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A Phenomenological Study on the Informal Learning Experiences of Female Mid-Level Administrators

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A Dissertation by

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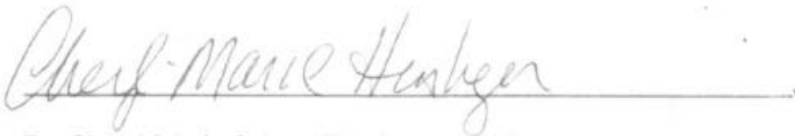 , Committee Member

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ABSTRACT

A Phenomenological Study on the Informal Learning Experiences of Female Mid-Level Administrators

by Kathryn L. Curameng

Purpose: The purpose of this phenomenological study is to identify and describe the informal leadership development experiences of female mid-level administrators in private nonprofit higher education.

Methodology: This phenomenological study identifies and describes the informal leadership development experiences of female mid-level administrators in private nonprofit higher education institutions in California. Respondents were selected based on specific criteria and recommendations of a sponsor. The researcher collected data through semi-structured interviews and observations of participants.

Findings: Examination of the qualitative data from interviews with 16 female mid-level administrators working in private nonprofit higher education yielded nine major findings. These included 2 unexpected findings. The findings included critical and important revelations about the informal leadership development experiences of female mid-level administrators, the strategies they used to acquire leadership skills, and the challenges they faced.

Conclusions: The study supported nine conclusions based on data. These conclusions focused on the various aspects female mid-level administrators value in leadership, such as authenticity, and how their experiences in acquiring leadership skills vary not only from their male counterparts but also from each other.

Recommendations: Future qualitative or mixed methods studies exploring informal leadership development experiences are recommended. Additional studies on areas such as gender-based attributional ambiguity, intersectionality, gender identity, age, and the impact of remote work in relation to the informal leadership development experiences of female mid-level administrators would be highly informative.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The value of diversity has been highlighted in the last decade, with a spotlight on the outcomes and advantages of diverse experiences and perspective, particularly in leadership roles. Having diverse leadership in an organization has been shown to create higher levels of innovation and better decision-making. In institutions of higher education, diversity in leadership has also been shown to contribute to increased student success and overall institutional well-being.

Student demographics in higher education have seen significant shifts toward an increasingly diverse student population during the last few decades. However, the demographics of higher education leaders have not kept pace with this shift. From a gender perspective, women now represent approximately 50% of all higher education administrators; however, they are often found more in the lower and middle levels of the institutional leadership hierarchy. Representation drops significantly at the senior ranks, with only 30% of presidents and 44% of provosts being women (Whitford, 2022). This disparity suggests a need to look inward at the leadership pipeline and investigate the experiences of the female mid-level administrator.

Despite their critical and well-established role in developing and educating students, higher education institutions are not known for developing those employed within their walls. Leadership development across the higher education industry is widely reported as being largely inconsistent and unplanned, with the lack of intentional development of mid-level administrators at the center of this issue (Hempsall, 2014). Absent intentional, planned development, they are left to find opportunities independently to acquire needed leadership skills and competencies.

This lack of intentionality is particularly problematic for female administrators attempting to navigate higher education's complex leadership development landscape. Research has consistently reported that women experience greater barriers and obstacles on their development path. Because these barriers and obstacles are often subtle in nature, they can be challenging to identify and address (White, 2012). However, their detrimental impacts are evident throughout prior research. Madera (2017) explained that outcomes of these barriers and experiences include feelings of disappointment and unhappiness, resulting in female mid-level administrators modifying their career aspirations, leaving their institutions for better opportunities, or in some cases, leaving the industry altogether.

Women have a long history of experiencing barriers in the workplace, including gendered expectations and other gender biases. Although advancements have been made with equity in the workforce, institutional culture and policies in higher education have been slow to catch up. These challenges may continue to represent barriers to the ability of the female mid-level administrator to acquire the skills needed to lead successfully. Thus, potentially adversely affecting her ability to progress as a leader, increase representation at all levels, and contribute to the institution's success.

Creating a more diverse leadership pool is essential to the overall success of the higher education industry. To create more intentional development opportunities and increase leadership diversity, it is critical for the higher education industry first to understand the leadership development experiences and barriers to learning and development encountered by female mid-level administrators.

Background

Leadership development is an essential aspect of any organization, with effective leadership directly attributed to higher education institutions' long-term competitiveness and sustainability. Yet, despite its importance, leadership development has not been a high priority across the higher education industry. Although succession planning and formal programs can be found in the effort to develop executive-level administrators in higher education, less attention has been paid to developing skills among mid-level administrators (Brunson, 2020). Further, the White House Project (2009) reported that the lack of development of female leaders in higher education settings was particularly problematic.

Status of Women in Higher Education

Women have made strides in higher education as students and professionals. Currently, they now hold the larger share of bachelor's and master's degrees (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022) and have earned the majority of doctoral degrees each year since 2009 (Council of Graduate Schools, 2020). Women have also entered the higher education workforce in high numbers and can be seen in a broad scope of leadership positions. Although this is indicative of progress, to understand fully the status of women in higher education, it is vital to understand the roles and levels they occupy in the industry's hierarchy. Kaplan and Tinsley (1989) used the visual of a pyramid to describe the phenomenon of women's roles in higher education, with the lower section being full and less representation at the top. Thus, although women occupy more than half the professional positions, a much smaller number occupy the senior levels. Women have

made progress; however, the disparity in levels of leadership points to continued barriers encountered on their journey.

Discrimination and bias affecting this disparity are certainly not as blatant and overt as in past decades; however, gender expectations and gender roles remain a pervasive issue in the industry landscape. These reflect deeply embedded institutional culture and practices, which can hamper women's professional development and advancement. Often described as invisible barriers, they are widely reported throughout the literature. These invisible barriers are commonly represented in themes such as describing a "good old boys club" (Airini et al., 2011; Ballinger, 2010; Glover, 2009) and a lack of access to networks (Madera, 2017), among other gender-based hurdles precluding women from the same opportunities as their male counterparts.

The position of women in the institutional hierarchy and barriers due to organizational culture suggest women will experience a different and more challenging path to leadership development and career advancement than their male counterparts. Further, the higher education industry is at risk of missing an opportunity to benefit from the diverse perspectives that women bring to the industry.

Value of Women in the Workforce

Over time, technological advancements, globalization, and the complexity of increased workforce diversity have added to leadership challenges. Additional challenges in the higher education industry include the pressure of student success, graduation rates, and a shift in student demographic, resulting in the need for ongoing competitive and relevant programming. The need for diversity in leadership style to promote innovation and forward-thinking solutions is increasingly vital given these challenges. Women

leaders play an important role in this diversity, bringing a different perspective and style that can promote higher quality decision-making and innovation in an institution (White, 2012).

In an interview published by *Harvard Business Review*, Woolley and Malone (2011) discussed their research that found that when a group includes more women, its collective intelligence rises. The findings were attributed to the traits needed to have a high-functioning team are often the same traits most associated with women leaders. For example, women have been found to engage in a more participative leadership style than men (Eagly & Johannessen-Schmidt, 2001; Melero, 2011). Women are also more likely than men to involve others in decision-making by asking for input throughout the process (S. Brown & Light, 2012). These traits help build an environment of trust in a team, leading to increased engagement and overall commitment.

Women's ability to build trust in a team may also reflect their tendency to be described as transformational leaders (Chandler, 2011; Jogulu & Wood, 2006). The value and outcomes of a transformational leadership style are well documented in the literature. One of these many benefits is that it is easier for transformational leaders to build trust in their teams, and that trust is shown to create an innovative atmosphere (Xie et al., 2018). With the evolving and increasing competitiveness in the higher education industry, leaders who can inspire innovation, or be innovative themselves, are invaluable.

Women leaders have a unique perspective and style that creates value for their institution and the industry. Airini et al. (2011) warned that not providing women with intentional access to development and advancement limits an institution's ability to utilize their skills and strengths to benefit the institution, ultimately reducing its

competitiveness and overall success. Perhaps more importantly, it raises the risk of losing them to another industry altogether.

Types of Institutions

To fully understand the complexity of leadership development experiences in higher education, it is important to understand the varying types of institutions that make up the higher education industry. Classifications are assigned to institutions based on several factors, including the size of the institution and the number of degrees awarded at each level. For doctoral universities, the level of research conducted is also considered with sub-categories of classification. The basic classifications are:

- Doctoral universities
- Master's colleges and universities
- Baccalaureate colleges
- Associate's colleges
- Special focus institutions
- Tribal colleges (Carnegie Classifications of Institutions of Higher Education, n.d.)

It is important to note that special focus institutions encompass a wide variety of needs, including but not limited to faith-based institutions, historically Black colleges and universities, arts and design schools and law schools. Special focus institutions are generally driven by a unique mission and vision based on a desire to meet the needs of that special focus. For example, a faith-based institution might integrate elements of its faith into the curriculum taught to the students. Historically Black colleges and

universities are institutions established before 1964 and founded with the principal mission of promoting the education of Black Americans.

Additionally, there are three primary sectors, or controls, of the industry in which institutions operate: public, private nonprofit, and private for-profit. Table 1 features information from the United States Department of Education, illustrating the number of 4-year institutions by sector in California.

Table 1

2021 IPED Reporting 4-Year Title IV Institutions in California

Institution type		%
Private nonprofit	145	58
Private for-profit	70	28
Public	34	14
Total	249	100

The different sectors are primarily distinguished by their financial models and how they are funded. Public institutions, typically state and community colleges, are 80% to 90% funded by public sources such as state and federal funds (Douglas, 2006). Private institutions operate primarily on private funding, although they often receive state and federal funds through student loans and other financial programs. They may also receive federal grants and contracts to subsidize research or other activity (Douglas, 2006). Private institutions exist as both for-profit and nonprofit. The distinguishing difference is that for-profit institutions distribute profits among stakeholders, whereas nonprofits reinvest profits into the institution in areas such as curriculum development, staffing, or additional student services.

It is important to note that although there is an extensive scope of types of institutions in the industry, with each exhibiting unique characteristics, the literature points to commonalities regarding leadership development. Among them are the general challenges associated with gendered expectations and barriers and their impact on leadership development.

Leadership Development in Higher Education

Despite the role higher education plays in formally developing future leaders, intentional leadership development has not been shown to be a high priority in the industry, regardless of gender. Due to this low priority, leaders in the industry often do not receive formal preparation before or after becoming leaders (Hempsall, 2014; Inman, 2007). Rather, they utilize more informal learning methods, with skills primarily learned on the job (Hempsall, 2014). This lack of priority in intentional development creates a risk of leaders not having the skills to assume leadership positions and fulfill their duties successfully.

Diversity and representation issues in leadership can also be traced to this lack of intentionality. Betts et al. (2009) posited that the current demographic makeup of leadership in the higher education industry is not keeping pace with the rapidly diversifying student population due to a lack of intentionality. Brossette (2021) furthered these findings by offering that even when professional development is provided, the quality and design of the programs can affect an institution's ability to diversify its leadership. This was particularly problematic for female leaders, indicating that professional development content is often not targeted toward the specific skills that are important for women who aspire to be leaders.

Further, this lack of intentionality can affect the desire for leaders to progress beyond mid-level roles into higher levels of leadership or aspire to be leaders at all (Garza & Eddy, 2008). It is possible that an institution, or the industry as a whole, is missing opportunities to benefit from these leaders if they opt out of pursuing higher-level leadership roles or never fully develop in their current position. A focus on the experiences of mid-level administrators may provide clues about these barriers and address this challenge.

Mid-Level Leadership Development in Higher Education

Leading from the middle is complex and demanding, requiring a combination of management and leadership skills (Inman, 2009). In the institutional hierarchy, mid-level administrators are typically located below senior leadership but above front-line supervisors. Due to this unique position, they are the link between the senior leadership's strategic plans and front-line staff's local knowledge (Clegg & McAuley, 2005). In this way, mid-level administrators are entrusted with successfully implementing critical organizational strategy. Given their size and position in the hierarchy, it is critically important they have the required skills and competencies to lead effectively.

Leading from the middle is not without its frustrations. Some of these frustrations may simply be due the nature of the middle position, such as having responsibility for implementing policies they did not have a voice in creating (Flanders, 2008; Rosser, 2000). However, other frustrations are more a result of institutional culture and decisions. Johnsrud et al. (2000) found that lack of career development and advancement opportunities were a common cause of frustration for mid-level administrators. Institutional decisions on budgetary considerations and priorities for funds exacerbated

these frustrations. Throughout the industry, minimal funds are often dedicated to the training and development of mid-level administrators (Filan & Seagren, 2003). This lack of funding, combined with the lack of intentionality, ultimately contributes to fewer learning opportunities, leaving mid-level administrators to find development opportunities independently.

To find these opportunities, studies indicate that mid-level administrators rely heavily on informal learning to develop and acquire leadership skills. Karavedas (2019) and Brunson (2020) conducted foundational studies on the use of informal learning in the leadership development of mid-level leaders in higher education. Karavedas (2019) discussed the importance of having a broad network of professional relationships from which to learn. Additionally, she found having access to and interactions with senior leaders and receiving feedback and positive affirmation regarding leadership potential helps build successful leaders. Brunson (2020) furthered these findings by including the critical nature of informal mentoring, observations, and networking in communities of practice. Through these informal channels, mid-level leaders attempt to build the skills to lead their teams successfully and support institutional goals.

However, it is important to note that these very activities described as critical in acquiring leadership skills are often reported as limited in terms of access for marginalized populations. These barriers were also discussed by Brunson (2020), whose findings suggested female mid-level administrators have different informal learning experiences than their male counterparts, including fewer opportunities and less access to develop their leadership skills. Essentially, female mid-level administrators report

experiencing barriers to the very activities needed to acquire the leadership skills required to be an effective leader.

Barriers to Informal Leadership Development of Women in Higher Education

Barriers due to gender are widely reported in conjunction with the experience of women in higher education. Bird (2011) described higher education institutions as structures with "complex systemic barriers to women's opportunities and advancement" (p. 203). She further suggested that the basic principles of work, the job evaluation process, and access to the social networks required to advance continue to advantage men on average more than women (Bird, 2011). Perhaps the biggest challenge to navigating these barriers is that many remain invisible and are difficult to address. These invisible rules often result in an environment where women report being held to a higher or different standard than their male counterparts (Airini et al., 2011; Canas et al., 2019; Jones-Goodwin, 2020).

Social networks are shown throughout the literature as playing a vital role in the informal learning process. These often take the form of developmental relationships and mentors specifically for female administrators. A great deal of value is placed on these distinct developmental relationships and their role in helping women navigate professional challenges (Longman et al., 2019). Women look to these relationships to provide professional development, guidance, and support on their career journey. However, a lack of access to mentors is commonly reported as a significant barrier to overcome in their professional development and career advancement (Ballinger, 2010; Canas et al., 2019; Davies & Healey, 2019; Harvey et al., 2009).

The cumulative effect of gender-based barriers can have a detrimental impact on the leadership capabilities and aspirations of female administrators. For some, they lead to feelings of disappointment and lost confidence, resulting in modified career aspirations (Madera, 2017). For others, the cumulative impact of gender-based barriers is even more detrimental. Rather than feel devalued by working in an unsupportive culture, they retreat and disengage from leadership entirely (Dahlvig & Longman, 2014). Either way, the result is a reduced number of effective female administrators contributing to the diversity of thought and leadership industrywide.

Informal Learning and Female Mid-Level Administrators in Higher Education

Leadership development of all administrators at every level in an institution is critical to the success of the institution. Female mid-level administrators are no exception. The body of literature on mid-level administrators in higher education and the critical role of informal learning is growing. However, less attention is paid to how women in this population use informal learning to acquire the skills needed to lead effectively. The studies that were found focus on the role and value of informal mentoring relationships (Hardy, 2019; Moscariello, 2015). Although these studies are critical to understanding the development of female administrators, they lack an overall scope of informal learning.

Statement of the Research Problem

Understanding the experiences of female mid-level administrators, how they navigate informal learning to develop as leaders, and the barriers they encounter is an important yet complicated topic. Yet without this understanding, there is a risk of missing developmental opportunities, resulting in the higher education industry failing to benefit from the diverse perspectives that women bring to the industry.

A review of the literature revealed an abundant body of literature highlighting women's experiences as leaders (Brossette, 2021; Dahlvig & Longman, 2014; Hankinson, 2013; Hardy, 2019; Jones-Goodwin, 2020; Lepkowski, 2009). These studies examined the many aspects that help or hinder their advancement to leadership roles. Many studies explore the specific gender barriers to learning encountered by women on their professional development path. For example, invisible rules (Airini et al., 2011; Canas et al., 2019), gender-based work assignments (Baltodano et al., 2012), lack of mentoring opportunities (Davies & Healey, 2019; Harvey et al., 2009), and the "good old boys" network (Ballinger, 2010; Glover, 2009). Although these significant studies explicated these experiences, they did little to address the question of how female mid-level administrators go about acquiring leadership skills.

Some literature has considered mid-level administrators in higher education. Researchers examined the frustrations of mid-level leaders (Flanders, 2008; Johnsrud & Rosser, 2000; Scott, 1975) and the lack of intentional leadership development (Garza & Eddy, 2008; Hempsall, 2014; Inman, 2009). This lack of intentionality creates the risk of leaders being ill-prepared to lead their teams or advance to higher levels of leadership. And although research has been completed on competencies needed to be successful in their role as mid-level leaders (Flanders, 2008), it stopped short of addressing how those skills are acquired.

A few recent studies have explored how mid-level administrators acquire leadership skills. Karavedas (2019) discussed the need for a broad network of professional relationships and their role in development. Brunson (2020) furthered this by addressing mid-level administrators' specific behaviors and actions in acquiring their

leadership skills. Through this research, the critical role of informal learning in the leadership development of mid-level administrators was firmly established. However, Brunson (2020) also found women have different experiences with informal learning than their male counterparts, including fewer opportunities and less access to develop their leadership skills. Although Karavedas (2019) and Brunson (2020) explored the leadership development of mid-level administrators and Brunson (2020) further explored the leadership development of marginalized populations in higher education, these studies did not explore the leadership development of women in the informal learning space.

Four research trends have been identified in the area of female leadership development in higher education. First, a large body of work has focused on the experiences of women as leaders (Ballinger, 2010; Baltodano et al., 2012; Brossette, 2021; Canas et al., 2019; Dahlvig & Longman, 2014; Davies & Healey, 2019; Glover, 2009; Hankinson, 2013; Hardy, 2019; Jones-Goodwin, 2020; Lepkowski, 2009). Next, research has been conducted and published on mid-level administrators in higher education (Flanders, 2008; Johnsrud & Rosser, 2000; Rosser, 2000; Scott, 1975) and more specifically, the lack of intentional leadership development (Garza & Eddy, 2008; Hempsall, 2014; Inman, 2009). Additional research has also been done on how mid-level administrators acquire the skills needed to lead (Brunson, 2020; Karavedas, 2019); however, very little is known about the intersection of these topics. These four trends in the literature are comprehensive in scope as individual trends. However, the convergence of these trends remains unexplored, thus pointing to a need for further investigation and a deeper understanding of the informal leadership development experiences of female mid-level administrators in private nonprofit higher education.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to identify and describe the informal leadership development experiences of female mid-level administrators in private nonprofit higher education.

Research Question

What are the informal leadership development experiences of female mid-level administrators in private nonprofit higher education?

Significance of the Problem

This study focused on the lived experiences of female mid-level administrators in private nonprofit higher education. It contributes to the current body of work by exploring their perceptions of their experiences using informal learning to develop as leaders. The results of this study are significant in the following four ways.

First, findings from this study extend the work of Brunson (2020), who identified the critical role of informal learning in developing mid-level leaders in private nonprofit higher education. In her study, Brunson showcased the frustrations of marginalized populations, specifically regarding how there are fewer opportunities and less access to develop their leadership skills. Although Brunson's work discussed the experiences of marginalized populations, she did not specifically focus on the female experience. The current study focuses on the leadership development of female mid-level leaders. Because women historically fall under the category of marginalized populations, findings from this study are significant because they can shed further light on those experiences and how they affect female mid-level administrators' ability to acquire the skills needed to lead.

Second, Karavedas (2019) noted that a study examining leadership skill development among mid-level leaders from the perspective of gender could further inform her study and future leadership studies. Although Karavedas (2019) looked at how participation in a leadership development institute supports the development of leadership skills, she did not look specifically at the female experience in her study. This current study explored the informal leadership development experiences of female administrators. As such, findings from this study extend the work of Karavedas by providing a new dimension of the female experience.

Third, findings from this study extend the work of Hardy (2019), who explored the personal, professional, and organizational challenges of female mid-level leaders at an urban community college. Advancing this body of work, by focusing on private nonprofit institutions, the current study provides a broader understanding of these experiences across the industry. Furthering this research is significant because these experiences often contribute to the lack of access to professional development experienced by female administrators. A more comprehensive understanding of these experiences would allow for comparisons across types of institutions and the development of industrywide initiatives and programs. Additionally, this study can further inform female mid-level administrators on barriers they can expect to encounter along their journey and the various pathways identified to overcome them.

Last, institutions need to be more intentional about creating professional development opportunities specific to the needs of women (Brossette, 2021). Although studies have focused on what skills are needed, little is known about the unique experiences of women in acquiring these skills. This current study adds to the body of

literature by informing institutions about the experiences of female mid-level administrators and how they acquire the skills needed to lead. This can provide beneficial data to institutions in designing intentional programming and opportunities unique to the development of female leaders. Further, this study can inform institutions by providing critical context to help guide decisions on creating intentional development opportunities for female mid-level administrators.

Definitions

This section provides definitions of the relevant terms in this study. The definitions provided have been used in this context throughout the entire study.

Espoused Theory/Theory in Use. Espoused theory refers to the way one describes how they operate or their belief system. Theories-in-use is what one actually does in practice or how one actually behaves.

Formal Learning. Formal learning is defined as intentional learning with structured learning objectives and learning time offered through an organization, college, or university. Examples include degree programs, certificates, and certifications.

Informal Learning. Informal learning refers to unstructured learning that occurs outside of a formal learning environment and is learner-driven. Examples include mentoring relationships, learning from peers, and other forms of communities of practice.

Leadership Development. Leadership development is defined as activities related to improving the skills, competence, and confidence of both leaders and those aspiring to be leaders.

Leadership Skills. Leadership skills are the specific strengths and abilities needed to be an effective leader.

Mentoring. Many definitions of mentoring exist in the literature. A common definition is a relationship between a senior and junior employee for the purpose of the junior employee's learning and development. For this study, both formal and informal mentoring are considered. Formal mentors are those that exist in a structured environment, generally initiated and managed by an organization. Informal mentors are those in spontaneous relationships determined and defined by the needs of the participants in the relationship.

Mid-Level Administrator. The definition of a mid-level administrator can vary among institutions. For this study, mid-level administrators are defined as leaders below the senior level of an institution. Examples of titles are manager, director, dean, or associate dean.

Higher Education Institution or Industry. For this study, higher education institutions are defined as postsecondary educational institutions that award an academic degree.

Private Nonprofit University. For this study, private nonprofit universities are defined as Title IV institutions that grant 4-year undergraduate and graduate degrees, carry the designation of private nonprofit, and are not part of a state college or university system.

Senior Leader. The definition of a senior leader can vary among institutions. For this study, it includes the roles of executive vice-chancellor, provost, chancellor, and president.

Delimitations

Delimitations are the boundaries of the study and how the scope is narrowed (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). This study was limited to female mid-level administrators employed at California private nonprofit universities. Further, they must have been in a leadership role for a minimum of 3 years and in the industry for a minimum of 5 years.

Organization of the Study

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter I provided an introduction to the study, background information, problem statement, significance of the problem, definition of terms, and delimitations of the study. Chapter II provides a comprehensive review of the literature on women in the workforce, leadership development, mid-level administrators, and the experiences specific to women. Chapter III focuses on the methodology of the study, including the research design, population, sample, sampling procedure, and the methods used to collect data. Chapter IV examines the study's findings, including a detailed analysis of the data collected. Chapter V provides the researcher's interpretations of the findings, implications for action, and recommendations for future study.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter begins with an overview of women in the workforce. It examines their role from a historical perspective, including legislation targeting workplace equity. Next, it examines the perspective of women as incongruous leaders. Background information is provided on role congruity, what it means to display agentic or communal behaviors, and the impact of not displaying the behavior deemed aligned with one's gender. A brief overview of how this appears in higher education is offered, along with an overview of the types of higher education institutions to provide context for the study. An extensive review of types of leadership development is provided, with a focus on informal learning development. The critical role of mentoring is covered, including the benefits of mentoring and the unique aspects, benefits, and challenges women may encounter in pursuing these developmental relationships. Peer relationships are also discussed, and the purpose and outcomes are compared to those of mentoring.

