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We Don’t Have to Do All of It Alone: A Phenomenological Study on How Mid-level Leaders in Community Colleges Flourish Through Collaboration and Advocacy

A Dissertation by

Mackenzie Klinker Hutchins

University of Massachusetts Global

A Private Nonprofit Affiliate of the University of Massachusetts

Irvine, California

School of Education

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

April 2023

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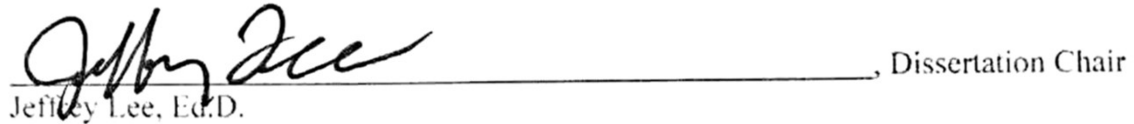
A Nonprofit Affiliate of the University of Massachusetts

Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

The dissertation of Mackenzie Klinker Hutchins is approved.



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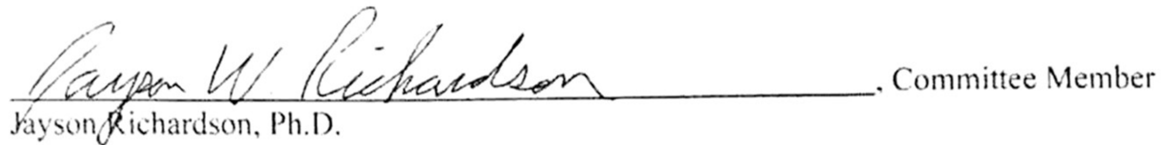

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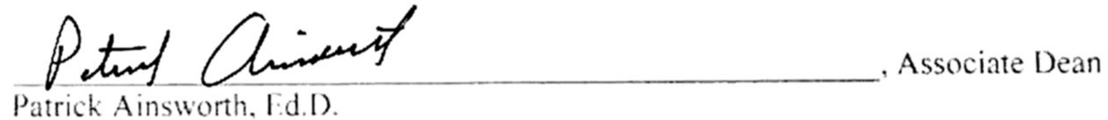

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"We don't have to do all of it alone. We were never meant to."

- Brene' Brown

Before starting this doctoral and dissertation journey, I thought I knew what to expect. I braced for a lonely period of locking myself in my office without contact with the outside world. Thankfully, this was so far from my experience, and I have so many people to thank for walking alongside me through this journey. First, my Chair - Dr. Jeffrey Lee, who dedicated hours upon hours, walking me through every step of the process, always providing feedback and encouragement. I never questioned your belief in my capabilities, and I will forever brag that I had the most extraordinary Chair of all time. My committee members - Dr. Don Scott and Dr. Jayson Richardson, who asked tough questions and made me think critically, all while affirming the impact of this study. You helped me to become a stronger researcher and leader. Dr. Melissa Brunson, whose work inspired this study and who consistently reminded me to pause and celebrate my accomplishments. Thank you for constantly pushing me to think bigger and keep moving forward.

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remarkable cohort mentor, Dr. Julie Hadden. While she left us far too early, the kindness, passion, and humor she shared were blessings I will never forget.

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We all deserve a Molly in our life – someone to guide, lift, and inspire. Mom, you have been my foundation from the start. You believed in me, even though you knew first-hand how challenging this process could be. You have been there to celebrate every milestone and comfort at every stumble. When you feel pride as you watch me walk across the stage, I hope you take a moment to be proud of yourself. I accomplished this feat because you showed me how to be passionate, dedicated, and resilient. You raised a woman who will use her strengths to lead compassionately and advocate for others. You are why I am the person I am today - I love you.

ABSTRACT

We Don't Have to Do All of It Alone: A Phenomenological Study on How Mid-level Leaders in Community Colleges Flourish Through Collaboration and Advocacy

by Mackenzie Klinker Hutchins

Purpose: The purpose of this phenomenological study was to identify and describe the formal and informal leadership development experiences of mid-level leaders promoted within Washington State Community Colleges.

Methodology: This phenomenological study identified and described the formal and informal leadership development experiences of 17 mid-level leaders promoted within Washington State Community Colleges. Respondents were purposively chosen based on specific criteria and recommendations of two expert sponsors. The researcher collected data through semi-structured interviews, where the participants provided descriptive data that would aid in answering the study's research questions.

Findings: Analysis of the qualitative data from 17 mid-level leaders promoted within Washington State Community Colleges produced ten significant findings, organized into three categories: formal learning, informal learning, and unexpected findings. The study's findings revealed insight into how mid-level leaders in community colleges identify and engage in leadership development opportunities, the significance of relationships in a mid-level leader's learning, the necessity and limitations of formal learning, and how advocacy increases leadership development opportunities for marginalized populations.

Conclusions: Ten conclusions related to the leadership development experiences of mid-level leaders in community colleges were drawn in this study. These conclusions were based on data and offered further insight into the various leadership development

opportunities and challenges faced by mid-level leaders in community colleges.

Recommendations: Further research is recommended to explore the leadership development of community college leaders. Recommendations include studies exploring barriers faced by community college leaders belonging to marginalized groups, leaders' experiences of developing competencies identified by the American Association of Community Colleges, and the informal learning experiences of mid-level leaders in community colleges.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

For ten years, Morgan worked in restaurants and coffee shops. These fast-paced environments required them to become an effective communicator, highly organized, and calm under pressure. Morgan focused their energy on developing their skills, always hungry for more knowledge. Because of their tenacity, Morgan was promoted to a manager role, where they learned to train others on the skills needed to be successful. After some experience in this role, Morgan recognized that working with others in this capacity brought them joy, and they wanted to pursue the opportunity to help others develop knowledge and skills further. Morgan went to school to study leadership and management to attain skills to help them serve others better. After completing that degree, Morgan wanted to go where they thought they could encourage others looking to develop their skills and grow their careers. Morgan applied for an entry-level position in their local community college, and to their surprise, they received the job.

Morgan learned quickly that the world of higher education would be an entirely different experience than any workplace they had previously encountered. Morgan's decade of experience in restaurant management did not prepare them for this new venture. Unfortunately for Morgan, there was no trainer to walk alongside them and ensure they understood the office's procedures. As Morgan stumbled through the industry jargon and understanding the hierarchy of the community college, they wondered: Who will help me learn this new job? Are there networks I can tap into? Are there learning opportunities within this organization? Sadly, Morgan's organization lacked clarity around available professional and leadership development resources. After five years of independently seeking development opportunities, applying for mid-level leadership

roles, and being passed over for promotions, Morgan left the organization, disappointed by the lack of support they experienced.

Morgan's experience is not unique and, instead, is a common experience for many who enter roles within the complicated environments of higher education. Regrettably, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) often lose talent, knowledge, and possibilities as under-utilized employees and potential leaders leave their institutions. These factors contribute to a growing leadership crisis affecting all higher education realms. Leaders in community colleges are not immune to this phenomenon. Serving almost half of all undergraduate students, the responsibilities of the leaders in these institutions have expanded. The challenges of strategically increasing completion rates, changing student demographics, varying learning modalities, and reduced budgets all contribute to the skills required of a successful leader in a community college (American Association of Community Colleges [AACC], 2018). As the need for strong leaders continues to grow, it is vital to understand how current and potential leaders develop the skills to be successful.

Mid-level leaders' roles in higher education continue to develop as technology, student populations, and college systems continue to transform in the 21st century. These individuals oversee the day-to-day management of operations, finances, personnel, policies, strategic plans, and evaluation (Amey & Eddy, 2018; Baber, 2020; Gillett-Karam, 1999). The duties of these roles are often complex and require professional, job-related skills paired with leadership skills as they seek to lead an effective team (Brunson, 2020). With so many duties resting on their shoulders, it is vital to understand the skills needed to succeed in their roles. In fact, many scholars have investigated the

competencies and skills required of mid-level leaders in community colleges (AACC, 2018; Garza Mitchell, Amey, Rosales & Giardello, 2020; Romero, 2004). However, little literature exists regarding methods of leadership skill development for mid-level leaders in community colleges.

Background

One of the great ironies of HEIs is that while they aim to develop the next great leaders of the world, there is little focus on leadership development for the administrative staff working within the organizations. In 2009, Graham published an article in the Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management highlighting that in opposition to their academic counterparts, the career development of administrative staff had not been prioritized within HEIs (Graham, 2009). While opportunities within their institutions may exist, a lack of clarity and planning leaves administrative individuals uncertain about where to turn for development activities. In 2020, Brunson explored the leadership development of administrative leaders in HEIs in her doctoral dissertation. Brunson (2020) identified three overlying types of leadership development: formal leadership development, informal leadership development, and mentoring. Understanding how leaders leverage these options in their institutions is beneficial for cultivating strong leadership in higher education.

Community Colleges in America

To better understand the complex cultures of America's 1,043 community colleges, one must investigate the history of American community colleges, which dates back to 1901. In 2003, Drury published an article titled Community colleges in America: A historical perspective. Drury's (2003) article is a foundational work on community

colleges' history and provides a detailed account of the evolution of community colleges in America. In this article, Drury explained that in 1901, William Rainey Harper, the president of the University of Chicago, forged the path toward the first junior college (Drury, 2003). Harper asserted that the first and second years of college were mainly spent preparing students to grapple with the more complex topics of their junior and senior years. Drury explains that universities hoped to maintain an elite status by splitting into junior and senior colleges. While students took their first two years of the curriculum at a junior college, only the most academically impressive would be admitted to continue their education in a senior college. While Harper's vision of separating all universities into junior and senior colleges did not come to fruition, the concept of offering higher education access to those who did not meet the universities' rigorous standards had already taken hold.

As the needs of Americans shifted, the junior college transformed to serve them. Drury (2003) explains that while junior colleges mostly offered transferable liberal arts classes in the early twentieth century, a significant shift occurred in 1920 when the American Association of Junior Colleges (AAJC) was founded. The author writes that the early leaders of the AAJC developed relationships with local business leaders, forming advisory committees to assess community needs. With a new focus on gathering feedback from stakeholders and meeting the needs of their communities, junior colleges served a new purpose, earning the moniker "Community College."

Community colleges benefited tremendously during many trying periods in American history. For example, students reaped benefits as the long-lasting effects of the Industrial Revolution transformed the social and economic structure of the country.

Community colleges partnered with industry leaders to develop practical training programs and better prepare students for careers in manufacturing. In addition, community colleges profoundly impacted another significant period, the Great Depression. In her article in the College Student Affairs Journal titled The evolution of community colleges, Jurgens (2010) explains that during the Great Depression, community colleges prepared more skilled workers and reduced potential unemployment with their targeted job training programs. Moreover, another example of community colleges impacting a difficult time in American history can be seen as World War II ended. The emphasis on practical training served Americans well as WWII veterans returned home and began to seek new career opportunities. Community colleges have provided refuge to those seeking skill development and career pathways throughout many difficult times.

What started as an exclusionary practice for universities to maintain their elite status has exploded into pathways for all Americans to access higher education. Jurgens (2010) explains that the Truman Commission Report in 1947 set the stage for recognizing community colleges as legitimate academic institutions. The report called for establishing a network of public community colleges that would combine the technical education needed to prepare skilled workers with the more comprehensive curriculum of the foundational junior colleges. Jurgens asserts that this expansion's goal was to extend higher education in America by founding institutions with low tuition, accessible to diverse community members, while serving local community needs. While historically seen as an alternative pathway to universities, community colleges can now be viewed as a distinct pillar of higher education.

Today, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) reports that over ten million students enroll in their institutions annually (AACC, 2022). Acting as the center of accessible education for minority groups, the resounding impact of community colleges is felt throughout the country. In 2022, 39% of all United States undergraduate students attended community college, including 53% of all Native American, 50% of all Hispanic, 40% of all Black and African-American, and 36% of all Asian and Pacific Islander undergraduate students in the country (AACC, 2022). Today's community college leaders must represent and serve varied stakeholders, leading to complex roles and responsibilities.

Washington State Community Colleges

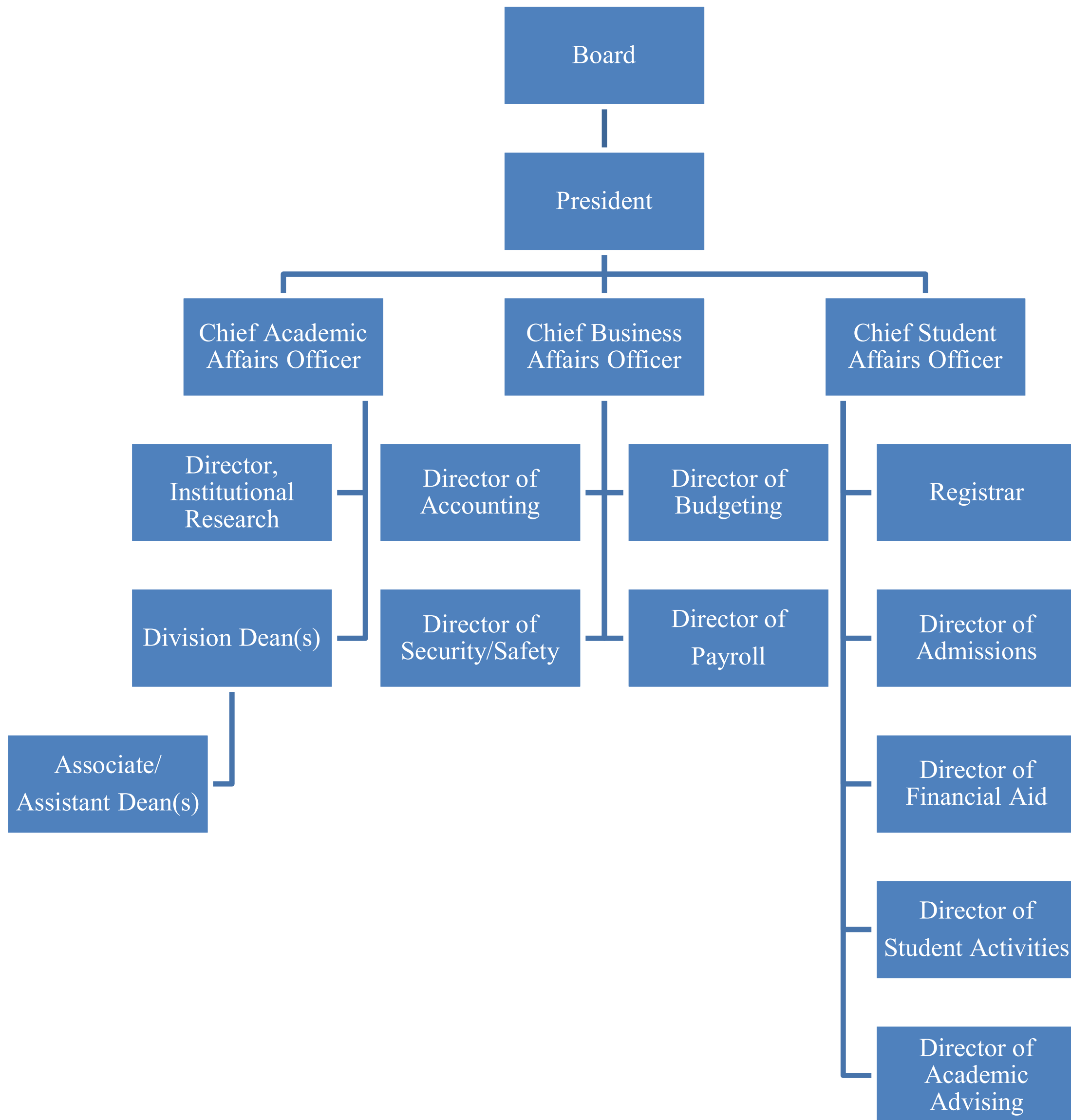
In 1915, Washington state's first junior college was founded. The community college system would grow to 34 community and technical colleges in the next century, overseen by the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC) (SBCTC, n.d.-g). In the 2020-2021 school year, nearly 278,500 students enrolled in Washington State Community Colleges (SBCTC, n.d.-c). These students rely upon the employees of community colleges to engage their learning, offer resources, and support them throughout their educational journey. In the same year, over 19,000 faculty and staff, including 3,696 administrators, were employed at these community colleges, working together to provide quality education and experiences (SBCTC, n.d.-e). Within this group of administrators lie mid-level leaders.

In Washington state community colleges, mid-level leaders are found in every area of the institutions, with many individuals holding the title of director, associate dean, or dean. The SBCTC (2022) defines these positions as the principal administrators of

their area. As seen in Figure 1, the mid-level leaders of these organizations report directly to members of the institutions' Executive Teams.

Figure 1

Sample Organizational Chart of Washington State Community Colleges



Note: Adapted from *Administrative & mid-level professional salary survey* by Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, 2022. (https://www.sbctc.edu/resources/documents/colleges-staff/my-employment/admin-salary-survey-2022-5-4-2022.pdf).

As seen in this organizational chart, titles and positions vary between areas of these institutions. While deans, associate deans, and assistant deans are typically found in Academic Affairs, their business and student affairs counterparts are often directors, excluding the Registrar.

Higher Education Leadership Crisis

Scholars have noted the impending leadership crisis within higher education for over two decades. In 2013, Adams published their doctoral dissertation, focusing on historically Black colleges and universities and their succession planning practices. Adams summarized that the retirement era of Baby Boomers, coupled with the smaller size of the following generations, may produce shortages in the labor market. Combined with the required education and experience to earn a high-level leadership position in an HEI, the field faces a shortage of applicants prepared for these roles. In 2008, Garza Mitchell and Eddy published an article titled In the middle: Career pathways of midlevel community college leaders. This article emphasized that HEIs lack formal development structures for mid-level leaders to grow into executive-level roles (Garza Mitchell & Eddy, 2008). The study's participants credited mentors and higher-level administrators as the motivation for applying to their mid-level leadership position (Garza Mitchell & Eddy, 2008). However, in community colleges where mentorship is not prioritized, potential leaders are either uninterested in applying for leadership positions or are overlooked. Garza Mitchell and Eddy (2008) expressed that mid-level leaders perceived executive-level leadership positions as unattractive, requiring more hours for marginally small salary increases. Without mentors to guide future leaders and provide insight into their roles, the leadership deficit will continue, and the business models of these

organizations will be negatively affected.

The higher education leadership crisis is felt deeply in community colleges, where leaders are expected to serve the needs of diverse community stakeholders. In 2002, Amey, Vanderlinden, and Brown published an article titled Perspectives on community college leadership: Twenty years in the making. This article underlined that as community colleges evolve and overall organizational complexity increases, they have seen an increased turnover with a lack of replacements (Amey, Vanderlinden & Brown, 2002). As the community college industry grows increasingly multifaceted, so do community college leaders' roles and responsibilities. In 2020, Baber expanded the work of Amey et al. (2002) in an article published in a peer-reviewed journal called New Directions for Community Colleges. This article explained that leaders in community colleges must meet the expectations of policymakers, community members, local industry partners, and other stakeholders, all while financial resources continue to dwindle (Baber, 2020). Leadership roles in community colleges have evolved to a state where leaders are literally at capacity in their daily responsibilities, as evidenced by Baber (2020). How can future higher education leaders be prepared to take on what appears to be an overwhelmingly massive list of responsibilities? As scholars continue to document the challenging nature of these roles, it is clear why well-prepared leaders are desperately needed.

Mid-Level Leaders

As the imminent leadership crisis was brought to light, scholars began focusing on mid-level higher education leaders. In 1999, Gillet-Karam interviewed six community college presidents to better understand mid-level management in their organizations.

Through these interviews, the presidents identified duties of mid-level management in the following areas: "Curriculum and program review, class scheduling, evaluation, hiring, budgeting, faculty professional development, liaison to the community, and supervision of office and staff" (Gillett-Karam, 1999, p. 40). However, community college scholars have observed mid-level managers' roles grow more complex in the following decades, resulting in increased responsibilities. In 2018, Amey and Eddy addressed mid-level managers' additional duties in their article Leading in the middle. In the article, Amey and Eddy (2018) explain that mid-level managers are positioned throughout the higher education system, managing day-to-day operations, developing and implementing strategic plans, evaluating institutional effectiveness, and leading complex teams of varying stakeholders. As the roles become increasingly intricate, they become more demanding. Unfortunately, the additional responsibilities lead to further issues for community college leadership. A decade before Amey and Eddy (2018) addressed the challenges for this population, Garza Mitchell and Eddy (2008) asserted that colleges need to make leadership in their organizations more attractive, as mid-level leaders did not want to grow into executive leadership. The leadership crisis will continue to devastate higher education without engaged mid-level leaders who are prepared and excited to develop into executive roles.

Leadership Development

Aspiring leaders often need to seek resources outside their organizations to further their leadership development. One option for developing leadership skills is through formal learning, such as degree and certificate programs. In their analysis of learning at the workplace, Tynjälä (2008) writes that formal learning is intentional learning,

following a curriculum with planned learning outcomes, and often focused on theory over practice. Knowledge earned in this environment is intended to prepare students for workplace situations by offering general information that can then be applied in the students' workplaces as needed. However, many educational programs have integrated applied learning into the curriculum, allowing students to put theory into practice with the guidance of their instructors. In 2000, Astin and Astin explored leadership development offered through educational curriculums that allow students to interact with other future leaders and their instructors, gleaning lessons from their experiences. Astin and Astin (2000) explain that instructors help students build skills and align values to empower them to become exemplary leaders within their organizations. With the opportunity to learn from others' experiences and apply the theories within their programs, leaders stand to learn exponentially from formal leadership development opportunities. However, the cost and time one must dedicate to formal learning can be a barrier to emerging leaders, who may seek learning opportunities elsewhere.

In many cases, informal leadership development allows future leaders to practice their skills in low-stakes environments due to the support of the experienced leaders around them. One such informal learning opportunity is connecting mentors and mentees to work through experiences and problem-solve together. In 2006, Bernthal and Wellins published an article titled Trends in leadership development and succession. This article was published in the Human Resource Planning Journal and highlighted that mentoring minimizes risk as experienced leaders guide new leaders and support them through new assignments and projects (Bernthal & Wellins, 2006). When mistakes are made, mentors can work with mentees to determine where they went wrong and help them learn from

the experience. The notion of leaders being mentored by more seasoned leaders is not new, but the idea of mentoring mid-level leaders is beginning to emerge in higher education literature. For example, two studies focused on mid-level higher education leaders and their mentoring experiences. Karavedas (2019) and Brunson (2020) found that by broadening professional networks and learning about others' experiences, new leaders better understand the needed skills to be strong leaders. By collaborating with an experienced leader, new leaders can identify and implement best practices in their field.

Leadership Development within Community Colleges

Community college leaders' development has been an urgent issue in higher education for decades. Drury (2003) explains that beginning in 1960, the W.K. Kellog Foundation provided a series of grants with the explicit intention of developing university programs to build knowledge and develop the skills of community college leaders. Multiple organizations utilized these grants to investigate which skills and tools new administrators would need to lead their institutions successfully, including the AACC. In 2006, the AACC published its Competencies for Community College Leaders, identifying six competencies required to prepare professionals for community college leadership. However, as community colleges grew more complex, so did the roles of the organizations' leaders. Consequently, more competencies of successful community college leaders emerged.

As recent leadership theory shifted to focus on dispersed leadership and shared power, organizations began to recognize the necessity of direction for leaders at all levels. The AACC published the third edition of their Competencies for Community College Leaders in 2018, addressing the need for quality leaders in all corners of their

organizations, not just at the executive level. In this edition, the AACC includes eleven focus areas for community college leaders, each encompassing a list of competencies customized to the different levels of community college leadership. The 2018 report addresses CEOs, New CEOs, Aspiring CEOs, Senior-Level Leaders, Mid-Level Leaders, and Faculty (AACC, 2018). With this report, community college leaders can better understand how each stakeholder group contributes to organizational effectiveness and determine where growth is needed.

