lead through a variety of external and internal factors. Women need experience, encouragement, and a personal commitment. Community colleges can provide women opportunities and encouragement that will help fuel their desires to lead. The community college environment, with women role models at all levels, appears to be particularly suited for helping women students develop their

leadership identity and thus may play an important role in preparing women students for executive leadership in a variety of sectors outside the academy. For many of these women, their community college leadership role was their first experience with leadership and it led to their executive role. This experience has undeniably shaped their future. The community college was a place of encouragement, support, and transformation for the women leaders as they found their voice and gained self-efficacy. These women were surrounded by role models and the women student leaders developed a self-concept as a role model for other women. Despite encountering barriers, these women demonstrated resilience, vulnerability, and a growth mindset. Perhaps it is these qualities that shape their internal drive and inner sense of self that propels them to both seek to make a difference through leading and to achieve their personal goals. Clearly, women gain skills through engaging in student leadership that will benefit them in both their personal and professional lives. When asked what advice they would give future women considering executive leadership roles the women unequivocally shared, “Just do it!”

Engaging in this hermeneutic phenomenological study has provided me ample opportunity for self-reflection. While I engaged in this research with the desire to elevate the voices of women community college students, I now see that this experience has further developed my own leadership identity. I am inspired by the women’s life and leadership experiences that shaped them into leaders that seek to motivate and encourage others through building relationships, participatory decision making, and a growth mindset. Like university women student leaders, I have struggled with perfectionism, but recognize I too should lead from a place of vulnerability. I was moved as they shared the important role that college employees, particularly women, had on influencing who they are and who they will become. Conducting this research has been a process of self-discovery that has enhanced my own aspirations for executive

leadership. It has also helped me recognize that women students are frequently inspired by non-executive woman leaders such as faculty, staff, and fellow students. You do not have to be the most visible executive leader to be a role model. Community colleges have an important role in enhancing equity for women in leadership and I am proud to be a part of that mission.



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## **Appendix A – Recruitment Email**

Hello \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Sherry Simkins. I am a doctoral student at Idaho State University and a Division Chair at North Idaho College. As a part of my degree requirements for an Ed.D., I am seeking participants for a research study on women community college student leaders. The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of women students in executive leadership positions at a community college. In working with \_\_\_\_\_ College, it was determined that you meet the criteria of an executive woman student leader. I am hopeful you are willing to participate.

The study will be conducted in October 2021. Your commitment will be two interviews, spaced about a week apart. Each interview will last 1-1.5 hours. I am fairly flexible, so we will work around your schedule. We will meet in person at a location of your choice or via Zoom. During the interviews you will be asked questions about your motivations to lead, leadership identity development, barriers and supports to leadership, as well as your future leadership aspirations. Interviews will be recorded and kept confidential without any personal identifiers.

Your participation is completely voluntary and you may withdraw at any time. There is no reward for participating or consequence for not participating. There are no identifiable risks beyond those experienced in normal, everyday life. The benefits include an opportunity to be a part of research that examines women community college students' leadership. Additionally, you will have the opportunity to reflect on your past and current leadership experiences and share your story. This reflection process may help further your leadership development. The results of this research may help practitioners better understand the leadership experiences of community college women students and find ways to support women in pursuing executive leadership opportunities.

I would greatly appreciate your support and participation. If you are willing to participate please respond and we will schedule the first interview.

Warm Regards,

Sherry N. Simkins

## Appendix B – Demographic Questionnaire

1. Age:
2. Name of High School you graduated from:
3. Race
4. Ethnicity:
5. Marital Status
  - a. Married
  - b. Single
  - c. Widowed
  - d. Divorced
6. Household socioeconomic status
  - a. Less than \$25,000
  - b. \$25,000-49,999
  - c. \$50,00- 74,999
  - d. \$75,00- 99,999
  - e. \$100,000 +
  - f. Prefer not to say
7. Are you a first-generation college student? (Did either of your parents graduate with a bachelor's degree?)
8. Years of college completed:
  - a. 0
  - b. 1
  - c. 2
  - d. 3
  - e. 4
  - f. 5+
9. Academic Program:
10. Employment Status:
  - a. Full-time
  - b. Part-time
  - c. Not employed