This chapter then reviews leadership development specific to the higher education industry and the state of diversity. Next, it explores leadership development relevant to women in higher education. The complex nature of this topic is explored through a developmental model and the role of institutional culture, developmental programs, and personal choice play in their development. Finally, this chapter discusses the role of the mid-level administrators and the skills required to lead from the middle successfully. The discussion includes the strategies mid-level administrators use to acquire these skills. The chapter concludes with an exploration of where these strategies collide with the challenges associated with being a female leader discussed throughout the chapter.

Women in the Workforce

This study focuses on female mid-level administrators' informal leadership development experiences in private nonprofit higher education. To gain a more in-depth understanding of this experience, it is important to briefly explore the history of women in the workforce, including how world events, economics, societal views, and legislation have guided the path and participation of women in the workforce throughout the last century.

Brief History of Women in the Workforce

Traditional norms for women working began changing in the early 1900s. Around 1900, less than 5.6% of married women worked outside the home (Webb, 2010). However, the start of two World Wars during the 1900s would shift this balance, with an influx of women entering the workforce as men left their roles to fight in the war. During World War II, 6.5 million women enter the workforce between 1942 and 1945 (Webb, 2010). This growth was supported and encouraged by society with images such as those of Rosie the Riveter, encouraging women to support the war effort by joining the workforce and assuming jobs traditionally held by men. Women responded to the call, and by 1944, they held one-third of all manufacturing jobs (American Social History Project, 2022). However, at the conclusion of both wars, the number of women entering and occupying positions in the workforce sharply decreased. Men returned home and resumed the positions that the women had held during wartime.

Societal views have also historically maintained a strong influence on the participation and role of women in the workforce and the positions they occupy. Following an increase in women enrolling in college to pursue an education, the 1920s

saw educated women enter the workforce and pursue professional-level careers. Although they were technically performing professional-level roles, the careers they pursued during this time were mostly those that society deemed acceptable for women, such as teaching, nursing, and social work (Webb, 2010). Eventually, this trend of women entering the workforce and being accepted societally began to reverse with the economic impact of the Great Depression in 1929. As unemployment rose, a negative perception of women in the workforce increased because women were seen as taking jobs from men (Parker, 2015). These perceptions and views were reinforced through ideas such as those by Maryna Farnham, a psychiatrist and coauthor of the 1947 book *Modern Women: The Lost Sex*. Farnham argued women must leave the workforce or their mental health would be in jeopardy (Webb, 2010). Despite women's contributions to the workforce, societal views remained rooted in the idea that they belonged at home.

Despite these challenges related to societal norms, the experience of entering the workforce during the World Wars had forever altered the course of women in the workforce. They had experienced what it was like to work and many did not want to return to how things had been. Thus, although workforce participation declined following the end of World War II, by the early 1950's, it had begun to climb again and soon surpassed wartime levels (Herz & Wootton, 1995). The start of the feminist movement in the early 1960's aligned with the increased desires of women to enter the workforce. Women saw entering the workforce as a way to increase their autonomy and find personal satisfaction outside the home (Herz & Wootton, 1995). As a result, their desire for equal access to employment continued to grow.

The civil rights movement in the 1960s saw societal views continue to be challenged and the passage of legislation to support equal treatment of women in the workforce. In 1961, President John F. Kennedy established the Commission on the Status of Women, requesting, among other things, an examination of employment policies affecting women (Harvard Radcliffe Institute, n.d.). Findings, published in 1963, reported extensive discrimination against women and included recommendations for resolution. Perhaps most notably, the Equal Pay Act of 1963, enacted to prohibit disparities in pay between men and women holding the same job, grew out of these recommendations (Lewis, 2020). In 1964, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act was enacted, prohibiting employment discrimination, including in compensation, based on race, color, religion, sex, and national origin (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, n.d.a.). In 1972, two critical pieces of legislation were enacted supporting the needs of women in higher education. Title VII was amended to prohibit discrimination in public and private education institutions, and Title IX extended prohibitions of discrimination in higher education employment based on gender, color, religion, or race (Hankinson, 2013). Although challenges would remain for women regarding entering the workforce, legislation began to support the idea that they had the same right to be there as their male counterparts.

In 2009, with women still being paid only 77 cents on the dollar relative to men, President Barack Obama signed the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act as his first piece of substantive legislation as President (National Women's Law Center, 2013). The act sent a clear signal of renewed interest in gender equity in the workforce. The act allowed an employee to sue for wage discrimination, overturning previous legislation by removing

restricted time periods for filing complaints and allowing for retroactive lawsuits. By removing the restrictive time periods, the act took aim at various systemic issues. These issues included job classifications, career ladder or other non-competitive promotion denials, tenure denials, and failure to respond to requests for raises (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, n.d.b). Yet, although legislation continues to be written and passed to support women's equality in the workforce, women continued to encounter bias and gender barriers. Acknowledging this, in 2021, the Biden Administration created the first national strategy on gender equity and equality, based on the belief that gender equity and equality are both a moral and strategic imperative (Blinkin, 2021).

Women in Higher Education

The role of women in higher education dates to the 1800s and the creation of women's colleges. In response to the increasing desire of women to pursue higher education, 50 women's colleges were founded between 1836 and 1875 (Parker, 2015). These women's colleges not only provided an educational opportunity for female students but also began to open the door for female faculty members. During this time, women were prohibited from holding faculty positions in men's colleges; however, they could be recruited to teach and lead at women's colleges (Parker, 2015). This opportunity provided a pathway for women to pursue professional academic positions in higher education. By 1892, enough women had entered co-ed colleges that the dean of women was created as the first female administrative position to address the specific needs of the female faculty and growing female student population (Parker, 2015). Marion Talbot, one of the first deans of women and a pioneer in the role, argued that women were as intellectually capable as men yet were also unique and required a unique community

(Nidiffer, 1998). The role was significant because it most commonly reported directly to the university president, making it a senior-level administrative position in a world dominated by men. However, over time, the position gradually moved from a senior-level administrator to a mid-level administrator. This meant the position often moved from reporting to the president to reporting to the dean of student affairs or similar office, most often a position held by a man (Nidiffer, 1998). By the 1970s, the position had largely been removed from most universities, typically merging with another position in student affairs, thus ending the first senior-level position dedicated to the unique needs of women in higher education.

Since 1892, women have made strides in higher education as students and administrators. Although the number of female administrators has grown in the higher education industry, to understand their current status, it is important first to understand the positions and levels they occupy. For example, although women are now represented in all levels of the faculty, representation in those roles decreases with progression in rank. An example is the representation of women among full-time tenure-track faculty members. Women comprise 50% of assistant professors, yet only 32.5% of full professors (American Association of University Professors, 2020). This disparity grows in male-dominated fields such as engineering, in which the American Association of University Women (n.d.) reported women comprise only 15% of tenured faculty.

Although progress has been made at the senior leader level, with 30% of college presidents now women (American Council on Education, 2021), many women in higher education leadership remain clustered at the mid-level administrator rank. Although women may be represented in mid-level leadership positions, a closer examination

reveals these positions are not evenly distributed throughout the institution. In 2019, the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources published a report documenting the percentage of women occupying the position of dean by academic department. They represented 55% of deans of continuing education, 52% of deans of students, and 63% of deans of instruction, highlighting the growing number of women occupying the position. However, women represented only 23% of deans of medicine, 21% of deans of engineering, and 11% of deans of agriculture (Whitford, 2020). These disparities highlight the influence of gender alignment to roles and functions.

The Glass Ceiling

The *glass ceiling* is a term used to explain the inability of many women to advance beyond a certain level in their careers and professions, regardless of their qualifications or achievements (Purcell et al., 2010). It is considered a glass ceiling because the barriers, like glass, are not visible and women are often unaware of their existence until they hit barrier. The Department of Labor defines the glass ceiling as "artificial or invisible barriers based on an attitudinal or organizational bias that prevent otherwise qualified women and people of color from advancing upward in their organization" (Department of Labor, 1991, p. 1). In 1995, The Federal Glass Ceiling Commission was formed to explore the phenomenon in the business sector and described the barriers as fitting into three classes: societal, internal structural, and government barriers (Jackson & O'Callaghan, 2009). And although the report focused exclusively on the business sector, the literature points to the glass ceiling as a unique form of discrimination that also exists in the higher education sector.

In their study *Measuring Glass Ceiling Effects in Higher Education,* Jackson et al. (2014) discuss the importance of distinguishing between general gender inequities and the glass ceiling in higher education. Although the glass ceiling is a form of gender inequity, it is a distinct form with unique effects. Jackson et al. (2014) outlined four descriptors to ensure effects are attributed to the glass ceiling:

> First, a glass ceiling represents a gender or racial difference that is not explained by other job-relevant characteristics of the employee; second, a glass ceiling is also associated with greater disparities at higher levels of an outcome rather than lower levels; third, glass ceiling effects reside in the opportunities for advancement in higher levels, not merely in the proportion of individuals currently at those higher levels; and lastly, disparities in advancement and opportunity must increase over the course of a career. (p. 8)

The effects of the glass ceiling can also be seen in the career trajectories of women throughout the higher education industry. They are most apparent when a woman is denied a promotion to a higher-level position after many years of accumulated disadvantage. However, as Madera (2017) discovered in her research *Pursuing leadership positions in higher education: A phenomenological exploration of female administrators' experiences with gender inequality,* it has also been shown to affect a woman's career trajectory earlier in her career, with women being influenced to the point of modifying their career aspirations.

Recent literature has begun to challenge the idea of a glass ceiling, pointing to the increasing success of women rising to senior levels of leadership across industries. Eagly and Carli (2007) speculated that a glass ceiling is an inaccurate description because it

represents an absolute barrier at a single point in the hierarchy. Rather, women's experiences are complex and changing, and they experience gender barriers from the moment they enter the workforce. Thus, the description of a labyrinth, where women must carefully navigate multiple barriers to leadership and exert extra effort as opposed to the relatively straight route that their male counterparts travel, is a more accurate description of the female experience.

The Leaky Pipeline

On the one hand, even as women face challenges related to the glass ceiling, another important dynamic of women in the workplace relates to the various reasons they may leave the profession and in essence, drop out of the leadership pipeline. The leaky pipeline refers to the phenomenon in which although women enter the workforce at the same rate as their male counterparts, something happens along the way that removes them from this pipeline. Currently, women outpace men in degree attainment in all levels of degree programs (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019), indicating that women are well qualified when they enter the workforce. However, something happens along the way that prevents them from attaining senior levels of leadership at the same rate as their male counterparts.

Research has indicated that women voluntarily leave the leadership pipeline 2 or 4 times faster than their male counterparts once they have reached mid-career, manager or senior manager levels (Gender Advisory Council, 2008). Reasons for this vary across the literature, including gender inequities, organizational culture, and personal choice, among many others. However, the common theme is that the experiences and challenges women

encounter in the labyrinth throughout their career are distinct and result in them leaving the leadership pipeline.

Women as Incongruous Leaders

The perception of women as leaders and how they navigate their experiences is a complex subject. Gendered expectations, social roles, and stereotypes combine to create an experience unique from their male counterparts and make how and why women are perceived as leaders a complicated topic. When considering how women acquire skills and learn to lead, it is essential to understand the role of gender in their experience and the culture in which they operate.

Extensive literature can be found describing women as leaders and how their characteristics are similar to or differ from male leaders. As a gendered discussion, the literature typically has described these differences through the lens of agentic and communal behaviors. In their study, on the leadership styles of women and men, Eagly and Johannessen-Schmidt (2001) provided common definitions for these attributes. Agentic attributes, primarily associated with men, are described as the tendency to be assertive, controlling, and confident. Communal attributes, which are mainly associated with women, are described as being helpful, interpersonally sensitive, and gentle with a concern for the welfare of people (Eagly & Johannessen-Schmidt, 2001). The challenge these gender roles create for female leaders is that the qualities perceived as being associated with effective leadership are more often associated with agentic behaviors. This perception can create misalignment or incongruity when women, who are expected to display communal attributes, assume roles associated with agentic attributes.

Role congruity theory, proposed by Eagly and Karuau (2002), describes the prejudice a female leader can experience when this incongruity occurs between perceived gender roles and attributes that are believed to be required for success. They described this prejudice as having the ability to take two forms: a less favorable evaluation of a women's potential to be a leader and a less favorable evaluation of their actual leadership skills. Because agentic behaviors are associated with being a strong and successful leader, it is considered easier for men to demonstrate competence and be seen as either existing or emerging leaders. By contrast, when women adopt the same agentic behaviors, they are seen as violating the standard or expectations of their gender, resulting in being unfavorably evaluated or judged (Eagly & Karau, 2002). This puts women into what is described as the double bind.

Studies have shown that highly communal women are often seen as weak or ineffective leaders. However, they may be considered cold or difficult when they display high levels of agentic characteristics. This tension between balancing the communal qualities preferred in women with the predominately agentic behaviors expected in leaders is considered the double bind (Eagly, 2007). Published literature is abundant on the role of the double bind in the careers and experiences of women in leadership (Hannum et al., 2015; Kraft et al., 2020; Madera, 2017). Outcomes are described as double standards and the basis for what is considered a gendered organizational culture.

It is important to note that research on gender expectations, roles, and leadership has pointed to the idea that the level of incongruity and impact on experience depends on many factors. These include the actual leadership role in question and the level to which those in the environment subscribe to traditional gender roles, among others. This same

concept applies to the industries in which they work. Eagly (2007) highlighted this through her meta-analysis of research on perceptions of effectiveness by gender. The level at which women were considered effective leaders was directly related to the number of men or other masculinized roles in the environment. Thus, they were judged to be substantially less effective than men in areas such as the military but more effective in educational and social services settings. This may explain why more women are seen at higher leadership levels in areas such as nursing and human resources. The skills required to be effective in these roles, such as empathy and interpersonal relationships, align with the communal expectations of women.

Higher Education

Higher education in general is seen as a primarily traditional gendered industry. The literature discussing leadership from a gendered perspective supports the notion that the leadership characteristics in higher education are associated with masculine traits (Chelf, 2018). However, the industry is large, with a wide range of types and sizes of institutions spread over a vast geographic area. Thus, the many different aspects that contribute to levels of role incongruity are seen throughout the industry, creating various experiences and degrees of discrimination or bias due to this incongruity. For example, what is acceptable gender behavior at a small liberal arts college may differ at a large research institution heavily steeped in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics disciplines (Brower et al., 2019). However, regardless of how minimal or extensive the impact of the incongruity, the outcomes still manifest a different experience for women compared to their male counterparts.

Types of Institutions

To fully understand female leadership development experiences in higher education, it is important to understand the varying types of postsecondary institutions that make up the higher education industry. Although experiences of female leaders may take fairly consistent forms across the different types of institutions, it is still important to understand the different environments in which they occur.

The higher education field is vast, with many types of institutions serving varying student populations; however, this literature review focuses on those considered Title IV institutions. The designation of a Title IV school refers to institutions that meet the terms of the U.S. Department of Education to participate in any Title IV federal student financial assistance programs. During the 2019–20 school year, 3,982 degree-granting Title IV postsecondary institutions operated throughout the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). Further, they are categorized as being either 2-year or 4-year degree-granting institutions.

Two-Year Institutions

The U.S. Department of Education defines 2-year institutions as postsecondary institutions that offer programs of at least 2 years but less than 4 years (Goan & Cunningham, 2007). These are commonly referred to as community colleges or junior colleges, depending on whether they operate in the public or private sector.

The 2-year institutions' instructional mission tends to focus on career-oriented programs at both the associate degree and certificate level and preparing students to transfer to 4-year institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). This mission, combined with being considered largely open access, meaning all students who

apply are admitted, is reflective of their student population. Although serving a broad demographic, they also serve a large percentage of marginalized students, including nontraditional learners and students of color (Howard & Gagliardi, 2018). This open access and sense of social equality may account for the difference in women serving in senior leadership positions. Compared to the national average of 30% of college presidents being women, women represent 36% of the presidents at associate-level institutions, the highest of all institution types (American Council on Education, 2017).

Four-Year Institutions

Postsecondary institutions that grant bachelor's degrees or higher are considered 4-year institutions. These institutions tend to have broad programmatic offerings at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. These can vary significantly in size and scope, from small liberal arts colleges to large research-based institutions. Equally broad are the student populations they serve. These differences create varying levels of barriers and obstacles for women in the workplace. Potential outcomes of these differences may be evidenced by the extent to which women have acquired the position of president across these types. As noted previously, 36% of associate-level institutions have female presidents. This number falls to 28% for the baccalaureate level, 29% at the master's level, and the lowest for doctorate-granting institutions at 22% (American Council on Education, 2017).

Types of Leadership Development

Leadership development is generally defined as activities related to improving the skills, competence, and confidence of both leaders and those aspiring to be leaders. These

activities can occur in a variety of settings and take numerous forms. They can be categorized into two types of leadership development: formal and informal.

Formal Leadership Development

Formal learning occurs "as a result of experiences in an education or training institution, with structured learning objectives, learning time and support which leads to certification. Formal learning is intentional from both the learner's and institutions perspective" (Rogers, 2014, p. 8). Formal development programs play an important role in providing the theoretical foundations of leadership and can help build credibility in the workforce. Women, in particular, have long pursued formal education as an equalizer, utilizing it as evidence of the requisite skills for promotion. Additionally, it can provide the credentials often needed to qualify for leadership roles. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (n.d.), employment in positions classified as management largely require at least a bachelor's degree, with some requiring a master's degree. The acquisition of formal education becomes the entry point, or price of admission, to higher-level positions.

However, limitations exist with this type of learning when it comes to the practical and meaningful application of concepts learned. It is not enough to have the credentials if one cannot apply what is learned. As Inman (2009) found, the concepts learned are most effective and make practical sense when they can be applied to the context in which the leader is to lead. Brunson (2020) noted similar findings in that leaders could better understand these theories and their applications when they entered the program with leadership experience. Therefore, although formal leadership

development provides necessary foundational support, there are limitations to the skill levels they can deliver.

Degree Programs

Perhaps the most widely accepted way of acquiring and demonstrating leadership skills is through formal degree programs offered at higher education institutions. These include various degree programs at various levels, including master's or doctoral degree programs. These degree programs typically focus on areas such as organizational leadership or leadership development. However, leadership classes and leadership theory are often found in the requirements of a wide variety of degree programs. By embedding leadership courses into the requirements for graduation of a vast number of degrees, the industry acknowledges the need for leadership skills across all sectors.

Certificates

Certificates offer an additional avenue to leadership development in a formal, shorter, and more direct environment than a degree program. Many higher education institutions offer these certificates at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. These are often targeted toward working adult learners and are explicitly designed to close a skills gap for those returning to school. Given this purpose, certificate programs are typically narrow in focus and target specialized skills needed in a specific area or industry. Additionally, many are offered virtually, with less restrictive admission requirements, to reach a larger and more inclusive audience. For example, Cornell University offers eCornell, an external education unit offering online certificate programs on leadership and management. The certificate programs involve approximately four to six courses each. Other examples include Harvard Professional Development Program

Certificates of Leadership Excellence and the University of Pennsylvania's Leadership and Management Certificate Program.

Specialized Development Programs

Other formal leadership development programs exist outside of the higher education classroom and can be attached to associations or professional development groups. These structured programs offer targeted programming for a specific demographic or the development of a particular skillset. Some groups, such as the Higher Education Resource Services, offer programming targeted toward marginalized populations. These types of specialized programs orient content to assist marginalized populations in overcoming challenges specific to them (León & Nevarez, 2007). For example, the Higher Education Resource Services Leadership Institute is a leadership development program for women in higher education to develop skills related to managing and leading a successful change process.

Informal Leadership Development

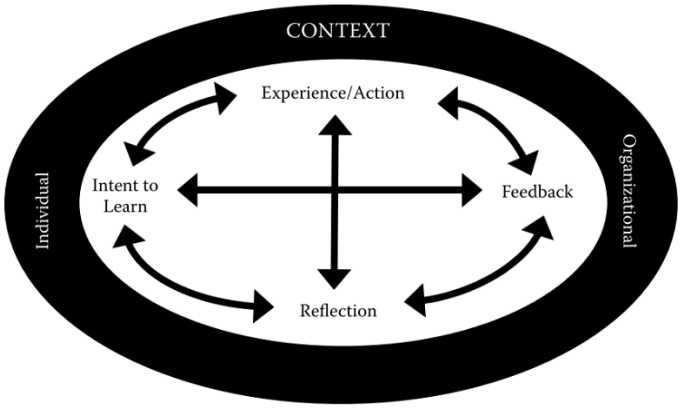
In contrast to formal learning, in which learning is structured, informal learning is generally described as unstructured, experiential, and learner driven, or focused on the specific needs of the individual. Informal learning is an additional essential component of developing leadership skills outside of a formal classroom experience. Ellinger (2005) further described informal learning as resulting from natural opportunities that arise in an individual's working life. When these opportunities arise, individuals use informal learning to acquire the skills or information needed to successfully move through the opportunity.

In their study *Facilitating informal learning at work,* Moore and Klein (2019) discussed the implications of informal learning arising from an individual's working life. An individual engaged in any kind of work activity will continuously encounter new situations requiring the acquisition of additional knowledge or skills throughout the day. They posited that this natural incorporation allows for more meaningful and permanent learning than formal learning, in which a direct connection to the concept learned may be lost. As a learner, this immediate and hands-on approach with informal learning increases the understanding and application of what they learned (Moore & Klein, 2019). Thus, from a learning and development standpoint, allowing for and cultivating effective informal learning is critical to an organization's day-to-day functions and overall performance.

Due to being unstructured and spontaneous, often with no clear beginning or end, informal learning takes on a dynamic structure rather than a linear one typically seen in formal learning. As a result, Tannenbaum (2010) offered a dynamic model as a training model for informal learning (see Figure 1). The model utilizes four informal learning components to represent the informal learning process: (a) intent to learn, improve, and develop, whereby the individual recognizes the intent to acquire knowledge; (b) expertise and action, whereby the individual engages in a learning activity; (c) feedback received related to the event or action; and (d) reflection, whereby the participant engages in thoughtful consideration of their experience.

Figure 1

Dynamic Model of Informal Learning



Learners can enter the learning process at any point in the model and experience one, several, or all components. The model implies that informal learning can occur in any sequence, depending on the needs and situation of the learner. However, each component serves its own purpose and outcome. Intent recognizes the learner's awareness; without it, the learner may not recognize a learning opportunity. Experience and action refers to hands-on experience or learning through doing, allowing the learner an opportunity to ensure they have acquired or learned the skill. Feedback provides the opportunity to gain perspective from others. And finally, reflection offers the space to internalize what was learned and make connections to everyday situations where the knowledge can be applied. Therefore, although informal learning can occur in any sequence, to be most effective, all four components should be experienced by the individual (Tannenbaum, 2010).

Mentoring

Mentoring is one of the most common pathways by which leaders develop skills through informal learning. Throughout the literature, multiple definitions of mentoring

can be found. However, the Association for Talent Development (n.d.) provides a common definition for mentoring as a "reciprocal and collaborative at-will relationship that most often occurs between a senior and junior employee for the purpose of the mentee's growth, learning, and career development" (para. 1). It is an extremely common relationship and often seen as a vital component of an individual's career growth and professional development.

Many outcomes derive from mentorships and reasons why individuals pursue and maintain the relationship, both formally and informally. In her seminal study, Kram (1983) described these functions of mentoring as being either career related or psychosocial. Mentoring goes beyond simply teaching and has the ability, through these two functions, to significantly enhance career development and advancement. In his study, Noe (1988) reported findings that further support the idea of the two functions of mentoring and their role in development.