The AACC summarizes that this report was created to steer the leadership development of aspiring and current leaders and to aid in selecting applicants in the hiring processes. The eleven focus areas include personal traits and abilities; collaboration; communications; fundraising and relationship cultivation; advocacy and mobilizing/motivating others; information and analytics; institutional infrastructure; institutional leadership; student success; organizational culture; and governance, institutional policy, and legislation (AACC, 2018). In 2021, Vines McDermott explored the importance of these competencies in her doctoral dissertation. Vines McDermott (2021) found that three major community college stakeholder groups (vice presidents, deans, and academic faculty) considered the 2018 AACC competencies fundamental to community college leaders. Her study highlighted the need for community colleges to prioritize developing their leaders, improving overall institutional performance. Further, Vines McDermott suggested that these competencies should be utilized as the scaffolding for leadership development programs in community colleges. With a clear understanding of which competencies should be nurtured in their leaders, community colleges can begin to focus on coordinating development opportunities and providing additional resources.

Leadership Development of Mid-Level Leaders in Community Colleges

Despite the literature surrounding the benefits of precise leadership development planning, few community colleges invest in development plans for mid-level leaders. Bernthal and Wellins addressed the advantage of investing in leadership development in their article in the Human Resource Planning Journal in 2006. This article explained that when organizations prioritize creating and communicating a clear leadership development plan, employees have more opportunities to advance their skills, recognize their growth potential, and unlock their talents (Bernthal & Wellins, 2006). The concepts of leadership development plans are not new, yet community colleges struggle to prioritize this for their mid-level leaders. Bernthal and Wellins' work parallels Karavedas' (2019), who found that "Mid-level leaders develop leadership skills when they are identified as emerging leaders and provided a clear leadership plan" (p. 148). Organizations can create a culture of more qualified, better informed, and more supportive leaders by practicing leadership planning.

The lack of leadership development plans in community colleges has negatively affected the mid-level leaders left to navigate the challenging details of their positions alone. Without the proper support, new leaders may be unable to adapt to their challenges as they lead their teams. In 2016, Little explored the experiences of staff promoted to a mid-level leader role in their HEI. Through interviews, the study's participants overwhelmingly shared the need for further leadership training, as they felt unprepared for the managerial aspects of their new roles (Little, 2016). Abutin (2019) had similar findings when examining the lived experiences of community college classified staff who had transitioned into administrative roles. In their study, Abutin concluded that

identifying leadership potential, encouragement from leaders, and support in overcoming barriers were critical in the successful transition from staff member to mid-level leader. When Brunson (2020) examined the stories of mid-level administrators, she found that even when they would have been happy to stay in their organization, they left their positions if they perceived a lack of support for their leadership development. Therefore, HEIs not only face the challenges of acquiring new leaders, but they are also challenged to retain loyal leaders. Community colleges face negative consequences should they continue to underprioritize their mid-level leaders' development.

Statement of the Research Problem

The existing literature on higher education leadership development practices overwhelmingly describes a lack of sustainable leadership planning practices. These institutions face a troubling future as prepared leaders become fewer and farther between due to generational turnover, the level of credentials required, higher education's rigid hiring and promotion practices, and a lack of leadership development opportunities within their institution (Adams, 2013; Amey et al., 2002; Brunson, 2020; Klein & Salk, 2013; Luna, 2012). As the current generation of higher-level administrators prepares for retirement, some may think current mid-level leaders are the obvious choice for replacements. Unfortunately, the deficiency of formal development structures and the absence of desire from mid-level leaders to grow into executive-level leadership exist. The studies of Karavedas (2019) and Brunson (2020) confirm that while an investment in leaders' career development leads to skill growth and the unlocking of talents, the lack of investment can negatively affect mid-level leaders who are left to navigate the challenging details with little direction. Further, Garza Mitchell & Eddy's (2008) study

firmly concludes that until mid-level leaders feel supported through their demanding current roles, they may remain unwilling and unable to explore the potential of growing into executive positions. Multiple scholars support this finding, explaining that mid-level leaders may have a negative perception of executive leadership due to the lack of positive insight from their superiors, preparing them to take on the roles (Duree & Ebbers, 2012; Korschinowski, 2018; Luna, 2012; Mellow & Heelan, 2014). If HEIs hope to repair the pipeline to executive-level leadership, they must first evaluate their organizations' resources available to mid-level leaders.

While literature supports the benefits of both formal and informal leadership development, finding resources that guide mid-level community college leaders through which activities will be most beneficial to their career growth is challenging. As demonstrated by the AACC (2018); Romero (2004); Garza Mitchell, Amey, Rosales, and Giardello (2020); and Vines McDermott (2021), the competencies of successful mid-level community colleges leaders are well documented. Still, an understanding of the activities that community colleges' mid-level leaders engage in to develop these competencies remains unclear. As mid-level leaders balance the complicated nature of their roles in community colleges, blending formal learning and informal learning opportunities may be vital to integrating leadership skills and competencies into their work successfully.

Despite the growing body of literature on challenges higher education leadership faces (Adams, 2013; Amey et al., 2002; Garza Mitchell and Eddy, 2008), the adverse effects of a lack of leadership development opportunities for mid-level leaders (Brunson, 2020; Garza Mitchell and Eddy, 2008; Karavedas, 2019; Klein & Salk, 2013; Luna,

2012), the research on formal and informal ways of learning in the higher education space (Bernthal & Wellins, 2006; Brunson, 2020; Karavedas, 2019; Little, 2016), the complex responsibilities of mid-level leaders in community colleges (Amey & Eddy, 2018; Garza Mitchell & Eddy, 2008), and the skills needed to be a successful mid-level leader in a community college (AACC, 2018; Romero, 2004; Garza Mitchell et al., 2020; Vines McDermott, 2021), there appears to be a need to identify and describe both the formal and informal leadership development experiences of mid-level leaders promoted within community colleges.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to identify and describe the formal and informal leadership development experiences of mid-level leaders promoted within Washington State Community Colleges.

Research Questions

The research was guided by one primary question and two sub-questions. The study's central question was: What are the leadership development experiences of mid-level leaders promoted within Washington State Community Colleges? The two sub-questions were:

1. What are the formal leadership development experiences of mid-level leaders promoted within Washington State Community Colleges?
2. What are the informal leadership development experiences of mid-level leaders promoted within Washington State Community Colleges?

Significance of the Problem

A growing body of literature suggests that community colleges must review their

internal leadership development practices if they hope to sustain quality leadership in their organizations (AACC, 2018; Amey & Eddy, 2018; Amey, Vanderlinden, & Brown, 2002; Baber, 2020; Duree & Ebbers, 2012; Garza Mitchell & Eddy, 2008; Graham, 2009; Korschinowski, 2018; Little, 2016; Luna, 2012; Mellow & Heelan, 2014). Furthermore, higher education scholars express a need to explore mid-level leaders' experiences (AACC, 2018; Amey & Eddy, 2018; Baber, 2020; Brunson, 2020; Garza Mitchell & Eddy, 2008; Gillett-Karam, 1999; Karavedas, 2019; Little, 2016). With a focus on the mid-level leaders' leadership development practices, the results of this study could significantly impact leadership in community colleges.

First, findings from this study could extend the work of Abutin (2019) and Little (2016), who investigated how HEIs coordinate a successful transition of staff into mid-level management. While Little's study was limited to four-year institutions, and Abutin's study focused on the motivators and barriers of staff that moved into administrative positions, this study could increase the population to include mid-level community college leaders and the activities contributing to their career growth. Should this study discover best practices for the leadership development of mid-level leaders in community colleges, such findings could further Abutin's and Little's work and provide guidelines for community colleges to consider when identifying resources for mid-level leaders.

Secondly, this study would respond to Karavedas' (2019) work, as she advocated that leadership development and succession planning studies could significantly impact higher learning. The advancement of this work, with a specific focus on community colleges, could be used for a comparative analysis of the leadership development practices of different types of HEIs. This study's findings could extend Karavedas' work

on formal learning into the community college space, as Karavedas looked only at leadership development in non-profit, faith-based institutions.

Thirdly, findings from this study could expand the work of Brunson (2020), who found that informal learning and mentorship were exceptionally influential for mid-level leaders in Private Non-Profit higher education. Brunson focused explicitly on the Private Non-Profit Higher Education sector, while this study would explore the phenomenon in community colleges. Findings from this study could extend Brunson's work to the community college space, furthering insight into common leadership development practices.

Finally, this study could support Vines McDermott's (2021) suggestion that Washington State community colleges use the 2018 AACC competencies as a framework to develop in-house leadership development programs. While Vines McDermott focused on community college leadership skills and competencies, this study could offer insight into the delivery methods that mid-level leaders find most impactful on their leadership development. The findings of both studies could be used to create holistic leadership development programs for current and aspiring mid-level leaders.

Definitions

This section provides definitions of the relevant terms in this study.

Community College. Community Colleges are public HEIs, sometimes referred to as junior colleges or two-year colleges. Community Colleges offer technical education and transferrable credits through courses, certificates, and associate and bachelor's degrees.

Formal Learning. Formal learning refers to structured learning programs in the

classroom setting offered through an HEI or organization (Brunson, 2020). Formal learning typically has an ending milestone, such as earning a degree, certificate, or credential.

Informal Learning. Informal learning can refer to experiences such as workplace training, mentorship, and social learning in a community of practice. Informal learning occurs outside formal environments, like classrooms, in non-structured experiences (Brunson, 2020; Eraut, 2004; Sharma & Raghuvanshi, 2020). Constant and ongoing, informal learning does not end with a significant milestone.

Leadership Development. Leadership development refers to experiences that cultivate aspiring and current leaders' knowledge, abilities, and confidence.

Leadership Skills. Leadership skills are competencies, abilities, and talents related to leading a team effectively. Leadership skills can be developed or instinctive (Bernthal & Wellins, 2006).

Mentorship. Mentorship is a relationship in which the more experienced individual shares resources with, encourages, and builds the confidence of the less experienced individual (Thomas, Lunsford, & Rodrigues, 2015). Mentorship can occur in formal settings, such as a formal pairing during an individual's onboarding, and in informal settings, as a naturally forming relationship between individuals (Brunson, 2020).

Mid-level Leader. The classification of Mid-level Leaders varies between organizations and professional fields. Typically, mid-level leaders are appointed administrators with decision-making power, program management duties, and supervisory responsibilities. For the purposes of this study, the title "mid-level leader"

refers to individuals holding the position of dean, associate dean, or director.

Promotion. Promotion is the act of moving into a higher position or rank (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Senior-level Leader. The classification of Senior-level Leaders varies between organizations and professional fields. For the purposes of this study, the title “senior-level leader” refers to individuals holding executive positions, such as Executive Directors and Vice Presidents.

Delimitations

The delimitations of a study are factors controlled by the researcher, which narrow the study’s scope (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). This study was delimited to mid-level leaders within Washington State’s Community and Technical Colleges. The study was further delimited to those who held a mid-level management position for at least two years and previously held a non-leadership role in a Washington State Community or Technical College.

Organization of the Study

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter I introduced the study and summarized the background of the research. This chapter outlined the purpose statement, research questions and significance of the research problem, definitions, delimitations, and the organization of the study. Chapter II examines the literature surrounding methods of attaining leadership skills and draws attention to the lack of literature regarding how mid-level leaders in Washington State Community Colleges earn leadership skills. Chapter III describes the study’s phenomenological research design, population, sample, instrumentation, validity and reliability, data collection and analysis, and potential

limitations. Chapter IV presents the study's collected data, including a detailed analysis of the findings. Chapter V provides conclusions drawn from the study's findings, implications for action, and recommendations for further research.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Much of the literature on leadership can be summed up in one question: Are great leaders born or made? While leadership trait researchers, such as Fleenor (2006), explore the concept that individuals are born with specific traits and characteristics that lead them to become strong leaders, others, like Kouzes and Posner (2017), assert that anyone can be a strong leader if they invest in learning and practicing skills and behaviors. However, in his book Outliers, Gladwell (2008) argues that success is not based on inherent skill nor effort. Instead, success comes to those who have been given support and opportunity by their community (Gladwell, 2008). The question then becomes, "How do leaders connect to their communities, identify opportunities, and leverage both through developing their skills?" In Chapter II, the researcher explores the long and tumultuous history of leadership development in American community colleges, beginning with the founding American universities and their mission of developing future leaders.

This literature review was conducted to provide context to this study and situate it within current research. Chapter II opens with an overview of the higher education industry in America, followed by the history of community colleges and the challenges these institutions face today. The chapter then examines leadership in community colleges, including a well-documented leadership crisis and the planning for future leaders. The chapter continues by exploring mid-level leaders within community colleges and their leadership development. Chapter II then examines different types of leadership development, providing a comprehensive review of both formal and informal learning structures. Finally, Chapter II closes by applying these structures to mid-level leaders in community colleges.

Higher Education in America

Since the Puritans first arrived in the New World, developing future leaders has been a priority in American society. Coming to America in search of religious freedom, the Puritans needed well-spoken, intelligent, and civilized ministers to build a coalition behind their beliefs. They recognized the value of higher learning in developing knowledgeable leaders who were disciplined, understood their message, and could communicate it effectively to their communities (McCarthy, 2011; Rudolph, 1962). In 1636, the Puritans founded Harvard College, named in celebration of its benefactor Reverend John Harvard (McCarthy, 2011). At Harvard, men were primed to lead their communities through the expression of their religious philosophy and the indoctrination of others. Throughout the 1600s and early 1700s, religious groups continued to lead HEIs with the mission of developing young men into members of the governing class (McCarthy, 2011; Morison, 1936). The field of higher education did not diversify until after the American Revolution, responding to the nation's embrace of a self-governing citizenry (Hutcheson, 2019; McCarthy, 2011).

The Beginning

Maintaining a fairly simple leadership structure, Harvard College became a model for new institutions, paving the path for developing HEIs in America. The first of nine colleges founded in the American colonies between 1636-1769, Harvard College established a governance structure still used in American higher education today (McCarthy, 2011; Thelin, 2004). This hierarchal structure placed a board of overseers at the top, with the university presidents reporting to them. The president, typically a clergyman still teaching in the classroom, managed the administrative functions, and the

board oversaw all operations, holding all decision-making power regarding the college mission and the public image (McCarthy, 2011). This governance structure served the founding universities well, offering support as they entered the 1800s when the industry was forced to transform to meet the needs of stakeholders.

The Turning Point

As they celebrated their victory in the Revolutionary War and their vision of freedom was actualized, the early Americans' beliefs, interests, and goals began to diversify. America grew and expanded west, and Americans found themselves with many opportunities for financial growth, regardless of their level of education (McCarthy, 2011). Nevertheless, the American college system had no issue enticing a new generation of students representing a religiously diverse America. Higher education offered opportunities for future leaders, whether religiously motivated or transformational trailblazers. A concept coined as the Wisconsin Idea began to spread, proposing that higher education could improve democracy by applying newly discovered knowledge to society's problems (McCarthy, 2011; Rudolph, 1962). Many universities connected with this idea, moving toward scientific and secular concentrations, while others maintained their conservative and religious roots (McCarthy, 2011). New colleges with varying missions were established, and three classifications of HEI emerged; private colleges associated with a specific religious sect, private non-denominational colleges, and public institutions (Bennett, 2014; McCarthy, 2011).

A defining characteristic of public colleges was the relationship with state agencies, leading to a transformation in leadership structure. The Wisconsin Idea promoted a mutually beneficial partnership between universities and the state, with

research-centered universities supplying educational services and the government providing financial resources and consultation on direction, societal issues, and finances (Geiger, 2014; McCarthy, 2011). States invested in their newly established public research universities, supportive of the advancement of society through new knowledge. The process of appointing members of the public universities' governing boards became the responsibility of the state's legislature or governor, and board composition transitioned from primarily clergymen to local businessmen as appointed board members (Geiger, 2014; McCarthy, 2011). This shift prompted a similar transition for the role of the college president, as boards were now comprised of busy professionals with limited time to contribute toward direct management (McCarthy, 2011). With a new level of authority delegated from the board, the college president received a new set of responsibilities and a new set of challenges.

The History of the Community College

One such challenge for university presidents was navigating an enrollment boom in the mid-1800s amidst the establishment and growth of public research universities. As Mellow and Heelan (2014) explain, many forces pushed more Americans toward higher education, including the settlement of the West and the country's continued industrialization, specifically in agriculture and transportation. New student populations who had never before had access to higher education flooded the industry, seeking the opportunity for economic growth and the American Dream. However, some university presidents did not see value in adding new demographics to their elite research universities. Instead, they viewed the lower divisions of their institutions as burdens, taking resources away from the high-level scholarship and their research. During this

time, these university presidents began proposing the creation of junior colleges, making space for the new generation of higher education students (Cohen & Brawer, 1996; Jurgens, 2010).

The First Junior Colleges

While the public found expanded access to higher education exciting, those who valued the elite history of the university did not. Acting as early promoters, administrators from the University of Chicago, University of Illinois, University of Minnesota, University of Georgia, University of Michigan, and Stanford agreed that they should shift to a new model of HEI, similar to a European model, with universities focusing on higher-level scholarship and research (Cohen & Brawer, 1996; Jurgens, 2010). They advocated for the universities to be split and to introduce a new type of institution focused on vocational training and general education (Cohen & Brawer, 1996; Drury, 2003; Jurgens, 2010). The two-year colleges, named Junior Colleges, would operate as branch campuses, "offering lower-division work either on the parent campus or in separate facilities" (Eells, 1931, as cited in Cohen & Brawer, 1996, p. 3). This separation of intent would allow the senior colleges to maintain their exclusive status while offering a separate path to the less prepared students (Drury, 2003; Medsker, 1961). In 1892, William Rainey Harper, the president of the University of Chicago, made the first move and officially divided the university into junior and senior colleges (Drury, 2003; Medsker, 1961). Harper continued to create momentum in this area, convincing his board of trustees to introduce the "associate degree" awarded to junior college graduates (Drury, 2003; Jurgens, 2010). University administrators across the country followed Harper's lead, working to establish junior colleges in hopes that they may leave the first

two years of higher learning behind, focusing solely on their most elite students and their research interests (Brint & Karabel, 1989). Soon after, in 1901, America's first independent public junior college, Joliet Junior College, was founded.

In a surprising turn of events, the push to limit access to elite universities was the catalyst for the revolution of higher education in America. Pederson (2000) explains that communities embraced local junior colleges as they provided access to higher learning students who could not attend universities due to location, aptitude, or income level. McCarthy (2011) furthered this sentiment, explaining that junior colleges opened the door to social and economic mobility for the children of industrial workers. This change arrived just in time, as the need for educated workers grew, and Americans saw higher education as the path to a successful life. In 1968, Brubacher and Willis reflected on the transitionary time, acknowledging that the higher education system could not have sustained the number of incoming students without establishing junior colleges. Through the creation of this new model, an entire generation swiftly received access to higher learning, regardless of their background.

The power of the junior colleges was undeniable, and the institutions began gaining their footing and analyzing their missions. However, they faced a significant challenge, as they lacked alignment. Many educators argued that higher education was founded on liberal arts education and should continue with its roots, while others felt that the central purpose of the junior college was to offer students terminal vocational education (Brint & Karabel, 1989; McCarthy, 2011). In 1920, leaders from 22 junior colleges met to address the role of two-year colleges in the American higher education system (Whissemore, 2020). At this meeting, the American Association of Junior

Colleges (AAJC) was formed to define junior colleges' position by creating curriculum and standards (Whissemore, 2020). The AAJC shaped how two-year colleges are seen today, as early leaders cultivated vocational education programs with support from community industries while concurrently offering transfer pathways for liberal arts students (Drury, 2003). Following a similar path as their four-year counterparts, numerous public two-year institutions were established, operating alongside historic private institutions. The AAJC continued its work, and in 1946, they began referring to the public, comprehensive, two-year colleges as community colleges (Drury, 2003). While private junior colleges offered liberal arts education for students intending to transfer to four-year colleges, the community colleges expanded their offerings to include vocational training (Williams June, 2003). Koos (1925) explained that community colleges, offering both options, saw their enrollment soar. Suddenly, the community college was a clear path toward the American Dream, offering something for everyone.

The Truman Commission Report

Before long, the two-year institutions drew the focus of America's leaders. In 1946, President Truman formed the first commission to evaluate America's higher education system, the Commission on Higher Education (Thelin, 2004). The Commission worked to examine the current higher education structure and determine if it could meet Americans' needs (Mellow & Heelan, 2014). In 1947, the Commission prepared the Higher Education for an American Democracy report, which would come to be known as the Truman Commission Report, and called for a substantial expansion in higher education, providing equal opportunity for access (Drury, 2003; Jurgens, 2010). The Commission suggested the expansion of community colleges, establishing a system of

public institutions offering both conventional and technical curricula at little to no cost to the student (Drury, 2003; Jurgens, 2010). Terrey (1997) asserted that the Truman Commission Report was the impetus for the American community college system that exists today:

> On the basis of the earlier work of the President's Commission on Higher Education (1947), the role of the colleges had changed. They were no longer extensions of the high schools. They were no longer junior colleges with a limited academic transfer function. They were community colleges with academic, occupational, and general education programs. Mature students and minority students in growing numbers were finding community colleges homes for new opportunity (p. 193).

The Truman Commission report highlighted the need for change and was the motivation for the transformation of America's two-year institutions.

With humble beginnings as an alternative to a "quality higher education experience," the community college became a staple in American higher education. Community colleges became a niche in the higher education industry, offering specialized pathways for students with varying interests (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Drury, 2003). Nonetheless, this incredible impact comes with incredible responsibilities. Community colleges were now known for offering something for everyone, and they needed transformational leaders who could support varying interests as their institutions grew increasingly complex. To support the leadership development of these presidents, AAJC partnered with the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, which provided financial support through grants to establish university programs for community college leaders (Drury,

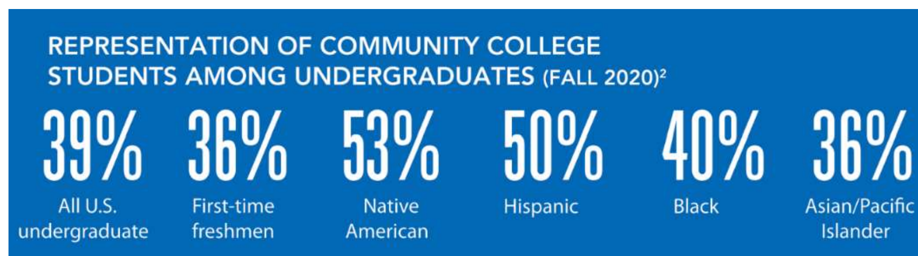
1960; Duran, 1998). The comprehensive leadership development plans that were developed and implemented successfully prepared the early community college leader, setting precedence for the knowledge and training needed in these roles.

Community Colleges Today

Today, the community college is an indispensable piece of the American educational system. In 2022, the AACC represented over 1,000 two-year colleges, including 936 public community colleges and 72 private two-year institutions. While some historic, private junior colleges still exist, many have closed, merged with another college, or transitioned to offering four-year degrees (Williams June, 2003). Public community colleges have taken command of the two-year college system, offering associate degrees at a lower cost and expanding access to higher education. Community colleges' commitment to educating diverse populations should also be noted. Duree (2008) explains that community colleges serve the historically underserved by offering comprehensive curricula in numerous concentrations, providing both terminal and transferable degree options. As seen in Figure 2, a significant percentage of all undergraduate students of color attend community colleges.

Figure 2

Representation of Community College Students Among Undergraduates



Note: From *AACC fast facts 2022* by American Association of Community Colleges, n.d. (https://www.aacc.nche.edu/research-trends/fast-facts/).

Committed to expanding access to higher education, community colleges fight against social inequities to improve economic mobility for marginalized populations.