## **Appendix C – Informed Consent**

Dear Participant:

Idaho State University and \_\_\_\_\_ College Institutional Review Boards have approved this dissertation project on behalf of Sherry N. Simkins, who is pursuing the Degree of Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership with a concentration in Higher Education Administration. You are being invited to participate in this research project to explore your experiences as a woman community college student leader. You were selected as a participant due to your role in an executive leadership position.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study is being conducted to learn more about the leadership experiences of community college women students in executive leadership positions. Through this study, I hope to learn more about what motivates women student leaders, what barriers and supports they experience as leaders, as well as their future desires for leadership.

### **Procedures to be Followed**

You are being asked to participate in two interviews that will last around 60-90 minutes each. Your total time commitment will be no more than two to three hours. The interviews will consist of a series of open-ended questions related to your experiences as a woman student leader. If you agree to participate, interviews will occur in person or via Zoom. The interviews will be recorded and later transcribed.

### **Risks:**

Your participation is completely voluntary and you may withdraw at any time. There is no reward for participating or consequence for not participating. There are no identifiable risks beyond those experienced in normal, everyday life. There is always the possibility that there are unexpected risks. For example, an unexpected risk may be an accidental disclosure of your private information. To minimize this risk, every effort will be made to protect your identity. For example, you will select a pseudonym at our first interview. The pseudonym will be used rather than your name to identify any data associated with you. The researcher will be the only one with access to the data and all of the data will be stored with password protection. Another unexpected risk is that you may experience discomfort by answering questions related to your leadership development that may have been difficult for you. If you feel uncomfortable at any time during the interviews, you are free to refuse to answer any questions or stop the interview at any point. If you choose to withdraw from the research, there will be no penalties associated with the withdrawal.

### **Benefits:**

Benefits from the study include the opportunity to be a part of research that examines community college women's leadership. The results of this research may help practitioners better understand the leadership experiences of community college women students and ways to support women in pursuing executive leadership opportunities. Additionally, you will have the

opportunity to reflect on your past and current leadership experiences. This reflection process may help further your leadership development.

**Statement of Confidentiality:**

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can identify you will remain confidential and will be stored on my password-protected Box account, a secure cloud-based document management system. It will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. In addition, confidentiality will be maintained by assigning you a pseudonym. Pseudonyms will be used during the interview, in the saving of any electronic files, and during data analysis and dissemination. Any connection of your pseudonym and your real name will be stored on a password-protected laptop which only the researcher will be able to access. To further protect your identity, your institution will be referred to as a Northwest Community College and your specific student organization will not be named.

For further information regarding this research please contact the researcher conducting this study, Sherry N. Simkins at (208) 755-0506, email: [simksher@isu.edu](mailto:simksher@isu.edu), or Dr. Berenice Sanchez at email: [berenicesanchez@isu.edu](mailto:berenicesanchez@isu.edu). If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, you may contact Idaho State University – Office for Research, Outreach, and Compliance (208)282-2618.

There are two copies of this letter, one copy for your records and one for mine. Thank you in advance for your cooperation and support.

Please indicate your agreement to participate by signing below.

I am 18 years or older and have read and understood this consent form and agree to participate.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ (Please Print)

Date: \_\_\_\_\_



## **APPENDIX D – Interview Protocols**

### **First Interview**

#### **1. Introduction**

- Introduce myself, share background, and personally thank the participant
- Explain the purpose of the study
- Explain the purpose of this first interview: To reflect on your past experiences all the way through your present experiences with leadership at a community college. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> interview you will have the opportunity to reflect upon the meaning of these experiences.
- Establish a pseudonym
- Complete informed consent
- Ask permission to record the interview and take notes
- Any questions for me before we begin?

#### **2. Early experiences with leadership**

- Tell me about your background. What year are you in school? What are you studying?
- What led you to choose to attend \_\_\_\_\_ college?
- What are your earliest recollections of leaders or the concept of leadership?
- What experiences did you have with role models or mentors before you started college?
- Describe your previous experiences with leadership prior to your executive leadership role as \_\_\_\_\_.