Career-related functions involve areas such as sponsorship, coaching, exposure, visibility, protection, and providing ideal work assignments (Kram, 1983). These activities typically directly relate to a mentee's opportunity and development toward career advancement. A mentor may sponsor a mentee by recommending them for a promotion or nominating them for an award. Visibility can be created when the mentor creates opportunities for the mentee to interact with more senior individuals or decision makers, removing access barriers for others. Protection can also be an essential aspect of career advancement. In the event the mentee errs or missteps, the mentor can step in and protect the mentee from potential fallout.

Psychosocial functions are described as demonstrating role-modeling behavior, counseling, and other activities that influence the mentee's overall self-confidence and competence (Kram, 1983). These functions further enhance an individual's sense of competence, self-image, and overall effectiveness as a manager (Noe, 1988). Mentors who provide these functions often help a mentee understand the social structures of an organization and how to navigate political dynamics. They may also offer more personal guidance, such as balancing work and family, which can be especially important for women in the workplace.

Though differing in their purpose and potential outcomes, career and psychosocial functions of mentoring aim to improve the mentee's overall career trajectory, providing a combination of learning with career and personal development. Ideally, a mentor would provide both functions to a mentee. However, the literature indicates that individuals often need to piece together these attributes through multiple mentoring relationships (Gersick & Kram, 2002; Searby et al., 2015). Essentially, they receive various aspects of their career and psychosocial functions from different mentors throughout their career paths, often through both formal and informal mentors.

Formal Mentoring. Formal mentoring programs exist in organizations to provide and support organized and structured professional development. These programs are generally initiated through an organizational program that connects or assigns mentees to mentors, creating a formal relationship managed and sanctioned by the organization (Chao et al., 1992). Additionally, formal mentoring relationships generally last for a specified amount of time (Baugh & Fagenson-Eland, 2007). These programs can be designed as a way to support or resolve some kind of organizational need, with outcomes

intended to benefit both the mentee and the organization as a whole. For example, they can be used as part of succession planning where a more senior member works with a junior member on leadership development, so they are equipped with the requisite skills to advance into senior-level roles in the future. In this regard, the junior member benefits by gaining skills required for career advancement, whereas the organization benefits by having prepared leaders in the advancement pipeline.

Informal Mentoring. Informal mentor relationships are spontaneous relationships that are "not managed, structured, nor formally recognized by the organization" (Chao et al., 1992, p. 620). Participants in informal mentor relationships chose each other with no obligation to continue the relationship beyond what is determined by the participants. Contrary to formal mentoring relationships, the terms of the relationship are not defined regarding the length of time, frequency of meetings, or topics discussed. However, as Baugh and Fagenson-Eland (2007) pointed out, although the relationship may appear casual to an outside viewer, it is more likely that members of the dyad have simply established their own norms to guide the relationship.

The formation of the informal relationship also differs from formal ones in the sense they are often more organic in nature. This organic nature contributes to the significance of how the participant sees the value of the relationship. Hardy (2019) found it mattered less whether the relationship was formal or informal in nature, as long as it was formed organically and not forced. Brunson (2020) furthered the significance of the organic formation and possibly an explanation for why the value was placed so high. These relationships often form based on the mentee's ongoing and changing leadership needs. The concept of not being bound by time or topic allows the specific developmental

needs of the mentee to be addressed as needed. In this way, the mentee can fill in knowledge gaps in an ongoing and more meaningful way because they are specific to situations the mentee encounters in their organization (Brunson, 2020).

Beyond the terms of the relationship, informal mentoring may also affect the commitment or level of engagement seen by the mentor. Chao et al. (1992) found that informal mentor relationships are more often formed based on similarity of goals and interests and can be based on work or nonwork issues. Because these relationships are by choice and not forced, the informal mentor may be more engaged in helping advance the mentee's career. The mentor may be more inclined to assist with career-related functions because they have identified the mentee's talent or skills on their own and choose to help further them. In contrast, in formal relationships in which the mentor and mentee are assigned, the mentor may not be willing to advocate on the mentee's behalf for fear of how it may reflect on them if the mentee does not meet expectations. Holt et al. (2016) further suggested that individuals seek out informal mentors specifically due to a formal mentor not providing the level of career-related functions desired by the mentee.

Importance to Women. The body of literature on informal mentoring strongly indicates the importance of informal mentors for women who seek mentoring relationships as a means of informal learning. Women have many reasons to seek informal mentors, with a common suggestion being the lack of formal mentoring options. In an international study of women, Duffy (2008) found that only 36% of women had been mentored as part of a formal program. Women in the United States were more likely to find mentors through informal means than women from other countries. This same concept appears to hold true in the higher education industry, with Dunbar and

Kinnersley (2011) finding that female administrators in higher education reported finding their most significant mentoring relationships through informal means. In their 2015 study on women in higher education, Searby et al. reported none of the women in their study mentioned the opportunity to participate in a formal mentoring program. Instead, they found diverse perspectives and multiple mentors through informal experiences. The importance of informal mentoring for the leadership development of women is evident and raises the question of the impact on their overall development as leaders when they have limited access to these types of relationships.

Benefits of Mentoring

The benefits of mentoring for career and leadership development and its impact on advancement are well documented in the literature. It is often presented as one of the most critical elements, with benefits extending beyond simply learning and development. Those who have successful mentoring relationships early in their career have reported higher salaries, faster promotions, and firmer career plans (Wright & Wright, 1987). Additionally, effective mentoring has been associated with an increase in overall job satisfaction (Duffy, 2008; Holt et al., 2016). Benefits reach beyond the mentee and create positive outcomes for the organization as well. These can be seen through employees' increased commitment and productivity and decreased turnover (Knippelmeyer & Torraco, 2017). Thus, mentoring can create a mutually beneficial relationship between the outcomes for the mentee and the institution.

Benefits to Women. Mentors also play an important role in developing women leaders in higher education, providing career-related and psychosocial functions. In her study of female presidents, T. M. Brown (2005) found that more than three fourths of

female presidents had a primary mentor who assisted them in achieving their position either directly or indirectly. This assistance can take many forms, including helping women navigate gender barriers that are often perceived in the workplace. For example, they can increase availability and access to needed networks (Glover, 2009). In their study of women and how they achieved leadership positions, Schipani et al. (2008) discussed how a mentor with higher levels of power could lend legitimacy to an individual, providing reflective power to the mentee. Although a woman may not have been seen as a leader or with the requisite skills on her own accord, the mentor's approval provides this level of legitimacy.

However, the decision to seek a mentor relationship goes beyond opportunities for career advancement and promotion and often serves a more personal intent. Moscariello (2015) found women sought mentors for the softer skills of guidance and counsel. Searby et al. (2015) noted similar findings of women seeking mentor relationships for help with career skills and identifying and understanding diverse perspectives. Effective mentor relationships have also been shown to increase the female mentee's self-confidence (Moscariello, 2015; Schott, 2004). Increased self-confidence contributes to the needed belief system that they have the abilities and skills required to achieve their career goals.

Female Mentors. Extensive literature points to the unique barriers presented by the lack of mentoring opportunities for women leaders, notably the lack of access to other women as mentors, particularly at the senior levels (Ballinger, 2010; Canas et al., 2019). Although men are shown to provide a high degree of value to women's career progression as mentors (Block & Tietjen-Smith, 2016; Ramaswami et al., 2010), there are specific benefits provided when women have the opportunity to learn and be mentored by

other women. These benefits are typically psychosocial, such as role-modeling behaviors of how to successfully navigate a leadership role from a woman's perspective (Block & Tietjen-Smith, 2016; Hannum et al., 2015; Longman et al., 2019). For example, women often find themselves trying to balance work and home responsibilities, and female mentors are often looked to for guidance on successfully balancing these roles. For women working in more male-dominated industries, having female mentors not only provides role-modeling behavior for navigating the male-dominated environment but also inspires and encourages women to pursue what might be perceived as nontraditional career paths in these industries (Bradshaw, 2021). Without access to women as mentors, they are often left to navigate these challenges on their own.

Peer Learning

In their article on peer mentoring relationships and career development, Kram and Isabella (1985) explored informal learning through the lens of peer relationships in the workplace. The results of their study point to the critical nature of peer relationships in career development and the different roles they play at various stages throughout a career. They offered the perspective that these relationships provide a level of exchange, equality, and empathy that offers unique developmental opportunities not found in traditional mentoring relationships. Figure 2 offers a comparison of peer and mentoring relationships.

Figure 2

Developmental Functions: Comparison of Mentoring and Peer Relationships

Mentoring Relationships	Peer Relationships
Career-enhancing functions • Sponsorship • Coaching • Exposure and visibility • Protection • Challenging work assignments	**Career-enhancing functions** • Information sharing • Career strategizing • Job-related feedback
Psychosocial functions • Acceptance and confirmation • Counseling • Role modeling • Friendship	**Psychosocial functions** • Confirmation • Emotional support • Personal feedback • Friendship
Special attribute • Complementarity	**Special attribute** • Mutuality

The primary difference between a mentoring relationship and a peer relationship is the status level of the participants. Whereas a mentoring relationship typically involves pairing a senior individual with someone more junior, peer relationships exist between those of similar status, rank, or experience. This difference is highlighted in Figure 3, which outlines the activities that comprise the different functions. For example, although both offer career-enhancing functions, how those functions are delivered and received varies. A mentor relationship in which one member is more senior than the other would likely be one way, with the mentor providing guidance and varying levels of support to the mentee. However, a peer relationship takes a more collaborative approach, with information and knowledge passed in both directions.

The idea of informal learning through peer interaction extends to additional theories based on the same concept of social learning. Wenger et al. (2002) described communities of practices as "groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (p. 4). They are groups of individuals who come together informally to learn from one another regarding a shared interest, problem, or growth opportunity.

To form communities of practice or peer relationships, it is important to note that individuals must first find others with a shared interest and desire to gain knowledge through interaction. In this sense, groups come together using the social structures in which they exist (Wenger, 2011)—thus, the larger the social structure or network one resides in or has access to, the larger the opportunity to form communities of practice to learn and develop leadership skills. Conversely, the smaller or more limited access to a social structure or network in an environment, the less opportunity to learn through these groups.

Leadership Development in Higher Education

It is well documented in the literature that the higher education industry falls short in the purposeful planning of leadership development of its future leaders. As an industry, higher education is looked to for the education and continuous learning of generations, yet it seems to do little regarding developing its own workforce. The lack of planning and development appears to be embedded in the industry's culture, with leadership development simply not being a priority (Bennett, 2015). This is supported by studies spanning a decade reporting the lack of formal leadership development found throughout

the industry (Betts et al., 2009; Garza & Eddy, 2008; Inman, 2007; Watson et al., 2019). The implications of this reach deep into all levels of the hierarchy.

Pathways into management and leadership become obscured and difficult to navigate when the planning needed to identify and follow the path is lacking. Hempsall (2014) found that pathways leading into management roles were often not planned and many people had not received formal training in how to lead others. Redmond et al. (2017) reported similar findings and used the word *serendipitous* to describe the journey into leadership due to this lack of career planning.

The culture of the industry leaves the pursuit of development opportunities to the individual. Those interested in advancing their career are left to identify opportunities and develop their skills independently (Garza & Eddy, 2008). Further, even with monetary or verbal support from supervisors, individuals often are left to identify opportunities themselves rather than the supervisor recommending or bringing the opportunity to them (Hankinson, 2013). This may reflect the supervisor's lack of skills required to know how to develop their teams, identify high-performing talent, or determine what kind of opportunities to provide them because they also had to develop their skills on their own. This all leads to a risk of gaps in skillsets and underdeveloped leaders and the teams they lead.

A further risk inherent with a lack of leadership development is the potential gap between espoused theories and theories in practice in regard to leadership skills. Savaya and Gardner (2012) describe these as "espoused theory refers to the worldview and values that people believe guide their behaviors. Theory-in-use refers to the worldview and values reflected in the behaviors that actually drive their actions" (p. 145). In other

words, leaders may think they are acting according to one set of values, however, due to a lack of critical reflection or understanding they are actually exhibiting a different set of behaviors.

The Need for Diversity

The implications of the lack of intentionality expand beyond simply the risk of having ill-prepared leaders. Over time, the population seeking higher education has evolved and expanded as it followed the trends and demographics of modern-day society. Whereas previously higher education was reserved for the traditional aged student, the National Center for Education Statistics (2022) reported that as of 2017, adult learners comprise almost 40% of the student population. And although female students have been the majority since 1979, there has also been a steady increase in other minority groups seeking higher education. Yet the demographic makeup of higher education leadership has remained largely the same during this same period.

Betts et al. (2009) argued that the overall lack of intent and strategy can be tied to the lack of diversity and representation in leadership ranks throughout the industry as compared to the student population it serves. Diversity and minority representation in the student population in higher education have been shifting and growing for quite some time. Yet despite the shift in student demographics toward an increasingly diverse population, the higher education industry has not kept pace with this demographic shift in its leadership ranks. The demographics of the student population no longer match the demographics of the leaders designing and implementing the policies directly affecting their success.

Recent studies have begun to explore the link between diversity in an institution's leadership and student outcomes. Padamesee and Crowe (2017) found a primary outcome to be providing a deeper and fuller understanding of the population it serves, which in turn, creates a virtual "seat at the table" for all students, providing a voice in writing policy and setting strategies and priorities. The ability to appreciate the context of the students' lived experience allows for more relevant curricula and programming, the inclusion of linguistic and other contextual nuances, and identifying and removing bias (Padamesee & Crowe, 2017).

The disparity in student demographics compared to institutional leadership is attributed partly to a lack of intentionality in preparing diverse leaders across the industry (Betts et al., 2009). If the culture across the industry is one of unintentionality and low priority, leaving learning and development to the individual to identify and pursue alone, what are the implications for populations that may already be experiencing barriers on their career paths and their ability to acquire leadership skills?

Leadership Development of Women in Higher Education

Extensive literature is available regarding women's experiences as leaders in higher education, particularly those in senior levels of leadership. Historically, these studies tended to focus on barriers encountered during their career advancement and the skills and traits they found most helpful to overcome these barriers. More recent literature has begun to look at the positive experiences women have had, providing insight into environments that cultivate women as leaders. To understand the development and learning experiences of women in higher education, it is important to understand both aspects.

In their study, Airini et al. (2011) found what both helps and hinders women leaders fit into five categories: work relationships, university environment, invisible rules, proactivity, and personal circumstances. Relationships played a notable role in their development and career advancement, with both peers and superiors. These relationships were reported as being the most impactful from a helpful perspective, particularly positive relationships with senior leaders in positions of decision-making power. Baltodano et al. (2012) found similar results, with these relationships being instrumental in identifying and securing desired positions. These findings reinforce the value of developmental relationships and the need for women to have access to the networks needed to establish them at all levels, particularly senior levels.

The establishment and utilization of developmental relationships have a far-reaching impact on female leaders and those aspiring to be leaders. These relationships provide women with "encouragement, renewed purpose, assistance with problem-solving, and tangible support" (Longman et al., 2019, p. 68). Throughout the literature, their presence is seen as an essential component of leadership development and advancement. These relationships are also seen as critical in assisting women when faced with developmental challenges such as culture, limited access and opportunity, and self-perception.

Although developmental relationships are seen as playing a critical role in the development of women, access to these networks and opportunities is commonly reported as a primary differentiator between the experience of women and their male counterparts. Women, contrary to men, often report limited access to developmental networks as a barrier to leadership development. The lack of access to these networks manifests in

many forms throughout the literature and is often seen as being embedded in an institution's culture or organizational practices. These include the invisible barriers created by gendered networks, which can result in a lack of mentoring opportunities for women (Ballinger, 2010). However, the sheer nature of being female in a gendered industry is also repeatedly seen as a differentiator to the leadership development experience of women. Because these gendered challenges are complex in nature, further exploration is warranted.

Invisible Barriers

The term *invisible barrier* is found extensively throughout the literature on the female experience in the workplace. Variations of the term are also found, including *invisible rules* and *unwritten rules*, among others. Although a single definition does not exist, all point to the idea that although bias may not be overt or even intentional, it certainly exists. Ibara et al. (2013) referred to this phenomenon as second-generation bias. Second-generation bias describes the powerful but subtle and often invisible barriers that "arise from cultural assumptions and organizational structures, practices, and patterns of interaction that inadvertently benefit men while putting women at a disadvantage" (p. 6). It is important to note that second-generation bias can be unintentional with no direct or immediate harm. Rather, the context in which it exists creates an environment where women fail to reach their full potential over time (Ibara et al., 2013). These invisible barriers are not a single event but rather an accumulation over time.

Invisible barriers are broad in scope, yet some themes appear consistently throughout the literature. For example, the double bind, discussed earlier in this paper, is a result of women's leadership styles being incongruous with the expectations for their

gender. Outcomes of this result in a woman and a man being viewed differently even when demonstrating the same behavior (Eagly & Carli, 2009). Access to networks and mentors are also often cited as invisible barriers, with men tending to mentor and network with other men (Ballinger, 2010). With more men tending to be in positions of power, this results in weaker networks for women and fewer opportunities for informal learning and access to influential leaders. Both examples point to these invisible barriers arising from cultural assumptions and organizational structures. They are not overt and likely not intentional, making them hard to pinpoint as single instances. However, collectively they drive the distinction between the experiences of women and their male counterparts.

Role of Culture on Learning and Development

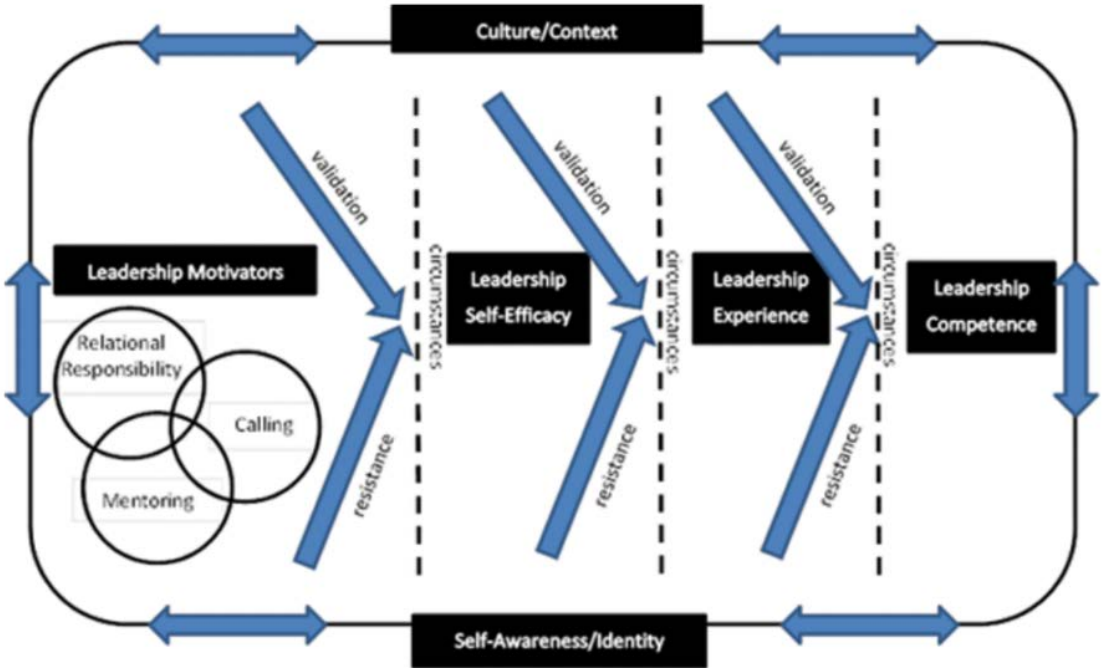
Institutional culture is often discussed in studies regarding women's experience as leaders—specifically, the various systems, policies, and practices in place in an institution that contribute to this culture. Airini et al. (2011) found most of the policies and practices in an institution were perceived as unhelpful for women, such as unclear communication regarding what universities look for in their leaders or whom they regard as leaders. It is difficult for a woman to seek and acquire the requisite skills or experience for advancement when the qualifications and expectations are unclear, invisible, or differ between women and men. Ballinger (2010) suggested that this culture ultimately determines the likelihood of a woman's success.

The culture of the institution and the role it plays in the development and advancement of women in higher education can be seen in the women's leadership development model proposed by Dahlvig and Longman (2014). In this model (see Figure 3), leadership development and progression to higher levels of leadership are heavily

influenced by both validation and resistance and shaped by a woman's self-awareness and the cultural context of the institution or environment.

Figure 3

Dahlvig and Longman's Proposed Women's Leadership Development Model



At each step of a women's career journey, validation of her skills and pursuits can create self-efficacy, fueling an interest in seeking additional opportunities. In contrast, resistance can cause her to pull back from pursuing these same leadership opportunities. When she asserts herself and is met with positive reinforcement, she is more likely to continue to pursue the path to leadership. However, when met with resistance, she is more likely to retreat. Dahlvig and Longman (2014) suggested that the interplay of the institution's culture and the women's self-identity are intertwined and exert a heavy influence on her experiences and effectiveness as a leader. Therefore, when her style or

values align with the institution's culture, she will experience more validation and less resistance in her pursuits. However, when they do not align, she will encounter more resistance.

In their study, Eagly and Carli (2009) explored the role of the double bind in contributing to the resistance women encounter. They explained that a key disadvantage women experience due to the double bind is the resistance it creates against their ability to lead and influence. Resistance appears in ways such as having their ideas being ignored or devalued at a higher rate than the same ideas from men or being judged more harshly than men even when their performance is objectively equal (Eagly & Carli, 2009). Evidence of this double bind and its impact on the experience of women leaders in higher education can be found throughout the literature. It is often attributed to what is considered the masculinized culture embedded in the industry, or the "good old boys club."

The effects of this culture have been reported as manifesting in various ways. Common themes found in the literature include women perceiving being held to a different set of expectations (Hannum et al., 2015), facing unwritten rules, and being held to a higher standard (Jones-Goodwin, 2020). Madera (2017) further explained how these "societal-level constructs of gender-based stereotypes and leadership impact organizational culture to create a disadvantage for women" (p. 95). The masculinized institutional culture creates a series of relatively minor experiences, often hard to pinpoint or recognize in a single instance. However, over time, these subtle and implicit biases collectively build to create insurmountable barriers, often termed invisible barriers.

The women's leadership development model in Figure 3 highlights how the cumulative impact of working in an unsupportive or masculinized culture over time can cause women to retreat or disengage from pursuing development as both emerging leaders and the later pursuit into higher levels of leadership.

Role of Personal Choice on Learning and Development

An argument is often found that more women do not rise to leadership positions because they do not aspire to these positions. Although this may be true for some women, the literature points to evidence that women do aspire to be leaders but encounter various challenges along their journey (Block & Tietjen-Smith, 2016; Canas et al., 2019; Hannum et al., 2015; Lepkowski, 2009; Redmond et al., 2017). Many of these challenges result in personal choices being made by women that directly affect their access and opportunities related to learning, development, and leadership progression.

Issues of work–life balance, its role in the development of women, and their desire to pursue leadership positions are prominent in the literature. Women often discuss the challenges of trying to balance their traditional roles in the family and their managerial or leadership roles at work. The work–life balance barrier has been cited as the greatest barrier perceived by women (Glover, 2009). Throughout the decades, the roles men play and their contributions at home have certainly evolved, with more men taking on an increasing share of duties. However, most women still traditionally bear the heaviest load of "family work" (Schipani et al., 2008). The need to address these family obligations and domestic responsibilities often results in women not pursuing training and other development experiences and opportunities at the same rate as their male

counterparts (Eagly & Carli, 2009). And as a result, they miss out on networking, learning, and other opportunities for development and advancement.

Women appear to be aware of the challenges that await them with finding a work–life balance. For many, the challenge represents a choice of either pursuing a higher leadership level or having a family. As a result, some women prefer to remain in lower-level subordinate roles to maintain this balance (Garza, 2019). Other women delay pursuing leadership positions until their children are older (Katuna, 2019). And still, others choose their career over motherhood and opt out of raising a family due to the perceived impact it may have on their career (BlackChen, 2015). Whichever path is chosen, the impact of work–life balance is evident, with women continuing to carry the heavier load of "family work" as they pursue career paths in higher education, even those who make it to the highest levels. The American Council of Education (2017) found that 32% of women college presidents had altered their career progression at some point to care for another family member, twice the rate of their male counterparts at 16%.