While a permanent staple in the American higher education system, there exists a stigma that community colleges are "less than" their four-year counterparts. There are multiple reasons for this assumption, though Barrington (2022) argues that misconceptions are primarily to blame. Community colleges earn a bad reputation when it is assumed that only students not accepted to a university attend community college or that community college courses offer lower quality courses (Barrington, 2022). However, community colleges offer rigorous education to students, with some choosing community colleges for convenience, not necessity. In 2017, Forthun and Freeman published an article in a journal titled Community College Enterprise. In the article, they assert that while some may still view community colleges as the "bottom rung of the higher education ladder" (p. 78), they hold a critical space in America's higher education system, making higher education accessible for those that are unable to attend more selective four-year colleges (Forthun & Freeman, 2017, p. 78).

Washington State Community Colleges

Washington is but one of many states with a thriving community college system. This system allows all Washingtonians to improve their lives through higher education at little cost to the student. The SBCTC represents 34 community and technical colleges, working to "deliver equitable higher education through antiracist policies that ensure economic vitality across Washington" (SBCTC, n.d.-f, para. 6). In 2021, the Washington State community college system was ranked third in the nation based on "1) Cost & Financing, 2) Education Outcomes and 3) Career Outcomes" (McCann, 2021, para. 3).

This system is highly effective, highly diverse, and requires high levels of strategic leadership to function properly. In the 2020-2021 school year, 3,696 administrators led Washington State's largest system of higher education (SBCTC, n.d.-e). This group of administrators includes deans, associate deans, and directors, also known as mid-level leaders.

Challenges for Community Colleges

With all the success of American community colleges, offering something for everyone brings unique challenges for those leading the organizations. First, the nation's attention to quality education has led to national initiatives that community colleges must strive to meet (Martin, 2021). In 2012, the AACC issued a call to action, launching the 21st Century Initiative. The initiative calls for community colleges to reimagine their institutions with the twenty-first-century learner in mind. The three central goals of the initiative include "increase completion rates by 50%, dramatically improve college readiness, and close the American skills gap" (AACC, 2012, n.p.). Whether tied to accreditation, funding, or public support, a community college's ability to meet these goals is critical. Secondly, the increased demand for technological preparation has led to the need for seemingly never-ending technology updates (Martin, 2021). Thirdly, the community college mission of open access to higher education has created constantly shifting demographics and student needs (Bolton, 2016; Garza Mitchell & Eddy, 2008). Finally, community colleges are expected to manage the challenges of operating as a comprehensive learning institution with reduced financial resources (Baber, 2020; Bolton, 2016; Eddy & Garza Mitchell, 2017; Garza Mitchell & Eddy, 2008; Martin, 2021). Multiple scholars, including Amey and Eddy (2018) and Vines McDermott

(2021), addressed the pressure of being "all things to all people," explaining that it may be unrealistic for community colleges to continue as they have.

Leadership in Community Colleges

The simple leadership structure of the founding two-year institutions is but a fond memory, as today's community colleges continue to grow increasingly complex and require more of their leaders. While the early junior colleges only required their board of overseers and the president to manage administrative duties, the diversification of responsibilities in today's community colleges has led to expanded organizational charts. Leadership in today's community colleges typically follows a bureaucratic model, which Cohen and Brawer (1996) describe as when "the positions are arranged in the shape of a pyramid, and each series of positions has specified responsibilities, competencies, and privileges" (p. 102). In 1996, Cohen and Brawer outlined a typical community college leadership structure, which many community colleges still follow today:

> A board of trustees, either elected locally or appointed by a governmental agency, establishes policy for the institution and employs a chief executive officer. Vice-presidents or deans manage business affairs, student personnel, academic instruction, and technical education. In most colleges the department chairpersons report to the dean of instruction or vice-president for instruction (p. 105)

While the bureaucratic model represents most community colleges' leadership structures, there is a variance in titles, roles, and responsibilities. The size of a community college or its connection to other colleges, belonging to a multi-district college district or as a standalone institution, may contribute to this variance (Community College League of California, 2020). The Chief Executive Officer (CEO) may be referred to as such or hold

the title of President, Chancellor, or Superintendent. Similarly, senior-level leaders may hold the title of Executive Director, Vice President, or Vice Chancellor. Regardless of their title, each person in a community college leadership position is called to be a transformational leader, willing to take risks to fulfill the vision of an inclusive higher education system (Mellow & Heelan, 2014).

At each level, community college leaders are challenged to meet the expectations of their constituents, which may include faculty, staff, students, community partners, and taxpayers. Mellow and Heelan (2014) elaborate that the community college environment is demanding, asking leaders to drive collaboration between stakeholders with varying interests and expectations. Nevertheless, it is expected that community college leaders are prepared to face these challenges. Scholars such as Gaither (2002) and Bisbee (2007) have explained that an HEI's success depends on its ability to employ prepared leaders in all areas of the organization. All the while, the organization is meant to model effective leadership practices for the students they are preparing as tomorrow's leaders (Astin & Astin, 2000). However, it is well documented that senior community college leaders with the experience to overcome these challenges are entering retirement age in the masses. The question remains, who will face these challenges with an unprecedented turnover in community college leadership?

The Community College Leadership Crisis

With their focus on establishing a thriving network of institutions, developing comprehensive curriculums, and forming community partnerships, community college leaders have continuously failed to address one gnawing question - who will lead these complex organizations once our time to retire arrives? In 2015, the AACC surveyed

CEOs of community colleges and found that 80% of respondents planned to retire within a decade, with 35% in the next five years (Phillippe, 2016). This data represents the critical nature of this issue, affecting four out of every five community colleges. While not limited to community colleges, the higher education leadership crisis threatens to throw entire systems of higher learning into chaos. Many scholars have documented this crisis and investigated it well, amplifying the gravity of the status of higher education leadership. Mellow and Heelan (2014) write that today's senior community college leaders are the generation who drove the movement for open access to education and that the concern lies not only in vacant positions but in the fact that they will be taking their vision and passion with them. As Cohen and Brawer (1996) write, "The successful colleges are blessed with the proper leaders: people who know how to guide their colleagues, stimulating each to put forth maximum effort toward attaining the proper goals" (p. 132).

Additional concerns arise after contemplating who will comprise the next leadership generation. Data demonstrate that there are not enough qualified candidates to assume these roles, with two significant concerns. First, fewer candidates are applying for executive-level roles. Not only do these roles require high-level education and credentialing (Adams, 2013), numerous scholars point to the fact that the demands and stress of these roles are not appealing, and potential candidates' negative perceptions may deter them from independently preparing for such responsibilities (Duree & Ebbers, 2012; Korschinowski, 2018; Luna, 2012; Mellow & Heelan, 2014). Secondly, due to an absence of leadership development opportunities in their institutions, those that may be interested in these positions are ill-prepared for the roles (Brunson, 2020; Klein & Salk,

2013; Luna, 2012). Vines McDermott (2021) writes that the effects of this ill-preparedness have already been seen:

> Smith (2016) reported the number of presidential transitions due to either resignation or terminations doubled from 134 to 269 between 2011 and 2015. Smith further stated performance issues, decision-making errors, and/or conflicts with trustees and faculty as some of the reasons for these presidential departures (p. 12).

As Vines McDermott (2021) describes, leadership turnover in some community colleges has provoked concerns from stakeholders about the organization's ability to meet their needs. Swanson (2018) writes that the higher education leadership crisis will significantly affect community colleges, as they are designed to fill the needs of their local businesses and citizens. Unfortunately for community colleges, the vacant roles and ill-prepared leaders have a resounding effect on the communities as a whole.

Multiple factors have led community colleges to their grim position today. Adams (2013) and Bennett (2015) point to historically rigid hiring and promotion processes that limit the organizations' opportunity for flexibility. Though these practices were not such a problem in the past, today's HEI must move quickly to remain competitive (Bennett, 2015). Additionally, Asadov (2020) writes that community colleges have not prioritized the leadership development of their employees, blocking the perceived pipeline from staff or mid-level leaders to executive roles. However, there may still be a ray of hope, as many researchers have taken an interest and contributed to a growing body of literature pertaining to identifying and developing future higher education leaders (Abutin, 2019; Adams, 2013; Barton, 2016; Bennett, 2015; Brunson, 2020; Karavedas, 2019).

Planning for Future Leaders

In a system founded on the commitment to developing the country's brightest leaders, the contradiction of the lack of development of leaders in American higher education is astounding. As Mellow and Heelan (2014) explain, many have addressed the community college leadership crisis, but not enough has been done regarding identifying and preparing future leaders. The future of community college leadership depends on those willing to investigate the phenomenon and strategically address leadership preparation. In fact, Mellow and Heelan expressly point to doctoral students and current leaders to lead the exploration of actions and behaviors needed to become comprehensive community college leaders and implore them to share their findings with colleagues. A specific focus for many scholars has been providing current employees with opportunities to develop skills and further their careers.

One challenge with the literature surrounding community college leadership development is that much of the research revolves around preparing current administrators for the role of president. However, as Abutin (2019) writes, there has been little research on preparing early-career employees for their journeys into leadership and management. Currently, there are not enough organizations with straightforward plans to prepare staff and early career leaders to become impactful leaders. Abutin investigated community college leadership experiences, focusing on developing classified staff into future leaders. In their conclusion, Abutin describes the urgency of developing the next generation of administrators into transformational leaders, suggesting that the future of community colleges depends on it.

Unfortunately, those with visions of comprehensive leadership development plans

must combat several opposing forces. Primarily, they must work within a constantly shifting system to meet their stakeholders' ever-changing needs. In 2020, Brunson examined mid-level leadership development in higher education, exploring specific challenges within the industry. A definitive issue is that the constant innovation within higher education leads to employees taking on new responsibilities, often with little preparation or models to follow (Brunson, 2020). Because the responsibilities of HEI employees are consistently shifting, it is challenging for senior leaders to look past administrative skills and assess the leadership potential of their employees. The culture of higher education is to place more value on these organizational skills, overlooking leadership skills and leaving a gap in leadership ability (Brunson, 2020). However, this culture has led to leaders lacking the interpersonal skills to build a coalition behind their vision. Instead, they struggle to manage the interpersonal aspects within their teams.

When leaders are ill-prepared, they find their jobs incredibly challenging, making their roles look unappealing to those around them. Unsurprisingly, after examining mid-level community college leaders' career pathways, Garza Mitchell and Eddy (2008) stated that mid-level leaders find senior-level leadership roles unattractive. Community colleges must make these roles more attractive while engaging in talent management. Riccio (2010) explains that the core of talent management is preparing capable employees, within every level of the organization, for future leadership positions. Bennett (2015) asserts that when there is a lack of internal candidates for leadership positions, an HEI must look inward at its practices and begin planning for the future. To accomplish this, boards of trustees and presidents must develop a united vision of leadership development in their organizations, explicitly outlining activities to engage and teach

future leaders (Barton, 2016).

A significant theme in the literature on preparing future leaders is the need for an explicit plan with ample opportunities to develop skills and learn from others. Mellow and Heelan (2014) suggest the integration of a staff development officer who can oversee formal leadership development programs and policies. They elaborate that such policies could include extended leave and financial support for those engaged in long-term leadership programs, trained mentors who can guide them through the challenges they face, and a shift of culture to see these activities as a service to the entire organization (Mellow & Heelan, 2014).

Implementing policies such as these are but one component of a larger project: developing a succession plan. There are multiple definitions of succession planning, though the general sentiment is an organization's plan for developing an ongoing pipeline of high-performing employees, prepared to transition into leadership roles at all levels as they become vacant (Klein & Salk, 2013). In a deeper look at emerging community college leaders, Luna (2010) lists the significant components of succession planning:

> Succession planning generally involves three major steps: (a) understanding the organization's long-term goals and objectives, (b) identifying the workforce's developmental needs in the organization, and (c) determining workforce trends and predictions in direct relation to the type of institution (p. 980).

As the significance of including succession plans within strategic planning is so immense, it has been predicted that community college accreditation will soon include succession planning practices (Luna, 2010).

While succession planning is common in private industry, higher education has

fallen behind in embracing the practice. Less than a third of HEIs have succession plans in place (Bowen, 1994 & Sinclair, 1996, as cited in Adams, 2013), and the implementation of succession planning is ultimately determined by the president's priorities and perceptions of pressing needs (Adams, 2013). Barton (2016) addressed these challenges, explaining that effective succession planning only occurs when senior leaders are engaged and able to develop a clear framework. However, effective succession planning is a powerful tool for institutions. In their evaluation of leader development in Christian higher education, Barton concluded that institutions with presidents prioritizing succession planning, allowing employees to grow through exposure to leadership, "are more likely to become preferred destinations for employees" (p. 109). Barton's findings suggest that succession plans could be the prevailing devices for recruiting, retaining, and developing an organization's future leaders.

As community colleges prepare to combat the leadership crisis, they must address the shortfall of effective leadership development models within the industry. It is not enough to encourage employees to engage in leadership development, assign them additional responsibilities, or focus only on developing senior leaders to assume the role of president. Throughout the community college industry, board members and executive leadership must engage in developing a clear vision for the next generations of leaders, intentionally creating plans for exposing employees in every corner of the organization to leadership activities and engaging them by investing in their potential to become transformational leaders.

Mid-Level Leaders in Community Colleges

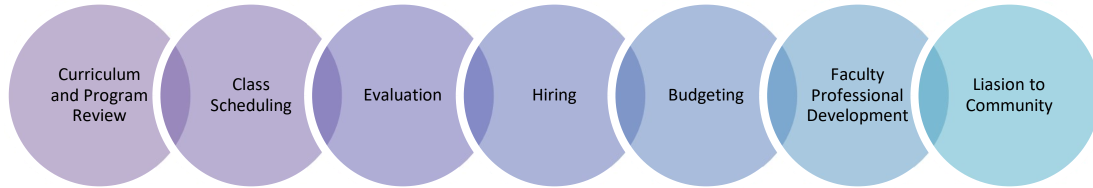
Often underrepresented, mid-level leaders are a vital link in the chain of

community college operations. As Brunson (2020) described in their dissertation, which focused on mid-level administrators in higher education, the title of mid-level leader (or administrator) varies between institutions and types of HEIs. However, Mautz (2021) defines these roles most simply as someone who has a boss, is a boss, and successfully fulfills their role by influencing others in all directions. Still, upon a closer look at this population, one will often find the unsung heroes of the organization. Garza Mitchell et al. (2020) describe the mid-level leader as someone who can develop relationships, communicate effectively, and resolve conflicts.

Mid-level leaders in community colleges can be found in all departments throughout their organizations. In these roles, the mid-level leaders manage their departments as “miniature governmental units within the larger college structure” (Cohen & Brawer, 1996, p. 126). Adding depth to this area of literature, Gillett-Karam interviewed college presidents in 1999, examining their perceptions of midlevel management in community colleges. Gillet-Karam (1999) reported that the responsibilities of midlevel management fell into seven categories, as seen in Figure 3. While mid-level leaders' roles vary, many are engaged in budgeting, class scheduling, curriculum and program review, evaluation, hiring, faculty professional development, and acting as community liaisons (Gillet-Karam, 1999).

Figure 3

Gillett-Karam's (1999) Categories of Midlevel Management Responsibilities



Note: Adapted from "College presidents examine midlevel management in the community college" by R. Gillett-Karam, 1999, *New Directions for Community Colleges, 105*, 37-46.

These seven categories represent the broad scope of mid-level leaders' work, calling on them to utilize evaluation, planning, financial, emotional intelligence, and management skills.

While the titles and responsibilities vary, it can certainly be said that today's mid-level leaders take on many roles within their organizations. In addition to their assigned duties, Garza Mitchell et al. (2020) explain that mid-level leaders are frequently the first to address problems and engage their teams, even though they may not have been adequately prepared for many of the trials they face. A serious challenge that mid-level leaders face is tied to their ability to flex to meet the organization's needs. Many mid-level leaders have accidentally become leaders, taking on responsibilities outside their job scope to support shifting demands placed on their senior leaders (Brunson, 2020; Garza Mitchell & Eddy, 2008). The pressures the public has placed on community college senior leaders inevitably trickle down to mid-level leaders, leaving them to assume accountability.

Often viewed as transitionary, there has been a lack of attention on mid-level leadership roles in community colleges. Garza Mitchell et al. (2020) attribute the minimal research on mid-level leadership to traditional leadership structures that primarily focus on the leader at the top of the hierarchy. However, they argue that mid-level, not senior-level, leaders have the most potential to positively impact students and develop relationships with stakeholders (Garza Mitchell et al., 2020). McPhail and McPhail (2020) emphasize mid-level leaders' unique positions, sitting close to those affected by senior leadership's decisions while simultaneously being responsible for implementing those initiatives. As partners to both camps, mid-level leaders often have a high-level understanding of the organization's operations and the impact of change on its stakeholders. Though they could be a great asset to institutional strategic planning, mid-level leaders are typically only engaged in work within their department and can rarely connect their efforts to the college's mission (McPhail & McPhail, 2020).

While some view mid-level leadership as a transitionary role to senior leadership and presidency, the truth is that mid-level leaders are irreplaceable in the community college structure. Rather than viewing them as a cog in the system, community colleges must recognize the untapped potential within their mid-level leaders. Whether in support of aspiring, new, current, or veteran mid-level leaders, community colleges must place more emphasis on their professional development (Garza Mitchell et al., 2020). While community colleges have historically underserved their stakeholders in leadership development, mid-level leaders could be the key to unlocking endless opportunities for their organizations. Brunson (2020) asserts that mid-level leaders engaging in learning and leadership development will drive their organizations' success.

Leadership Development for Mid-Level Leaders in Community Colleges

Whether considering a transition into mid-level leadership, reaching the goal of obtaining a mid-level leadership role, or transitioning from mid-level leadership into senior leadership, leadership development opportunities are exceptionally impactful. Brunson (2020) writes that multiple recent studies have demonstrated a need for organizations to employ leadership development programs and succession plans to meet their strategic goals (Barton, 2016; Karavedas, 2019; Swanson, 2018). While much literature centers senior leaders in universities, scholars have called for research that explores leadership development at other employee levels (Barton, 2016; Swanson, 2018). Similarly, researchers have suggested looking at leadership development in different types of HEIs (Brunson, 2020; Karavedas, 2019).

Strengthening the leadership of an organization is critical in a constantly evolving industry, and in recent years, the potential impact of professional development has been brought to light. In an article outlining trends in leadership development, Bernthal and Wellins (2006) explain that organizations hoping to help employees realize their potential must have clear plans for developing leaders at all levels. As organizations draft this plan, it is critical for them to create opportunities for informal learning, allowing employees to try new skills and learn from mistakes in safe environments (Bernthal & Wellins, 2006). Leadership development for employees in higher education offers the chance to enhance their students' learning, identify new information, and serve their communities (Astin & Astin, 2000). However, Bernthal and Wellins emphasize that leadership development opportunities not only produce stronger leadership in the organization but also promote the retention of current employees.

As Bernthal and Wellins (2006) explain, leadership development inspires leaders in such a way that they maintain their motivation and are less likely to be pulled toward opportunities outside the organization. They drive the importance of this fact by acknowledging that a lack of career growth and development opportunities is often a critical factor in an employee's decision to leave an organization (Bernthal & Wellins, 2006). Further, data show that employees who chose to leave one HEI for another would have stayed if they perceived opportunities for growth within the organization (Swanson, 2018). Therefore, community colleges lacking leadership development plans for their employees have untapped potential and risk losing employees that would have otherwise been loyal to the organization. Community colleges must prioritize leadership development planning if they hope to sustain their organizations. As they do so, they must determine the competencies and skills their employees need to learn to become influential leaders.

As community colleges approach leadership development planning for mid-level leaders, there are several factors for consideration. These considerations may include the type of leader they want to cultivate in their organizations, the competencies they will need to thrive in their roles, and the methods for acquiring these skills. While few studies have focused on how mid-level leaders in higher education develop leadership skills (Brunson, 2020; Karavedas, 2019), a breadth of literature is available on effective leadership styles. Additionally, several researchers have documented the competencies of successful community college leaders, offering guidance for leaders on where they should focus their leadership development efforts.

Leadership Styles

While many researchers have explored the leadership styles of successful community college leaders, there has been little focus exclusively on how mid-level leaders lead their teams. Still, mid-level leaders may have had exposure to different leadership styles, adopting certain aspects in their approach. As mid-level leaders pursue learning and leadership development opportunities, they should consider the work of community college leadership scholars and which styles they want to cultivate.

Transactional Leadership. For example, when Cohen and Brawer explored the American community college in 1996, they wrote that leadership has transactional qualities, requiring a leader to convince others that it is in their best interests to work toward their vision. However, transactional is but one style of leadership. While the ability to move others toward a cohesive vision is a vital skill, power is not everything.

Emotionally Intelligent Leadership. In contrast to transactional leadership, many community college leadership scholars have explored emotionally intelligent leadership. Authors like Mellow and Heelan (2014) explain that employees do not respond positively to mandates and orders. Instead, people need a leader with emotional intelligence who can create safe spaces to solve community needs. Eddy and Khwaja (2019) shared similar sentiments while exploring the history of authoritative leadership in community colleges, recognizing the strength of building relationships over a single, domineering leader. In 2018, Korschinowski explored how community college leaders leverage emotional intelligence to manage job stress. Korschinowski (2018) found that several senior-level leaders used emotional intelligence skills in their stress management, concluding that "Those who aspire to be a community or technical college leader should develop a

breadth of emotional intelligence skill" (p. 140). Korschinowski's conclusion aligns with Astin and Astin's (2000) analysis of leaders in higher education as they articulated the need for future leaders to "display a high level of emotional and spiritual wisdom and maturity" (p. 11). The ability to regulate emotions is a powerful skill for leaders, preparing them to support others as they face new challenges.

Transformational Leadership. Another prominent leadership style is transformational leadership, bringing ingenuity to solving tomorrow's problems. In 2014, Mellow and Heelan explored the idea of transformational leadership in community colleges, suggesting that the industry's future will call for more creativity and innovation from the next generation of leaders. Kezar, Carduzza, and Contreras-McGavin (2006) called on leadership researchers to rethink leadership, explaining that the awareness of their teammates' aspirations and skills and the ability to empower them makes a good leader. Astin and Astin (2000) share this sentiment, concluding that the purpose of leadership is to create a culture of growth and harmony in a supportive working environment where each person is valued and supported. Leaders can encourage diverse perspectives in transformational environments by empowering those around them.

Competencies

While limited, a small amount of literature is explicitly related to mid-level leadership in community colleges. In 2004, Romero addressed this population, stating that mid-level leaders must understand conflict resolution and manage competing priorities. Other researchers, such as Garza Mitchell et al. (2020), have addressed mid-level leadership skills, suggesting an emphasis on the type of leader rather than on the specific duties of mid-level leaders. Thankfully, one professional organization has led the

trend of identifying competencies for mid-level leaders in community colleges. The AACC has started the conversation about different skills needed to be successful in different roles, highlighting the differences in responsibilities.

AACC Competencies for Community College Leaders. Recognizing the value of prepared leaders in every level of community colleges, the AACC has recently added to the literature on mid-level leadership competencies. The AACC's commitment to developing community college leaders dates back to the 1960s when they benefitted from a series of grants from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation established to fund training for community college leaders (Drury, 2003). These grants funded the establishment of doctoral programs and fellowships dedicated to shaping the future of community college leadership (Mellow & Heelan, 2014). For over sixty years, the partnership between the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and the AACC has helped community colleges better prepare their leaders.

Entering the twenty-first century, the AACC identified the need to intentionally develop current and future community college leaders, preparing them to bring their institutions into the future. In 2003, the AACC gathered data from community college leadership educators and scholars at leadership summits, seeking to "build consensus around key knowledge, values, and skills needed by community college leaders and to determine how to best develop and sustain leaders" (AACC, 2006, p. 2). From this data, the AACC identified six competencies of thriving community college leaders. These six competencies included Organizational Strategy, Resource Management, Communication, Collaboration, Community College Advocacy, and Professionalism (AACC, 2006). Next, in 2004, the AACC surveyed community college leaders to gather feedback on the

competencies and ensure all vital areas of community college leadership were addressed (AACC, 2006). Following a positive response from the survey participants, the AACC published the Competencies for Community College Leaders in 2006.