#### **3. Motivation to Lead**

- When did you first realize you wanted to be a leader?
- Who influenced your desire to lead?
  - i. Family, friends, faculty, staff, advisors, others. Describe experiences you had with mentors or role models in regards to leadership.
- What experiences influenced you to decide to take on \_\_\_\_\_ executive leadership position.
  - i. What kind of change did you want to bring to the organization?
  - ii. What benefits did you expect to gain through executive leadership in \_\_\_\_\_ student organization?

#### **4. Community College Climate**

- What experiences at the community college influenced your leadership?
- What experiences with employees impacted your leadership development?
- What experiences did you have interacting with administrators?
- What were your interactions like with your organization's other student leaders and members?

- How did the climate on campus encourage women to become student leaders?
5. Barriers
- Describe experiences with obstacles or barriers to your leadership.
    - i. How did you overcome these barriers?
  - Tell me about a time when you had to face a difficult decision as a leader.
  - Did you experience any barriers specific to being a woman leader? If so, please explain.
6. Support/Influences
- Describe experiences that supported or positively influenced your leadership.
  - Tell me about a time/experience you are most proud of as a leader
  - What experiences did you have with support systems on or off campus during your leadership?
7. Future Leadership Aspirations
- Do you think you will continue to pursue leadership in your future? In what capacity? Why or why not?
  - What experiences have influenced your future leadership aspirations?
8. Leadership Development
- Do you see yourself as a leader? Why or why not?
  - How do you define leadership?
  - What is the role of a leader? What is the role of followers?
  - What is your leadership style? What experiences did you have positively or negatively utilizing this style?
    - i. Why did you gravitate toward this style?
  - What traits do leaders have? To what extent can you see those traits in yourself.
  - What experiences did you have in transitioning the organization to the next leader?
  - What experiences did you have with gender impacting your executive role?
9. Wrap up
- Is there anything I didn't ask about that you think is important for this research?
  - Thank you!
  - Following-up with a copy of the interview transcript for your review
  - Schedule next interview
  - Follow-up email
    - i. Thank you
    - ii. Transcript
    - iii. My contact information
    - iv.** Next interview reminder

## Second Interview

1. Introduction
  - Hello again
  - Explain the purpose of the study
  - Explain the purpose of this second interview: to allow you to reflect on the meaning of the leadership experiences shared in the first interview.
  - Remind participant of
    - a. Established pseudonym
    - b. Completed informed consent
    - c. Participation is voluntary
  - Ask permission to record the interview and take notes
  - Any questions for me before we begin?
2. Start with follow-up questions from first interview.
3. Guiding Questions:
  - Given everything we have talked about, what do these experiences mean to you?
  - How did your early leadership experiences influence your leadership?
  - How did your motivation to lead influence your leadership?
  - How did the barriers you described influence your leadership?
  - How did the supports you described influence your leadership?
  - How has the community college influenced your leadership?
  - How has being a leader impacted your views of yourself?
    - Did you notice any changes in yourself as you served as a leader?
  - How has being a leader influenced your future desires to lead beyond \_\_\_\_\_ college?
  - How has being a woman impacted your leadership?
    - Does gender shape your perceptions about leaders or leadership?
  - How has race and/or other identities impacted your leadership?
  - Has serving in this role changed how you think about leadership?
  - After reflection, would you do anything different as a leader?
  - What advice would you give to women students considering or not considering top leadership roles?
  - What, if any, support systems, programs, or experiences could higher education officials implement to encourage more women to take on executive leadership roles?
  - Is there anything else about your leadership journey or your experiences as a woman student leader that you'd like to share?
4. Wrap up
  - Thank you!

- Following-up with a copy of the interview transcript for your review
- Once I analyze the interviews, I will also provide a brief overview of my findings and ask for any feedback that you may have
- Follow-up email
  - i. Thank you
  - ii. Transcript
  - iii. My contact information