For those who choose to pursue a family, cultural barriers are reported in the university system that add to work–life conflict. Ballinger (2010) reported a lack of support for women with family responsibilities. Airini et al. (2011) had similar findings regarding negative attitudes toward women having children and maternity leave. Although it is commonplace now for institutions to have official policies in support of women and family, unwritten rules and standards in the culture persist and present challenges to women. These challenges, often seen as invisible barriers, add to the labyrinth in which they must learn and develop skills to navigate.

Role of Professional Development Programs on Learning and Development

Effective professional development is established throughout the literature as a key component of developing and maintaining leadership skills. Although professional development programs can be found in institutions, one challenge is that the programming tends to be gender neutral and targeted toward leaders in general. Women have reported the need for access to professional development that address the specific needs of women aspiring to leadership positions (Brossette, 2021). Given women's unique challenges in obtaining skills and advancement, general sessions do not appear to be targeted enough to meet their needs.

The lack of targeted development programs in institutions may not be due to a lack of desire on the part of the university. Although literature exists on the developmental needs of women in general, a general lack of literature is available on how to design these types of programs in the university space. Many such programs, and the literature supporting them, are part of external associations and organizations, not universities. This leaves universities that wish to develop their staff and faculty struggling to design programs on their own (Madsen, 2012). Brossette (2021) suggested that for those providing leadership development in the university, the quality and design of programs can affect their ability to diversify their leadership. It is not enough to simply offer programming; it must be effective and targeted to the needs of women.

Development challenges faced by women leaders in higher education are well discussed in the literature. These obstacles can reduce efforts to increase diversity and not benefit from the many contributions of women in leadership. To address the challenges women face, Luzebetak (2010) suggested that institutions serious about diversifying their

leadership dedicate a portion of their development plan to developing the talent and leadership skills of women in mid-level positions.

Leadership Development of Mid-Level Administrators in Higher Education

Much of the literature on leadership development in higher education has been directed at the senior levels of leadership. Although little research has examined how universities onboard and train entry-level or front-line staff members, evidence in the literature suggests that this type of training and development is commonly found throughout the industry. However, little evidence was found regarding the training and development of those in the middle of the hierarchy. This phenomenon is described by McKinney et al. (2013) as a “barbell” approach, meaning that development is heavy at the beginning and end, but light in the middle (Adams-Dunford et al., 2019). This lack of leadership development is reflected in recommendations across the literature that universities need to be more intentional in supporting the development of their mid-level leaders (Inman, 2007, 2009; Mather et al., 2009; Smith, 2014; Watson et al., 2019).

Limited studies have considered how mid-level administrators acquire the skills needed to lead. Information can be found regarding the skills required; however, even these studies vary in terms of the most critical skills. Recognizing the need to better understand this issue, recent research has begun to look at the learning styles and strategies of the population. Although few studies have explored this domain, they led to the firm conclusion that women rely heavily on informal methods of learning.

Skills of the Mid-Level Administrator

The specific skills needed to lead from the middle can vary depending on the needs and culture of an individual institution or even a department. Northouse (2009)

suggested that these varying skills can be grouped into three categories: technical, human, and conceptual. The level of proficiency of the skills in each category varies by the level in the hierarchy.

Figure 4

Skills Necessary at Various Levels of an Organization (Noe, 1998)

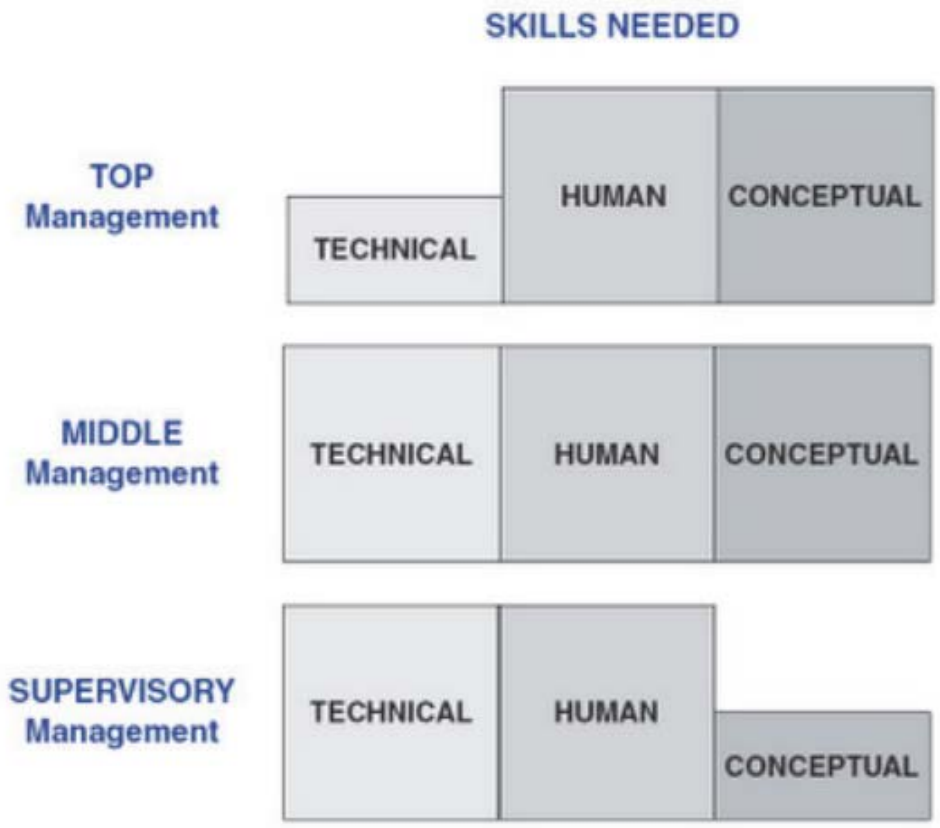


Figure 4 demonstrates the difficulty and unique challenge of leading as a mid-level administrator. Often described as being in a pivot position, the mid-level leader is charged with translating between senior leaders and the front-line staff. Mather et al. (2009) described this position as being in the delicate role of taking values and

expectations from above and translating them into practical on-ground realities that make sense to the front-line staff, all with limited authority.

In their survey of mid-level administrators, Sermersheim and Keim (2005) found those currently in the role rated leadership as the most important skill needed, with personnel management as the second most important. The same study found that 63% of those aspiring to be a director or dean in their functional area indicated a need for continuing leadership development to advance to the next level. Thus, mid-level administrators in the study understood the need for leadership skills and perceived that they lacked the requisite skills to advance. Absent formal or intentional opportunities provided by their institution, mid-level leaders often rely on informal methods to acquire the requisite skills.

Other studies looked more closely at the competencies needed to lead effectively from the mid-level position. Common areas reported by those currently in mid-level roles as top competencies needed were (a) integrity and trust and (b) ethics and values (De Meuse et al., 2007; Flanders, 2008). Both studies rated these competencies in the top three needed to lead from the middle successfully. Interestingly, De Meuse et al. (2007) also looked at how subject-matter experts responsible for leadership training perceived the required competencies for mid-level roles. Both competencies rated high by mid-level leaders fell out of the top five, being replaced with competencies of developing direct reports and drive for results by the subject-matter experts. These results indicate a discrepancy in perceptions between those in the role and those training individuals for the role. This may be a further manifestation of the lack of focus and intentionality toward

developing those in these positions. More exploration is needed to determine how mid-level administrators acquire the skills they find necessary to lead successfully.

Informal Learning Strategies of Mid-Level Administrators

Much of what can be found on the learning strategies of mid-level administrators in higher education are relatively new contributions to the literature. In more recent years, research has begun to look at how the mid-level population develops skills. From the limited literature found, the role of informal learning quickly emerged. Although it is clear from the research that formal learning experiences play a critical role in educating leaders, informal experiences provide context for the learning that is so essential to the development of skills.

Strategies described for learning informally are mostly centered on social interactions encountered in various areas. These interactions are built across multiple levels and relationships, taking the form of networks, mentoring, and communities of practice—each dependent on the quality, strength, and value of that relationship.

On one end, some mid-level leaders simply watch others in their environment and learn through observations of their actions (Flanders, 2008). However, the most successful mid-level leaders seem to take a more involved approach. Karavedas (2019) found access to senior leaders helpful in the development of skills. Having the ability to interact closely provides firsthand knowledge and a personal example to follow. However, she also was clear about the critical nature of having a broad network of professional relationships. These networks supported development “through exposure to people and institutions outside their immediate sphere, support from other professionals who currently hold a similar professional role, and through being known by others who

have the ability to advance participants into future leadership roles" (Karavedas, 2019, p. 104). Brunson (2020) shared similar findings regarding the need for a strong network. Specifically, she also concluded the value of communities of practice in gaining skills and helping leaders stay motivated to continue learning and developing throughout their career. It is abundantly clear that access to networks and relationships is central to informal leadership development.

Leadership Development of Female Mid-Level Administrators

When considering the strategies mid-level administrators use to gain leadership skills, it is critical to acknowledge the intersection where these strategies collide with the barriers experienced by female mid-level administrators. This collision is highlighted by Brunson (2020), who found in her study of how mid-level administrators in higher education learned to lead that marginalized populations, including women, felt frustrated and perceived that the lack of access to development opportunities left them at a disadvantage. Evidence of this disadvantage is reported extensively throughout the literature in abundant forms, including invisible rules (Canas et al., 2019) and lack of mentoring opportunities (Davies & Healey, 2019), among others. Although extensive research can be found on the experiences of women who have overcome these barriers, these studies focused on participants whose journeys resulted in senior-level leadership positions. Less is known about the developmental experiences of women who remain in the mid-level ranks or opt out of leadership after reaching the middle-level rank.

In more recent years, research has begun to emerge specific to the experiences of female mid-level administrators. Central to the literature on their developmental experiences is the role of mentoring and other professional relationships. Much of what

can be found is centered on these relationships and the perceived impacts resulting from the strength or lack of the relationship (Garza, 2019; Hardy, 2019; Moscariello, 2015). The body of literature strongly indicates that female mid-level administrators value mentor relationships and see them as critical to their development. Yet little is known about how those in the middle actually navigate their environments to find or manage these relationships, especially for those with limited access.

Summary

This review of literature focused on understanding the many aspects of leadership development in higher education, focusing on the female experience. It covered the history of women in the workforce and the various gendered barriers they encounter on their leadership journey. Different types of leadership development were covered, with mentoring and developmental relationships highlighted as critical components. Next, this chapter discussed leadership development from the perspective of the female leader and how this experience may differ from their male counterparts. Last, this review of the literature examined the role of mid-level administrators, the strategies used to gain requisite leadership skills, and the experiences of female mid-level administrators.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Overview

This study explored the lived experiences of female mid-level administrators as it related to informal leadership development in private nonprofit higher education. It sought to understand how participants' perceptions of these experiences have informed their development of leadership skills in these institutions. Chapter I provided an introduction to the study and background to the research. It also noted the problem that arose in literature, the purpose statement, the research question, and the significance of the study.

Chapter II reviewed the literature associated with the variables of this study. The chapter provided a brief history of women in the workforce and explored the current status of women in higher education. Next, it explored mid-level leadership development in higher education with a critical eye on the role of informal learning in their development. Finally, it examined the literature associated with the unique barriers to leadership development experienced by female administrators in higher education.

Chapter III focuses on the research methodology chosen for this study. It describes the rationale behind the methodological design and provides the purpose statement and research questions. The chapter also explores the population, sample population, data collection, reliability and validity of the data collected, researcher bias, and limitations to the research.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to identify and describe the informal leadership development experiences of female mid-level administrators in private nonprofit higher education.

Research Questions

What are the informal leadership development experiences of female mid-level administrators in private nonprofit higher education?

Research Design

This study sought to identify and describe the informal leadership development experiences of female mid-level administrators in private nonprofit higher education institutions. To accomplish this, a qualitative research design was used. Qualitative research studies contribute to the understanding of how people and groups construct meaning and make sense of the world (Patton, 2015). This study sought to understand informal leadership development experiences and how participants made meaning of them in acquiring leadership skills. The researcher aimed to glean this meaning through in-depth interviews and observations.

Qualitative research is especially effective in gathering and understanding information about the opinions, behaviors, and social contexts of particular populations (Mack et al., 2005). These intangibles can be missed in broader studies with less flexibility and can help a researcher understand why and how something occurs. To understand these intangibles, a qualitative approach can be used to view the whole, paying particular attention to the role of nuance and context in the themes and patterns that emerge (Patton, 2015). A qualitative approach was appropriate for this study because

it sought to understand the nuance and context specific to female mid-level administrators and how they experience informal learning.

After careful consideration of the many frameworks available, a phenomenological framework was deemed the most appropriate for this study. Phenomenology inquiry seeks an in-depth understanding of the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience—the firsthand experience—of a phenomenon for a person or group of people (Patton, 2015). Patton (2015) explained that phenomenology is reflective in nature, with the participants describing an experience that has already passed in great detail with a focus on how they view the phenomenon to make sense of the world. The phenomenon in this study was informal leadership development experiences and the group of people were female mid-level administrators in private nonprofit higher education. McMillan and Schumacher (2014) further described phenomenological study as capturing the essence of the experience as perceived by the participant and "focused on understanding the participants' voice" (p. 346). Because this study sought to gather data through in-depth interviews with those who have experienced this phenomenon, understanding it through their words, their perceptions of their experience, and how they made meaning of it, the phenomenological framework was appropriate.

Population

McMillan and Schumacher (2014) defined the population in a research study as a group of individuals or elements that conform to specific criteria for which the research results can be generalized. The population for this study was female mid-level administrators in California's 249 4-year Title IV institutions. In California, an estimated 100 to 150 mid-level administrators work in each institution. As such, an estimated

24,900 to 37,350 mid-level administrators work in the 249 4-year Title IV institutions in California. Of these, approximately 60% are female (College and University Professional Association for Human Resources, 2020). This amounts to approximately 14,940 to 22,410 female mid-level administrators in California, which is the estimated population for this study.

Sampling Frame

The sampling frame is a subset of the population, a result of placing additional limitations on the population (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). To determine the sampling frame, additional selection criteria are used. The sampling frame for this study was female mid-level administrators in private nonprofit universities. Given 145 private nonprofit universities in California and approximately 100 to 150 mid-level administrators in each institution, with 60% being female, the target population for this study was estimated to be 8,700 to 13,050 female mid-level administrators who work in private nonprofit universities.

Sample

The sample is the group of individuals from whom the data will be collected (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). There are no rules regarding sample size in qualitative studies, only guidelines. McMillan and Schumacher (2014) suggested a qualitative sample size can range between one and 40 or more, depending on the research purpose, research problem, data collection strategy, and data availability. For phenomenological studies, Creswell (1998) suggested five to 25 participants. The purpose of this study was to describe the informal leadership development experiences of female mid-level

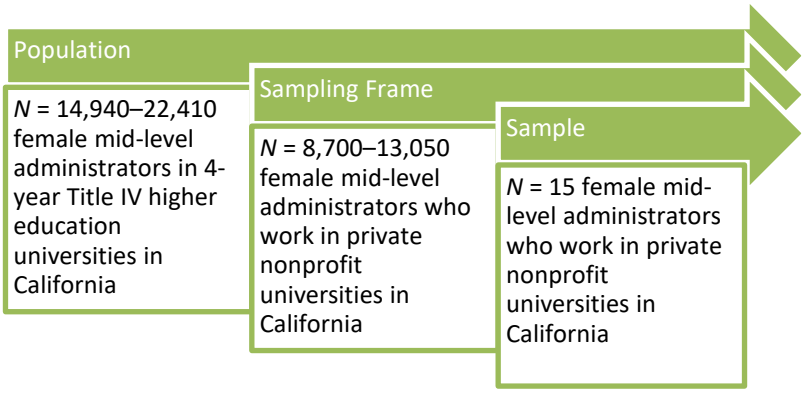
administrators in private nonprofit higher education. Based on the target population of 8,700 to 13,050, a sample of 16 was taken.

In this sample, participants had to meet the following criteria:

1. The individuals must hold a leadership position with the title of dean, associate dean, program chairs, directors, associate directors, or their equivalent
2. To ensure participants have adequate experience on which to reflect, a minimum of 3 years in a mid-level leadership position was required.
3. They also needed to have a minimum of 5 years of experience in the higher education industry.

Figure 5

Population, Target Population, and Sample Alignment of Study



Sampling Procedure

Samples can be drawn from the target population using general qualitative sampling methods (Asiamah et al., 2017). For this study, criterion sampling was used to identify qualified female participants in the private nonprofit higher education field.

Patton (2015) described criterion sampling as “review[ing] and study[ing] all cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance, thereby explicitly (or implicitly) comparing the criterion cases with those that do not manifest the criterion” (p. 280). Patton further stated that the point of criterion sampling is to use information-rich cases because “they may reveal major system weaknesses that become targets of opportunity for program or system improvement” (p. 281). The criteria for this study included female mid-level administrators in private nonprofit universities who have held leadership positions for a minimum of 3 years and worked in the private nonprofit higher education industry for a minimum of 5 years.

The following steps were used to recruit participants for this study:

1. Upon approval from the University of Massachusetts (UMass) Global Institutional Review Board (Appendix B), the researcher reached out to the sponsor of the study.
2. The sponsor of the study agreed to help recruit 16 participants who met the criteria to participate in the study.
3. The sponsor of the study contacted women in their network who met the requirements of the study and requested their participation.
4. The researcher verified that the potential participants met the established criteria.
5. The researcher contacted each potential participant through email, requesting participation and offering to answer any questions regarding the study. This communication included an information letter (Appendix C), participant bill of rights (Appendix D), and informed consent (Appendix E).

Of the participants who met the criteria, convenience sampling was used to reduce the pool of participants to 16. Convenience sampling is defined as participants being "selected based on being accessible or expedient" (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014, p. 137). Although this sampling method can be problematic, this study used it as a secondary method to obtain the sample.

Instrumentation

For this phenomenological study, the researcher was considered the primary instrument used to gather data for this study. Data were gathered using a semi structured interview process with questions related to acquiring leadership skills using informal learning.

Researcher as an Instrument

The researcher plays a primary role in a qualitative study's data collection and process. During the interview process, they facilitate the flow of communication, and following the interview, they translate and interpret data into meaningful information (Poggenpoel & Myburgh, 2003). Because of the researcher's level of involvement, their attributes can influence data collection (Pezalla et al., 2012). To address this potential issue, the researcher intentionally included safeguards to limit the influence of researcher bias on study results.

Interview Questions

McMillan and Schumacher (2014) described the personal in-depth, semi structured interview as the mainstay of phenomenological study. This phenomenological study used semi-structured interviews to gather data. Semi-structured interviews provide structure with formulated interview questions developed in advance but allow the

researcher to ask follow-up questions to follow the flow of the conversation (Patton & Newhart, 2018). This provides flexibility to the researcher to explore the deeper meaning of answers provided by participants.

A standard set of predetermined questions was scripted prior to the interviews to maintain consistency and avoid bias. Questions were intentionally designed to align with the research question and were rooted in the literature.

Validity

Validity in research refers to the degree to which the research truly measures what it intended to measure (Golafshani, 2003). Because the researcher is an instrument of the study, the validity hinges to a "great extent on the skill, competence, and rigor of the person doing the fieldwork" (Patton, 2015 p. 22). The researcher must intentionally employ strategies to limit these challenges and limitations. For the purposes of this study, strategies to increase validity involved an expert panel and a pilot interview.

Expert Panel

An expert panel was formed to establish the validity of the research questions and alignment to the research question. The panel reviewed the interview questions to ensure their usefulness in the study and ability to answer the research question. Expert panel participants were not included in the study's data collection portion and served only as a way to provide insight and feedback to the researcher. To participate on the panel, experts had to meet a minimum of three of the following five criteria:

1. Possessed a graduate degree in organizational leadership, higher education leadership, or equivalent
2. Published author in organizational leadership or equivalent

3. Delivered workshops on the topic of organizational leadership or equivalent
4. A minimum of 5 years of experience as a leader or manager in the field of higher education
5. A minimum of 10 years of experience in the field of higher education

Pilot Interview

Because of the reliance on interviews as a single source of data, the researcher must be skilled at interviewing (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). To ensure the researcher had the required skillset, a pilot interview was conducted before data collection with an expert observer present. The expert held a doctorate, had qualitative research experience at the doctoral level, and had coached or mentored others in qualitative research. The expert observed the researcher conducting a pilot interview and provided feedback and validation on the interviewer's qualitative research skills. For example, the expert addressed areas such as body language, pacing, follow-up questions, possible bias, and active engagement, thereby increasing the study's validity.

Reliability

It is important to establish reliability in qualitative research. Reliability is defined as the "degree to which your instrument consistently measures something" (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019, p. 149). McMillan and Schumacher (2014) described reliability as the ability of the research instrument to achieve consistent results even on different data collection occasions.

Internal Reliability

Internal reliability refers to the use of multiple data sources to increase the reliability of results. Patton (2015) described data triangulation as the use of various data

sources, such as interviewing, artifacts, and observation to strengthen the overall study. In the event artifacts were unable to be obtained or observations made, the researcher would expand the participant pool to include a higher number of mid-level administrators to allow for triangulation across multiple interviews to draw conclusions and themes from the data.

External Reliability

External reliability is the extent to which a study's findings can be applied, or generalized, to other situations (Merriam, 1995). However, qualitative research aims to "understand the particular in-depth, rather than finding out what is generally true of many" (Merriam, 1995, p. 57). Therefore, because generalizability was not an expected attribute, external reliability was not a concern for this study.

Intercoder Reliability

McMillan and Schumacher (2014) described intercoder reliability as the extent to which independent coders evaluate various data points and reach the same conclusion about what they have seen, heard, or rated. The higher the agreement, the more reliable the outcomes are considered. For this study, a second researcher with content knowledge on mid-level administrators, leadership development, and qualitative research participated in a double-coding exercise. Ten percent of the data were double-coded to ensure alignment and agreement with the researcher's assertions. A goal of 90% agreement in this double-coding process was established as an acceptable level of reliability (Lombard et al., 2004).

Data Collection

This study sought information-rich stories from the participants regarding their lived experiences with informal learning and leadership development. To accomplish this, data collection instruments included semi-structured interviews. Prior to formal data collection, an application was submitted to the UMass Global Institutional Review Board for review and approval (Appendix B). As an additional safety measure, the researcher completed a training course on research and protection of human research participants (Appendix F).

Following review board approval, an email was sent to the 16 participants identified for the study, formally requesting their participation in the study. This request included copies of the interview questions (Appendix G), participant bill of rights (Appendix D), and an informed consent form (Appendix E). These forms were all sent in advance to provide the participant ample time to review and understand the study and their rights.

Types of Data

Interviews

Interviews in this study consisted of semi-structured questions developed with the assistance and review of an expert panel whose members specialized in leadership development and had higher education experience. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they include the formulation of questions in advance but allow the interviewer to reword the question if needed and ask follow-up questions (Patton & Newhart, 2018). Interview questions focused on experiences with informal leadership development methods and mentorship. Interviews were conducted in a virtual

environment due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the need to follow Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines. Additionally, this allowed participants to select a location of their choice to be interviewed, increasing their comfort level. Copies of the interview questions were provided to participants in advance. Interviews were 45 to 60 minutes in length.

Data Collection Procedures

This section reviews the data collection process used in the study. It covers the steps of participant recruitment and interviews in detail to allow for replication in future studies.

Participant Recruitment

The research question in this study focused on understanding the informal leadership development experiences of female mid-level administrators in private nonprivate higher education. Identification of participants with appropriate experience to contribute was paramount to the study. The researcher recognized that utilizing a sponsor would allow access to a vast network of individuals she may not otherwise have access to and could contribute deep and meaningful experiences to the study. A sponsor who worked in the field of higher education was identified, and a formal request was sent through email requesting if they would be willing to sponsor the study.

Due to the sample size of 16, attention to detail was paramount in selecting participants. To ensure appropriate participants were recommended, the researcher met with the sponsor and explained the scope of the study and the criteria to be a participant. During this meeting, the researcher also shared the interview questions, informational letter, and participant bill of rights for review. The researcher answered the sponsor's

questions. Following the meeting, the researcher requested formal acceptance of agreeing to sponsor the study. The sponsor responded by agreeing to sponsor the study.