As community college leaders began identifying the challenges of the new millennium, including the need for institutional transformation to improve student success results, the AACC revisited the competencies (AACC, 2013). The AACC published the second edition of the Competencies for Community College Leaders in 2013, stating, "…we believe it is imperative that we recalibrate the skills necessary to implement this radical change in restructuring community colleges to be more fluid and responsive" (AACC, 2013, p.2). While the first edition identified six competencies, the second highlighted five (see Table 1). The second edition removed Resource Management and Professionalism and added a complex competency titled Institutional Finance, Research, Fundraising, and Resource Management (AACC, 2013). Additionally, the second edition organized competencies based on population, including emerging leaders, new CEOs, and CEOs (AACC, 2013). The restructure allowed leaders to engage with the competencies progressively as they advanced in their careers.

A valuable contribution to the field's literature, both editions of the AACC Community College Leadership Competencies were utilized nationwide in community college leadership programs to guide curriculum updates. However, these documents served only those aspiring and holding presidential or CEO positions. In 2016, the AACC recognized the need to yet again, revisit the Community College Leadership Competencies. The organization formed the Commission on Leadership and Professional Development to provide recommendations for revisions of the Community College

Leadership Competencies (AACC, 2018). With the commission's findings, the AACC published the third edition of the Competencies for Community College Leaders in 2018 (AACC, 2018). In the document, the AACC specified that leaders should not expect to enter a role with all competencies mastered. Instead, they should aspire to develop these skills throughout their time in the role (AACC, 2018). Community college leaders are encouraged to use the document proactively, assessing their strengths and guiding a professional development plan for improvement.

The third edition of the AACC's Competencies brought two significant changes. Primarily, whereas the first edition addressed all leaders as one population and the second focused on the presidency, the third edition acknowledges that leaders at different levels of the organization have different responsibilities and priorities. The document was organized into six sections, each targeting specific populations' needs. These populations include Faculty, Mid-Level Leaders, Senior-Level Leaders, Aspiring CEOs, New CEOs, and CEOs (AACC, 2018). With the distinction of competencies within roles, community college professionals at all levels received a new resource to guide their professional development planning.

The second significant update in the third edition of the AACC Competencies was the organization of competencies into Focus Areas. While there was a minor variation in competencies between the first and second editions, the third edition brought a transformation, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

AACC Competencies for Community Colleges Leaders

Competency	First Edition	Second Edition
	2006	2013
Organizational Strategy	X	X
Resource Management	X	
Communication	X	X
Collaboration	X	X
Community College Advocacy	X	X
Professionalism	X	
Institutional Finance, Research, Fundraising, and Resource Management		X

Focus Area	Third Edition
	2018
Organizational Culture	X
Governance, Institutional Policy, and Legislation	X
Student Success	X
Institutional Leadership	X
Institutional Infrastructure	X
Information and Analytics	X
Advocacy and Mobilizing / Motivating Others	X
Fundraising and Relationship Cultivation	X
Communications	X
Collaboration	X
Personal Traits and Abilities	X

Recognizing the need for identifying and preparing emerging leaders, the AACC tailored the third edition to guide leadership development for different employee groups within community colleges. Within the eleven focus areas, competencies and behaviors are listed for each identified population, including mid-level leaders, allowing leaders to assess their current skills and plan for improvement.

AACC Competencies for Community College Mid-Level Leaders. A momentous update of the third edition of AACC Competencies for Community College was the identification of specific competencies and behaviors for mid-level leaders. The inclusion of mid-level leaders in the AACC's competencies was a substantial addition to the literature on this topic. Within the eleven Focus Areas, the third edition of the AACC's Competencies included 59 competencies and associated behaviors for mid-level leaders (AACC, 2018). Finally, aspiring, new, and veteran mid-level leaders were presented with a list of skills that, when applied, would help them navigate their roles and career advancement. With the AACC's gift of "What" to learn, mid-level leaders must next understand "How" to learn.

Types of Leadership Development

Certainly, there is no shortage of methods for leadership skill development. However, how does a mid-level leader determine which methods will be the most effective? When the AACC surveyed community college leaders to gather feedback on the competencies in 2004, they also asked how well their formal training applied to each competency (AACC, 2006). Unfortunately, many respondents indicated that their training had "minimally" or "moderately" prepared them to apply the competencies to their work, and the response prompted the AACC to call for the integration of the six competencies into community college leadership programs (AACC, 2006). However, formal learning options, such as university-based degree programs and leadership programs sponsored by professional organizations, are but one avenue for developing and attaining leadership skills.

While formal programs are the most common pathway to leadership development,

recent literature has highlighted the value of informal learning. In 2006, Bernthal and Wellins published an article titled Trends in leader development and success. In their study, Bernthal and Wellins (2006) expressed that leaders find mentors and coaches highly beneficial. The researchers also write that special projects that allow leaders to apply new skills to their work are the most effective for skill development (Bernthal & Wellins, 2006). This study emphasized the efficacy of informal learning opportunities that allow leaders to learn by doing. In another example, Brunson (2020) analyzed how mid-level leaders in higher education learned and acquired skills. Brunson concluded that mid-level leaders engaged in informal learning were better prepared to adapt to diverse needs. They also found that giving context to leadership theories by applying them in real-world situations was highly beneficial for mid-level leaders (Brunson, 2020). With the opportunity to learn and practice new skills in a supportive environment, mid-level leaders can apply their learning directly to their work. Learning this way promotes reflection and applying the learned lessons to future situations.

Many leaders engage in a combination of leadership development opportunities. In 2005, Eddy published an article in the Community College Journal of Research and Practice, focusing on how community college presidents develop their leadership styles. In the article, Eddy (2005) concluded that presidents developed their leadership through constant learning and adjustment, reflecting on and growing from past experiences. Reflecting on this conclusion, Duree and Ebbers (2012) write that, over time, engaging in different formats and sources of learning opportunities can help develop transformational leaders. Similarly, in their study of community college presidents' acquisition and development of skills, Rothstein (2016) found that all participants had relied on multiple

approaches to develop their skills. These approaches included gaining experience in their roles, learning from others, formal learning, and mentorship (Rothstein, 2016). Still, presidents have very different roles than mid-level leaders, presenting different needs and considerations regarding leadership development. When reviewing leadership development methods, community college scholars must consider the benefits and hindrances for mid-level leaders.

Formal Learning

When picturing leadership development activities, one might first think of formal learning. Formal learning refers to structured learning programs in the classroom setting offered through an HEI or organization (Brunson, 2020). Formal learning typically has an ending milestone, such as earning a degree, certificate, or credential, which can add credibility and present new employment opportunities. Including these experiences on one's resume can validate their mastery of skills, indicating that they are a trained professional (Indeed, 2022). Many aspiring and current leaders turn to formal learning for skill development. In fact, university-based and national/state-based programs are two of the most common methods of community college leadership development (Vines McDermott, 2021). Campbell, Syed, and Morris (2010) explain that formal learning programs can help leaders develop specialized skills through content prepared through collaboration between professional organizations, community colleges, and university leadership development programs. These programs add tremendous value for the students, having been prepared by experts in the community college industry. In 2012, Duree and Ebbers found that community college presidents perceived formal, terminal education and formal leadership programs outside of HEIs as crucial prerequisites to the

presidency.

While formal learning is abundant, leaders must also consider drawbacks. Duree and Ebbers (2012) write that if a leader enrolls in a degree program or another formal leadership development program after assuming their leadership appointment, the leader may experience burnout while managing competing responsibilities. However, if attending before holding a leadership role, the full scope of leadership responsibilities may overwhelm the aspiring leader and result in a negative perception of leadership positions (Duree, 2008; Duree and Ebbers, 2012). With these disadvantages in mind, leaders must be intentional with their goals for leadership development and career growth, engaging with formal learning when it is the direct path to meeting those goals.

While the downsides may be discouraging, formal learning can be especially beneficial for leaders in two situations. First, mid-level leaders with leadership experience will find it easier to understand and relate experiences to leadership theories (Brunson, 2020). With personal experiences to draw connections, mid-level leaders can add context to leadership theories and reflect on how they would like to grow in future situations. Secondly, Rothstein (2016) found a relationship that formal learning can increase a leader's self-value and improve leadership capacity when the leader works within an organization or under managers who do not prioritize mentorship or developing new skills on the job (Rothstein, 2016). Presenting the opportunity to gain theoretical knowledge, develop new skills, and open doors to new professional opportunities, formal learning can be powerful for leaders as they work to further their careers.

Formal University-Based Programs

One such opportunity for formal learning is through a university-based degree or

certificate program. The Council for the Study of Community Colleges (n.d.) recognizes 14 universities offering graduate degrees in community college leadership. However, an additional 25 universities offer coursework related to community colleges (Council for the Study of Community Colleges, n.d.). In their analysis of community college leadership preparation programs, Forthun and Freeman (2017) explain that the anticipated leadership crisis drove the development of these programs. University-based programs aim to prepare more skilled community college leaders, reducing the impact of the retirement of a generation of leaders. The universities that offer these graduate programs are poised to solve a substantial issue in the industry if they provide valuable content that learners can integrate into their work.

One consideration for mid-level leaders considering enrollment in a degree program is the degree's concentration. Mellow and Heelan (2014) explain that degrees in the broader leadership discipline offer more career mobility than the more narrowly focused degrees with a concentration in community college leadership or higher education administration. However, while examining numerous community college leadership degree programs, the researchers found that while many skills were taught, some areas required more depth and opportunity for applying theories to institutions' strategic goals (Mellow and Heelan, 2014). For example, rather than a typical communications course, community college leaders may benefit more from courses incorporating skills such as mediation between staff and faculty, building relationships with community members, and union negotiations.

Mid-level leaders engaging in degree programs then face a difficult choice. While general leadership programs offer flexibility in career moves, they may not prepare them

for the specific challenges they will face in community college leadership, such as national community college initiatives, technological updates, and increasing access to higher education. However, community college leadership degree programs lack the depth needed for students to apply their learning to specific situations. The choice brings up two points for consideration. First, what does the mid-level leader want from their career? If they dream of becoming a community college president, they may benefit from a degree program with a concentration in community college leadership. If they have other aspirations or are open to other industries, they would be better suited to enroll in a more general leadership degree program. Secondly, there is an opportunity for improvement in community college leadership degree programs. Forthun and Freeman (2017) explain that universities have begun surveying students for feedback on these programs. In their feedback, students have called for the involvement of current community leaders in curriculum updates and opportunities for practical application to their work (Forthun and Freeman, 2017). Until the leaders of these programs can integrate this feedback, mid-level leaders may continue to feel that degree programs are less valuable for learning development.

Like degree programs, those seeking leadership development will find many university-based certificate options. Certificates in community college leadership have grown in popularity, offered through universities either as a standalone option or as an additional certification offered with a graduate degree in higher education administration (Mellow & Heelan, 2014). Additionally, many certificate programs offer opportunities to develop skills in a specific area, such as resource management, fundraising, marketing, and communications (Ebbers, Conover, & Samuels, 2010). A certificate is a viable

alternative to a degree program for those whose learning style benefits from the classroom setting. Further, a certificate program would require a smaller financial and time investment than a degree program. In addition to universities, many professional organizations and councils have invested in community college leadership development.

External Formal Leadership Programs

Outside of the university setting exist further opportunities for formal learning. With a stake in the success of community college leadership, multiple professional organizations have developed formal leadership programs and institutes aimed at mid-level leaders. National organizations, such as the League for Innovation in the Community College and the AACC, and state organizations, like the SBCTC, have sponsored programs to combat the leadership crisis in community colleges by identifying and developing more leaders (Garza Mitchell & Eddy, 2008; Mellow & Heelan, 2014). These programs are a vital resource for community college mid-level leaders, offering insight from veteran leaders, networking spaces, and opportunities to practice applying new skills.

American Association of Community Colleges. The AACC has developed multiple leadership development programs for leaders at different points in their careers. The AACC's leadership programs introduce participants to the AACC Competencies for Community Colleges Leaders, demonstrate how to apply the competencies in their professional roles, and provide opportunities for networking with aspiring, new, and veteran community college leaders (AACC, 2018). The AACC offers the John E. Roueche Future Leaders Institute (FLI), which specifically supports mid-level leaders' leadership development. The Future Leaders Institute is a three-day seminar for mid-level

leaders in community colleges interested in roles in senior-level leadership (AACC, n.d.-b.). Unlike university-based degree programs, the FLI addresses the AACC competencies and their relationship to leadership roles, offering the following sessions at the 2022 FLI:

- Embracing the Community College Mission
- Understanding Governance, Institutional Policy, and Legislation
- Supporting the Student Success Agenda
- Understanding Interpersonal Relationships, Personal Philosophy, and Management Skills
- Managing the Foundational Aspects of the Institution: Strategic Planning, Financial Management, Accreditation, and Technology
- Using Data for Decision-Making to Improve Student Success
- Advocating, Mobilizing, and Motivating Others to Support the Mission and Goals of the Community College
- Cultivating Relationships Across Sectors to Advance the Community College Agenda
- Taking on the Role of Community College Spokesperson
- Creating a Culture Around Diversity, Equity and Inclusion
- Building Your Leadership Strengths

(AACC, n.d., para 3). The FLI is a valuable resource for mid-level leaders, connecting the AACC's competencies to practical learning.

League for Innovation in the Community College. As a prominent professional organization in the community college industry, the League for Innovation in the Community College launched the Executive Leadership Institute (ELI). The purpose of

the ELI was to prepare senior-level community college leaders to become influential presidents (Mellow & Heelan, 2014; Vines McDermott, 2021). Boasting a high hiring rate for program alumni, the ELI is a weeklong program that allows participants to identify their interests and practice through mock applications and interviews (Mellow & Heelan, 2014). While the league is now an influential, international organization serving many community college leaders worldwide, mid-level leaders have unfortunately been excluded from the benefits of the ELI.

Washington State Board of Community and Technical Colleges. In addition to national and international organizations, mid-level community college leaders in Washington State have ample opportunities for tapping into professional development through the SBCTC. The SBCTC supports the professional development of mid-level leaders through two programs: the Community and Technical College Leadership Development Association (CTCLDA) and the Washington Executive Leadership Academy (WELA). The CTCLDA hosts conferences and leadership training for administrators focused on offering knowledge and a professional network for administrators in Washington community colleges. Separately, WELA has supported mid-level leaders since 2001 in developing leadership skills through a cohort model, offering a network of colleagues in similar roles (SBCTC, n.d.-h). In 2019, WELA announced a hiatus, explaining that they would spend the academic year revamping the curriculum to “meet the social and educational imperatives of those we serve” (WELA, n.d., para. 1). The SBCTC’s commitment to offering updated, applicable professional development opportunities is a significant benefit for mid-level community college leaders in Washington.

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Social Justice. With a need to diversify the demographics of community college leaders, multiple organizations have developed leadership development programs for underrepresented groups. One example is the LEADERS Institute, offered by the American Association for Women in Community Colleges (AAWCC). The LEADERS Institute is an intensive five-day workshop intended to support women community college leaders in preparing for career advancement (AAWCC, n.d.). Another exceptional quality of this program is that it is offered to women working at all levels in community colleges, with the AAWCC acknowledging "that we lead from where we are" (AAWCC, n.d., para. 2).

Another example is the Hispanic Leadership Fellows Program, offered by the National Community College Hispanic Council (NCCHC) in partnership with San Diego State University. The Hispanic Leadership Fellows Program aims to prepare Hispanic leaders for executive leadership in community colleges through a two-year program (NCCHC, 2022). Offering seminars, one year of intentional mentorship, and career planning, the program is another much-needed opportunity for an underserved population to receive support to grow professionally in community college leadership.

Washington State has followed suit in developing leadership development programs serving underrepresented populations of mid-level leaders. For example, the Administrators of Color Leadership Program (AOCLP), in partnership with the SBCTC, prepares mid-level leaders of color to advance to executive leadership (SBCTC, n.d.-a). Participants in the AOCLP learn leadership strategies and develop skills needed to become influential leaders in Washington's community and technical college system. Additionally, the Social Justice Leadership Institute (SJLI) hosts Washington and Oregon

community college leaders as they learn skills for becoming a "culturally responsive, social justice leader" (Bellevue College, n.d., para. 1). The SJLI's mission is "To achieve full leadership participation, educational equity, and empowerment for members of historically disfranchised and underrepresented groups through mentoring, and culturally responsive training" (Bellevue College, n.d., para. 1). The programs offered by the NCCHC, the AAWCC, and the SBCTC have become staples in community college leadership development, offering pathways to diverse and culturally intelligent leadership that reflects the diverse communities they serve.

Informal Learning

While mid-level leaders have abundant opportunities for leadership development through informal learning, those around them, and even themselves, may not recognize the value or be familiar with the idea. The importance placed on formal learning can be partially attributed to the breadth of research contributed by those in fields where standardization is highly valuable, such as education, providers, and government (Golding, Brown & Foley, 2009). However, several researchers have contributed to the growing amount of literature on informal learning, highlighting the value and impact for those who engage in informal learning activities. Researchers such as Coffield (2000) have advocated strongly for informal learning, recommending that the concept be considered fundamental and necessary. Informal learning provides access to leadership development as participants develop new knowledge through participating in "group activities, working alongside others, tackling challenging tasks, and working with clients" (Eraut, 2004, p. 266-267). Offering learning and skill development for all, opportunities for informal learning are critical.

Informal learning can refer to experiences such as workplace training, mentorship, and social learning in a community of practice. Informal learning occurs outside formal environments, like classrooms, in non-structured experiences (Brunson, 2020; Eraut, 2004; Sharma & Raghuvanshi, 2020). Sharma and Raghuvanshi (2020) describe a unique difference between formal and informal learning. Whereas formal learning is presented from the top of the chain to the bottom, informal learning comes from all directions, giving individuals opportunities to learn from everyone around them (Sharma & Raghuvanshi, 2020). Constant and ongoing, informal learning does not end with a significant milestone as one would expect with formal learning.

Through informal learning, mid-level leaders can leverage their daily experiences and conversations as leadership lessons to incorporate into their future work. In a study investigating informal learning in the workplace, Eraut (2004) writes that informal learning provides more agency to individuals, offering more flexibility and leveraging active learning in the workplace. In a list of informal learning activities, Eraut includes participation in group activities, observing and listening to others as they work, taking on new tasks that require learning, and working through new situations with clients. Sharma and Raghuvanshi (2020) add that informal learning can occur directly through the individual's experiences and indirectly through observing others' experiences. In a study investigating how informal learning is facilitated in the workplace, Moore and Klein (2020) found that knowledge and skills developed through informal learning are meaningful due to the natural incorporation into one's regular work duties. In fact, Moore and Klein concluded that knowledge gained through informal learning may be more permanent than through formal learning, as there is no guarantee that knowledge gained

through formal learning directly applies to an individual's work.

Emerging literature has demonstrated that informal learning can be precious for leaders. Duree and Ebbers (2012) explained that while formal education has benefits, engaging with transformational leadership in real-life experiences may assist in developing new skills. In a stronger argument for the value of informal learning, Rothstein (2016) stated that when compared, their study participants believed that formal learning was less beneficial than hands-on experiences and learning from mentors. Brunson (2020) had similar findings, concluding that mid-level leaders flourished with opportunities to engage in group activities that allow risk-taking within controlled environments. With many ways to engage in learning informally, mid-level leaders stand to benefit significantly from a wealth of knowledge that already exists around them.

Communities of Practice

An informal learning method, communities of practice incorporate social learning, allowing individuals to learn from each other. Members in a community of practice construct new knowledge through communication, and one another's expertise (Weaver, Pifer, & Colbeck, 2009; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). In 2002, Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder explored the phenomenon in their book Cultivating communities of practice: A guide to managing knowledge. The authors explain that their work began with Wenger's (1990) dissertation. In the study, Wenger argued that "knowledge does not exist by itself in the form of information, but that it is part of the practice of specific sociocultural communities, called here communities of practice" (p. xv). While writing his dissertation on the link between learning and organizational performance, Snyder (1996) found the concept of communities of practice in Wenger's dissertation. As more

scholars explored employee learning, they began identifying communities of practice as a structure for framing new knowledge through practical application (Wenger et al., 2002). Recognizing the need for foundational material on the topic, Wenger et al. (2002) brought their expertise in the subject together and published their book. The authors are recognized as seminal authors in communities of practice, bringing the information to the masses.

Characteristics of Communities of Practice. In their exploration of communities of practice, Wenger et al. (2002) describe the groups' characteristics, functions, and boundaries. They write that the basis of a community of practice is the feeling of belonging and mutual commitment to one another, growing together (Wenger et al., 2002). Alongside this foundation, there are several specific features of communities of practice. These groups are defined by their placement within larger systems or industries, members with similar goals and histories, and an ongoing cycle of new members as old members leave (Weaver et al., 2009). They have a start date, but there is no standard for the longevity of the groups. Communities of practice are not limited to one department or organization. Instead, they can connect individuals across an industry, focusing on foundational learning needed to be successful in the field (Wenger et al., 2002). Additionally, it is significant that the information shared in communities of practice reaches past structured curriculum or training. Instead, the knowledge lives within the participants, shared through conversations, storytelling, and group activities (Wenger et al., 2002). The information shared in these groups is challenging for others to replicate, as it is the embodiment of participants' experiences, expertise, and understanding (Wenger et al., 2002). Each community of practice is special and unique,

guided by individual members.

Benefits for Community of Practice Members. Involvement in a community of practice can generate new knowledge leading to organizational improvement and improvement of the participants' lives. The authors write that participants expand their understanding and proficiency in their fields by regularly interacting with others with similar challenges or passions (Wenger et al., 2002). In addition to benefits to their career, members can also benefit personally and emotionally. Wenger et al. (2002) explain that the relationships developed between peers add value to individuals' well-being, recognizing that they have a group of people who understand them, their interests, and the challenges they face. Communities of practice allow individuals to find support from like-minded individuals in their greater community outside of limiting departments or organizations. In fact, communities of practice benefit from dispersed members who bring diverse experiences, opinions, and interests to the group (Wenger et al., 2002). As Wenger et al. (2002) explain, "With enough common ground for ongoing mutual engagement, a good dose of diversity makes for richer learning, more interesting relationships, and increased creativity" (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 33). These benefits can be critical for marginalized populations who may not have support within their organizations.

Mid-level leaders are not exempt from receiving these benefits and can develop leadership skills through engaging with a community of practice, gathering insight and advice from peers. While investigating how mid-level leaders engage with communities of practice, Brunson (2020) writes that this connection to peers sharing similar roles and experiences helps mid-level leaders stay current in their field. Additionally, connecting to

a network of peers through a community of practice helps mid-level leaders feel valued and motivated (Brunson, 2020). A powerful resource in leadership and skill development, mid-level leaders in community colleges will benefit significantly from engaging with a community of practice.

Considerations for Leveraging Communities of Practice. While communities of practice have historically formed naturally, scholars have studied the groups and provided recommendations for creating the right conditions for them to flourish. The cultivation of communities of practice is a practical method for organizations to develop more knowledgeable leaders (Wenger et al., 2002). While some communities of practice form naturally as colleagues and peers share experiences, others require groundwork to be laid. Wenger et al. (2002) explain that organizations can support these groups by removing potential barriers and encouraging employees' participation in either situation. The authors also state that there is a growing need for organizations to manage knowledge intentionally and systematically. Though social learning occurs constantly, it is rarely leveraged in strategic organizational improvement planning. Organizations must begin viewing knowledge as a resource, just as financial and physical resources, and include opportunities like communities of practice in their strategic planning.

Mentorship

While communities of practice create space for mutual learning between peers, mentorship allows aspiring and current leaders to learn from those who came before them. Sometimes referred to as coaching, mentorship can take many shapes and is not easily defined. In a study examining mentorship networks in higher education, Thomas, Lunsford, and Rodrigues (2015) define mentorship as a relationship in which the more

experienced individual shares resources with, encourages, and builds the confidence of the less experienced individual. The AACC (2018) uses the term coaching to describe an experience customized to the mentee's learning interests, which may include advice on leadership skills and job opportunities. Bernthal and Wellins (2006) describe mentorship as an opportunity for leaders to identify areas for growth, receive feedback and support in leadership development planning, and regularly evaluate growth. While definitions vary, the literature agrees that leaders benefit from relationships with more experienced leaders who provide ongoing guidance related to their career aspirations.

Formal Mentorship vs. Informal Mentorship. As previously stated, mentorship can take many forms. Brunson (2020) explains that mentorship can occur in formal settings, such as an official pairing during an individual's onboarding, and informal settings, as a naturally forming relationship between individuals. In an analysis of faculty mentoring networks, Luna and Cullen (1995) found that both informal and formal mentoring relationships empower employees and support their growth. However, Brunson found that mid-level leaders see positive effects in their careers when engaged in an ongoing, naturally formed mentoring relationship. As experienced leaders prepare to step into a mentor role, they must consider their mentees' roles and the conditions that must be met to ensure the relationship is most beneficial.

Mentorship in Higher Education. Many scholars have contributed literature on mentorship experiences within higher education and community college leadership. Brunson (2020), Karavedas (2019), and Little (2016) have all conducted studies on leadership development in HEIs, and each strongly asserts that access to mentors is a driving factor in the success of leaders. Luna and Cullen (1995) found that mentoring

helped faculty better understand their organization's culture and offered professional stimulation for both the mentor and mentee. In 2010, McNair found that community college presidents believed they would have been better prepared for their role in the presidency if they had been engaged in mentoring with a focus on the specific challenges and skills needed (McNair, 2010). Luna and Cullen's findings aligned with McNair's, explaining that there is a strong connection between mentorship and career advancement for less-experienced employees. When experienced leaders mentor aspiring and new leaders, they contribute to the future success of higher education leadership.

Community colleges can combat the ongoing leadership crisis by preparing qualified future leaders. Brunson (2020) recommended that HEIs incorporate goals related to mentorship into their annual review process. When mentorship is connected to the organization's success, mentors align organizational goals with the mentee's goals, better preparing the individual to lead the organization (Brunson, 2020). While explicitly focused on the presidency, Duree and Ebbers (2012) highly recommended that experienced leaders become intentional in developing their mentees' leadership skills, bringing awareness, and preparing them for future challenges. Duree and Ebbers found that when aspiring leaders are mentored, they gain a higher awareness of the responsibilities and challenges they will face in future leadership roles. With this exposure, mid-level leaders can be more intentional in selecting leadership development opportunities to support their career growth.

Grow Your Own Programs

A growing trend in community colleges is the development of Grow Your Own (GYO) programs that prepare leaders for the nuances of leading a specific institution.

Asadov (2020) describes the objective of GYO programs as developing a reserve of skilled future leaders ready to take on leadership roles. Similarly, Coll and Weiss (2016) define the goal as developing leaders with shared values while simultaneously identifying employees with the potential to be successful leaders. Experts in community college leadership development have acknowledged the positive impact of these programs. The AACC advocates for institution-led development programs, providing technical support and consultation on incorporating their Competencies for Community College Leaders into the curriculum (AACC, 2018; Eddy & Garza Mitchell, 2017). With the AACC's endorsement, GYO programs can potentially transform mid-level community college leaders' skill development.

There are many benefits to GYO programs in community colleges, including allowing employees from all areas of the community college to explore their potential for a future leadership role in their organization and apply new information in their current roles (Mellow & Heelan, 2014). In addition to piquing an individual's interest in leadership roles, GYO programs offer opportunities for leadership to identify future leaders to fill vacant positions. In their study on the effectiveness of institution-led leadership development, Asadov (2020) found that the programs encourage employee training at all levels, require minimal costs to the organization, are convenient to schedule, and provide hands-on practice. Moreover, GYO programs signal organizations' investment in leadership development and career growth. This investment may be a critical factor in retention, as employees value growth opportunities highly (Swanson, 2018).

While GYO leadership development can be influential within an organization,

some question participants' knowledge and skills transferability. While exploring the effectiveness of a GYO leadership development program, Rowan (2012) found that while the program had many positive qualities, there was a lack of infrastructure and program evaluation. Because the programs are unaccredited and not held accountable by an outside governing body, they hold little weight outside the specific institution. To balance the advantages against the disadvantages, Reille (2009) provided several recommendations that organizations consider while developing a GYO program. Reille recommends that developers identify local biases, conduct a needs assessment to determine what skills are needed, compare the findings from the needs assessment against professionally recognized competencies and pedagogy, and implement an evaluation system (Reille, 2009). If they lay the path toward career growth with skills applicable both in and out of the organization, GYO programs in community colleges can be a highly effective leadership development method.

Application for Mid-Level Leaders in Community Colleges

Between formal and informal learning activities, mid-level leaders have no shortage of options to engage with. However, as described throughout this section, there is no perfect method for leadership development. Instead, there exists a multitude of options that can be combined and incorporated into a professional development plan. Recent scholars have recognized the importance of assessing how mid-level higher education leaders develop leadership skills (Brunson, 2020; Karavedas, 2019). While Karavedas (2019) examined mid-level leaders in Christian universities and Brunson (2020) looked at mid-level leaders in private non-profit universities, there is little literature on how mid-level community college leaders engage in both formal and

informal learning for leadership skill development. With new contributions to literature in this area, current and aspiring leaders can better understand practices that will support their career growth in the community college system.

Summary

Chapter II tells the story of leadership in American higher education, detailing the long and deficient past of leadership identification and development. This chapter highlights the mystery of an industry designed to create tomorrow's leaders and its inability to prepare enough leaders to fill the country's colleges, beginning with the first colonial colleges, to the expansion of public-research universities, to the development of accessible education through junior colleges. As Chapter II explores the journey of junior colleges to community colleges, the current climate of community colleges, the Washington State community college system, and the ongoing leadership crisis, the urgency of research in community college leadership development is recognized.

This literature review details the roles of mid-level leaders, stressing the importance of this population and the potential for a direct pipeline of future executive leaders. As described throughout the chapter, the competencies and skills needed to be a thriving mid-level leader have long been acknowledged, yet there is little published on how mid-level community college leaders engage in learning to develop these talents. The literature review closes with an overview of formal and informal leadership development methods, acknowledging the pros, cons, and applicability for mid-level leaders.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Overview

Learning plays a critical role in exemplary leadership. Leaders thrive when they have opportunities to develop their leadership skills before facing challenging situations for the first time. There are many ways that leaders can develop these skills, including through informal learning such as mentorship or participation in a community of practice. Chapter I offered an introduction to the study, summarized the background of the literature and outlined the study's purpose statement, research questions, the significance of the research problem, definitions, and delimitations. Chapter II examined the literature surrounding methods of attaining leadership skills and drew attention to the lack of literature regarding how mid-level leaders in Washington State Community Colleges earn leadership skills.

Chapter III depicts the qualitative methodology used to conduct the study, describing the use of a phenomenological framework to explore the formal and informal leadership development experiences of mid-level leaders promoted within Washington State Community Colleges. This chapter reiterates the purpose statement and research questions and describes why a phenomenological framework was the most appropriate method for this study. Additionally, this chapter details the population and sample, explaining the sampling methods and participant recruitment. Finally, Chapter III describes the study's instrumentation, data collection, data analysis, and limitations.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to identify and describe the formal and informal leadership development experiences of mid-level leaders promoted

within Washington State Community Colleges.

Research Questions

The research was guided by one central question and two sub-questions. The study's central question was: What are the leadership development experiences of mid-level leaders promoted within Washington State Community Colleges? The two sub-questions were:

1. What are the formal leadership development experiences of mid-level leaders promoted within Washington State Community Colleges?
2. What are the informal leadership development experiences of mid-level leaders promoted within Washington State Community Colleges?

Research Design

To better understand how mid-level community college leaders develop leadership skills, it was necessary for the study to collect information-rich data from participants living through these experiences. Patton (2014) explains that qualitative studies gather descriptive, detailed, contextual data and explore the implications of the study's focus on the people involved. By selecting a qualitative research method, the researcher commits to exploring the meaning of participants' experiences, stories, challenges, and lives. Further, Roberts and Hyatt (2019) elaborate that qualitative studies make meaning of the participants' experiences. Because they intended to describe mid-level community college leaders' stories regarding formal and informal leadership development, the researcher felt that this study was precisely aligned with a qualitative method.

The development of one's leadership skills is a deeply personal matter for each

leader and is not easily replicated by others. When considering how to best analyze this phenomenon, allowing participants to share their experiences in a semi-structured format is critical, encouraging reflection and storytelling. Patton (2014) explains that a phenomenological framework allows the researcher to investigate the lived experiences of a group of people experiencing the same phenomenon and explore how they make sense of these experiences. This study aims to examine and describe the specific phenomena of formal and informal leadership development experiences and the implications for mid-level leaders promoted within Washington State Community Colleges. For these reasons, the researcher concluded that a phenomenological design was the most appropriate choice for this study.

Population

To identify participants for their study, a researcher must begin by selecting the population. A population is an entire group on which the study's findings can be generalized (McMillian & Schumacher, 2010). The population of this study was current and previous mid-level leaders in Washington State's community and technical colleges. Mid-level leaders are administrators with decision-making power, program management duties, and leadership responsibilities. In this system, mid-level leaders in academic affairs hold the titles of Dean or Associate Dean, while their counterparts in student and business affairs hold the title of Director. There are currently 34 community colleges in Washington state, as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4

Washington's 34 Community and Technical Colleges

Note: From *Explore our colleges* by SBCTC, n.d. (https://www.sbctc.edu/our-colleges/explore-colleges/default.aspx).

In the 2020-2021 academic year, the SBCTC reported a headcount of 3,696 administrative staff working in Washington State's 34 community colleges. Of the mid-level leaders in Washington State community colleges, each institution is estimated to employ approximately 10-60 mid-level leaders. This brings the study population to an estimated 340-2,040 mid-level leaders working in Washington State's 34 community colleges.

Target Population

To ensure the study is feasible, the population must be narrowed. The researcher

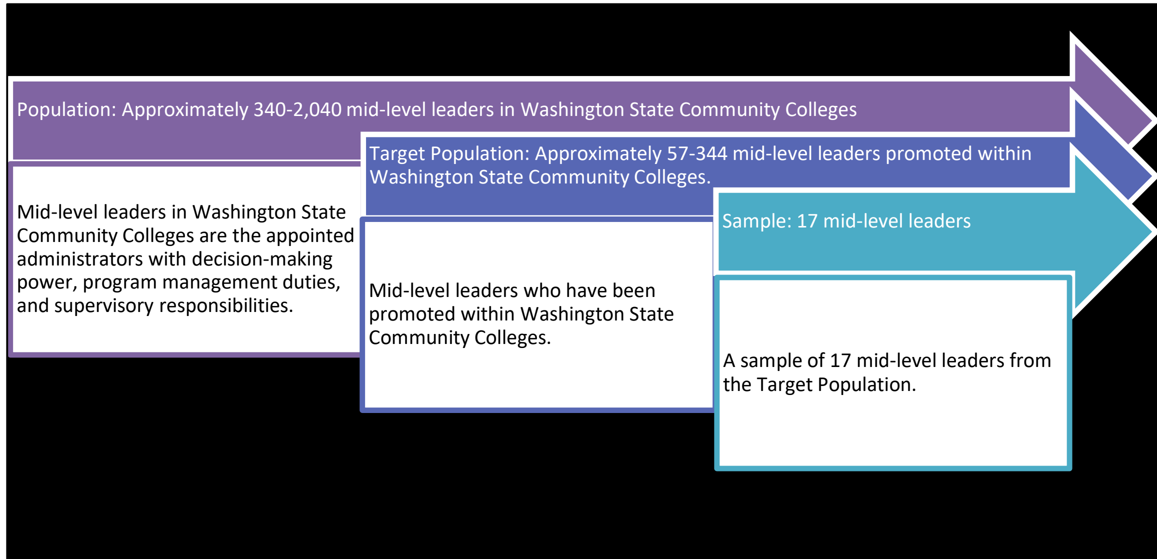
identified a target population, which refers to a smaller subgroup of the larger Population (Creswell, 2013). The study's target population is mid-level leaders promoted within Washington State community colleges. Considering the study's focus on leadership development activities of mid-level leaders, the researcher will specifically focus on those who were successful in furthering their careers. In 2019, the ADP Research Institute reported that 16.9% of managers in the fields of education and health were promoted internally. By applying this rate to the estimated 340-2,040 mid-level leaders in Washington State community colleges, it is estimated that the target population of this study is 57-344 mid-level leaders.

Sample

The researcher narrowed the target population to a sample, a group of individuals whose experiences were representative of the larger population (McMillian & Schumacher, 2010). When determining the sample size, the researcher considered the time constraints, resource availability, and the study's goals (Patton, 1990). The study's sample size was 17 participants, allowing the researcher to investigate information-rich cases with the resources and time available for the study. Each of the 17 participants held a mid-level leadership position and had been promoted within the Washington State Community College system. As seen in Figure 5, the researcher gathered data from a sample belonging to the larger population.

Figure 5

Population, Target Population, and Sample



Note: Adapted from *Faculty and staff data dashboard*, by SBCTC, n.d. (https://www.sbctc.edu/colleges-staff/research/data-public/faculty-and-staff-data-dashboard.aspx).

By identifying study participants in this fashion, the researcher could examine information-rich cases within the boundaries of available time and resources.

Sampling Procedures

While conducting qualitative research, there are many sampling procedures to consider, each purposefully identifying information-rich cases to be evaluated (McMillian & Schumacher, 2010). The researcher utilized criterion-based sampling, in which all participants must meet predetermined criteria (Patton, 2014). Study participants were recruited and selected based on the following criteria:

- Currently holds or previously held a mid-level leadership role in a Washington

State Community College;

  - These roles may include Director, Associate Dean, or Dean, though titles vary between organizations and regions.

- Held their current or a previous position in community college mid-level leadership for at least two years;
- Previously held a part-time staff, classified staff, faculty, or another non-leadership role in a Washington State Community College.

After receiving IRB approval, the researcher contacted two potential study sponsors. The sponsors were identified as expert leaders in higher education and community colleges, each with over ten years of leadership experience in higher education and having held a mid-level leadership role in a Washington State Community College. The researcher took the following steps to identify qualified study participants:

1. Upon IRB approval (see Appendix B), the researcher contacted the study's sponsors (see Appendix C).
2. The study's sponsors agreed to contact individuals within their networks that met the selection criteria (see Appendix D).
3. The sponsors gathered 17 potential participants, requesting individuals meeting the study's criteria to volunteer. One sponsor posted a request through an SBCTC listserv for Library and E-Learning leaders, while the second posted a request to a Facebook group of alumni from their master's program, an M.Ed. in Student Affairs.
4. The researcher verified that each potential participant met the study's criteria.
5. The researcher emailed each potential participant, including the Informational

Letter (see Appendix E), Participant's Bill of Rights (see Appendix F), and Informed Consent Form (see Appendix G).

Instrumentation

This section details the instrumentation of this study, referring to the tools and methods used to gather and interpret data. For this phenomenological study, the researcher was considered the primary instrument for data collection. As the researcher's goal was to gather reliable data from the population (Patton, 2014), they conducted semi-structured interviews with all study participants, utilizing interview questions aligned with the research questions. The researcher designed the research questions to gather participants' stories regarding formal and informal leadership development experiences.

Researcher as the Instrument

In qualitative studies, the researcher is crucial in collecting and analyzing data. In this study, the researcher acted as the primary instrument used to gather data by developing interview questions and conducting interviews. Patton (2014) explains that qualitative research's credibility hinges on the researcher's talent and aptitude and how they collect and interpret the data. Because of this, personal bias can threaten the validity of the research. Therefore, the researcher must intentionally add safeguards to prevent any influence from personal bias before beginning to gather data.

Creswell (2013) explained that a suitable validity process is for the researcher to disclose their biases and beliefs that may influence their inquiry. A potential bias existed in this study due to the researcher's experience working at a Washington State Community College. While the researcher is no longer employed within the Washington State Community College system, they brought bias from previous experiences that could

be similar to the participants' experiences. By explicitly recognizing this potential area of bias, the researcher could take steps to avoid influence on the study.

Interview Questions

Another instrument in this study was the interview questions used during the semi-structured interviews with participants. Patton (2014) explains that in phenomenological interviews, the researcher aims to capture the participants' descriptions of specific experiences, allowing for a comprehensive account rather than interpretations and generalizations. During the semi-structured interviews, the researcher followed a structured script and utilized unstructured questions, increasing flexibility to allow for further clarification. Interview questions were scripted before interviews were conducted, and all participants were prompted with the same questions. Each interview question was designed to directly align with this study's research questions, intending for themes to emerge from the data and adequately address the research questions. The researcher used eleven interview questions during the interviews (see Appendix H).

Validity

Researchers should attempt to enhance the validity of their studies to affirm a lack of bias. McMillian and Schumacher (2010) explain that the validity of qualitative studies is how closely the researcher's explanation of the data matches the participants' experiences. Patton (2014) expands on this idea, explaining that ensuring that instruments measure the intended phenomena is critical to qualitative research validity. To enhance the validity of this study, the researcher utilized two strategies. First, the researcher formed an expert panel to review the interview protocol. Second, the researcher conducted a pilot interview. These steps were taken to safeguard the study's validity.

Expert Panel as Instrument

Prior to data collection, each interview question was validated by an expert panel. Following examination, the expert panel validated the interview questions' alignment with the purpose of this study. The researcher recruited expert panel members as experts in both qualitative research methods and higher education. The experts utilized on this panel met a minimum of three of the following criteria:

1. Over five years of experience as faculty in an HEI.
2. Leadership experience within higher education.
3. Published author in leadership development or higher education.
4. Conducted qualitative research within the last five years.
5. Conducted leadership workshops.

Pilot Test as Instrument

The researcher's interview skills can affect the data collection, which could be a significant challenge in qualitative studies as the researcher is the primary instrument. As such, the researcher conducted a pilot interview with an observer. During the pilot interview, the observer evaluated interview skills such as pacing, tone, eye contact, and engagement with the participant. The researcher selected an expert to observe the pilot interview for this study, who provided feedback for the researcher after the interview. The expert is a faculty member with over five years of experience in qualitative research and higher education.

Reliability

Another consideration for researchers is the reliability of their research instruments. McMillian and Schumacher (2010) explained that reliability describes how

an instrument will produce comparable results in various conditions. In qualitative research, ensuring reliability is critical, as the primary instrument is the researcher. The researcher must employ safeguards to ensure they are consistent with all participants in both data collection and data analysis. The researcher utilized three measures of reliability to ensure consistency and accurate results.

Internal Reliability of Data

Internal reliability refers to the idea that different data collection methods may provide different perspectives and, therefore, a broader picture. Patton (2014) explains that researchers can gain deeper insight into the phenomenon by finding consistent data or analyzing the reasons for differences through triangulating data. In this study, the researcher sought increased reliability through data triangulation and added additional mid-level leaders to the participant pool. The higher number of participants allowed for data triangulation across multiple interviews, drawing conclusions and themes from the data collected through interviews.

External Reliability of Data

The consistency of findings, when repeated over time and with different individuals, is referred to as external reliability (American Psychological Association, n.d.). As the purpose is to glean insight into a specific population experiencing a specific phenomenon, it is not expected that another researcher could duplicate the study and achieve the same results. Consequently, external reliability is not a substantial factor in this study.

Inter-coder Reliability

Inter-coder reliability refers to measuring consistency in coding between

individuals while evaluating the same data (Lombard, Snyder-Duch, & Bracken. 2006). For this practice, an outside researcher codes a sample of the collected data, and their coding decisions are compared against those of the study's researcher. Lombard, Snyder-Duch, and Bracken (2006) explain that while sample sizes may vary due to multiple factors, 10% of the collected data is acceptable for this practice. Following the data collection of this study, an outside researcher reviewed 10% of the data collected through interviews. After the second researcher had coded the data sample, the researcher confirmed 87% agreement with identified themes. Lombard et al. (2006) assert that while 90% of agreement between the coders is the goal, 80% is acceptable.

Data Collection

Researchers are responsible for including safeguards in their study to increase autonomy and avoid harming or exploiting vulnerable participants. As such, participants must give informed consent to participate following a review of the research procedures and risks. The researcher submitted a proposal to the University of Massachusetts Global Institutional Review Board (IRB) for review, feedback, and approval to meet ethical standards. Additionally, the researcher completed a Human Subject Research training course (see Appendix I), furthering their understanding of ethical research practices. Following IRB approval, the researcher emailed each of the study's 17 participants, providing the Informational Letter, the Participant Bill of Rights, and the Informed Consent Form. Before interviewing each participant, the researcher confirmed their informed consent, documented through the Informed Consent Form.

Types of Data

Interviews

The interviews in this phenomenological study were conducted to gather insight into participants' lived experiences of formal and informal leadership development. The researcher consulted with an expert panel while developing open-ended, semi-structured interview questions. The research questions were designed to collect data related to the study's research questions and fell into one of two categories: Leadership Development through Formal Learning and Leadership Development Through Informal Learning. The researcher developed additional exploratory questions for each interview question that allowed for further clarification when needed. Additionally, the researcher conducted a pilot interview to prepare for the interview process and ensure the validity of the interview protocol. The names, titles, and organizations were removed from the interview data for anonymity.

Data Collection Procedures

The following section details the researcher's data collection procedures for this study. This section will outline the interview procedures so the study can be easily replicated.

Participant Recruitment

The primary research question in this study sought to understand the leadership development experiences of mid-level leaders promoted within Washington State Community Colleges. The researcher recognized potential challenges to recruiting participants as they worked outside the Washington State Community College system. Therefore, the researcher was intentional in the recruitment process to ensure

information-rich cases. The researcher took the following steps to recruit participants for this study:

1. The researcher identified two potential sponsors with connections to the Washington State Community College System for the study. The researcher recognized that the potential sponsors might have an extensive network in the field due to their experience and leadership.
2. The researcher emailed them to ask if they would be willing to meet and discuss the possibility of sponsoring the study. (see Appendix C).
3. The researcher met each potential sponsor to discuss the purpose of the study and the criteria for participants. The potential sponsors reviewed the Informational Letter (see Appendix E), Participant's Bill of Rights (see Appendix F), and Informed Consent Form (see Appendix G).
4. Following this discussion, the sponsors provided their endorsement and contacted individuals within their network that met the selection criteria (see Appendix D).
5. After verifying that each potential participant met the study's criteria, the researcher emailed each potential participant, including the informational letter (see Appendix E).
6. After reviewing the study materials, 17 mid-level leaders consented to participate in the study through semi-structured interviews.

Interviews

This study followed a phenomenological framework, and semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather data on the professional development experiences of

mid-level leaders promoted within Washington State Community Colleges. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, meetings and operations in many HEIs have shifted online. Because of this atmosphere, the researcher elected to hold the interviews virtually using Zoom. The interviews were recorded using Zoom's built-in features with permission from all participants. The researcher utilized Zoom's automatic transcription feature, then reviewed and edited each transcript to ensure accurate data was collected. The following steps were taken to ensure all interviews were conducted in the same fashion:

1. Before the interview, the researcher emailed the participant to arrange a day and time that would work best to meet virtually. The researcher asked the participant to select a meeting time that would allow them to be comfortable and free from disruptions. The researcher explained that the interview would last 60-90 minutes and focus on the participant's leadership development activities.
2. After the interview was scheduled, the researcher emailed the participant, attaching the Participant's Bill of Rights (see Appendix F) and Informed Consent Form (see Appendix G). Before the interview, the researcher offered to meet with the participant to answer questions and address potential concerns. After addressing all questions and concerns, the researcher asked the participant to review the Informed Consent Form. The researcher then asked the participant to sign the Informed Consent Form and email it back, indicating their consent to participate.
3. Upon receiving consent, the interviewer thanked the participant for their time and sent them the interview questions to review before the meeting.
4. Upon meeting, the researcher confirmed that the participant understood the

interview protocol. Before starting the interview, the researcher answered any questions the participant had (see Appendix H).