Interviews

Interviews consisted of semi-structured questions with follow-up questions as needed. Questions were provided to the participants in advance for review and reflection if desired. To ensure accuracy, all interviews were recorded with the participants' permission and transcribed by the researcher. The following steps were taken to collect interview data:

1. Participants were identified based on their position, experience, and tenure.
2. An email was sent to request and gain agreement to participate in the study. The email request included the informational letter, participant bill of rights (Appendix D), recording release and consent form, and informed consent form.
3. Upon agreement, a mutually agreed upon date, time, and place was chosen to ensure participants were available given their busy schedules and would be free from distractions. Interviewees were advised the interview would last between 45 and 60 minutes and would be recorded and later transcribed.
4. The participant was again provided the participant bill of rights (Appendix D) at the time of the interview and given an opportunity to ask any questions.
5. The researcher reviewed the informed consent form (Appendix E) with the participant and answered any questions.
6. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary, and they had the right to stop the interview or take a break at any time.

7. Following the first six steps, the researcher began the interview.

Data Protection and Control

Data from this study reflected the lived experiences of female mid-level administrators in identifying how they used informal learning in their development as leaders. Because of the personal nature of the study, the researcher took careful steps to protect the collected data and minimize the risk to participants. All responses collected through this study remain anonymous, and all identifying marks have been removed. For identification purposes, all participants were assigned a number (e.g., Participant 1, Participant 2, etc.). A key to the participant numbers, digital files, field journal, and transcriptions of the interviews were kept in a locked cabinet to which only the researcher had access. Upon completion of the study, all data files and field journals were destroyed.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is used to construct the meaning of the data collected. McMillan and Schumacher (2014) described this analysis as a "systematic process of coding, categorizing, and interpreting data to provide explanations of a single phenomenon of interest" (p. 367). Data from this study highlight the informal leadership development experiences of female mid-level administrators in private nonprofit higher education. The accuracy of the data reported is paramount, and steps must be taken to ensure this accuracy. Roberts and Hyatt (2019) made it clear that it is the researcher's responsibility to employ validation strategies to ensure the accuracy of the data. To ensure accuracy, specific steps were taken.

All interviews were recorded and then transcribed to ensure the accuracy of responses. Once transcribed, copies of the transcript were provided to the participants for

verification of accuracy. Upon approval, the researcher reviewed the transcribed data to identify trends and relevant themes. Through this review of the data, the researcher ensured the alignment of the themes to the research question for the study.

Once the researcher identified themes that aligned with the research question for the study, NVivo software was used to organize the themes and categorize the data. The researcher reviewed the transcripts to identify stories and experiences relayed by the participants. As these emerged, they were coded in alignment with the identified themes. Through this process, frequency counts and source of themes were also identified and recorded in the NVivo software. After the data were coded, the researcher reviewed the results with an expert in qualitative research to establish intercoder reliability to confirm the data had been coded appropriately.

After the data were coded and intercoder reliability was established, the researcher analyzed the data. The researcher analyzed the codes and frequencies to understand the lived experiences of female mid-level administrators. Codes with higher frequency counts were reflective of more common experiences among participants.

Limitations

Limitations are a part of qualitative research studies. Roberts and Hyatt (2019) defined limitations as features that may affect the results of the study or the ability to generalize and may involve issues that are outside the researcher's control. It is the responsibility of the researcher to identify and report limitations (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). In addition to identifying the following six limitations, the researcher employed strategies to minimize their impact on the study.

Researcher as the Instrument of Study

The researcher played a primary role in the data collection of this qualitative research study. To limit the potential for bias, safeguards were put into place. These included an expert panel to review interview questions to ensure alignment with the research question and a pilot interview to validate the researcher's interviewing skills. Additionally, methods of intercoder reliability were utilized to limit potential bias in the development of themes.

Missing or Limited Participants

A potential outcome of being part of a marginalized population is individuals leaving the industry. This study sought to understand the lived experiences of women, who are a marginalized population. A potential limitation is the unavailability of some participants due to having already left the industry.

Time Constraints

The nature of qualitative study requires extensive amounts of time. This includes the time needed to identify participants, conduct in-depth interviews, transcribe the interview data, identify themes, code data, and conduct detailed analysis. Because of this, time constraints are a limitation. To address this limitation, the researcher utilized criterion sampling followed by convenience and snowball sampling to identify qualified participants. Additionally, virtual interviews were conducted to eliminate the researcher's need to travel to the locations of the participants. Once data had been collected, the researcher dedicated sufficient time to accurately code and analyze the data.

Gender Identity

This study focused on the lived experiences of female mid-level administrators. The researcher acknowledges the complexity of gender identity and its role in leadership experiences. However, due to this complexity, the role and impact of gender identity were not within this study's scope. Due to this, a potential limitation is understanding the full scope of the female experience.

Virtual Environment

Data were collected through interaction on a virtual platform where the participant and researcher were not in the same physical space. A potential limitation of this environment is the limited ability of the researcher to observe body language and the general atmosphere of the room where the participant is located. To address this potential limitation, the researcher was vigilant in observing the visible virtual environment areas.

Summary

The qualitative method of phenomenology allowed the researcher to understand better the informal leadership development experiences of female mid-level administrators in Private Nonprofit Higher Education. Chapter III defined the research design, population, sample, sampling procedures, and instrumentation of the study. It also covered detailed steps taken to ensure the validity and reliability of the study. Finally, it covered the types of data collected, collection procedures, data analysis, and possible limitations of the study.

CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH, DATA COLLECTION, AND FINDINGS

Overview

Chapter I provided an introduction to the study and the background of the research. Chapter II featured a comprehensive review of the literature associated with women in the workforce, mid-level leadership development in higher education, and the unique barriers to leadership development experienced by female administrators in higher education. In Chapter III, the researcher described the methodology of this phenomenological study, providing a thorough explanation of the methodology used in collecting data for the study. This chapter identifies and describes the findings of the study by examining data collected from 16 female mid-level administrators in private nonprofit higher education institutions in California.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to identify and describe the informal leadership development experiences of female mid-level administrators in private nonprofit higher education.

Research Question

What are the informal leadership development experiences of female mid-level administrators in private nonprofit higher education?

Research Methods and Data Collection Procedures

A qualitative, phenomenological investigation method was chosen to examine the informal leadership development experiences of 16 female mid-level administrators in private nonprofit higher education. Mid-level administrators were identified by their job title, institution type, time as a mid-level administrator, time working in the higher

education industry, and location of the institution. Using a phenomenological approach allowed the researcher to gather stories to identify and describe informal learning methods and strategies used by the participants.

Data were collected using individual interviews conducted in a virtual environment. Interviews were semi structured, consisted of 10 questions, and lasted approximately 60 minutes. Interviews were transcribed and data were analyzed using NVivo software. Data analysis sought to answer the research question and aid the researcher in understanding the essence of the lived experience of the phenomenon.

Population

The population for this study was all female mid-level administrators in California's 249 4-year Title IV institutions. In California, an estimated 100–150 mid-level administrators work in each institution. As such, an estimated 24,900–37,350 mid-level administrators work in 4-year Title IV institutions in California. Of these, approximately 60% are female (College and University Professional Association for Human Resource, 2020). This amounts to approximately 14,940–22,410 female mid-level administrators in California, an estimate for this study.

Sampling Frame

The sampling frame for this study was female mid-level administrators in private nonprofit universities. California has 145 private nonprofit universities and approximately 100–150 mid-level administrators in each institution, with 60% being female. As such, the target population for this study was estimated to be 8,700 to 13,050 female mid-level administrators who work in private nonprofit universities.

Sample

Based on the target population, a sample of 16 participants was recruited. These 16 participants were mid-level administrators from private nonprofit universities in California.

Demographic Data

This study included 16 participants who met the eligibility criteria to participate. Prior to participating, they signed the informed consent form and received a participant's bill of rights. Demographic information was collected about each participant that was relevant to the study, including race or ethnicity, years as a mid-level administrator in private nonprofit higher education, and current position held. Table 2 represents demographic data for each participant, identified with numbers from 1 to 16.

Table 2

Participant Demographics

Participant number	Title	Years in mid-level administration	Ethnicity or race
Participant 1	Assistant director	10	African American
Participant 2	Associate dean	4	White
Participant 3	Dean	22	White
Participant 4	Director	15	White
Participant 5	Director	15	Latina/Chicana
Participant 6	Director	3	White
Participant 7	Department chair	3	White
Participant 8	Dean	21	White
Participant 9	Director	7	Filipina
Participant 10	Associate dean	10	East Indian
Participant 11	Dean	15	African American
Participant 12	Dean	20	White
Participant 13	Associate dean	3	Indian
Participant 14	Director	10	White
Participant 15	Director	10	White
Participant 16	Director	10	White

Presentation and Analysis of Data

The findings presented in this chapter are the outcome of 16 interviews that lasted approximately 60 minutes each, for a total of 16 hours. Data were analyzed to answer the research question: What are the informal leadership development experiences of female mid-level administrators in private nonprofit higher education? After analysis of the data, nine themes emerged relative to the research question. The themes are presented from highest frequency to lowest frequency and reflect the informal development experiences of female mid-level administrators:

1. Intentionally engaged supervisors allow for authentic mentoring of highly personalized needs of the mentee
2. Female mid-level administrators use observation of experienced leaders in key situations to learn appropriate responses to behaviors
3. Putting a strong emphasis on building strong relationships with stakeholders
4. Gender is one of many dimensions of diversity, deeply influencing participants' experiences
5. Having a psychologically safe space where women can engage on how to effectively navigate gender-nuanced situations
6. Barriers to seeking mentors that can assist with unique or varying problems or challenges
7. Sought support from communities of practice with a high level of trust to navigate the nuances of gender-related topics
8. Regularly reflecting on how leadership style is congruent with personal values
9. Intentionally seeking aspiring women leaders to mentor

Data Analysis

The researcher collected and analyzed data from 16 participant interviews to understand the informal leadership development experiences of female mid-level administrators in private nonprofit higher education. The data were collected through individual interviews conducted in a virtual environment. Interviews were semi structured with open-ended questions that guided participants to explore their experiences with informal leadership development.

Upon completion of the interviews and data collection, the researcher transcribed the interviews, sought clarification from participants where needed, and reviewed the data. After analyzing the data collected, the researcher identified nine major themes that aligned with the study's research question and therefore, were deemed significant. Table 3 illustrates the frequencies and sources for each theme in order from highest to lowest.

Table 3

Theme, Sources, and Frequency: Highest to Lowest Frequency

Theme	Number of sources	Frequency
Intentionally engaged supervisors allows for authentic mentoring of highly personalized needs of the mentee	13	31
Putting a strong emphasis on building strong relationships with stakeholders	12	32
Female mid-level administrators use observation of experienced leaders in key situations to learn appropriate responses or behaviors	12	22
Gender is one of many dimensions of diversity, deeply influencing participants' experiences	7	15

Having a psychologically safe space where women mentors can engage on how to effectively navigate gender-sensitive situations	7	12
Barriers to seeking mentors that can assist with unique or varying problems or challenges	7	10
Sought support from communities of practice with a high level of trust to navigate the nuances of gender-related topics	6	10
Regularly reflecting on how leadership style is congruent to personal values (be true to who you are)	6	10
Intentionally seeking aspiring women leaders to mentor	5	7

Descriptions of Findings and Themes

This study investigated the informal leadership development experiences of female mid-level administrators in private nonprofit higher education. Throughout the semi-structured interviews, some participants were very open about their experiences and eager to share. Others grappled with the personal nature of the interview questions and the extent to which they were willing to openly discuss their experiences. However, as each interview progressed, participants became more willing to be open and candid about their thoughts and experiences.

The remainder of this chapter describes study findings through the exploration of the nine themes that emerged from the data gathered during the interviews. The participants' rich descriptions are used to support each theme, provide context, and illustrate each finding.

Intentionally Engaged Supervisors Allow for Authentic Mentoring of Highly Personalized Needs

The research question in this study sought to identify the informal leadership development experiences of female mid-level administrators in private nonprofit higher education. The analysis of the data revealed one of the study's major findings: Having intentionally engaged supervisors allows for authentic mentoring of highly personalized needs. This was the most frequently occurring theme, appearing in 13 sources with a frequency count of 31 (Table 4).

Table 4

Theme, Source, and Frequency: Critical Role of Supervisor

Theme	Number of sources	Frequency
Intentionally engaged supervisors allows for authentic mentoring of highly personalized needs	13	31

Based on their responses to the research question for the study, participants shared the valuable and often critical role their supervisors played in providing personalized growth and development opportunities. Most participants spoke positively of critical relationships with key supervisors encountered during their career journey and emphasized the importance they placed on the relationship. These specific relationships were often credited as providing both foundational and ongoing opportunities for the development of key leadership skills. The personal nature of the relationship, combined with the specific and intentional interest of the supervisor in the participant's

development and growth, allowed for deep learning customized to the individual needs of the participant.

Although the supervisors described by the participants were predominantly female, the gender of the supervisor did not appear to play a significant role in this overall theme. Rather, the experiences were defined by the interest level of the supervisor in the participant, the relationship with the supervisor, and the role of the relationship in creating an authentic mentoring experience that contributed to the participant's leadership development.

Participant 4 shared one of many examples regarding the value of intentional mentorship from their supervisor. Participant 4, a director, had extensive experience in higher education and placed great emphasis on how she shows up as a supervisor to both her staff and others. This emphasis is due in part to her experiences with her supervisors over the years. When asked about her previous leadership development in informal spaces, she spoke at length regarding the depth of her relationship with a specific supervisor early in her career, the level of interest the supervisor took, and its impact on her long-term professional perspective. They had a very deep relationship, with the supervisor acting as a sponsor at times. For example, the supervisor taught her not only the logistics of the job but also how to navigate the institutional hierarchy, serve the community, and manage the needs of her staff. She received opportunities and access to development she might not otherwise have had. The impact of the supervisor's interest was noteworthy in how Participant 4 developed as a leader and continues to lead:

> When somebody does that for you, it has helped me with relationship with staff, because I was mentored that way. It really showed me how I wanted to lead as a

leader, um, so I would say that made the biggest impact on me. … So, I think she was the one that kind of gave me hope of my future.

The authenticity of the relationship played a role in the mentoring experiences of many participants in the study. Participants described how authenticity allowed their supervisors to serve as mentors and guide them in learning to navigate different and potentially difficult situations on an everyday basis. The participants often described these personalized interactions as more conversational rather than instructional. This intentional approach by the supervisor created the ability to personalize the feedback in a way that met the unique and specific needs of the participant.

This conversational type of experience, although pervasive in the data, can best be seen in the responses of Participant 3, who described how her supervisor at the time was a natural builder of talent and had taken an interest in her development. This was of particular importance to her, given that mobility was an issue for her with children at home and not feeling she could relocate her family to advance her career. She described how after meetings, her supervisor would take time to ask her intentional questions about what she had observed in the meeting and what she thought of these observations. Through these interactions, he drew out conversation to help make meaning of her observations, providing insight into the dynamics of the institution's political landscape and helping her acquire additional skills while limiting the need to change jobs. She described this as "beginning to understand the dynamics of teams and decision making and of power, really, I think, came into full bloom through the kinds of questions he asked."

Although being asked questions by their supervisor to provoke reflection and growth proved valuable, some described the ability to ask questions in response as another benefit. This proved important for the participants when they encountered difficult or new situations by providing a feeling of security about asking questions. When describing the value of this ability, Participant 3 stated: “You also have freedom to ask questions, because asking a question is not seen as a weakness.” Feeling positive about asking questions allowed for an even deeper level of personalized mentoring, because the participant could address the areas where they felt they needed assistance.

Participant 15, a current director, also spoke of the value of having a supervisor who created space for asking questions. In previous roles, she had worked in an environment where things were accepted as they were and rarely were processes or decisions questioned. Learning how to navigate nuances without making waves, she was hyperaware of institutional politics and unwilling to question the actions of others or seek guidance on how to respond because of the institutional culture. However, she described a new supervisor who provided an opportunity to discuss in confidence specific situations and scenarios with which she struggled and ask for guidance. This proved instrumental to her as a leader and provided the confidence to make needed changes in her department and how she interacts with other departments. She attributed this shift to the intentional engagement of her supervisor who had made the space for her to discuss what worked and what did not and ask for additional feedback and guidance specific to a situation.

Having an engaged supervisor also allowed for a higher level of risk-taking built on a level of trust. Participant 16 described a time earlier in her career when she had observed her male peers being informally mentored by other male supervisors, but she

never felt she benefited from that type of relationship with a supervisor. She could not say that this was due to gender but stated that she could not help but notice that her male colleagues were picked out and mentored by the male supervisors. She felt the difference when she moved to the supervision of a female supervisor who took an interest in her development. She described how having a strong relationship with this supervisor, built on a significant level of trust, provided her the courage to take risks and try new things. This led to leadership growth and proved beneficial in allowing her to try out new strategies and forms of communication in her role. Knowing that her supervisor "has her back" gave her the confidence to draw boundaries and make changes she previously did not feel she could do. This level of confidence, built through the interactions with and engagement from her supervisor, ultimately resulted in her developing new skills and furthering her leadership abilities.

As participants grew in their careers and began seeking advancement, the role of their supervisors also shifted from leadership training to helping with the next step in their careers. However, they still spoke of the value of having a supervisor take interest in them as critical to providing personalized development and access to opportunities. The mentoring focus simply shifted from developing as a leader in their current job to providing access and opportunities to gain skills for additional responsibility or higher-level roles. For example, some participants, such as Participant 8, came into higher education with leadership experience from another career. Participant 8 came from K-12 education and brought with her previously established mentoring relationships. She spoke highly of these mentors and their impact on her career leading up to her time in higher education. However, once in higher education and after spending several years as a

program director at her university, she was ready to move into higher levels of leadership. Participant 8 described how her supervisor at the time, a dean, went above and beyond to provide her with opportunities to help her gain the skills and knowledge to take the next step in her career.

> She did such a great job of setting me up to either be the next dean there or know what I needed to do to get a dean's job. She sent me to conferences, she talked me through the budget, would give me opportunities that I might not have otherwise.

Participant 10, an associate dean, also had worked at different institutions and industries prior to being hired at her current institution, bringing with her leadership experience. She spoke very openly and fondly of her experience at her current institution and the opportunities for growth and advancement provided to her by the dean of her school. She spoke at length regarding the uniqueness of her role and the value of having her supervisor, the dean, provide customized support. He showed her how they did things or what needed to be done and provided opportunities to "get her hands wet and try some of these things." And when an opportunity to take on more responsibility arrived, she could take it on successfully, resulting in a rather meteoric rise in the hierarchy of the department.

As an associate dean, Participant 11 had a similar experience with her supervisor, a dean. She had also brought extensive experience from her roles prior to entering higher education. When asked about her mentoring experiences, she spoke of the most impactful ones being outside the higher education industry. However, she felt the dean she worked under as an associate dean taught her an important skill regarding advocacy that she continues to use today. During their years working together, he took the time to show her

how to advocate for her college or school through the budget and by pushing back on antiquated processes. She spoke of an innovative approach to the budget and how the dean did not hesitate to pool resources to provide more significant support for students. His approach of using the budget as a form of advocacy was significant to her learning and is something she continues to leverage today in her position as dean.

Although experiences across participants varied, the commonality in this theme was having the intentional engagement—i.e., time and attention—of their direct supervisor. This level of interest allowed for customized and unique mentoring based on their individual needs. This intentional emphasis ultimately led to a feeling of increased self-confidence as leaders, growth in their roles, and leadership development.

Putting a High Emphasis on Building Strong Relationships with Stakeholders

The second theme that emerged from the data was that participants placed a high emphasis on building strong relationships with stakeholders. This theme reflects the high value that participants placed on relationships and how they use their soft skills to lean on these relationships as a form of informal learning. This theme had a source count of 12 and a frequency count of 32 (Table 5).

Table 5

Theme, Source, and Frequency: Emphasis on Relationships

Theme	Number of sources	Frequency
Putting a high emphasis on building strong relationships with stakeholders	12	32

Participants discussed their ability related to and preference for building strong relationships in the workplace as a way of leadership development in an informal environment. Participants repeatedly discussed their intentional efforts to build relationships with those they work with to grow professionally and learn from the experience and expertise of others. Additionally, they made intentional efforts to build relationships to accomplish their job requirements successfully on a day-to-day basis. An important aspect of this theme is that relationships at all levels of the hierarchy were discussed, as were relationships across departmental lines. Although position level played a role for some participants, many of the relationships that participants emphasized on were due to the other individual's area of expertise rather than position in the hierarchy. For most participants, these relationships were described as a way to increase job performance and meet institutional goals, rather than seeking advancement. They used the information gleaned from the relationship to become a better leader.

Some participants spoke of long-term relationships, some stretching back to early in their career. They reflected on their ability to create and maintain deep connections in a professional environment over time and how that influenced their ongoing professional development. Participant 1, a director who had worked in higher education for 15 years, described a small collection of individuals with whom she continues to connect long after they worked together at the same institutions early in her career. They had initially connected over understanding content and policy relating to their roles and continued their relationship over the years as they grew in their careers. She described their ongoing conversations as covering "everything," from how they feel about their jobs to brainstorming ideas on how to handle challenging situations. Participant 5, who had

worked in higher education for 20 years, described similar long-term relationships that she built at the very beginning of her career as a way of learning the basics of her role. She still connected with one individual as a way to grow and develop, because they both work in the same area, although at different institutions. “When I need technical advice or I need a fresh perspective, not inside the university, I call [name]. … I can tap into her experience.”

Not all strong relationships discussed were long term. Many participants in this theme also described how they emphasized building strong relationships with their current peers. Doing this provided them with an opportunity to expand their skills or solve problems they would not be able to do on their own. Participant 4 provided an example of this when she described in depth her relationship with several colleagues and how she leans on those relationships to overcome her weaknesses. When asked to elaborate on how she accomplishes this, she discussed first identifying her strengths and weaknesses. Once she fully understood herself, she could intentionally seek out, build, and cultivate relationships as a way of filling her knowledge and experience gaps.

Participant 2 described how she sought relationships with stakeholders as a way to understand better the dynamics or bigger picture of a situation. She spoke in depth about one relationship she would turn to for assistance when she entered a new role and struggled to understand some of its nuances. She recounted how an associate dean would make requests or discuss topics that she found very confusing, and she was not sure how to respond. Being new to her role, she hesitated to continuously ask for clarification. However, because of her strong relationship with another leader in the institution, she felt

comfortable seeking assistance and asking about the meaning and bigger picture of the request. This helped her understand the nuances of what was being requested.

> She doesn't know how to speak about it, and I would not understand what she's talking about; she's talking a different language. And so, I'd have to ask [name], "What now? What does that mean? She's asking for [pause]. … What is that really? Why are we doing that?"

The emphasis on relationship building often took on a collaborative approach, as described by the participants. Many participants spoke of the value they placed on relationship building and the extent to which they intentionally built cross-departmental collaborative relationships as a way of seeking other points of view. As an example, Participant 15, a director, talked about when she needed to put together a strategic plan for accomplishing her department's goals. Understanding that she lacked skills in some areas needed to accomplish this, she intentionally sought out a director in another department to build a plan that benefited both departments. She described how her emphasis on creating a strong relationship allowed them to work well together and learn from each other, drawing on each other's experience and skills. Because of this emphasis, she built a level of trust that allowed them to learn openly from each other.

Participant 3, a dean, described how she also took a relationship-building approach to forming collaborative relationships across institutions as a form of development not only for her but for the profession as a whole. She acknowledged that she did not like needing to make hard decisions independently. One way she would overcome this was to seek out others in similar roles, even at other institutions. She also said that to advance the profession, collaboration is needed. Therefore, she emphasized

building relationships with others and valued collaboration as a way of gaining additional perspectives and viewpoints. “On the one hand, we’re competitors. On the other hand, we’re collaborators, and I have benefited from that over my career.”

Participant 5 described how having strong relationships allowed her to solve problems and provided opportunities for growth. As a lifelong learner, she always looked for new ways to push herself and try new things as a form of both personal and professional growth. She revealed how at any given time, she liked to take on at least one new challenge as a way of ensuring growth by stepping outside of her comfort zone. Because of this, she often found herself in unfamiliar territory but could lean on the strong relationships she had built over time to find answers and solutions.