5. Interviews took approximately one hour and began with interview questions prepared in advance. When the researcher felt further detail or clarification was needed, they asked follow-up exploratory questions.
6. Interviews were recorded using Zoom's recording feature. The researcher also recorded the audio via iPhone as a backup.
7. At the end of the interview, the researcher asked the participant if they had any questions. The researcher thanked the participant for their time and explained that they would provide the interview transcript for their review if requested.
8. After the interview, the researcher downloaded the automatically generated transcript from the Zoom cloud. The researcher then reviewed the recording and edited the transcript to ensure accuracy.

Data Protection and Control

The researcher was intentional in their data collection, working carefully to protect the participants' identities and minimize risk. The researcher only collected data following the participants' informed consent and removed all information identifying name, position, or institution. The researcher assigned a number to each participant, allowing them to organize interview transcripts. The files were stored in secure, individualized folders on the researcher's computer. The researcher was the only person with access to the password-protected computer. Following the completion of the study, the researcher destroyed all data files.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data analysis process involves organizing an extensive amount of data into categories, identifying relationships between those categories, and interpreting those relationships (McMillian & Schumacher, 2010). While qualitative researchers follow these general guidelines, each analytical approach will be unique and suited to the specific study and researcher (Patton, 2014). For this study, the researcher selected an inductive process outlined by McMillian and Schumacher (2010) as the framework for data analysis. The inductive analysis allows qualitative researchers to make meaning of themes identified within the data rather than attempting to fit data into predetermined categories (McMillian & Schumacher, 2010). The researcher took the following steps while conducting the data analysis:

1. All interviews were recorded and transcribed to ensure accuracy.
2. The researcher examined the data for emerging themes related to the research question. The researcher then labeled potential themes that would directly answer the study's research questions.
3. The researcher used NVivo software to code the data and count the frequency of each potential theme.
4. The researcher submitted 10% of the collected data to an outside researcher, who coded the data sample. The researchers established inter-coder reliability, confirming themes and frequencies with an agreement rate of 87%.
5. The researcher analyzed the themes and frequencies to make meaning of the mid-level leaders' leadership development experiences.

Limitations

In all studies, it is critical that the researcher consider limitations that may affect their findings. Limitations exist in all research, and researchers must address potential biases, influences, and intentional strategies to avoid negative impacts on the study's credibility (Patton, 2014). The researcher recognized the following limitations and worked to decrease their effect on the study:

- Researcher as the instrument: In this qualitative study, the researcher served as the primary instrument in data collection. The researcher used several strategies to limit potential biases affecting the study. These strategies included working with an expert panel, conducting a pilot test, and utilizing an outside researcher to confirm inter-rater reliability.
- Self-Reported: This study utilized semi-structured interviews as a primary data collection method. The participants' self-reported data was a limitation in this study. The researcher triangulated the data with responses from other interviewees, adding additional participants to the study to increase validity.
- Sample Size: As the study's sample size was 17 participants, the data may not be generalizable for the larger population. The researcher was intentional with sampling methods, utilizing both criterion-based sampling and purposeful random sampling. These purposeful sampling procedures allowed the researcher to narrow the sample size to those that can be studied with the available time and resources while reducing bias.
- Promoted vs. All Mid-level Leaders: In this study, the researcher chose to

investigate the lived experiences of mid-level leaders promoted within the Washington State Community College system. A limitation of the study is that the findings may not be generalizable for a larger population. However, qualitative research typically focuses on small, purposeful samples to understand a phenomenon in-depth (Patton, 2014). The researcher identified information-rich cases through purposeful sampling methods and opened the door to further research.

- Criterion-Based Sampling: The researcher selected three criteria that participants must meet to capture information-rich cases. A potential limitation to this method is that the voices of those not meeting the criteria will not be shared. For instance, this study did not include community college employees who were unsuccessful in earning a promotion or who left the industry due to a lack of leadership development opportunities. While the criteria may limit this study, the potential of examining these individuals in future research exists.

Summary

In Chapter III, the researcher described the methods used to fulfill the purpose of the study and answer the research questions. The researcher described the phenomenological research design, the study's population and sample, the instrumentation used, and the processes of ensuring validity and reliability. Finally, the researcher detailed their data collection and analysis process and identified potential limitations. This chapter aimed to help readers understand the researcher's methods and support future researchers who may replicate or expand on this study. The researcher

intentionally designed this study, ensuring that the data collected addressed the research questions and accurately detailed the formal and informal leadership development experiences of mid-level leaders promoted within Washington State Community Colleges.

CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH, DATA COLLECTION, AND FINDINGS

Overview

In Chapter I, the researcher introduced the study and provided a background for the research problem. Chapter II expanded on the background, offering an extensive review of the literature related to community college leadership, Mid-level leaders in Washington State Community Colleges, and formal and informal methods of leadership development. Chapter III outlined the study's methodology, in which the researcher utilized a qualitative phenomenological design to explore the leadership development experiences of Mid-level leaders in Washington State Community Colleges. Chapter IV presents the research findings of this study by analyzing data collected from 17 Mid-level leaders in Washington State Community colleges. In this chapter, the researcher details the data collection process, insights and experiences shared by the study's participants, and a summary of the findings.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to identify and describe the formal and informal leadership development experiences of mid-level leaders promoted within Washington State Community Colleges.

Research Questions

The research was guided by one central question and two sub-questions. The study's central question was: What are the leadership development experiences of mid-level leaders promoted within Washington State Community Colleges? The two sub-questions were:

1. What are the formal leadership development experiences of mid-level leaders

promoted within Washington State Community Colleges?

2. What are the informal leadership development experiences of mid-level leaders promoted within Washington State Community Colleges?

Research Methods and Data Collection Procedures

As the researcher sought a deeper understanding of how mid-level community college leaders engage in leadership development, it was necessary to collect data from the participants with a lived experience of this phenomenon. To best capture the participants' stories of their lived experiences, the researcher followed a qualitative framework and focused on gathering information-rich data from the study's population. By gathering contextual and detailed data directly from the participants, the researcher could make meaning of these lived experiences (Patton, 2014; Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). Through semi-structured interviews, the participants reflected on their leadership development experiences and shared their stories, providing descriptive data that would aid in answering the study's research questions. The semi-structured interview format allowed the participants to answer interview questions aligned to the research questions while simultaneously allowing the researcher to follow with probing questions when they felt the story had a deeper meaning to be revealed.

Population

McMillian and Schumacher (2010) define a population as a group of individuals meeting specified criteria and on which the study's findings can be generalized. The population of this study was mid-level leaders in Washington State's community colleges. Mid-level leaders are administrators with decision-making power, program management duties, and supervisory responsibilities. In this system, most mid-level

leaders in academic affairs hold the titles of Dean or Associate Dean, and their counterparts in student and business affairs hold the title of Director, though these roles and titles vary between institutions. In the 2020-2021 academic year, the SBCTC reported a headcount of 3,696 administrative staff working in Washington State's 34 community colleges. Of those administrative staff in Washington State community colleges, each institution is estimated to employ approximately 10-60 mid-level leaders. Therefore, the study's population is estimated at 340-2,040 mid-level leaders working in Washington State's 34 community colleges.

Target Population

The researcher identified a target population, referring to a group of individuals whose characteristics represented the larger population (Creswell, 2013). The study's target population was mid-level leaders promoted within Washington State community colleges. Based on the ADP Research Institute's 2019 report, 16.9% of managers in the fields of education and health were promoted internally. By applying this rate to the estimated 340-2,040 mid-level leaders in Washington State community colleges, it is estimated that the target population of this study is 57-344 mid-level leaders.

Sample

The researcher narrowed the target population to a sample, allowing for examining information-rich cases within available time and resources. McMillian & Schumacher (2010) explain that a sample is a group of individuals whose experiences are representative of the larger population. The participants of this study belong to the larger population, sharing similar experiences. The study's sample size was 17 participants, each of whom had held a mid-level leadership position and been promoted within the

Washington State Community College system.

Demographic Data

A sample of 17 participants was interviewed after the researcher confirmed that each had met the study's criteria. After reviewing the Participant Bill of Rights, each participant signed an Informed Consent Form and was assigned a number between 1-17 by the researcher. The researcher gathered demographics relevant to the study, including gender, years in Community College Mid-Level Leadership, and the position titles each participant held in the Washington State Community College System, as seen in Table 2.

Table 2

Participant Demographics

Participant Number	Gender	Years in Mid-Level Leadership	Mid-level Leader Positions Held
Participant 1	Female	2	Director
Participant 2	Male	3	Director
Participant 3	Male	10+	Associate Director Director, Registrar
Participant 4	Female	10+	Department Chair
Participant 5	Female	10+	Dean Director
Participant 6	Female	3	Dean
Participant 7	Male	10+	Director, Registrar Dean Registrar Associate Registrar
Participant 8	Female	10+	Dean
Participant 9	Female	6	Dean Director
Participant 10	Female	3	Director
Participant 11	Female	10+	Dean Associate Dean Director
Participant 12	Male	4	Director
Participant 13	Female	3	Director Manager
Participant 14	Female	10+	Assistant Dean Manager
Participant 15	Female	10+	Dean Director
Participant 16	Female	10+	Assistant Dean Director Associate Director Assistant Director
Participant 17	Female	3	Director

Presentation and Analysis of Data

The findings documented in this chapter are the product of 17 semi-structured interviews. Each interview was conducted virtually through Zoom and lasted

approximately one hour. The researcher analyzed the data in an attempt to answer the study's central research question: *What are the leadership development experiences of mid-level leaders promoted within Washington State Community Colleges?* The sub-questions addressed how mid-level leaders developed leadership skills, including formal and informal learning and experiences. While the study did not use a formal framework, the study's two research sub-questions were used to organize the 12 identified themes by the researcher, as well as themes that did not fall into either category as unexpected findings:

- Formal Leadership Development Experiences
- Informal Leadership Development Experiences
- Unexpected Findings

The study's participants were individuals who currently or previously held a mid-level leadership role in a Washington State Community College, held their current or a previous position in community college mid-level leadership for at least two years, and previously held a part-time staff, classified staff, faculty, or another non-leadership role in a Washington State Community College.

Data Analysis

The researcher collected and analyzed data from 17 participants, attempting to identify and describe the formal and informal leadership development experiences of mid-level leaders promoted within Washington State Community Colleges. Data collection occurred through individual, virtual interviews. The researcher held semi-structured interviews, with interview questions guided by the study's research questions

and falling into one of two categories: Leadership Development through Formal Learning and Leadership Development Through Informal Learning (see Appendix H).

The researcher designed the data collection method of semi-structured, virtual interviews with primary and exploratory interview questions for the 17 participants. Once the researcher had collected data, transcribed the semi-structured interviews, and scanned and re-read the data, the researcher identified 12 emerging themes. Seeking intercoder reliability, the researcher asked a second researcher to review and code approximately 10% of the collected data, looking for themes that answered the study's research questions. Once the second researcher had coded the data sample, the researcher confirmed 87% agreement with identified themes.

Once they had analyzed the data, the researcher confirmed 12 significant themes related to the study's research questions. The major themes listed in Table 3 are presented from the highest frequency to the lowest, noting the number of sources from which the data were identified. The researcher organized the data by type of experience, formal or informal, and included unexpected findings from the data. There were 12 themes identified from the data, with four falling into each category: formal experiences, informal experiences, and unexpected findings.

Table 3

Themes, Sources, and Frequency – Highest to Lowest

Type of Experience	Themes	Sources	Frequency
Unexpected	Lacking formal pathways, leaders embrace flexible leadership development plans guided by ongoing challenges and opportunities.	17	92
Informal	Consciously seeking advice from communities of practice in challenging situations.	15	47
Informal	Developing leadership skills through various types of mentorship.	15	45
Unexpected	Recognizing that leadership development is not passive; Leaders must intentionally identify opportunities to develop new skills and knowledge.	14	38
Informal	Developing a leadership style based on both positive and negative experiences with supervisors and peers.	16	37
Formal	Leveraging formal leadership development experiences as opportunities to network across organizations.	14	29
Formal	Theory alone is not enough; leadership skills are developed through applying educational concepts in the workplace.	14	27
Informal	Seizing opportunities to learn through collaboration while navigating isolating roles.	15	25
Formal	Intentionally leveraging formal learning to broaden opportunities.	12	24
Unexpected	Being selective in engaging with leadership development opportunities due to limited time and financial resources.	14	22
Unexpected	Advocacy increases leadership development opportunities for marginalized populations.	7	15
Formal	Previous leadership experience allowed leaders to contextualize new concepts from formal learning experiences.	9	15
	Total Frequency Count		416

Themes Based on Type of Leadership Development Experience

The following data are presented under the categories of formal leadership development and informal leadership development experiences. In some cases, themes

did not fall into one of these two categories and were categorized as unexpected findings. Participants were asked to share their leadership development experiences within formal and informal learning contexts during their interviews. Participants often shared how their varied experiences shaped their career paths and contributed to their leadership efficacy.

As a result of collecting and coding the data, the researcher concluded that the 12 themes could be categorized evenly between formal leadership development experiences, informal leadership development experiences, and unexpected findings, with four themes falling under each. In each category, the themes have been listed from highest frequency count to lowest, and the discussion is supported by the researcher's findings from the 17 participant interviews.

Formal Leadership Development Experiences

The researcher asked each study participant a series of questions related to their formal leadership development experiences leading to the development of leadership skills. The interview questions were designed to answer the study's first research sub-question: *What are the formal leadership development experiences of mid-level leaders promoted within Washington State Community Colleges?* The researcher used Brunson's (2020) definition of formal learning, referring to learning programs offered through an HEI or organization that typically have an ending milestone. The participants of this study shared examples of several formal leadership development experiences, including university-based graduate programs, conferences, institutes, workshops, and classroom-based professional development opportunities.

When asked about their formal leadership development experiences, participants

shared that formal learning had opened new pathways to further opportunities and that the opportunity to engage with peers in formal learning settings was highly effective in creating professional relationships across organizations. Further, participants spoke about the necessity of gaining workplace experience alongside their formal learning and how previous leadership experiences allowed them to contextualize new concepts presented through formal learning. As seen in Table 4, four themes related to formal leadership development experiences emerged from the data, with a total frequency count of 95. Given that the study's overall frequency count is 416, formal leadership development experiences themes represent 23% of the study's findings.

Table 4

Themes, Sources, and Frequency – Formal Leadership Development Experiences

Type of Experience	Themes	Sources	Frequency
Formal	Leveraging formal leadership development experiences as opportunities to network across organizations.	14	29
Formal	Theory alone is not enough; leadership skills are developed through applying educational concepts in the workplace.	14	27
Formal	Intentionally leveraging formal learning to broaden opportunities.	12	24
Formal	Previous leadership experience allowed leaders to contextualize new concepts from formal learning experiences.	9	15
	Total Frequency Count		95

Formal Leadership Development Experience Theme 1: Leveraging formal leadership development experiences as opportunities to network across organizations

When asked about their formal leadership development experiences, participants often spoke not of the curriculum or instructors but of the opportunities to network with peers from within and outside their organizations. Additionally, the researcher learned that the mid-level leaders leveraged these newly developed connections as opportunities to learn from one another and deepen their understanding of leadership concepts. As seen in Table 5, the researcher identified this theme with 14 sources at a frequency of 29.

Table 5

Themes, Sources, and Frequency – Leveraging formal experiences for networking

Type of Experience	Themes	Sources	Frequency
Formal	Leveraging formal leadership development experiences as opportunities to network across organizations.	14	29

Through multiple interviews, the researcher learned the value that mid-level leaders placed on forming relationships during formal leadership development experiences. Participant 11 shared that interacting with classmates allowed them to "work more on those leadership and interpersonal skills," which they identified as good practice for future leadership roles. Participant 14 shared that while interactions with their classmates may not have directly contributed to developing specific leadership skills, they felt the opportunity to "build each other up" aided in developing a "sense of self and confidence," which they ultimately believed contributed to their efficacy as a leader. Though typically not a focal point of formal learning, several participants shared their belief that relationships strengthened their leadership development experience, including

Participant 17, who shared that insights gathered through these interactions were “what makes the application of leadership skills possible.”

Other participants shared the value of long-term connections they developed while engaging in formal leadership development experiences. Participant 2 explained that these relationships were “critical for us to advance where we were going” and that the long-term relationships were something they “could always fall back on” when challenging situations arose. Similarly, Participant 10 shared that they benefited from building relationships at conferences, as they now had a network of peers they could call and ask, “What did you guys do in this situation?” When asked about the essential elements of their formal leadership development, Participant 5 emphatically answered, “the relationships that you build or strengthen through these experiences.” As they described their experience attending the Workforce Deans Academy, sponsored by the Workforce Education Council and administered by the Center of Excellence for Careers in Education (Workforce Deans Academy, n.d.), Participant 5 explained:

> There were 16 of us that, you know, spent four days together five different times. And those are people that I still call, eight years later, nine years later, when I need something. A lot of us are still in the system, and those are my go-to people because we've got that bonded experience together. And there's a level of trust there that I could call and say, ‘Hey, I think I really screwed something up. Have you ever had this experience?’

As they listened, the researcher learned that for some mid-level leaders, the professional relationships developed in these spaces became support networks, guiding them as they navigated the more challenging facets of their roles.

In some cases, mid-level leaders utilized networking opportunities to look at leadership from a new perspective. Participant 6 shared that their experience at the Powers of Leadership Retreat offered through the Whidbey Institute (The Whidbey Institute, n.d.) was an opportunity to “get outside of the academic bubble and learn from people enacting significant change in other realms.” Moreover, participants had varying motives for seeking insight from peers in different fields. When describing their experience of taking a leadership course offered through their institution, Participant 15 explained how conversations in the classroom help them in their current role:

> I felt like I was in workshops with people who were struggling with the same kinds of problems, the same kinds of issues. And so, we're there together to learn new things and work through problems together, how to make things work better. So, although even in that class, we had people from wildly different areas of the campus and very different levels of the organization, we were all trying to make things better in our own areas . . . I think it can be helpful to see the slightly different challenges and to be able to apply them to your own area.

While multiple participants spoke of the benefits of relationship-building for solving challenges in their current roles, others were more future-focused, looking forward to their continued career development. For instance, Participant 16 shared their goal of becoming a college president and explained that a challenge they face is understanding the organization through the perspectives of those from other areas of a community college. As their experience was in Student Services, Participant 16 explained they were rarely involved in plans like academic program development, building management, or capital projects. However, they felt their formal leadership development experience at the

American Association of Community College's (AACC) Future Presidents Institute (AACC, n.d.-a.) gave them specific insight into the challenges their counterparts faced in other areas of the organization and allowed them to better understand the community they hope to lead someday.

A reoccurring sentiment from participants was the excitement of their leadership development experiences returning to in-person formats, as most classes, conferences, and meetings had been held virtually since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020. It became apparent to the researcher that these mid-level leaders missed the unstructured social time during an in-person formal leadership development experience. Participants found it more challenging to network in the online space. As Participant 6 framed it, "there is something about eating with people and hanging out" that allowed attendees to connect more deeply. Participant 10 also spoke to the power of in-person sessions, describing the interactions with others as "little learning circles," where a break or lunch "turns into a roundtable" where attendees can have further discussions on the content offered at that event.

Many of the study's participants agreed that engaging with classmates gave context to challenges faced in community college leadership, allowed the mid-level leader to see their organization from a different perspective, and reinforced the development of a support network to turn to in new or challenging situations. The data highlight the benefits of formal learning settings with networking opportunities for developing the leadership skills of mid-level leaders in community colleges.

Formal Leadership Development Experience Theme 2: Theory alone is not enough; leadership skills are developed through applying educational concepts in the workplace

While discussing formal leadership development experiences, several of the study's participants suggested that studying leadership theory alone was insufficient. However, many recognized that skill development came when using leadership concepts as a framework for decision-making while practicing leadership scenarios and applying lessons in the workplace. As outlined in Table 6, the researcher identified this theme with 14 sources at a frequency of 27.

Table 6

Themes, Sources, and Frequency – Theory alone is not enough; applying concepts

Type of Experience	Themes	Sources	Frequency
Formal	Theory alone is not enough; leadership skills are developed through applying educational concepts in the workplace.	14	27

Several participants acknowledged their formal learning experiences as the foundation of their leadership skill development. Participant 7 passionately shared the value of their formal leadership development experiences, sharing that acting as a practitioner by applying the knowledge of specific theories made them a "stronger servant in this work." They continued, sharing that their critical thinking skills improved as they could take concepts they had learned in their graduate studies and apply them directly to their challenges. Participant 10 shared that "there are so many things I wouldn't even be aware of" without their formal leadership development experiences and that their classroom learning experiences were the "building blocks" of their leadership skills and style. Participant 15 echoed these sentiments, sharing that they were glad they

had taken leadership coursework at the beginning of their career as they had a chance to "critically think about leadership" before being placed in a leadership role. Similarly, Participant 9 shared that developing knowledge in formal classes had given them confidence as they approached new leadership challenges.

Still, as they listened to the mid-level leaders' stories, the researcher learned that many felt that combining learning theory and applying the concepts was instrumental in developing their skills. For example, Participant 12 observed the most significant changes in their behavior and thinking when "connect[ing] a research concept to my lived experience." Participant 14 attributed this phenomenon to timing, as they explained that formal learning could feel "prescriptive or out of the norm." The participant continued by explaining that their skill development came as they faced challenges occurring naturally, learning through "application," "reflection," and "trial and error." Sharing a similar sentiment, Participant 16 explained, "You know, you can only get so much in the classroom. You can only get so much in the workshop if you don't apply it".

As participants shared their formal leadership development experiences, the researcher gathered that a curriculum with opportunities for practice or application was highly impactful for mid-level leaders. Several participants spoke of specific experiences with role-playing or simulation exercises that allowed them to prepare for upcoming roles. For example, Participant 12 shared about a workshop offered through the University of Illinois' School of Labor and Employment Relations (n.d.) and how it prepared them for specific leadership tasks.

> I actually went through a two-day simulation workshop. It was amazing. It literally was scenario based. So you go in, there's a whole team of you, and one

> person follows you and shadows you all day. They put you through these very strenuous leadership activities. It was really intense. So you had to terminate employment with a person, you had to do conflict resolution between two people . . . That kind of level of scenario and roleplay, that is really hard to replicate . . . being able to get the authentic experience of what it's like to do it.

Participant 7 also shared their experiences of "practicing in different environments," explaining, "I think that most leadership training for me has come through roleplay."

For mid-level leaders in community colleges, knowledge of leadership theory serves as the foundation of their leadership skill development. Nevertheless, many feel that learning theory alone is not enough when seeking the development of leadership skills. Instead, mid-level leaders benefit most when their formal leadership development experiences offer opportunities for practice and reflection on applying concepts to their work.

Formal Leadership Development Experience Theme 3: Intentionally leveraging formal learning to broaden opportunities

As the researcher asked participants how they selected which formal leadership development experiences to engage in, a common belief was that formal learning would broaden their career opportunities. While multiple participants had not necessarily dreamed of engaging in higher learning, several shared that they viewed advanced degrees as a means of obtaining leadership positions. The researcher identified this theme with 12 sources at a frequency of 24, as outlined in Table 7.

Table 7

Themes, Sources, and Frequency –Leveraging formal learning to broaden opportunities

Type of Experience	Themes	Sources	Frequency
Formal	Intentionally leveraging formal learning to broaden opportunities.	12	24

Participants shared that even when they had no personal goal of earning an advanced degree, they recognized it as a means to an end regarding career growth. Participant 1 explained that they loved working in higher education and wanted to stay in the field, but they had to pursue a degree to become eligible for growth in their organization.