> I feel like there was this hand from the universe, always pushing me into these situations where there was no playbook and I had to use my resources and people and connections and ability to reach out and find the answers and find the way. And I think every time I did it, you learn new techniques, you learn new ways to solve problems.

Observation of Experienced Leaders in Key Situations to Learn Appropriate Responses or Behaviors

Further analysis revealed the emergence of a third theme: Participants observed experienced leaders in key situations to learn appropriate responses or behaviors. This theme reflects the participants’ extensive use of observation as a form of leadership development and learning how to navigate the landscape of their institutions. This theme had a source count of 12 and a frequency of 22 (Table 6).

Table 6

Theme, Source, and Frequency: Observation of Experienced Leaders

Theme	Number of sources	Frequency
Female mid-level administrators observed experienced leaders in key situations to learn appropriate responses or behaviors	12	22

Observations of others were repeatedly discussed as a primary way participants understood not only acceptable behavior and norms in their institution but also how they desired to be perceived as a leader. Participants came across as mindful of fitting into the institutional culture and desired to understand institutional practices and norms to accomplish this. Participants also appeared mindful of how they were perceived as leaders and used observation of other experienced leaders to distinguish between desirable and less desirable leadership styles. Many discussed how early in their careers, or as they transitioned into new or higher-level positions, they would watch other leaders closely to better understand these practices, reflect on the observation, and then react accordingly. It is important to note that they used observation due to a lack of desire to ask questions or for guidance in this area. Rather, they preferred to use observations to learn on their own.

As female mid-level administrators, some participants would observe a more experienced female leader and how she approached leadership. Participants described how they used these observations as a model for reflection on how they should approach leadership as a woman. For example, Participant 9 noted that early in her career, she had the benefit of two strong female leaders. She took the opportunity to "lean into their skills and kind of watch them, how they moved, how they communicated with others." When

her children were born, after she had spent a few years in the workforce, she made the decision to leave the workforce to be a stay-at-home mom. Later, upon returning to the workforce and needing to balance home and work while pursuing advancement in her career, she again found other female leaders who reflected her desired leadership style to observe. She continued to surround herself with other female leaders intentionally as a way of continuous observation and reflection on how she wants to be perceived as a female leader.

Observation of a more experienced female leader's style allowed for a shift in how Participant 16 approached challenging situations in which her expertise or knowledge was questioned. By observing the more experienced female leader, she learned how to use her soft skills to get her point across and assert her expertise. She described how she continuously watched the other leader's approach in meetings of using active listening, acknowledging the other party, and staying focused on the common ground in the given situation. Adapting this style and embracing her natural soft skills had been beneficial to her overall development. However, she felt it specifically benefited her as a female leader.

Although some respondents, such as Participant 16, observed female leaders from a positive perspective, learning could also occur from observing negative behaviors. Participant 5 described a time earlier in her career when she had an idea during a meeting but rather than express it to the group at large, she chose to tell the male colleague sitting next to her. The male colleague then announced the idea to the group, giving no credit to Participant 5. This stayed with her, clarifying that she would need to find the confidence and courage to share her ideas. However, understanding that as a female leader, she

would need to be intentional in her approach to ensure her ideas would be heard at times, Participant 5 described how she used observation to better understand these situations. She spoke of how she intentionally observed and reflected on negative situations and what could have been done differently to produce a more positive result.

> I would observe a female leader—I don't know if being dismissed is the right way to say it, but perhaps not being taken as seriously. And I would look at, you know, all of the elements of that scenario and try and understand and learn from it.

Understanding the norms and unofficial practices of their institution was also important to the participants in relation to this theme as a way of fitting into the institutional culture. Their ability to understand the culture was enhanced by observing the behaviors of other leaders in their environment. When asked about institutional norms and unofficial practices, participants regularly responded that they received no training and simply needed to watch and learn from others. Participants were mindful of their actions and how they might be perceived by others, but they stopped short of seeking guidance in this area. None of the participants reported asking for guidance or direction on norms, accepted practices, or general institutional culture. Rather, several spoke about taking the approach of not immediately engaging in the environment and instead being a quiet observer of more experienced leaders as a way of acquiring this knowledge. Participant 12 summarized the idea of learning through observation by responding that "you kind of have to watch, kind of saddle up next to somebody that you trust, and just kind of do what they do and watch how they navigate the situation."

In her role as an associate dean, Participant 2 described how she would watch the dean interact with other leaders to better understand their communication styles and

norms of how meetings would run. However, she also reflected on how she observed individuals who violated accepted norms and practices and learned what not to do.

> I think I learned the most by seeing super uncomfortable things go down. … And then you're like, "OK, that's not something I want to do. "… But nobody ever said, "Hey, you may not want to do that, or you may want to do this, or this how the culture is." I just learned it.

Due to the lack of formal leadership training, participants spoke at length about how they would observe experienced leaders as one way to fill the training gap. Through this process of observation, they gleaned both positive and negative approaches to achieving how they desired to be seen or not seen as a leader. When describing her leadership style, Participant 1 clearly stated her commitment to being a transparent leader and the value she places on this style. She described feeling strongly that as a leader, it is always better to provide as much information and background as possible. Participant 1 illustrated how this belief and style evolved from watching a previous leader's style and how she approached change management during a tumultuous time at a previous institution. She appreciated this approach from her leader, and she credited her desire to be seen as a transparent leader and how she models this approach to observing this other leader's style.

An unexpected aspect of observation came from Participant 6 as she described her approach when she moved into a new role. She had been in her previous position for almost a decade and had become quite outspoken due to her experience. She described her style as participatory and engaging, particularly in groups. However, she explained

how in her new role, she decided to step back into being more of an observer, spending more time listening and watching those with more experience as a way of learning.

Participants also used observation to learn the basics of the job when other training or informal learning was not available. Across all participants, none had received any formal training in how to perform the primary functions of their job. Although some described spending time researching policies to assist in certain areas of their role, they received nothing from their institution regarding leadership. Time and again, participants responded that they utilized observation as a supplement to learning.

Gender is One of Many Dimensions of Diversity, Deeply Influencing Participants' Experiences

The fourth theme to emerge from the data focused on gender as one of many dimensions of diversity that deeply influenced participants' experiences. This theme was significant in that it indicated the degree to which intersectionality played a role in the informal leadership development experiences of female mid-level administrators in private nonprofit higher education. This theme had a source count of seven and a frequency count of 15 (Table 7).

Table 7

Theme, Sources, and Frequency: Gender as a Dimension of Diversity

Theme	Number of sources	Frequency
Gender is one of many dimensions of diversity, deeply influencing participants' experiences	7	15

The common link of all participants in this study was being a female mid-level administrator in private nonprofit higher education. Being female tied them together in many ways and experiences, both personally and professionally. However, gender was only one aspect of how the participants in this study defined themselves and their experiences. For some, their lived experiences were closely tied to other aspects of their identity—at times, these different aspects were inseparable. This theme is significant in that it expresses the extent of intersectionality's role in the lived experiences of female mid-level administrators and how it can create distinctly different lived experiences.

Every participant in this theme clearly stated they did not see their lived experiences as simply a reflection of being female, but rather being female coupled with one or more other dimensions of diversity. These dimensions covered many areas for the participants and ranged in level of influence from one aspect and participant to another. It should also be noted that although all participants in this study reflected intersectionality in some capacity, this theme only reflects those who distinctly spoke of how this intersectionality played a role in their lived experiences.

Some participants described gender coupled with race or ethnicity as influencing their experiences. Participant 10 described an experience earlier in her career at a different private nonprofit institution than her current institution. At the time, she was highly educated with multiple degrees and in a PhD program. Additionally, because she had previous leadership experience both inside and outside higher education, she knew she was capable of taking on higher-level roles and responsibilities. However, in the department in which she worked, she encountered a barrier she perceived as not looking like the clients they served. She stated it was "not as much gender as it was more race or

ethnic background," such that it may have been acceptable to be a woman but certainly not acceptable to be a woman of color.

> And the vibe there with [organization] was very much like you can be in the role you're in now, but you're never going to move up. And the unspoken part of that was more, "You don't look like our donors. We don't want you on the front lines communicating with the donors or basically engaging with donors." It was never said, never explicitly stated, but that type of, like, a background type of thing.

Participant 11 reported similar experiences as a Black woman, rather than simply a woman. She explicitly stated that what she had experienced in her life and career was a result of this intersectionality in her identity. During her semi structured interview, she communicated multiple examples of these experiences during her career and how she responded to them. In one example, she said that after the experience, she knew she could no longer work at the institution and opted to leave in response. As a way of finding support and connection in her experiences, she described a group formed early in her career that she still connects with twice a year. She regarded it as the most significant peer group she has connected with regarding her development.

> We literally are all over the country, and we all happen to be Black women. And so, um, so we were able to talk about kind of, um, the racism that existed, and in the academy, the obstacles that we were being presented with, um, you know, the fact that we were being held to different standards than our colleagues and our peers, and it was so obvious.

Participant 13 also highlighted being a woman of color. She further described how being a woman of color and a first-generation college student born and raised in

another country was “not an easy pathway.” As a first-generation college graduate whose father had limited education, she discussed how she did not have the navigational capital that others had in higher education and lacked an understanding of how structures are built into systems. Because of this and the lack of a formalized development program, she simply put her head down and did good work, “just praying and hoping that was sufficient for the school.” When asked about experiences or challenges that she felt she had encountered that her male counterparts did not, she recalled an example that coupled gender with race: when she was appointed to an associate dean position. Her male counterparts questioned her competence and abilities in the role, questioning why it was not an elected position and why they were not consulted prior to her being appointed, even though it historically had been an appointed role. She pointed out that “if you go down in history, the past 18 years that I’ve been here, and they’ve all been appointed roles. But it wasn’t until a woman of color stepped into this role—suddenly, that’s the question.”

Participant 5 spoke at length about the impact of being female coupled with her age and ethnicity. Appearing younger than her actual age during most of her career often influenced how others perceived her and her abilities. She felt that this, tied with gender and being Latina, had played a significant role in her professional life. The three characteristics together deeply influenced her leadership perspective and how she approached situations as she moved through her career. Always mindful of how she would be perceived, particularly as a woman, she described how her identity would prevent her from speaking up or providing input for fear that she would be judged.

> So, for me it was always an age thing, and then also, being Latina was another factor along with being female. So, I think the three always traveled together in my head, and I was always hyperaware of all three. … I was always mindful of what I would say out loud for all those reasons, and it was that fear of being judged for being female, for looking really young, and you know, for being Latina, like the weight of it all. It has never gone away. It doesn't go away. I still have it.

Several participants mentioned age as a common factor that when coupled with gender, created a different experience from other women. Some participants described the added challenges of being a young female leader, particularly when their colleagues were older men. Similar to Participant 5, some participants simply looked younger than their actual age. For example, Participant 7 described the challenges of not being taken as seriously as a department chair because of how young she looked and that others often mistook her for a student. When she described this frequent scenario, she was open about the extent to which it frustrated her and that the combination of being female and appearing young, created barriers for her ability to be effective in her role at times.

Being female brought the participants of this study into a shared experience. However, this theme represents other dimensions of diversity that when coupled with gender, created unique experiences that were potentially no longer shared with others.

A Psychologically Safe Space Where Women Mentors can Engage on How to Effectively Navigate Gender-Nuanced Situations

Another finding from this study is the fifth theme: that participants experienced an informal leadership development experience of having a psychologically safe space

where women mentors can engage regarding how to navigate gender-nuanced situations effectively. This theme had seven sources and a frequency count of 12 (see Table 8).

Table 8

Theme, Sources, and Frequency: Psychologically Safe Space

Theme	Number of sources	Frequency
A psychologically safe space where women mentors can engage on how to effectively navigate gender-nuanced situations	7	12

Throughout the semi structured interviews, participants described informal leadership development experiences that occurred across gender lines. Many described valuable mentor relationships they deemed critical to their informal learning with both male and female mentors. The data analysis made it clear that aspects of informal learning were not gender nuanced. However, a theme that emerged when describing mentoring relationships was the value of having a female mentor to understand or provide perspective or guidance when gender-nuanced situations did occur. Having a female mentor who understood these nuances and how to approach them led to a higher level of trust than participants may have experienced with a male mentor. Participants expressed gratitude for having female mentors who understood what Participant 7 referred to as the “complexities of women leading” and created a psychologically safe space to engage openly on how to navigate their role as female leaders.

This complexity took many forms, including how being female affected others’ perceptions of them as leaders. Most participants were acutely aware of how they were perceived by others, particularly their male colleagues. Therefore, they were intentional

in how they managed this perception. When asked about this experience, Participant 7 described the complexities of leading as a woman by noting what often happens when she walks into a room of male colleagues:

> You're standing outside the hall, and then you walk in and everything changes. The tone changes, the topics change—it just changes. So, you have to be very sensitive and aware of that, and how you are entering into that space, and how you're perceived in that space. And, uh, what you need to do to be heard in that space to be seen as a valid and reliable source of information, and someone who should be respected. And [it's] not that you walk in and they don't respect you. But you're just, you're just seen differently.

Understanding how to navigate this situation and how she was perceived as a female leader was not something Participant 7 figured out on her own. She described how she had learned many aspects of leadership by observing previous chairs and other leaders and intentionally building relationships with them as a way of learning. However, she credited a dean who served as a female mentor for creating a space where she offered a female perspective based on her experience and at times even provided talking points for gender-nuanced situations. She credited this dean for engaging with her and showing her how she might adjust when walking into a room of men versus a room of women and how she may be perceived in those spaces.

Participant 13 had a similar relationship with a current female mentor who helped her understand the perceptions of others that she did not know existed. Her female mentor helped her understand how dynamics may play out in a room, how gender-nuanced situations may arise, and how she should respond. As an example of the

importance of this female mentor, she described a situation that occurred shortly after being promoted to her current position. As a first-generation female college student who described herself as lacking social capital growing up, she highlighted what she described as being "quite naïve":

> We came to our first meeting as soon as I got into that position, and right away I was asked to take notes for the meeting. And so, I did, you know. But immediately, that mentor told me right after that, "That's not your job. You're director of programs. You're not the secretary, not the assistant." And so, for me to understand that was really, really important and to help me set boundaries is really, really important, because I would have continued to do it that way. I didn't know any other way.

Another participant discussed being provided the space to discuss how her personality and communication style affect the perception of her as a female leader. As a naturally direct communicator and being concerned that overly direct communication can be seen as aggressive coming from a woman, Participant 9 sought guidance on how to approach situations she felt required directness. She described concern about how her communication would be received and as a result, how others would view her as a leader. However, seeking guidance on how she could soften her approach in a conversation without diminishing her message helped her manage how she is seen as a leader. The mentor from whom she sought guidance created a psychologically safe space where she felt she could openly express her concerns about being perceived as too aggressive and engage in meaningful conversation about what this meant for her as a female leader.

Participants also referenced understanding the complexities of women as leaders in the sense of how their external lives can influence their professional lives. Participant 12 openly spoke about the impact of being a working mom with children at home and the resulting limitations on her ability to attend some afterhours work events. She also described an opportunity to attend a weeklong leadership development program but missed the evening activities because she needed to drive home to be with her children after the formal events of the day concluded. However, she also stressed that female complexities extended beyond the role of being a mom when it came to responsibilities and approaches to situations outside of the work environment. She described the value in having a female leader who understands the difference between how male and female colleagues might approach or view similar personal situations. As an example, Participant 12 described this from the perspective of taking care of parents.

> I think she has on an awareness of, um, family issues at play … and it's not so much kids, but they have parents, and they understand sort of the issues of—sort of being the responsible daughter, which I think plays out differently, like, when my male colleagues have something happen with their mother. It's, like, very on logistical, right? Like, they'll be like, "I need to fly and move my mother to this new suite, or I need to sign her up for this home that she's going to be sent to." But it's very, like, bureaucratic and paperwork. Whereas my female peers who are leaders, um, it's the softer stuff. It's like, um, "My mom's lonely. I need to go and check in. I need to spend a week with my mom. Is it OK if I work virtually?" Or I mean, there's this—it's a different kind of responsibility that I see, um, that typically falls on gender lines. And so, um, I think it is advantageous to me when

> I can navigate that space with people that also sort of understand the same issues are at play.

Participant 12 further explained how at one time, almost the entire leadership team of her institution were women, which she described as “pretty profound.” Although she was surrounded by other female leaders, she leaned on her relationship with her female direct supervisor, the provost, for gender-nuanced conversation and guidance.

> I could count on her for perspective. I could go to her for her take on a certain situation. I just trusted her judgment. I trusted her understanding of the variables. Um, so, she was somebody that I could bounce ideas off of, um, in a way that I didn’t feel if you ever put myself or my school in jeopardy by doing so.

Participants described the ability to be vulnerable as leaders as a common experience. Engaging with female mentors provided a psychologically safe space that allowed for open expression without fear of looking weak, not knowing what they were doing, or overstepping a perceived boundary. Participant 7, a department chair, expressed that she had very purposefully only had women mentors throughout her career. When asked if this was intentional, she responded affirmatively because it allowed for a level of vulnerability and the ability to share information openly. They had created a safe space where she could share in a way that she simply did not feel comfortable doing with men.

Barriers to Seeking Mentors Who can Assist with Unique or Varying Problems or Challenges

Encountering barriers when seeking mentors who can assist with unique or varying problems or challenges emerged as a theme in the data. Participants discussed challenges with finding mentors for various reasons, including lack of awareness of

needing one and the risk of how needing one may be perceived. This theme had a source count of seven and a frequency of ten (Table 9).

Table 9

Theme, Sources, and Frequency: Barriers to Mentors

Theme	Number of sources	Frequency
Hardship when seeking mentors that can assist with unique or varying problems or challenges	7	10

When asked what they would change about their mentoring experiences, participants commonly reported the desire to have more intentional mentoring as a means of leadership development. A lack of intentionality on the part of their institution left them to seek mentors on their own, and due to this lack of intentionality, they found they often encountered hardships. Some did not know they should seek a mentor. Others opted not to ask for a mentor due to how they perceived asking for help may make them look. They said they felt left on their own to figure things out and expressed they would have benefited from intentional intervention by their institution. Participants expressed a desire to have their institution provide this type of development, whether formal or informal mentoring programs or another type of leadership development program. Participant 9 summarized this by saying: “You know, someone that I can always just go to, and I think that’s something that I have been missing. So yeah, definitely, I would change that.”

Participant 16 shared her experience with a lack of mentoring early in her career. As with the other participants who discussed this theme, her institution did not provide

any formal mentoring. She stated she simply did not know that she should ask for one or seek one out. Therefore, she had to figure things out on her own.

> I think it would have been great to have someone in leadership intentionally mentor me, definitely, especially when I was earlier in my career. Um, I didn't even know, you know, to ask for mentoring. I didn't—I just didn't know that it was out there. I just thought, "OK, I'm, you know, just supposed to do my job and figure it out." And that was kind of the expectation.

Participant 13 shared a similar experience early in her career not knowing she should seek a mentor. Reflecting on her culture and status as a young mother, she did not have access or the opportunity to seek mentors compared with some of her colleagues.

> I come from a different culture altogether. … Came here, the first gen [generation] to graduate and to be in higher ed [education], so I never knew, I didn't know that I could go and seek out mentorship or I could network. … That's one of the navigational capital I didn't have for higher education. Um, but in the same vein, I have to say that my personal life, you know, being a mother to really young children and the—having to publish or perish at that time, I would go to conferences, do my presentation, and come right back, so I didn't have what some of my colleagues have in terms of the networks that they were able to create because they had the energy and the resources and the capital to be able to stay and attend those after-conference meetings and, you know, events and luncheons and all of those kinds of things. So partially, I didn't realize the extent to which those that that would have been really, really helpful for me because just life happens, and if you're a young mother and you have a young family—I also take

> care of my father. Those things really, you are my priority, but now in reflection, I'm seeing that those were really important ways in which to have gained mentorship.

Although some participants discussed their lack of knowledge about seeking a mentor as a hardship, this was not the case with all participants regarding this theme. Some participants knew they would benefit from a mentor but did not seek one because they did not want to ask for help. For example, Participant 7 expressed her desire to have had more intentional mentorship earlier in her career. She expressed her wish that she had been paired with a mentor as part of the institutional process so she would not need to ask for help. When asked why she did not want to ask for a mentor once she recognized she would benefit from one, she responded that she thought it might be seen "as a sign of weakness."

For some, intentional mentoring seemed available but was limited based on gender. Participant 16 reflected on an experience with intentional mentoring earlier in her career and the difference between when a man was the leader versus a woman.

> There were definite intentional mentoring relationships provided to male mid-level managers versus female [ones], because the leaders were male. So, I think that's probably the biggest—like, when I had female leadership, I would say I was invested in more than when I didn't. Hmm. I think that was a big difference, and that could be because of it being, uh, faith-based, you know, private higher education. There's kind of some of those lines where it's like men with men and women with women sometimes. Um, I don't—I can't—I don't really know exactly the reason for that, but I do know that that was felt.

Sought Support from Communities of Practice with a High Level of Trust to Navigate the Nuances of Gender-Related Topics

The sixth theme that emerged from this study involved participants' use of communities of practice to acquire informal leadership development. Further, these participants specifically sought support from communities of practice to navigate the nuances of gender-related topics. This theme had a source count of six and a frequency count of 10 (Table 10).

Table 10

Theme, Sources, and Frequency: Communities of Practice

Theme	Number of sources	Frequency
Sought support from communities of practice with a high level of trust to navigate the nuances of gender-related topics	6	10

When asked about their experience with communities of practice as a form of informal leadership development, most if not all participants in this study could recall at least one community of practice from which they drew leadership development benefits. However, the significance of this theme is the role of communities of practice with a high level of trust in providing a connection to other female leaders to assist with navigating the nuances of gender-related topics. Separate from female mentoring relationships, which involved an element of hierarchy, these communities of practice allowed the participants to discuss challenges or experiences related to gender openly with their peers and find support through common ground. Finding common ground based on gender

allowed for more authentic conversation regarding topics they did not feel they could or wanted to discuss with their male colleagues.

Participant 12 best highlighted the reason for gender alignment in certain communities of practice when she described the difference between two separate communities of practice with which she connected. One involved a large group of deans and was not gender specific. The other featured only the female deans who were part of the larger group. When asked why there were two groups and why the female deans met independently, she described the type of gender-nuanced situations they discuss.

> I think the female group will cover the issues that we don't necessarily cover in the all-deans group. More work–life balance issues come up more often. On, uh, gender equity issues come up more often on just sort of supporting each other on such issues. One of the other deans said, "You know, I'm not going to renew my contract. I, you know, I know what the past deans got paid in my position, and I'm not making that. I'm not going to continue on unless they bring my salary up, you know." And so, yeah, that you know—just—I don't think that that discussion would have happened at the deans group as a whole, you know. I mean, it's much more sort of personal, individualized. Um, like does that—how does that meet your ears kind of thing. Yeah, that sounds about right.

Participant 8 described similar conversations in her role as a dean. An experienced leader who said peer groups are incredibly important, she had attended a leadership experience program outside of her institution designed to develop mid-level and senior-level administrators. Through this program, she connected with a small group of other women leaders who still get together about once a month to talk about various

issues that they face in their institutions, including gender-nuanced challenges. All of their institutions are heavily gendered, with most senior leaders and all presidents being male. As a group, they talk about the gender-influenced things they are expected to do and how they navigate those situations. The level of trust in the group allows for deep and meaningful conversations among the members to explore their experiences as female leaders.

The interactions with these specific communities of practice were generally not described as opportunities to solve problems, but rather to seek perspective or support for how they felt about a given situation. Some participants in this study appeared unsure at times whether a given situation was due to gender bias. For some, when they encountered these scenarios, they could lean on their communities of practice. In this sense, they could be termed "thought partners," as Participant 3 described. She elaborated on this term by explaining she liked to solve problems on her own but still found it helpful to have other female leaders to call and discuss a situation, particularly gender-nuanced issues. Through this interaction, she could seek support or another perspective, gaining reassurance or affirmation that "it's not just me."