> It wasn't that I was sitting there thinking, 'I want bigger and better things,' and I decided to pursue education because of that. But at the time, I recognized that I had gone as far as I could as Classified Staff. I would have to switch to Admin/Exempt . . . but job descriptions got updated all the time, then a bachelor's degree became a minimum qualification, which I didn't have.

Participant 3 said similarly, "It was kind of a means to an end. I saw what my future was going to look like, and I had to pick a degree that I thought would be most helpful." Participant 7's motivation for pursuing formal learning came as they sought stability in their career. Participant 7 explained that they came to work at a community college as they had recently been laid off, and they sought a bachelor's degree as they recognized, "the more credentials I have, the more likelihood of being protected." For several mid-level leaders, earning a position in a community college was the start of falling in love

with the field, and they quickly realized that they would need more education if they wanted to be successful.

Through multiple interviews, the researcher discovered that mid-level leaders perceived an advanced degree as required for a community college leadership role. Participant 1 observed that their shift from Classified Staff to leadership was “only made possible by this degree. Nothing else was different, I could have done this job years before. The degree was the barrier.” The expectation of higher learning was recognized by many, such as Participant 7’s boss, who pushed them to earn their bachelor’s and master's degrees if they “wanted to make higher ed. a career.” Participant 10 met their goal of becoming a Director in a community college after pursuing a Master’s degree when they found they could not apply for positions they were interested in without one.

While some participants acknowledged that formal leadership development experiences were not always required, they certainly understood that engaging in them could propel their careers forward. While discussing training offered through their organization, Participant 1 explained, “They weren’t always required. There were some things that I could have opted out of. However, if you opt out, it will certainly slow your career process." Participant 7 encourages their employees to pursue education, sharing a similar sentiment:

> Without the master’s degree, its not impossible. There are people without them. But they carry weight, whether we like it or not. And if you want to be considered for leadership positions, that’s one of the things a lot of positions look for.

For some mid-level leaders, formal leadership development experiences offered growth opportunities in specific areas. For example, Participant 9 sought a class on conflict

resolution after recognizing they had little experience in that area. By engaging in the course, Participant 9 felt they would be better prepared when conflict arose in future leadership roles.

While the opportunities and reasons are diverse, formal leadership development experiences are critical to career growth. Whether seeking job security, meeting a job description requirement, or developing critical leadership skills, mid-level leaders leverage their formal learning experiences to overcome barriers and broaden their opportunities.

Formal Leadership Development Experience Theme 4: Previous leadership experience allowed leaders to contextualize new concepts from formal learning experiences

A theme that emerged from the semi-structured interviews was that mid-level leaders with previous leadership experience could conceptualize new concepts from their formal learning experiences. Mid-level leaders with leadership experience felt they had a better idea of what they hoped to get from their education and that their real-life examples provided context to what they were learning. The researcher identified this theme with 9 sources at a frequency of 15, as shown in Table 8.

Table 8

Themes, Sources, and Frequency – Previous leadership experience

Type of Experience	Themes	Sources	Frequency
Formal	Previous leadership experience allowed leaders to contextualize new concepts from formal learning experiences.	9	15

Several participants spoke of how their previous leadership experiences added value to their education as they could better contextualize the concepts presented. For

example, Participant 7 felt their master's program offered "theoretical knowledge at a higher level or intellectual stimulation" because it gave them "answers to questions" that had arisen in their leadership roles. Likewise, Participant 8 shared how their experience in an Ed.D. program was starkly different from their previous educational experiences:

> What I like about the Ed.D. is that, as opposed to when I did my bachelor's and master's work, I have had the advantage of reflection right out of the gate. I can go, 'Oh, these are the things I've learned on the job, and now I can pull them up against the frameworks. Now I can see the theory and literally apply it to what I am doing every day. So I would say that it's nice to have had the life experience and work experience, and then come into the scholarly experience.

With real-life examples to draw from, mid-level leaders, such as Participant 11, could have "great interactions" with classmates and instructors because they "brought experience to a classroom."

In contrast, some participants felt that certain formal leadership development experiences came too early for them to engage with the content thoroughly. For example, Participant 14 shared their challenges while participating in the Workforce Deans Academy (Workforce Deans Academy, n.d.):

> This was when I was really starting to explore what I might want to do and if I wanted to grow into a Dean's position. But I didn't really understand all that was involved with this work. So I think it was just a little too premature. I wasn't able to connect what I was learning and apply it because I didn't have that context yet.

Without the context, it can be challenging to retain the information or apply it in future roles. As Participant 9 explained, "You can read all the books in the world about

managing people. But until you've actually managed people, none of those book matter."

As mid-level leaders engage in formal leadership development experiences, it may be crucial to identify opportunities that align with their career level. Previous leadership experience gives mid-level leaders a better idea of what questions to ask, promotes reflection of real-life experience, and gives context to theory so it can be applied in the workplace.

Informal Leadership Development Experiences

The researcher asked each study participant a series of questions related to their informal leadership development experiences leading to the development of leadership skills. The researcher designed the interview questions to answer the study's second research sub-question: What are the informal leadership development experiences of mid-level leaders promoted within Washington State Community Colleges? For this study's purpose, informal learning is defined as ongoing, non-structured experiences outside formal environments without a significant ending or milestone. (Brunson, 2020; Eraut, 2004; Sharma & Raghuvanshi, 2020).

When asked to describe their informal leadership development experiences, the participants described their involvement in communities of practice and various types of mentorship and how their leadership style had been shaped by both positive and negative experiences with supervisors and peers. Many study participants spoke of the impact of various relationships on their leadership skills and styles, recognizing the necessity of these relationships in their isolating roles. Four themes related to informal leadership development experiences emerged from the data, with a total frequency count of 154 (see

Table 9). Themes related to informal leadership development experiences represent 37% of the study's findings, given that the study's overall frequency count is 416.

Table 9

Themes, Sources, and Frequency – Informal Leadership Development Experiences

Type of Experience	Themes	Sources	Frequency
Informal	Consciously seeking advice from communities of practice in challenging situations.	15	47
Informal	Developing leadership skills through various types of mentorships.	15	45
Informal	Developing a leadership style based on both positive and negative experiences with supervisors and peers.	16	37
Informal	Seizing opportunities to learn through collaboration while navigating isolating roles.	15	25
	Total Frequency Count		154

Informal Leadership Development Experience Theme 1: Consciously seeking advice from communities of practice in challenging situations

As participants described their informal leadership development experiences, the researcher observed many references to seeking advice from a community of practice members in challenging situations. Whether seeking advice on specific job functions, problem-solving, or overall emotional support, mid-level leaders rely heavily on their professional networks for guidance. Many mid-level leaders in the Washington State community college system find this support through institutional or systemic councils and committees. As demonstrated in Table 10, the researcher identified this theme with 15 sources at a frequency of 47.

Table 10

Themes, Sources, and Frequency –Seeking advice from communities of practice

Type of Experience	Themes	Sources	Frequency
Informal	Consciously seeking advice from communities of practice in challenging situations.	15	47

When asked to describe their informal leadership development experiences, it became clear to the researcher that the study participants had consciously sought advice from their communities of practice as they faced challenges. Multiple participants spoke of bringing questions or concerns about their specific job functions and roles to members of their professional networks. For example, Participant 2 spoke of their participation in the National Association of Branch Campus Administrators (NABCA), which comprises professionals in similar roles (NABCA, n.d.). Similarly, Participants 8, 11, 14, and 15 spoke of weekly meetings between the Deans on their campus. Participant 15 shared details about the weekly dean's meetings, explaining that they offered a space to bring questions about budgets, enrollment, leading teams, and more. Participant 7 shared their unique experience of developing a community of practice when they were part of a group of employees who had been promoted to mid-level leadership roles on their campus:

> We were all in these mid-level, director, and manager positions and were now going to the big table - the Dean's Council, the Student Services Council meetings . . . So it was a little intimidating to go from being outside of that to being in the meeting. And so we kind of created our own support group, in a sense. We nicknamed it MaDR, which is Managers, Directors, and the Registrar. And so we would meet for an hour before Dean's Council or before Student Services Council

> and prepare ourselves honestly for that meeting because we didn't want to say anything in that room that might embarrass the boss, or embarrass each other, or ourselves. And so we would hold each other accountable for whatever nonsense was going on, saying, 'let's work it out here so that when we go in there, we are solution-focused.' I actually ended up taking this as a leadership concept to the WSSSC (Washington State Student Services Commission) Conference as a workshop. It was sort of grassroots in the sense that the eight of us just naturally created this. And then what happened as a result of those one-hour meetings once a week was that we could pick up a phone and call or text each other and say, 'Hey, what about this?' Or, 'Hey, I've got an idea how we might collaborate.' And it is almost like when the brain starts learning new things and creates new pathways. That's what happened in this experience. We built relationships.

As mid-level leaders in community colleges navigate their roles, they develop new skills through the advice and experience of their peers.

For some study participants, a community of practice service is a vital source of wisdom during problem-solving. Several participants, like Participant 3, spoke of relying on their professional networks to act as "sounding boards while working through challenges." For Participant 9, a small, naturally-formed community of practice led to growth not only in their career but in their program. Acting as one of three Directors in the state of a specific grant-funded program, Participant 9 felt isolated in their organization and sought insight from their fellow Directors:

> So the three of us asked ourselves, 'How do we do this? How do we form industry partnerships? How do we advocate for more money? How do we go to the state

> board and do all the things we need to do to grow the program?' So we joined our efforts on data reporting, showing outcomes, and working together to send a clear message about the benefits of the program. And because of that, the state doubled the funding, so then six more colleges were able to bring in the program. And so, we just banded together, and that felt very much like a community of practice.

This mid-level leader's example is one of many shared by study participants on the power of leveraging the wisdom and experiences of peers for their learning and development.

Several study participants spoke explicitly of the value of commissions, councils, and committees within their organizations and the SBCTC system. Participant 2 described their involvement in committees within their organization, sharing that their participation led to forming new professional relationships they could turn to for a new perspective on a problem. Likewise, Participant 12 explained that organizational committees were "opportunities to learn from each other, learn about how different departments run, and how a decision impacts other people." Further, participants spoke of multiple councils organized by SBCTC, including the Council for Basic Skills, the eLearning Council, the Library Leadership Council, the Workforce Education Council, the Student Services Commission, the Admissions and Registration Council, and the Financial Aid Council (SBCTC, n.d.-i). Participant 5 shared that sitting on the Workforce Education Council's Executive Committee had been "a huge leadership development opportunity." They explained that the council offered the chance to learn from peers who had been in the system longer, from those who brought in new ideas from outside the system, and to develop relationships that could be called upon when problem-solving. Similarly, Participant 7 explained that their participation in the Admissions and

Registration Council gave them insight into "how other people were doing my job" and allowed them to "merge the smart things they're doing" into their work.

As the data demonstrates, mid-level leaders in community colleges stand to gain an immense amount of information from their peers. In both naturally-forming and formal communities of practice, participants leveraged these connections with their colleagues as leadership development opportunities, seeking new ideas, problem-solving, and developing new skills.

Informal Leadership Development Experience Theme 2: Developing leadership skills through various types of mentorships

While describing informal leadership development experiences, many participants spoke about how mentorship contributed to their leadership skill development. The researcher found that not only were mid-level leaders learning from supervisors in formal and informal mentorship relationships, but they were also learning from peers, employees, and the experience of acting as a mentor themselves. As referenced in Table 11, the researcher identified various types of mentorship as a theme with 15 sources at a frequency of 45.

Table 11

Themes, Sources, and Frequency – Developing skills through mentorship

Type of Experience	Themes	Sources	Frequency
Informal	Developing leadership skills through various types of mentorships.	15	45

As the participants described their experiences with mentorship, the researcher learned that several had participated in formal mentorships with leaders in their field. For

example, before coming to higher education, Participant 12 participated in a mentorship program for leaders in public service. Participant 12 explained that they were paired with a leader of a park district, whom they shadowed on the job. They described their interactions and explained, “We intentionally met to talk about how I would do things and then learn how they would handle the situation.” Participant 9 also engaged in a formal mentorship relationship while participating in the New Workforce Professionals Academy offered through the National Council for Workforce Education. As they described the experience, Participant 9 identified the mentoring relationship with a retired Dean as “the biggest benefit” they got from the Academy. Meeting monthly, Participant 9 could ask questions of someone who had the benefit of reflecting on their leadership career and gleaning insight from their experiences. Participant 9 also highlighted that this mentor worked outside of the SBCTC system, which they felt was a benefit as there was no bias to sway the advice they were given.

While formal mentorship influenced some study participants, many spoke of informal mentorship, which naturally formed through relationships with their supervisors. In fact, several participants explained that they felt fortunate to have a supervisor who encouraged professional development and career growth. As Participant 1 described, “She gave the nudge when I didn’t have it. She was very encouraging, and I did a few things that I would not have done if she hadn’t suggested them.” Likewise, Participant 5 depicted the mentoring relationship with their supervisor: "When she says, ‘I think you should explore this.’ I explore it because she has never led me astray in her recommendations and requests for me to grow.” For Participant 11, working side-by-side with supervisors allowed them to refine leadership skills and build trust as they

demonstrated their abilities. Participant 11 explained that they built a positive reputation by working on "stretch projects" or opportunities to demonstrate their leadership potential by completing projects outside their scope. They explained, "A lot of that comes from those mentorships, just letting people know that you can be trusted and then doing the work to accomplish the goal."

Some participants described peer mentorships, where they developed leadership skills as they learned from their colleagues. For example, Participant 4 detailed their experience of their first day working in a community college, when they were instructed to observe their peers in action and "absorb" how they did things. Participant 4 said they recommend observing experienced peers to all new faculty and leaders, stating, "that was the best training I ever could have had." Participant 13 also credited supportive colleagues as a valuable resource in their leadership career, explaining that conversations with "folks who have walked a similar path and who are a few years in front of me" helped "develop my own self-efficacy" and "formalize my career goals." Likewise, Participant 14 credited observations in a group of colleagues as catalysts for their leadership career in community colleges. They described a group of women who formed a social circle that gathered outside the workplace, comprising leaders from multiple levels of their college. Participant 14 described their experience of observing these leaders who "understood what it takes to do that as a woman - as a female leader - to be able to thrive and build each other up." They continued:

> And that's the one point that I am grateful for, and I am convinced that that is what helped me change my trajectory, as opposed to maybe staying at a low-level

> supervisory role. Or even leaving the college, moving around, and trying something different.

The data demonstrate that peers who share their experiences and model exemplary leadership skills can profoundly influence mid-level leaders.

In some cases, participants developed new skills through the advice and experiences of their employees. For instance, Participant 2 described how they learned from the people they supervised, as some had been in the field for many years and had insight into best practices. They explained that when they intentionally visited with employees and listened to their stories, they could “walk in their steps to see what their barriers and challenges were.” Once they understood where employees were coming from, Participant 2 felt they could “dig deep on the issue and learn how to manage it, how to overcome it.” Participant 2 has continued to intentionally seek feedback from employees, citing the practice as a crucial component of their leadership development:

> I always encourage my staff to give feedback. I tell them, ‘Don’t be afraid to manage up, because this is how I’m going to develop. I’m going to borrow from your expertise.’ I think that is key for me in my leadership development and my growth.

Similarly, Participant 8 encourages the leaders that work under them to have a voice in decision-making. Participant 8 explained, “I’m the dean, but I have directors that report to me. I really consider it a flat hierarchy, where we come together as the leadership team.” Through this practice, Participant 8 gathers insight into the methods of the leaders they oversee and can incorporate new ideas in their leadership style.

Another concept shared by some participants was that acting as a mentor

contributed to their leadership development. For example, Participant 5 described their experience of sitting on the Workforce Education Council's Executive Committee and mentoring new Workforce Deans and Directors as "the best leadership development experience" they had. The opportunity encouraged Participant 5 to reflect on their experiences and consider how they could improve. Similarly, Participant 11 shared that there has recently been a shift in leadership in their organization, leaving them as the only Dean with institutional knowledge. Participant 11 explained that while they are mentoring the Deans because they are "the one who knows our systems," they feel that more new ideas are coming in. They explained:

> We don't get stuck in the past because I'm the only one who has the history. We've already talked about things we could change or improve that wouldn't take a lot of pivot on the part of the college, but I think would have huge gains.

The idea that new leaders have strong ideas to contribute contradicts the traditional hierarchy found in most HEIs. Nevertheless, the data shows that fresh concepts from mentees can inspire mid-level leaders.

While mentorship is a common practice in leadership development, the data collected from this study's participants may shed new insight. Mid-level leaders in community colleges have challenged the status quo of a traditional hierarchy, with leaders at the top holding all knowledge. Instead, mid-level leaders learn from others leading down, laterally, and upwards. As they remain open to new ideas, mid-level leaders can develop leadership skills through insight from everyone around them.

Informal Leadership Development Experience Theme 3: Developing a leadership style based on both positive and negative experiences with supervisors and peers

As in mentoring relationships, mid-level leaders can develop their leadership style based on positive behaviors modeled by supervisors and peers. However, the researcher learned that study participants also credited their approach to examples of "what not to do." Through the semi-structured interviews, the researcher listened as the leaders described both positive and negative experiences that shaped their leadership styles. The researcher identified this theme with 16 sources at a frequency of 37, as shown in Table 12.

Table 12

Themes, Sources, and Frequency – Developing a leadership style

Type of Experience	Themes	Sources	Frequency
Informal	Developing a leadership style based on both positive and negative experiences with supervisors and peers.	16	37

When asked about informal leadership development, several participants described experiences where positive leadership behaviors were modeled. Participant 1, for example, described their first supervisor and stated, "I still do things the way she did it because I was so impressed." Participant 1 continued, explaining that they worked very closely with their supervisor as their assistant and had the opportunity to learn how to manage with integrity "because she had a whole lot of it. She was just modeling that behavior." Similarly, Participant 7 shared stories of two supervisors, explaining that "they gave so much of their heart to this work" and the examples they set are things they "still

try to emulate in [my] work." In a specific example, Participant 7 shared how one supervisor approached responsibilities in the workplace:

> I still think about some of the things she's taught me about enrollment management and leadership in general, like, living what you expect of your employees. So, for example, she had no problem with cleaning the windows. She had no problem stocking the supply closet when it was needed because it needed to be done. And it wasn't a hierarchical thing. It was just a recognition of what needed to be done. And that's something that I really take around with me. I try not to get hung up on 'Well, I'm too advanced for that sort of thing,' or 'I'm the boss; I can't be doing that.' It needs to be done, so I'm doing that.

Many participants shared similar stories, detailing how they carry the behaviors they witnessed from others. When mid-level leaders are affected by someone, they want to incorporate their behaviors into their leadership style.

Still, for every positive leadership example, participants had negative experiences to share. Several participants used the phrase "what not to do" when describing their observations of leaders. For example, as Participant 2 described their career and how they became a mid-level leader in a community college, they described their time working in the banking industry. While describing their peers' behaviors, Participant 2 explained, "It did not align with who I am, or who I see myself as a person, or how I see myself growing professionally. And that meant walking away from a career." As they witnessed practices that went against their ethics, they chose to walk away from their career and turn toward a field focused on supporting others. For some, bad examples of leadership

became the very foundation of their leadership style. Participant 10 had a clear vision of the type of leader they did not want to be before even entering a leadership role:

> I can tell you that throughout my career, I learned what I did not want to be like. So even though I wasn't in a leadership role, I learned a lot from working for different leadership styles. And so I had a very firm idea of what I did not want to be like, or how I would want to treat my staff. So I had that very ingrained before I started my master's program.

For other participants, this concept took form as they learned from the mistakes of others. Participant 7 shared that their time on SBCTC’s Admissions and Registration Council was valuable as they could hear from others in similar roles as they shared choices that ended poorly. Participant 7 explained that they would listen to those insights and say “we’re not going to do that.” then, turn it around and say, “here’s what we’ll do instead.”

As evidenced in the study’s data, mid-level leaders in community colleges learn much about leadership from leaders around them. As they reflect on experiences with supervisors and peers, they can glean lessons from all observations and continue to improve the state of leadership in their organizations.

Informal Leadership Development Experience Theme 4: Seizing opportunities to learn through collaboration while navigating isolating roles

When asked about their informal leadership development experiences, several participants described occurrences of learning as they collaborated with peers. As they asked probing questions, the researcher learned that these mid-level leaders sought support as they felt isolated in their roles. The participants described a feeling of loneliness, as others in their organization often did not understand the pressures of being

situated between faculty and senior-level leadership on the organizational chart. This theme emerged with 15 sources at a frequency of 25 (see Table 13).

Table 13

Themes, Sources, and Frequency – Learning from peers

Type of Experience	Themes	Sources	Frequency
Informal	Seizing opportunities to learn through collaboration while navigating isolating roles.	15	25

Through several semi-structured interviews, the researcher heard participants share stories about coming together to learn, as few others understood the true nature of their roles. Participant 14 shared the importance of their relationship with another Dean on their campus:

> There are situations where it is so helpful to be able to rely on each other. We can brainstorm and ask 'What do you think? How should I approach this? What have you done in the past? How did you handle that?' I think those relationships are really helpful in a leadership role. Particularly at the Dean's level because it's somewhat isolating and lonely.

While sitting in a mid-level leadership role, participants recognized that their choices carry much weight, as they impact more people than those directly involved. For Participant 12, the value of a collaborative culture was amplified as they partnered with other campus leaders while navigating the COVID-19 pandemic:

> These meetings were really opportunities for us to learn from each other. When you're sitting at the table by yourself, or just with your department leaders, making decisions, you don't necessarily understand the impact that decision is

> going to make on other people. But when you have these cross-departmental teams and communities of practice, you learn to how decisions impact each other so that you can make a really educated decision on policies and procedures.

Participant 7 also spoke highly of collaborating with other leaders on campus, stating, "You need relationships to make things work. If you're not connecting with people, its so much harder to solve problems as they come up." As they continued, Participant 7 explained that they had to gather with peers to "address really complex challenges" because "transformational change is not done in isolation."

As participants shared, the researcher learned that decisions made in isolation could have an unintended negative impact. These mid-level leaders have learned that collaborating with others allows them to learn more about other areas of the campus and new ways of thinking while facing challenges.

Unexpected Findings

Before conducting semi-structured interviews with the study participants, the researcher designed a list of interview questions aligned with the study's research question: *What are the leadership development experiences of mid-level leaders promoted within Washington State Community Colleges?* Further, the researcher designed the interview questions to provide insight into the study's two research sub-questions, focused on formal and informal leadership development experiences. However, several themes emerged throughout the interviews that could not be categorized as formal or informal leadership development experiences. Instead, the themes represent mid-level leaders' overall leadership development. Though the themes

are not aligned with the sub-questions, they provide valuable insight into the lived experiences of mid-level leaders in community colleges.

Four themes have been identified as "Unexpected Findings," given that they do not fall in either of the two previous sections. The study's unexpected findings represent a significant portion of the study's findings, with a frequency count of 167, as listed in Table 14. Given that the study's overall frequency count is 416, the unexpected findings represent 40% of the study's findings.

Table 14

Themes, Sources, and Frequency – Unexpected Findings

Type of Experience	Themes	Sources	Frequency
Unexpected	Lacking formal pathways, leaders embrace flexible leadership development plans guided by ongoing challenges and opportunities.	17	92
Unexpected	Recognizing that leadership development is not passive; Leaders must intentionally identify opportunities to develop new skills and knowledge.	14	38
Unexpected	Being selective in engaging with leadership development opportunities due to limited time and financial resources.	14	22
Unexpected	Advocacy increases leadership development opportunities for marginalized populations.	7	15
	Total Frequency Count		167

Unexpected Finding Theme 1: Lacking formal pathways, leaders embrace flexible leadership development plans guided by ongoing challenges and opportunities

As the researcher listened while participants shared stories about their leadership development, it became clear that their institutions had not outlined career paths or succession plans to guide mid-level leaders in their leadership development. Instead, the researcher recognized that the participants engaged in leadership development activities

as they sought tools for facing their roles' challenges and were presented with new opportunities. The mid-level leaders' leadership development plans were flexible and shifted alongside their struggles and resources. The first unexpected finding represents the most prominent theme of the study, with a frequency count of 92 (see Table 15). This theme alone represents 22% of the study's findings, as the total frequency count of the study was 416.