Participant 13, an associate dean, also emphasized the value of having a group to share with and receive reassurance, describing how finding a community of practice of other South Asian women helped her feel empowered. Through their meetings, she observed leadership, and through their work and writings, she began to understand that she had something to offer. This community of practice helped her discover she had a level of expertise to share, and the group ultimately wrote a book.

> But what it gave me—it empowered me a little bit more through this experience, this community, that I actually had something to share, I had expertise, because prior to that nobody ever, you know—I didn't know. I was like, "What do I know?" In fact, I had [name] and I was saying something and [the person] goes, "Oh, she's a girl, what does she know?" So, that kind of stuck with me forever. But it wasn't until I actually published this book and for the last three or four years, three years or so, that I finally felt empowered through this community of South Asian women.

The significance of these communities of practice related to their high level of trust and personal nature, representing a place where women can be vulnerable and discuss issues relevant to them as female leaders. As described by some participants, they may have first met through an organized program, but their connection related to being like-minded in some way had kept them together over the years. Although no longer tied together by any official reason or requirement, they chose to maintain these relationships as a way of continuous connection and means of support.

Regularly Reflecting on How Leadership Style is Congruent to Personal Values

An additional theme that emerged from the data analysis was the participants' belief in the importance of remaining true to who they are and their value system. Regularly reflecting on how their leadership style is congruent with personal values had a source count of six and a frequency of 10 (Table 11).

Table 11

Theme, Sources, and Frequency: Leadership Style Congruency

Theme	Number of sources	Frequency
Regularly reflecting on how leadership style is congruent to personal values	6	10

Although smaller in frequency than other themes, this theme highlights the role of personal values and belief systems for participants. During interviews, this often came to light when they were asked what advice they would provide to aspiring female leaders who came to them seeking mentorship. Drawing from their experiences, they provided thoughtful responses that often highlighted the value they placed on being authentic and honoring their values in their role as leaders. These were highly personal answers, a reflection of their personal values and how along with their experiences, these values have guided them in who they are in the workplace and their leadership style.

Participant 4 discussed honoring herself as a female leader and the importance of being secure in her identity. During her semi structured interview, she spoke often of a mentor she had benefited from and how the mentor helped her be secure in drawing from both her softer side and her competitive side. Both of these traits are natural parts of her identity, yet they can be seen as incongruous. She described the importance of drawing from all parts of herself in her leadership style to remain true to her identity. She leaned on her mentor to discover how she could balance both traits and be comfortable with this style of leadership.

> To be who you are, and [that] it's OK to be a woman leader … it's OK to have a softer side, it's OK to lead with emotions sometimes. Sometimes you need that.

> Um, and as a woman, use your strengths, so use your intuition. Use your—use your heart, but you can still think logical, and you can get past some of the barriers that they, you know, or the generalizations that they say, and still be—still be goal driven. Still be competitive. I'm extremely competitive. Um, and it's OK to still have those traits as well. So, I think it was, you know, just kind of being OK in your own skin.

Every participant who discussed this theme spoke of the need to take time to reflect on self-identity and stay true to core personal values as a leader. For several participants, this meant leaning on their faith as a way of knowing who they are and for what they stand. Participant 14 referenced her faith as a guide multiple times during her interview. She said her faith gave her the confidence and courage to be true to who she is, and honoring this approach was an important part of her leadership style.

These participants said it was important to honor their core values and identity throughout their career. Two participants spoke about how this reflection and alignment with their personal values played a role in their decision whether to be a leader. Participant 3 explained:

> It's at least my intention to be the same person, no matter what role I'm in, formal or informal. So, I think for me, it's sort of knowing my core values and my core identity. So, changing job titles doesn't change fundamentally who I am. It changes the work I do, [but] it doesn't change who I am.

Participant 13 echoed this sentiment, describing the value she places on being an authentic leader who is true to her value system.

> I think for me, I don't know if it's advice, but I have shared with my colleagues before moving into this role that if there's anything in me that shifts or that changes because of my being in that role, then that would be my time for them to tell me I need to step down, because that's not who you are. And so, my biggest fear, and I don't know if it's advice or if it's through my spiritual background and upbringing, is that you don't let the job define you. You keep with the untested authenticity and integrity of who you are. And then the job—and then run the job through that lens, so that I don't have to do it like somebody else. I can do it as I would, through my humanity.

Intentionally Seeking Aspiring Women Leaders to Mentor

The final theme to emerge in this analysis is that participants intentionally sought aspiring women leaders to mentor. This theme reflects the actions that more seasoned participants took later in their careers based on reflecting on their experiences. These participants used those reflections as a way to determine the best way for them to serve as a mentor to aspiring female leaders. This theme had a source count of five and a frequency count of seven (Table 12).

Table 12

Theme, Sources, and Frequency: Seeking Women to Mentor

Theme	Number of sources	Frequency
Intentionally seeking aspiring women leaders to mentor	5	7

The last major theme in this study had the lowest frequency count; however, it remains a significant finding due to the participants who discussed this theme and their

intentional actions. These five participants were seasoned leaders who had reached a point where they intentionally transitioned into the role of a mentor rather than a mentee. The intentionality of their actions was driven by their experiences of being female leaders in higher education. Based on self-reflection regarding these positive and negative experiences, they took some form of intentional action to assist those who come after them. Their intent was to help younger female leaders avoid negative experiences as they developed in their careers, whenever possible.

Participant 3 had worked in higher education for 33 years and in leadership for 22 years. Throughout her interview, she discussed systemic challenges she encountered as a female leader during her career. Like other participants, she described being asked who was taking care of her kids and the challenges of not always being able to attend afterhours events due to needing to go home to her children. She described a time when her supervisor would take her male counterparts out to lunch to strategize but told her he would only take her to lunch if his wife also attended. This left her concerned that her department would not receive the same level of support as the others with male department heads. When asked about her mentoring experiences now, she shared that when she connects with peers in similar stages of their careers, they discuss how to move the industry forward. She captured the essence of this theme at a systemic level when she discussed these mentoring conversations with her colleagues.

> It's less [about] how do we deal with what's being done to us, but more [about] how do we strategically, um, speak into systemic things for future generations? Um, and so, yeah, I think the handoff has occurred from being mentored to mentoring, but even more trying to be a part of the systemic change.

Other participants spoke about everyday actions they take in response to gaps they experienced in their careers. For some, these are not only intentional but also personal actions based on a challenging experience. They had reflected on the challenges they overcame and now took steps to help others as a way of paying it forward by mentoring other aspiring female leaders. For example, Participant 5, who had worked in higher education for 20 years, described how she was almost never mentored by other women of her background (Latina) and at times, she had wondered if that was because she was doing something wrong. Her lack of female mentors early in her career inspired her to connect intentionally with younger women and provide them with the assistance she felt would have benefited her earlier in her career.

During her interview, Participant 13 reflected on her earlier experiences and the sense of isolation and not belonging, mostly due to being a mother of two young children. She described wishing she had a mentor in her early days and so in her current position, she mentors young faculty members. She captured the essence of the overall theme and perspective of the women in this group when she revealed that her intentions are to "share with them those things I learned by accident, those things I wished I had known."

Summary

This chapter provided a detailed overview of the study, purpose statement, research statement, and methodology. It included a comprehensive presentation and analysis of the data collected to understand the informal leadership development experiences of female mid-level administrators in private nonprofit higher education. The data, uncovered during semi structured interviews with 16 participants, were presented in nine themes. Of these nine themes, two represent unexpected findings.

Chapter V is the final chapter of this study. It outlines the major findings, unexpected findings, and conclusions drawn from the results of the study. Additionally, the final chapter includes implications for action, recommendations for further research, and concluding remarks and reflections.

CHAPTER V: FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to identify and describe the informal leadership experience of female mid-level administrators in private nonprofit higher education. The researcher utilized semi structured interviews with 16 female mid-level administrators to answer the research question: What are the informal leadership development experiences of female mid-level administrators in private nonprofit higher education? Using a phenomenological approach allowed the researcher to gather stories to identify and describe informal learning methods and strategies used by the participants.

The target population of this study included all female mid-level administrators in California's 145 private nonprofit 4-year Title IV institutions. Based on the target population, a sample of 16 participants was recruited. These 16 participants consisted of mid-level administrators from private nonprofit universities in California with at least 3 years of experience as mid-level administrators. Interviews took place between October and November 2022.

Major Findings

Following the data collection, the researcher transcribed and analyzed the data, coding it into themes. Based on the analysis of the data collected during the semi structured interviews, the researcher made the following findings.

Finding 1: Having an intentionally engaged supervisor allows for authentic mentoring of highly personalized needs.

The critical role of the direct supervisor in providing not only foundational development but also ongoing advancement opportunities was apparent during the interviews with the participants of this study. Thirteen of the 16 participants spoke about

the value of this relationship, with a frequency count of 31. They emphasized the degree of importance they place on these relationships and the significance of the supervisor being intentionally engaged with them as a person rather than simply providing oversight as a supervisor. This intentionality allowed for more authenticity, resulting in deeper learning customized to the individual needs of the participant.

Finding 2: A high emphasis is placed on building strong relationships with stakeholders as a form of learning.

The value these female mid-level leaders place on positive relationship building was evident throughout the interviews. They built these relationships as a means to grow professionally and learn from the experience and expertise of others, allowing them to expand their skills or solve problems they would not be able to do on their own. An important aspect of this finding is that because of this collaborative approach to learning, an emphasis on relationship building is placed at all levels of the institutional hierarchy and cross-departmentally to gain skills. This finding was based on 12 participants and a frequency count of 32.

Finding 3: Observation of experienced leaders in key situations is used to learn appropriate responses to behaviors due to a lack of formal development opportunities.

These female mid-level leaders used observation of other more experienced leaders as a form of learning, particularly when they encountered situations where they did not feel comfortable seeking assistance. This was noted by 12 sources at a frequency count of 22. These areas included understanding institutional practices and norms and determining how they want to be perceived as a female leader and how they should

approach leadership as a woman in general. To accomplish this, they used the power of observation to reflect on behaviors and outcomes to determine desirable and less desirable behaviors and leadership styles.

Finding 4: Gender is one of many dimensions of diversity that deeply influences female mid-level administrators' experiences.

The common link among all participants in this study was being female. However, it was abundantly clear that gender was only one of many aspects of each participant's identity. These various identities, when combined with gender, created extensively different experiences among these women. Lived experiences are not simply a reflection of gender, but rather the intersectionality, or cumulative impact, of many dimensions of diversity. This finding was based on seven sources and a frequency count of 15.

Finding 5: Female mentors can provide a psychologically safe space where women can engage regarding how to effectively navigate gender-nuanced situations.

Navigating gender-nuanced situations is a regular part of being a female leader in higher education. Having a female mentor who understands these nuances and providing this psychologically safe space proved to be important in learning how to not only identify but also successfully approach these situations, as confirmed by seven sources at a frequency count of 12. The trust established between the female mentor and mentee regarding these topics was not something these participants would normally openly discuss with male mentors, indicating the distinct difference in value between having a female and a male mentor.

Finding 6: Female mid-level administrators encountered access barriers to mentoring relationships.

Barriers to mentoring relationships were noted by seven sources at a frequency count of 10. These barriers created hardships in developing mentor relationships and included challenges associated with access to potential mentors. Although mentors at times were available, they seemed limited along gender lines. Other barriers included a lack of awareness that participants should seek a mentor. Participants felt left to their own devices in overcoming hardships, and when reflecting on what they would change about their overall experiences, they reported a desire for more intentional mentoring as a form of leadership development.

Finding 7: Support on navigating the nuances of gender-related topics was sought from communities of practice, both inside and outside of their institution.

Communities of practice were reported as a primary form of informal leadership development. However, female mid-level leaders additionally sought support from communities of practice with a high level of trust as a means of navigating the nuances of gender-related topics. This finding was based on six sources and a frequency of 10. They described this process as finding like-minded women with whom they could engage openly on experiences related to gender and find support through common ground.

Unexpected Findings

This study revealed two unexpected findings. Although smaller in frequency, the impact of these findings on the participants was substantial enough that they were considered significant.

Unexpected Finding 1: Female mid-level leaders regularly reflected on how their leadership style is congruent with their personal values.

The role of personal values consistently arose during the semi structured interviews. It was evident that participants' behaviors and attitudes toward their careers were strongly shaped by these values. They provided thoughtful and highly personal answers, often highlighting their individual values and how they shaped their career journey and experiences. This finding was based on six sources and a frequency of 10.

Unexpected Finding 2: Female leaders intentionally seek aspiring women leaders to mentor.

The second unexpected finding was the female leaders in this study who had reached a later stage in their career had begun to intentionally mentor younger women at earlier points in their career. This finding was based on five sources and a frequency count of seven. Upon reaching these later stages, they reflected on their experiences, challenges, and various barriers. As a result of these reflections, they said they felt compelled to act intentionally in ways to influence the journeys of those who come behind them. They reported a sense of responsibility to reach back and assist in ways they either experienced or wished they had experienced.

The major findings of the study were drawn from nine themes identified in the data. Conclusions and recommendations were carefully crafted based on the major findings of the study. Each conclusion and recommendation represent the experiences shared during the semi structured interviews regarding the research question.

Conclusions

Based on the research findings of this study and connected to the literature, the researcher drew 9 conclusions that provide deeper insight into the informal leadership development experiences of female mid-level administrators.

Conclusion 1: Female mid-level administrators are more likely to achieve breakthroughs as leaders when their relationship with their supervisor is rooted in trust and allows for vulnerability to build courage and confidence.

This study explored the lived experiences of female mid-level leaders and their use of informal learning to acquire leadership skills. Participants in this study overwhelmingly discussed the importance of their relationship with their direct supervisor and its impact on building self-efficacy. The personal nature of the relationship, combined with intentional engagement, allowed for personalized mentoring tailored to the growth and development of the mentee. Through this, they established a deep level of trust, allowing the participant to be vulnerable and willing to take risks and try things as a leader that they might not have otherwise. Building this self-efficacy was deemed especially important as female leaders. Both Moscareiello (2015) and Schott (2004) noted similar findings that effective mentor relationships can increase a female mentee's self-confidence and add to their belief that they have the requisite skills and abilities. Based on the finding that having an intentionally engaged supervisor allows for authentic mentoring of highly personalized needs, female mid-level leaders are more likely to achieve breakthroughs as leaders when their relationship with their supervisor is rooted in trust and allows for vulnerability to build courage and confidence.

Conclusion 2: Female mid-level leaders reported resistance to asking questions or requesting assistance, resulting in their use of observation of other leaders as a way to fill the learning gaps.

Throughout the interview process, it was clear that participants were deeply mindful of how they are perceived as leaders and took extra steps to shape this perception. They were aware of the expectations of their gender and the impact of being female on how they are perceived as leaders, as described by Eagly and Carli (2009). Participants shared their concern that as a female leader, they might be perceived as weak or unqualified if they asked for assistance. This was particularly evident when it came to understanding institutional culture and gendered expectations. Based on the finding that participants observed experienced leaders in key situations to learn appropriate responses to behaviors, it can be concluded that due to resistance to asking questions or seeking assistance, female mid-level leaders use observation of other leaders to fill the learning gaps.

Conclusion 3: Female mid-level leaders persist in gendered environments and are more willing to be vulnerable in seeking guidance when they have a trusting relationship with a female mentor.

Participants in this study noted that the complexities of being a female leader are better understood by a female mentor than by a male mentor. Although they acknowledged the value of having male mentors, they reported that aspects of being a female leader were better addressed by someone who understood the female perspective. The literature supports the importance of having gender-based guidance and the need for women to have access to the perspectives of other women (Block & Tietjen-Smith,

2016). For example, Bradshaw (2021) found that having female mentors provides role-modeling behavior for navigating gendered situations. Based on the finding that female mentors can provide a psychologically safe space where women can engage regarding how to effectively navigate gender-nuanced situations, it can be concluded that female mid-level leaders persist in gendered environments and are more willing to be vulnerable in seeking guidance when they have a trusting relationship with a female mentor.

Conclusion 4: For institutions to be agile from a culturally responsive leadership perspective, all dimensions of diversity must be considered.

This study explored the informal leadership development experiences of female mid-level leaders. During the interviews, several participants described how gender is only one aspect of their identity and were resolute that their experiences were intertwined and inseparable from other aspects. To fully understand the lived experience of female mid-level leaders in a way that is meaningful and helps them overcome challenges, all aspects of their identity, including gender, must be understood. Based on the finding that gender is one of many dimensions of diversity deeply influencing participants' experiences, it can be concluded that in order for institutions to be agile from a culturally responsive leadership perspective, all dimensions of diversity must be considered.

Conclusion 5: Female mid-level leaders reported feeling validated and supported in their leadership experience when they connected with other like-minded female leaders through communities of practice.

At the center of this study was the desire for the researcher to understand informal leadership development experiences specific to female mid-level administrators. As such, participants in the study shared that they only feel comfortable discussing certain topics

and experiences with other like-minded female leaders. Many study participants shared that being a part of a community of practice helped their confidence as a female leader and reduced feelings of isolation regarding their experiences. Based on the finding that participants sought support from communities of practice to navigate the nuances of gender-related topics, female mid-level leaders will likely feel validated and supported in their leadership experience when they connect with other like-minded female leaders through communities of practice.

Conclusion 6: Personal value systems and authenticity play a strong role in how female mid-level administrators approach leadership.

Based on data indicating that participants regularly reflected on how their leadership style is congruent with personal values, the researcher concluded that personal value systems and authenticity play a strong role in how female mid-level administrators approach leadership. This aligns with the literature indicating that female leaders tend to be described as transformational leaders (Chandler, 2011; Jogulu & Wood, 2006).

Conclusion 7: Female leaders later in their careers are aware of the challenges facing younger generations based on their experiences and seek to use their influence and position to promote change and awareness.

During the semi structured interviews for this study, participants were asked what advice they would give aspiring female leaders based on their experiences. In answering this question, participants reflected on their experiences during their career. Five of the participants who were in later stages of their career spoke about how they perceived their responsibility to assist those who come after them. Based on the finding that female leaders intentionally seek aspiring women leaders to mentor, it can be concluded that

female leaders later in their careers are aware of the challenges facing younger generations based on their experiences and seek to use their influence and position to promote change and awareness.

Conclusion 8: A higher level of value is given to building meaningful relationships for the purpose of learning and development than for advancement, resulting in strong relationships built at all levels of the institutional hierarchy.

Participants in this study overwhelmingly discussed the importance of building relationships in the workplace as an avenue to acquire knowledge and skills as a leader. Soft skills were leveraged to build meaningful relationships as a way to grow professionally and learn from the experience and expertise of others. They valued these relationships and leveraged them to fill gaps in areas they knew were deficient, regardless of the other individual's position or level in the hierarchy. Twelve of 16 study participants articulated their preference for and high level of intentionality in building strong relationships as a tool for learning. This extends the work of Airini et al. (2011), who found that relationships with both peers and superiors were considered the most impactful in helping women in their development. These data led to the conclusion that a higher level of value is given to building meaningful relationships for the purpose of learning and development than for advancement, resulting in strong relationships built at all levels of the institutional hierarchy.

Conclusion 9: Female mid-level leaders felt frustrated and isolated by the lack of access to mentoring relationships, particularly early in their careers.

Mentorship is commonly discussed as a form of informal learning and often pointed to as a critical component of leadership development and advancement. During

the interviews for this study, several participants shared they had experienced some form of hardship or barrier to accessing a mentor. A lack of access to mentors is a commonly reported barrier for women (Ballinger, 2010; Canas et al., 2019; Davies & Healey, 2019). These barriers are often considered invisible, evolving from gendered networks, cultural assumptions, and organizational structures. Because these barriers are invisible, they can be difficult to address or overcome, resulting in a feeling of isolation and frustration. Based on the data that participants encountered access barriers to mentoring relationships, it can be concluded that female mid-level leaders felt frustrated and isolated by the lack of access to mentoring relationships, particularly early in their careers.

Implications for Action

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the researcher recommends the following implications for action. These recommendations are directed toward female mid-level administrators, senior and executive leaders including presidents and chancellors, professional associations serving marginalized populations, and women who aspire to be a leader in their institution.

Implication for Action 1: An equity and diversity study be conducted to investigate how the institution's leaders are culturally responsive in their practices.

a. **It is further recommended that this study focuses on the intersectionality of multiple dimensions of diversity.**
b. **Moreover, it is recommended that the study investigate how culturally responsive leadership is learned in the informal setting.**
c. **Lastly, the results of the study are published for accountability and transparency.**

Based on the finding that gender is one of many dimensions of diversity that deeply influenced participants' experiences, it can be concluded that in order for institutions to be agile from a culturally responsive leadership perspective, all dimensions of diversity must be considered. It is recommended that an equity and diversity study be conducted to investigate how institutional leaders are culturally responsive in their practices. It is further recommended that this study focuses on the intersectionality of multiple dimensions of diversity. Moreover, the study should investigate how culturally responsive leadership is learned in the informal setting. Last, the results of the study should be published for accountability and transparency.

Findings from the study suggest that institutions must take a more culturally agile approach to leadership development. As a result, leadership and institutional practices that prohibit this approach must be identified and addressed across the industry for meaningful change to occur. Institutions must acknowledge their role in creating an environment of inclusion and act to resolve areas of deficiency.

Additionally, it is critical to acknowledge the role of intersectionality and its influence on the experiences of female mid-level administrators beyond how they are defined by gender. Participants clearly stated that they did not see their lived experiences as simply a reflection of being female. Rather, their identity is defined as being female coupled with one or more other dimensions of diversity. It is clear that addressing equity and diversity issues requires institutions to move beyond strategies based solely on gender.

To drive needed change, it is equally important to employ accountability measures. To accomplish this, annual updates to the study should be published. This

would reflect actions taken based on the results of the study and the outcomes of those actions.

Implication for Action 2: Creation of a senior-level advisement committee to examine institutional culture and norms, given the authority to make recommended changes in policy and priorities to ensure operations are congruent with equitable and inclusive practices.

Two findings and conclusions pointed to the need to examine how inclusion manifests, if at all, in the leadership and operational practices of institutions. First, based on the data that participants regularly reflected on how their leadership style is congruent with their personal values, it was concluded that personal value systems and authenticity play a strong role in how female mid-level administrators approach leadership. The study findings also indicate that these approaches do not always align with the leadership practices of the institution. As a result, female leaders may opt out of leadership advancement, thus perpetuating the lack of female leaders at senior levels.

Second, based on the finding that female leaders intentionally seek aspiring women leaders to mentor, it was concluded that female leaders later in their careers are aware of the challenges facing younger generations based on their experiences and seek to use their influence and position to promote change and awareness. Although a component of this involved mentoring aspiring female leaders, a larger component focused on addressing some of the systemic issues they had encountered.

As a result of these two conclusions, it is recommended to create a senior-level advisement committee to examine institutional culture and norms and identify recommended changes in policy and priorities to ensure operations are congruent with

equitable and inclusive practices. To further ensure operations and practices from a gender perspective are understood and reviewed, experienced female leaders must be included on the committee. In all, members of the committee should represent the various stakeholders of the institution. To create accountability, this committee must have the authority to make recommended changes in institution-wide policy and priorities.

Implication for Action 3: Institutions conduct a leader self-assessment combined with 360 evaluations every 2 years as a means of feedback on leadership with a goal of ensuring alignment between espoused theories and theories in practice.

Trust is a cornerstone of any positive and successful relationship. In a mentoring relationship, this attribute allows for a more authentic experience and the space to be vulnerable. As female leaders, participants in this study expressed how difficult it can be to show vulnerability due to the effects of gendered expectations and emphasized the importance of having a mentoring relationship that allowed for this space.

Based on the finding that having an intentionally engaged supervisor allowed for authentic mentoring of highly personalized needs, it can be concluded that female mid-level leaders are more likely to achieve breakthroughs as leaders when their relationship with their supervisor is rooted in trust and allows for vulnerability to build courage and confidence. A positive and trusting relationship is built through contributions by both parties. To foster this relationship, it is imperative that strategies exist to ensure the supervisor is demonstrating the requisite behaviors. Strategies must ensure the supervisor's espoused theories, or how they describe their leadership style or approach, aligns with their theories-in-use, which is their actual leadership style in practice.

Institutions should conduct a leader self-assessment combined with 360 evaluations every 2 years as a means of feedback on leadership, with the goal of ensuring alignment between espoused theories and theories in practice. Further, the self-assessment and 360 evaluations should be centered on the ability to build trust. Results of the evaluations will provide opportunities for leaders to self-reflect on gaps between espoused theories and theories in practice regarding trust building and devise strategies to fill these gaps.

Implication for Action 4: Senior leaders are mandated to go on a listening tour each year as a way of gaining critical insights and perceptions of stakeholders.

The culture of an institution was shown to greatly affect the informal leadership development experiences of female mid-level administrators. For many, this culture created barriers to informal learning, creating a void and prompting them to observe other leaders to fill these gaps. This was particularly evident when it came to understanding and learning about institutional practices and gendered expectations.

Based on the finding that participants observed experienced leaders in key situations to learn appropriate responses to behaviors, it can be concluded that due to resistance to asking questions or seeking assistance, female mid-level leaders use observation of other leaders to fill the learning gaps. Their resistance to asking questions due to concern over the perception this may create speaks volumes about the culture of an institution and its practices. It is recommended that senior leaders are mandated to go on a listening tour each year as a way of gaining critical insights and perceptions from stakeholders.

The outcome of the listening tour would include promoting an open dialogue regarding the culture and practices of the institution. It would behoove institutions to shift their culture, but how can change be effective without fully understanding the female perspective? A minimum of 10 hours should be dedicated each year to the listening tour.

Implication for Action 5: Universities intentionally match female mentors and mentees during the onboarding process. Organizations such as the American Association of University Women, where available, be consulted in the design and implementation.

Mentoring is widely recognized as a primary and critical source of informal leadership development. The literature and this study's findings indicate that women experience barriers to mentors in the higher education industry. It is critical that institutions acknowledge their responsibility to intentionally create a culture of support and build strategies aligned with this culture into the overall institutional strategy.

Based on the data that participants encountered access barriers to mentoring relationships, it can be concluded that female mid-level leaders felt frustrated and isolated by the lack of access to mentoring relationships, particularly early in their careers. Therefore, female leaders would benefit from purposeful mentoring interventions on the part of the institution. Universities should intentionally match female mentors and mentees during the onboarding process, in consultation with organizations such as the American Association of University Women, where available. Consulting with organizations that have a mission of empowering women in the higher education industry would ensure better outcomes and better serve the intended population of female leaders.

Implication for Action 6: Female mentoring relationships are supported by allocating a budget each year for participants to attend events such as professional conferences together, fostering a mutually beneficial relationship based on trust.

A key component of a successful mentoring relationship is having a foundation of trust. When this foundation of trust exists, it creates a space where mentees can feel safe in asking more sensitive questions that they may not otherwise bring forward to discuss. For example, participants in this study described complexities of being female that they felt only another woman would truly understand. When these complexities affected their professional lives, they were willing to seek the perspective of a female mentor whom they trusted to provide guidance and perspective.

Based on the finding that female mentors can provide a psychologically safe space where women can engage regarding how to effectively navigate gender-sensitive situations, it is concluded that female mid-level leaders persist in gendered environments and are more willing to be vulnerable in seeking guidance when they have a trusting relationship with a female mentor. Activities that build trust should be prioritized in cultivating an effective mentoring relationship as a means to support this persistence. It is recommended that female mentoring relationships are supported by allocating a budget each year for participants to attend events such as professional conferences together, fostering a mutually beneficial relationship based on trust. During these events, the mentor and mentee can discuss and share experiences and perspectives as a way of fostering a mutually beneficial relationship and building trust, thus combining an informal learning experience with a trust-building opportunity. Other recommendations include attending networking events together where the mentor can introduce the mentee

to professional connections as a means of providing access to networks to which the mentee may not otherwise have access.

Implication for Action 7: Professional associations supporting the higher education industry must create networking groups dedicated to promoting connections of marginalized populations across institutions.

The communities of practices described by participants in this study often had their beginnings outside of institutions. Members maintained these communities over time and leaned on them to build confidence as a female leader. Participants sought support from communities of practice to navigate the nuances of gender-related topics and concluded that female mid-level leaders feel validated and supported in their leadership experience when they connect with other like-minded female leaders through communities of practice. Therefore, because these communities are often formed outside of the institution, it is recommended that professional associations supporting the higher education industry commit to the advancement of marginalized populations. To accomplish this, professional associations should establishe networking groups dedicated to promoting connections among marginalized populations across institutions.

By their nature, professional associations in the higher education industry bring together individuals from a wide range of institutions on various topics. Although most have existing networking groups or communities of practice in line with the purpose of the association, there is a missed opportunity. Rather than leaving female leaders to individually find each other, intentional action can be taken to bring like-minded female leaders together and create a space where they can connect on gender-related topics.

Implication for Action 8: A university blog is created to highlight senior-level female leaders and their leadership advice to aspiring female leaders.

Barriers to mentors for marginalized populations are widely known and reported throughout the literature. One barrier also noted by participants in this study is the lack of female mentors available. Based on the finding that participants encountered barriers to acquiring mentoring relationships, it can be concluded that female mid-level leaders often feel frustrated and isolated by the lack of access to mentoring relationships, particularly early in their careers. As a result, institutions should take intentional action to ensure female mid-level administrators are provided with access to alternative relevant and meaningful content. It is recommended that a university blog is created to highlight senior-level female leaders and their leadership advice to aspiring female leaders. This would create an avenue to share information that may be beneficial to emerging female leaders. Further, with content written by female leaders in the higher education industry, this blog would reflect the culture and practices in the industry.

Implication for Action 9: Female mid-level leaders have a leadership growth plan focused on relationship-building skills attached to their annual performance expectations and reviews. As part of this plan, they are further recommended to spend 5 hours per month intentionally engaging in cross-departmental network activities.

Feedback from participants in this study indicated that using soft skills to build meaningful relationships helped them take a collaborative approach to learning new skills. Based on the finding that participants emphasized building strong relationships with stakeholders as a form of learning, it is concluded that a higher level of value is

given to building meaningful relationships for the purpose of learning and development than for advancement, resulting in strong relationships at all levels of the institutional hierarchy. As a result, a focus should be placed on developing the skills required to form these relationships. It is recommended that female mid-level leaders have a leadership growth plan focused on relationship-building skills attached to their annual performance expectations and reviews. As part of this plan, they are further recommended to spend 5 hours per month intentionally engaging in cross-departmental network activities.

Recommendations for Further Research

Based on the findings of this study, the researcher recommends ongoing research in the following areas to further explore the lived experiences of female mid-level administrators as they relate to informal learning and leadership development.

1. Explore the experiences of male university presidents in the area of cultural agility and how perspective-taking is used when working with female leaders. Findings from this proposed study may help gain insight into the perspective-taking experiences of male university presidents, which may assist in finding common ground when differences arise.
2. Examine how female presidents use equitable and inclusive practices to influence the institution's culture. This would contribute to other emerging studies comparing organizational outcomes when women hold the top position.
3. Develop a case study on how the increase in remote work environments affects the ability to build trusting relationships for female leaders. Investigating this experience may shed light on challenges and successes when building trusting relationships both in-person and in virtual environments.

4. Conduct a correlation study to investigate the impact of psychological safety and the advancement of female leaders in higher education. Female mid-level leaders are more willing to be vulnerable and seek guidance when they have a trusting relationship with a female mentor, which is a finding from this study. The proposed study may discover the extent psychological safety contributes to their career advancement to senior levels.
5. Explore the phenomenon of gender-based attributional ambiguity and its impact on the developmental outcomes of female leaders. More specifically, explore how these potential microaggressions impact a female leader's self-efficacy. Findings from this proposed study may shed light on a female leader's willingness to pursue higher levels of leadership.
6. Conduct a retrospective longitudinal study that explores how perceptions of gender issues evolve over the course of an individual's career. Understanding the lived experiences of how female leaders' practices grew over time and how their perceptions of gender issues evolved may unveil trends in reframing ideals of leadership over time.
7. Expand this phenomenological study by exploring the complexities of gender identity and its role in leadership development experiences. Understanding the complexities of gender identity allows for better perspective-taking and in return may provide critical insights into the full scope of the female leadership development experience.
8. Explore the characteristics and motivations among female leaders in higher education who become mentors and those who do not. It is often reported that

women can be each other's worst critics, yet some go above and beyond to help each other. Understanding what drives the difference between these two approaches could help institutions in encouraging a higher rate of female mentors.

9. Replicate this study at the community college since community colleges generally have a higher percentage of female leaders than 4-year institutions. Findings from this proposed study may offer a comparative viewpoint on the potential disparities between community colleges and 4-year institutions, as it relates to the advancement of female leaders.

Concluding Remarks and Reflections

This was an unexpected journey—one I was not sure I would ever take. I have worked exclusively in higher education throughout my career, so the notion of pursuing a doctorate is not an unfamiliar one; however, it is one I had always managed to put off for other priorities or reasons. When the opportunity again presented itself, this time in the middle of a pandemic, something felt different. I am thankful I listened to that inner whisper telling me the time was now.

The topic of this dissertation was also not my original topic. However, early in my doctoral journey, I came across literature on the leadership experiences of women in higher education and the workforce in general. Through this process, I found a passion for something I had not known existed. It was also hard not to notice that I continuously saw versions of me and my experiences represented in various studies. I knew I had to explore this topic further.

As I began the research on my topic, I quickly discovered that the literature on the female leadership experience is extensive. There is no shortage of studies on the

behaviors and skills needed to be successful and what women can do to adjust their styles to fit the traditional mold. But the more I read, the more I found myself asking why women must change at all. If we are striving for an equitable and inclusive culture, then shouldn't higher education make space for women to lead as women? Perhaps the answer to the question of how to address the disparity in the number of women leaders at the top of the pyramid is not providing tips and guidance on how women can change. Rather, the answer is in shifting institutional cultures that undervalue less traditionally accepted leadership styles to a culture that genuinely recognizes and utilizes the skills and perspectives of all.

At the heart of this dissertation is a study on equity and inclusion—how institutions of higher education can better understand the informal learning experiences of female mid-level administrators and use the information to create an environment where all women can thrive as unique individuals. My hope is that that the ideas and concepts presented in this dissertation inspire all of us in the higher education industry to shift the culture to one of inclusive practices that recognize, accept, and celebrate our differences.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Synthesis Matrix

Synthesis Matrix	Leadership Development	Higher Education	Females Leaders	Mid-Level Leaders
Adams-Dunford, J., Cuevas, F., & Neufeldt, E. (2019). Navigating your career as a mid-level manager. *New Directions for Student Services* , *2019* (166), 29–40.				x
Airini, S. C., L.; McPherson, K.; Midson, B.; Wilson. Ch. (2011). Learning to be leaders in higher education: What helps or hinders women's advancement as leaders in universities. Educational Management Administration & Leadership(1), 44-62.	x	x	x	
Ballinger, J. (2010). Women's Access to Higher Education Leadership: Cultural and Structural Barriers. Forum on Public Policy(2).	x	x	x	
Baltodano, J. C., Carlson, S., Jackson, L. W., & Mitchell, W. (2012). Networking to Leadership in Higher Education: National and State-Based Programs and Networks for Developing Women [Article]. Advances in Developing Human Resources, 14(1), 62-78.	x	x	x	
Baugh, S., & Fagenson-Eland, E. A. (2007). *Formal mentoring programs: A "poor cousin" to informal relationships?* In B. R. Ragins & K. E. Kram (Eds.), *The handbook of mentoring at work: Theory, research, and practice* (pp. 123–147). Sage.	x			
Bennett, N. (2015). Our leader left. Who's left to lead? , 61(42), A56.	x	x		
Betts, K., Urias, D., & Betts, K. (2009). Higher education and shifting U.S. demographics: Need for visible administrative career paths, professional development, succession planning and commitment to diversity. *Academic Leadership: The Online Journal* , *7* (2), Article 6.	x	x		x

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Appendix B

Institutional Review Board Approval

Katy Curameng <kcuramen@mail.umassglobal.edu>

IRB Application Approved As Submitted: Katy Curameng

1 message

Institutional Review Board <my@umassglobal.edu> Fri, Sep 23, 2022 at 7:33 AM
Reply-To: webmaster@umassglobal.edu
To: kcuramen@mail.umassglobal.edu
Cc: jlee1@umassglobal.edu, irb@umassglobal.edu

Dear Katy Curameng,

Congratulations, your IRB application to conduct research has been approved by the UMass Global Institutional Review Board. This approval grants permission for you to proceed with data collection for your research. Please keep this email for your records, as it will need to be included in your research appendix.

If any issues should arise that are pertinent to your IRB approval, please contact the IRB immediately at IRB@umassglobal.edu. If you need to modify your IRB application for any reason, please fill out the "Application Modification Form" before proceeding with your research. The Modification form can be found at the following link: https://irb.umassglobal.edu/Applications/Modification.pdf.

Best wishes for a successful completion of your study.

Thank you,
Doug DeVore, Ed.D.
Professor
Organizational Leadership
IRB Chair
ddevore@umassglobal.edu
www.umassglobal.edu

Appendix C

Informational Letter

Dear Participant:

My name is Katy Curameng and I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Massachusetts Global in the area of Organizational Leadership. I am also a staff member at UMass Global. Currently, I am the Director of Career Planning and Development and an adjunct faculty member for the School of Business and Professional Studies. In my role, I direct all student-facing, career services-related functions for the university.

My research interest includes leadership development for female mid-level administrators in higher education. More specifically, I would like to understand the experiences that female mid-level administrators have regarding leadership development in informal settings.

I am asking for your assistance in the study by participating in a virtual interview which will take from 45-60 minutes and will be set up at a time convenient for you. If you agree to participate in an interview, you may be assured that it will be completely confidential. No names will be attached to any notes or records from the interview. All information will remain in locked files or in a password-protected computer accessible only by me. No other person will have access to the interview information. Additionally, you will be free to stop the interview/discussion and withdraw from the study at any time.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at kcuramen@umassglobal.edu, or 949-566-1568.

Sincerely, Katy Curameng

Appendix D

Participant Bill of Rights

UMASS GLOBAL INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD Research

Participant's Bill of Rights

Any person who is requested to consent to participate as a subject in an experiment, or who is requested to consent on behalf of another, has the following rights:

1. To be told what the study is attempting to discover.
2. To be told what will happen in the study and whether any of the procedures, drugs or devices are different from what would be used in standard practice.
3. To be told about the risks, side effects or discomforts of the things that may happen to him/her.
4. To be told if he/she can expect any benefit from participating and, if so, what the benefits might be.
5. To be told what other choices he/she has and how they may be better or worse than being in the study.
6. To be allowed to ask any questions concerning the study both before agreeing to be involved and during the course of the study.
7. To be told what sort of medical treatment is available if any complications arise.
8. To refuse to participate at all before or after the study is started without any adverse effects.
9. To receive a copy of the signed and dated consent form.
10. To be free of pressures when considering whether he/she wishes to agree to be in the study.

If at any time you have questions regarding a research study, you should ask the researchers to answer them. You also may contact the UMASS GLOBAL Institutional Review Board, which is concerned with the protection of volunteers in research projects. The UMass Global Institutional Review Board may be contacted either by telephoning the Office of Academic Affairs at (949) 341-9937 or by writing to the Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs, UMASS GLOBAL, 16355 Laguna Canyon Road, Irvine, CA, 92618.

Appendix E

Informed Consent Form

INFORMATION ABOUT: A Phenomenological Study on the Informal Learning Experiences of Female Mid-Level Administrators

RESPONSIBLE INVESTIGATOR: Katy Curameng, MA

PURPOSE OF STUDY: You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Katy Curameng, a doctoral candidate from the School of Education at UMass Global. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to identify and describe the lived experiences of female mid-level administrators as it relates to informal leadership development in private nonprofit higher education.

By investigating both formal and informal ways leadership skills are learned and developed, the data can potentially delve deeper into the various types of experiences of female mid-level administrators. Unseen in previous studies, data may reveal leadership development through mentoring, informal learning in communities of practice, and the like. By focusing on the lived experiences of female mid-level administrators, findings from this study can significantly highlight some common practices and opportunities in private nonprofit higher education in the area of leadership development.

By participating in this study, I agree to participate in an individual interview. The interview will last approximately 45–60 minutes and will be conducted virtually. Completion of the virtual interview will take place in November 2022.

I understand that:

There are minimal risks associated with participating in this research. I understand that the investigator will protect my confidentiality by keeping the identifying codes and research materials in a locked file drawer that is available only to the researcher.

I understand that the interview will be audio recorded. The recordings will be available only to the researcher and the professional transcriptionist. The audio recordings will be used to capture the interview dialogue and to ensure the accuracy of the information collected during the interview. All information will be identifier-redacted, and my confidentiality will be maintained. Upon completion of the study all recordings will be destroyed. All other data and consents will be securely stored for three years after completion of data collection and confidentially shredded or fully deleted.

The possible benefit of this study to me is that my input may help add to the research regarding the informal leadership development of female mid-level administrators in private nonprofit higher education. I understand that I will not be compensated for my participation.

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact Katy Curameng at kcuramen@umassglobal.edu or by phone at 949-566-1568; or Dr. Jeffrey Lee (dissertation chair) at jlee1@umassglobal.edu.

My participation in this research study is voluntary. I may decide to not participate in the study, and I can withdraw at any time. I can also decide not to answer particular questions during the interview if I so choose. I understand that I may refuse to participate or may withdraw from this study at any time without any negative consequences. Also, the investigator may stop the study at any time.

No information that identifies me will be released without my separate consent, and all identifiable information will be protected to the limits allowed by law. If the study design or the use of the data is to be changed, I will be so informed and my consent reobtained. I understand that if I have any questions, comments, or concerns about the study or the informed consent process, I may write or call the Office of the Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs, UMass Global, at 16355 Laguna Canyon Road, Irvine, CA 92618, (949) 341-7641.

I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this form and the "Research Participant's Bill of Rights." I have read the above and understand it and hereby consent to the procedure set forth.

_____

Signature of Participant or Responsible Party

_____

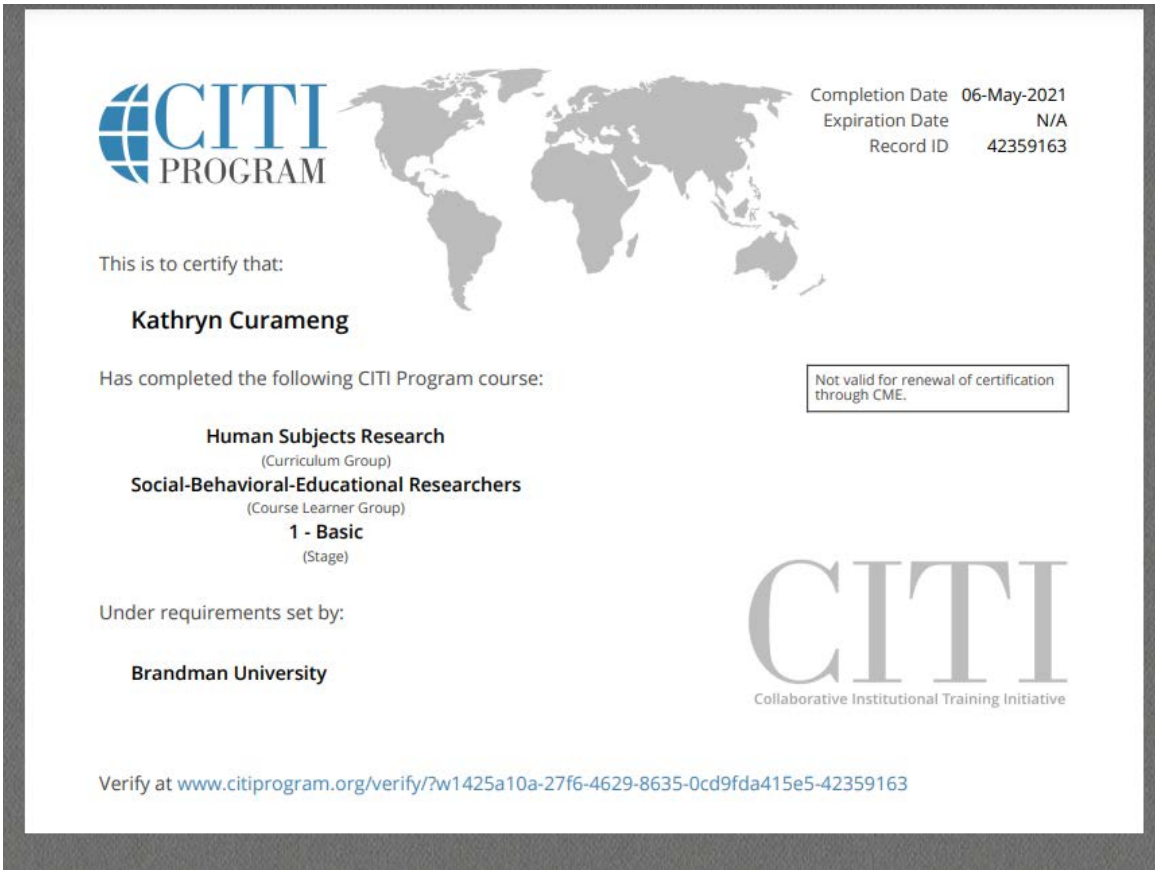
Signature of Principal Investigator

_____

Date

Appendix F

Protecting Human Research Participants



CITI PROGRAM

Completion Date 06-May-2021
Expiration Date N/A
Record ID 42359163

This is to certify that:

Kathryn Curameng

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

Not valid for renewal of certification through CME.

Human Subjects Research
(Curriculum Group)
Social-Behavioral-Educational Researchers
(Course Learner Group)
1 - Basic
(Stage)

Under requirements set by:

Brandman University

CITI
Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative

Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify/?w1425a10a-27f6-4629-8635-0cd9fda415e5-42359163

Appendix G

Interview Protocol

Introduction

My name is Katy Curameng, and I am a doctoral candidate at UMass Global in the area of Organizational Leadership. I would like to start by thanking you for sharing your valuable experiences with me. I know your time is valuable, and I appreciate your willingness to participate in this interview. Having this opportunity to speak with you will be of great benefit to my research, and I truly appreciate you being willing to contribute to the study.

I am conducting my dissertation research in the area of leadership development in higher education. I am interested in learning about the experiences of female leaders like you and how you have developed leadership skills through informal learning opportunities. I plan to conduct 15 interviews with leaders like you. My hope is that the information I gather will provide a clearer picture of how female leaders navigate informal learning to develop leadership skills. After our interview concludes, I will transcribe the interview. I will provide you with a copy of this transcription that you will be able to review for accuracy.

Informed Consent

I have a copy of your signed informed consent. You should also have a copy of the UMass Global Bill of Rights I sent you via email. Do you have any questions or need clarification about either document? Please remember that anytime during the interview, you have the right to stop the interview or take a break. If you don’t understand the questions being asked, please do not hesitate to ask for clarification.

Research Question

This study investigates the informal leadership development experiences of female mid-level administrators in private nonprofit higher education.

We have about 50 minutes scheduled for the interview and 10 questions that I will ask you. Responses to these questions will be anonymous, so please feel free to share openly. I am genuinely interested in learning about your experiences. Is there anything else I can clarify before we begin? OK, let's get started.

Interview Questions

1. Can you tell me about your career journey that brought you to the role you currently serve in today? Where did you begin on your path to leadership and how did you progress to the leadership position you hold today?

Informal Leadership Development

2. What are some ways you have learned about leadership and/or acquired leadership skills in the informal setting?
3. In what ways were mentoring relationships helpful?
4. What part of your experience as a mentee was most beneficial for you as a female leader? Is there any aspect of the mentoring experience you would have changed, and why?
5. Can you think of times when your leadership skills were developed through participating in communities of practice?
6. As a female leader, how would you describe any experiences or challenges you may have encountered that you believe have not impacted your male

counterparts? Did you need to seek help in these situations? Where did you go for help? What were those experiences like?

7. Are there any unique aspects of navigating the norms of your organization as a female leader?
8. Can you describe how supported you feel within your institution to access formal learning opportunities, and why? What about informal learning opportunities?

Wrap-Up

9. What guidance or advice would you give to an aspiring female leader? Why?
10. Are there any final comments you would like to make or thoughts you would like to share before we conclude?