Table 15

Themes, Sources, and Frequency – Leaders embrace flexible development plans

Type of Experience	Themes	Sources	Frequency
Unexpected	Lacking formal pathways, leaders embrace flexible leadership development plans guided by ongoing challenges and opportunities.	17	92

The researcher expected to hear that mid-level leaders lacked a formal pathway, but it became clear through the interviews that the participants had found a path forward regardless. Some participants had a goal in mind, like Participant 1, who sought a bachelor's degree when they wanted to grow in their community college career because they recognized "there was no pathway or effort on anybody's part to help classified staff develop into something else." On the other hand, some participants engaged in leadership development experiences seeking insight into potential roles when uncertain where they wanted to take their careers. For example, Participant 6 attended the Association of College & Research Libraries' Institute for Information Literacy Immersion Program (ACRL, n.d.) because they knew they wanted to move on from their role but were unsure of what direction to take. Participant 6 leveraged the ACRL Immersion Program as an opportunity to hear about library environments and roles different from their own so they

could begin to visualize their future path. For others, like Participant 15, selecting which leadership development experiences to engage in was guided purely by seizing opportunities as they arose:

> I think all the training that I've had is haphazard. It's things that have become available, either at the local level or the state level, something's advertised. And you look at it and think, 'hey, that's something that would help,' and you go and do that, but there's no structured framework. It's not like going to school for leadership where they actually have a curriculum and have a path laid out. It's haphazard. So how did I choose? It was recommended by somebody else, or I saw an advertisement, or it came over listserv, or all of a sudden everybody's talking about Guided Pathways - so I need to learn more about Guided Pathways. It is all very, very subject to what's available.

The researcher learned that regardless of the reason, the participants in this study had tenacity and motivation when engaging in leadership development experiences. As Participant 17 explained, "My experience has been that I am always going to have to work harder because there was not a clear pathway to leadership for me. So, I had to work harder in order to make one."

Several participants spoke of how their selection of leadership development experiences was guided by the challenges they were currently facing. For example, Participant 9 explained that they had recently taken on a Dean position in a community college with a history of conflict between faculty and administrators. As they faced this new challenge, they wanted to strengthen their conflict resolution skills, so they attended a class offered at a local community college. Participant 11 explained that most of their

leadership development experiences in recent years were related to accreditation and assessment, significant components of their leadership role. As they described their participation in the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities' Mission Fulfillment Fellowship (NWCCU, n.d.) and the Community College Baccalaureate Association Conference (CCBA, n.d.), Participant 11 stated that even though they had been employed in community colleges for over a decade, they always learned something new from the professionals in other community colleges.

Furthermore, multiple participants spoke of more significant societal challenges impacting their choice of leadership development experiences. Participant 8 explained that their primary leadership development focuses over the last eight years were equity and anti-racism. The participant explained that they have often witnessed a "white savior" complex in higher education, and they actively sought training to learn how to be a more dedicated ally. Participant 8 recognized they "sit in a place of privilege" with a limited scope, so they often attended panels where they could hear diverse perspectives and learn best practices from others. Similarly, Participant 15 shared, "over the last couple of years, every leadership thing I've gone to has been about diversity, equity, inclusion, and closing opportunity gaps." As they described the workshops, they emphasized their importance as they learned about "creating an equitable environment" and "working together to change the culture." As the field of higher education as a whole addresses systemic racism, the mid-level leaders of community colleges are engaged in learning how to contribute to improving the system.

Throughout the semi-structured interviews, the researcher learned that no two leadership development paths were the same. While multiple participants mentioned

specific conferences, commissions, or programs, there was a diverse range of experiences that each participant had engaged in. Additionally, the motivations behind selecting which experiences to engage in varied between the participants. Without clear pathways to mid-level leadership, within mid-level leadership, or from mid-level to senior-level leadership, each participant had laid their own path, seizing opportunities as they became available and seeking resources for facing their challenges.

Unexpected Finding Theme 2: Recognizing that leadership development is not passive; Leaders must intentionally identify opportunities to develop new skills and knowledge

After asking about the leadership development experiences leading to mid-level leadership, the researcher was surprised to learn that most study participants intentionally identified opportunities to develop new skills and grow in their careers. Despite Garza Mitchell and Eddy's (2008) assertion that many mid-level leaders accidentally become leaders, the data showed that leadership development is not passive for mid-level leaders in community colleges. The researcher identified this theme with 14 sources at a frequency of 38, as listed in Table 16.

Table 16

Themes, Sources, and Frequency – Leadership development is not passive

Type of Experience	Themes	Sources	Frequency
Unexpected	Recognizing that leadership development is not passive; Leaders must intentionally identify opportunities to develop new skills and knowledge.	14	38

Multiple participants spoke of their initiative when identifying opportunities for leadership development experiences. Participant 16 spoke passionately on the topic,

stating, "I'm very aware that if I wait for development opportunities, I'm going to be waiting some time." When asked further, Participant 16 explained that they always find a way to learn:

> I do a lot of self-teaching, especially around equity and inclusion. So, for example, I take online classes through Coursera, and that's on my own. I attend virtual workshops through NCORE and other associations. I find opportunities based on the topics and areas I'm interested in.

Participant 13 shared similar sentiments when asked about barriers to leadership development opportunities. They explained, "You have to seek out experiences. Whether that is enrolling in formal leadership opportunities or just doing the work to put yourself out there to form connections and relationships." For Participant 12, the leadership journey was an intentional one. They shared that they have always asked for professional development and been very clear about their goals with supervisors, which has led to new opportunities.

In some cases, mid-level leaders felt they had to seek opportunities outside of their organizations for career advancement. Participant 2 shared their belief that "there are such limited opportunities for advancement" in higher education and that "to move up, you have to move out." Participant 5 also spoke of this idea, explaining that "those reorientations are where a lot of people pick up and bring in new ideas." For Participant 6, this meant moving on from an organization they enjoyed working in. As they considered the move, Participant 6 made an observation about longevity in leadership roles within a community college:

> I feel like you need some percentage of the of the community 're-potting'

> themselves because you benefit when you go to different institutions. There's also a lot of value in developing people within the institution that they're at and having longevity. Although I think one of my observations has been that sometimes institutional, cultural challenges arise when you have too many people who've been there for 30 years. There's something that gets a little dysfunctional about that. So you need some people that have been there for a long time, but not everybody.

For mid-level leaders in community colleges, the opportunities for advancement and skill development may feel limited if they wait for opportunities to present themselves. Instead, the mid-level leaders who take the initiative in seeking leadership development experiences share that the opportunities to develop new skills and knowledge are limitless.

Unexpected Finding Theme 3: Being selective in engaging with leadership development opportunities due to limited time and financial resources

While discussing barriers to accessing leadership development experiences, most participants agreed that time and money are the most significant limitations. Whether limited by the nature of their role or the demands of their personal life, participants agreed that leadership development requires prioritization when scheduling and utilizing resources. As shown in Table 17, this theme emerged with 14 sources at a frequency of 22.

Table 17

Themes, Sources, and Frequency – Being selective of leadership development

Type of Experience	Themes	Sources	Frequency
Unexpected	Being selective in engaging with leadership development opportunities due to limited time and financial resources.	14	22

Several participants shared that the nature of the roles limits the amount of leadership development experiences they can engage in. For example, Participant 2 shared that their conference budget is tight, and even when they can afford to send someone, they wanted more time to schedule "a meaningful report-out" so everyone on their team could learn from the experience. Participant 8 felt similarly, sharing that "there is not a professional development budget" in their area, even explaining that the president now had to approve all travel within the organization. Moreover, even if they had the budget, Participant 8 explained that as leaders, "we have so many roles. If I go to a conference for a week, that work doesn't go away. I don't get to just go to a conference anymore without having to check my email at every break." The strain of a full schedule extends further than attending leadership development events, limiting the time participants can contribute solely to leading their team. Participant 7 shared their frustrations, explaining, "I have so many ideas" and "I am constantly putting out fires when I've actually got some skills that I could use on innovation." Rather than having the opportunity to act as a transformational leader and develop new skills, mid-level leaders are over-booked as they cover their staff and address crises.

For Participant 11, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic had a surprising effect on their opportunities for leadership development:

> I think that one of the benefits that came from COVID is that so many conferences went virtual and reduced their fees. It's much easier in a virtual environment, when you don't have travel and you don't have to pay for a hotel and you don't have a bunch of expenses. You can pop into what you really think is going to be meaningful. So, I really appreciated that about informal trainings for the last two years.

However, while Participant 11 felt the shift to an online format in leadership development experiences was positive, Participant 15 felt quite differently. During their interview, Participant 15 explained that online training was more flexible than in-person training, where you are removed from the workplace:

> I had two different things that I wanted to go to this week, neither of which I made it to. Someone scheduled a meeting over the first, and something else urgent came up that had to be solved, so I couldn’t go to the second. So, then you get recordings, which is great. But do you ever have time to watch the recordings? Sometimes you do, but while you're doing something else, right? I don't know anybody at our community college who isn't over-scheduled. We are all over-scheduled at every single level of the college. So, you have to make some conscious decisions and let some things go. And unfortunately, the professional development is kind of optional, right? Even though it's important, it doesn't always rise to the top, and that's unfortunate.

As organizations consider the format of their leadership development experiences in the future, there is seemingly no correct answer. For Participant 17, the answer lies in hybrid or hy-flex opportunities. While they felt in-person events led to a deeper connection for

participants, Participant 17 explained that hybrid meetings, conferences, and training help address challenges that many face. They shared several examples, such as colleges that "can't send people to these meetings" because of budget cuts or folks who "have COVID or other symptoms of illness but still want to attend." In these cases, Participant 17 feels strongly that "flexibility is the key."

Nevertheless, even when they can overcome limitations posed by their professional roles, mid-level leaders in community colleges feel the strain of time and financial resources in their personal life. Several participants shared that the time spent away from home while traveling for leadership development experiences, attending classes, or studying was a significant strain while working full-time and caring for children at home. The prioritization of family over leadership development was shared by several participants and was not limited to participants who identified as female, historically viewed as primary parental figures. Participant 6 shared that most of their formal leadership development experiences took place before having children, explaining it would have been "much harder" and "less appealing" to participate if they had children at the time. Participant 17 shared that they felt they had to "work harder" than their colleagues as they went to school and managed a family. Some participants shared that as their children grew into adults, they had more time for leadership development. For example, Participant 11 explained, "Now I don't have kids at home that I have to come home to take care of. I'm going into a different phase of life where I have more time to engage in those things." Participant 7 shared a similar sentiment, yet the new phase of their life has them more selective of where they spend their energy. Participant 7 explained that while their son is now an adult and they have more time, they have grown

to value a better work/life balance as they grow closer to retirement and do not feel the drive to sacrifice time at home for learning opportunities.

The experiences shared by the study's participants acknowledge the importance of leadership development, yet that importance often pales in comparison to other responsibilities. For mid-level leaders in community colleges, opportunities for leadership development experiences must be carefully balanced with competing priorities. Whether sacrificing time and money in their workplace or home roles, these leaders feel the strain.

Unexpected Finding Theme 4: Advocacy increases leadership development opportunities for marginalized populations

As participants shared their stories about their leadership development experiences, the researcher picked up on a subtle theme which was later confirmed while coding the collected data. Multiple participants who identified as members of marginalized populations shared that, in one form or another, leadership development opportunities arose after someone had advocated on their behalf. For some, the advocate was a supervisor invested in their development; for others, self-advocacy led to new possibilities. Further, it became clear that these participants recognized the deficiency of opportunities and now utilized their leadership power to advocate for their employees. As outlined in Table 18, the researcher identified this theme with 7 sources at a frequency of 15.

Table 18

Themes, Sources, and Frequency – Advocacy of marginalized populations' development

Type of Experience	Themes	Sources	Frequency
Unexpected	Advocacy increases leadership development opportunities for marginalized populations.	7	15

Throughout the interviews, the researcher listened as several participants shared stories of supervisors who supported their development and advocated for their chance to participate in activities. For example, Participant 1, an immigrant who identifies as a woman, shared that they believed the most influential factor in leadership development for community college employees is who their boss is. Participant 1 explained that as the system lacks official pathways or clear trajectories toward leadership roles, leadership development opportunities come to those who "just happen to have a boss who cares." The participant explained that in their case, "I happened to have a boss who cared, who would promote me and challenge me, and she was really supportive." Similarly, Participants 5 and 6, who both identify as women, spoke highly of their supervisors and the opportunities they presented. Participant 5 described how their supervisor would suggest specific leadership development experiences and stated, "She has been a huge advocate and a great supporter of women in leadership within our institution." Participant 6 explained that their supervisor's belief in their capacity "kept them in motion," as they "were very good at putting opportunities that I couldn't yet see for myself in front of me." For each of these mid-level leaders, the link between their supportive supervisors and leadership development opportunities was clear.

Not all participants were as fortunate to have a supervisor who put forth that level

of support. Nevertheless, several acknowledged that their own self-advocacy had been the path to new opportunities. When the researcher asked Participant 13, who identifies as a woman, what their most significant barriers to accessing leadership development experiences were, they explained:

> My first thought, rather than barriers, is the most significant ingredient, which I would say is advocacy. You have to seek out experiences, and maybe that's enrolling in formal leadership opportunities or doing the work to put yourself out there to engage in informal learning by forming new connections and relationships.

For Participant 16, who identifies as a Latina woman, self-advocacy was critical in their leadership development journey. From early in their higher education career, Participant 16 recognized that statistics were not on their side, acknowledging a deficit of women in leadership roles and stating, “And then, as a woman of color, there’s even more dismal statistics.” Even seeking potential mentors was “really difficult” for Participant 16, who explained, “There were very few people who looked like me or had a trajectory like me. So, it was difficult for me to make connections.” Still, this community college leader forged a path forward, climbing from a student employee to classified staff, to mid-level leader, and into their current role as a senior-level leader. They explained that while they may have been disadvantaged while “operating in the dominant culture,” their power came from how they “approached the work and negotiated in that space.” Through negotiation and self-advocacy, Participant 16 had opportunities to attend workshops such as the American Council of Education that focused on women in leadership (ACE, n.d.),

AACC's Future Presidents Institute (AACC, n.d.-a.), and Harvard's Institute for Educational Management (Harvard Graduate School of Education, n.d.).

Reflecting on their leadership development experiences, some participants have prioritized advocating on their employees' behalf, hoping to shift the culture. For example, Participant 12 believes that there is a "relationship between these opportunities" and their identity as a white male. They explained that they did not experience barriers when they asked for leadership development opportunities and acknowledged that "not everybody has equal access to a job at this level." Further, having grown from a faculty member to a mid-level leader, and into a senior-level leader, they hold a level of privilege because of their role alone. Participant 12 explained, "The best training has come from an organization that has paid for [the experience] and my travel. There's a lot of privilege in that." Working to shift the culture, Participant 12 actively creates a professional development plan with each of their team members, offering one-on-one mentorship for any employee who wants it. They shared that this practice contributes to a learning culture in their organization, stating, "Five of my staff are participating in one-on-one mentoring. I'm literally teaching them how to have my job. And I'm not threatened by that."

Participant 16 has also adopted a culture of leadership development in their workplace, stating, "there is a need to create spaces for people of color specifically." Still, they explained that they know first-hand that the path is "fraught with other issues." For example, Participant 16 shared that they would be questioned about how specific conferences related to their position in the past. In one instance, they sought approval to attend the National Conference on Race & Ethnicity in Higher Education (NCORE, n.d.)

and were questioned on how the conference related to their role, as they were the Director of Financial Aid at the time. Now, as a senior-level leader, Participant 16 intentionally works with their leadership team to “be more open” and listen to understand how certain topics and leadership development activities can be directly applied to their employees’ work.

With so many leadership development opportunities in place, it may seem like mid-level leaders would have an endless list to choose from. However, throughout the semi-structured interviews, the researcher heard several participants speak of some form of advocacy leading to leadership development opportunities for marginalized populations. While not directly aligned with the study’s research question, this lived experience is critical to consider in conversations related to the leadership development of mid-level leaders.

Summary

Chapter 4 provided an overview of this study’s purpose statement, research questions, and methodology. This chapter outlined the research design and data collection methods and summarized the population, sample, and the study participants’ demographics. In an effort to describe the leadership development experiences of mid-level leaders promoted within Washington State Community Colleges, the chapter provided a comprehensive analysis of the data collected from 17 participants in semi-structured interviews. The data was organized into 12 themes and categorized into formal leadership development experiences, informal leadership development experiences, and unexpected findings. Within each category, the researcher shared specific experiences that participants shared during their semi-structured interviews.

Chapter V will provide the final insights from the study. This chapter will explore the study's major findings and conclusions drawn from the findings. Next, the chapter will suggest implications for actions based on the study's conclusions. Chapter V closes with recommendations for future research and the researcher's concluding remarks and reflections.

CHAPTER V: FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to identify and describe the formal and informal leadership development experiences of mid-level leaders promoted within Washington State Community Colleges. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews to answer the study's central research question: What are the leadership development experiences of mid-level leaders promoted within Washington State Community Colleges? Interview questions were designed to address formal and informal leadership development experiences, providing a deeper understanding of how mid-level leaders develop leadership skills in different settings.

The population of this study was an estimated 340-2,040 mid-level leaders, calculated by an approximated 10-60 mid-level leaders in each of Washington State's 34 community colleges. The study's target population was mid-level leaders promoted within Washington State community colleges, estimated to be 37-223 mid-level leaders. Study participants were recruited and selected based on the following criteria:

- Currently holds or previously held a mid-level leadership role in a Washington State Community College;
  - These roles may include Director, Associate Dean, or Dean, though titles vary between organizations and regions.
- Held their current or a previous position in community college mid-level leadership for at least two years;
- Previously held a part-time staff, classified staff, faculty, or another non-leadership role in a Washington State Community College.

Considering available time and resources, the researcher narrowed the sample to 17 participants, conducting interviews between October 3rd and November 4th, 2022.

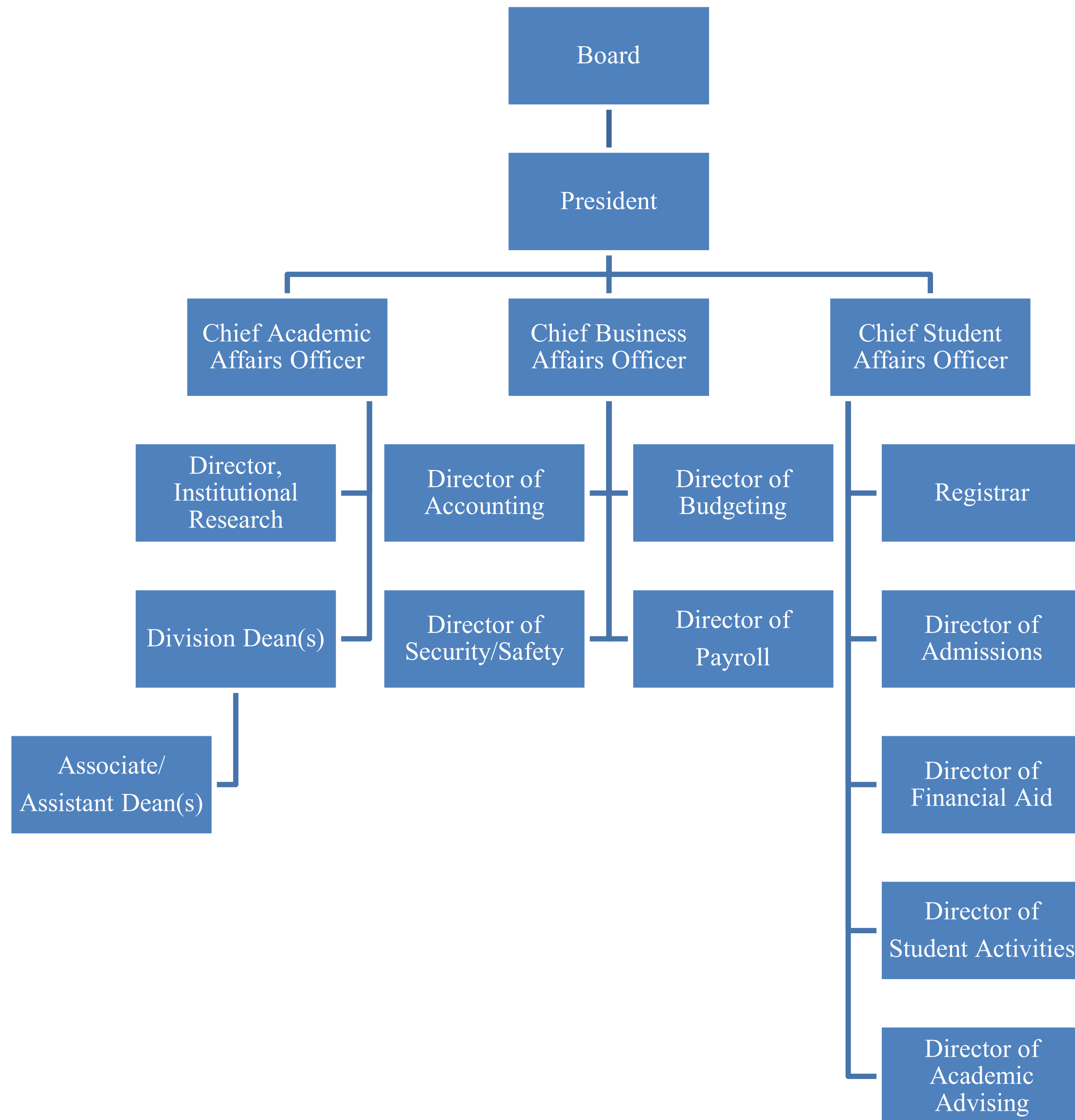
Context of the Study

This study aimed to identify and describe the leadership development experiences of mid-level leaders in Washington State community colleges. The researcher analyzed the self-reported data gathered through semi-structured interviews with mid-level community college leaders in Washington State. As such, the conclusions drawn from this data are based on these leaders' experiences and may represent a microcosm and not the larger nationwide population. While the conclusions of this study align with those of similar studies in the state of California and literature on leadership development methods and mid-level leadership in community colleges, it is possible that this study's conclusions would not apply to other areas of the country with varying cultural influences.

An additional consideration for the context of this study is the title of mid-level leader, which can vary between industries, organizations, and even within organizations. For the purposes of this study, mid-level leaders are defined as administrators with decision-making power, program management duties, and supervisory responsibilities. Recognized by the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC) as their division's or department's principal administrators, mid-level leaders in Washington State community colleges typically hold the title director, associate dean, or dean. As seen in Figure 6, the mid-level leaders in Washington State's community colleges fall directly under Executive, or senior-level, leaders in the organizational chart.

Figure 6

Sample Organizational Chart of Washington State Community Colleges



Note: Adapted from *Administrative & mid-level professional salary survey* by Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, 2022. (https://www.sbctc.edu/resources/documents/colleges-staff/my-employment/admin-salary-survey-2022-5-4-2022.pdf).

As seen in this organizational chart, titles, and positions vary between areas of these institutions. While deans, associate deans, and assistant deans are typically found in Academic Affairs, their business and student affairs counterparts are often directors, excluding the Registrar.

A final consideration for this study is related to mid-level leaders' motivations for participating in leadership development opportunities. Because of their position within their organizations, some view mid-level leadership as a transitionary role to senior leadership or presidency and may seek development opportunities tailored to their career growth within community colleges. Others have no plans for senior leadership and seek opportunities to strengthen their leadership abilities in these critical roles. While the researcher did not explore this concept with the study participants, it is possible that the individuals' career goals influenced their leadership development experiences and the conclusions drawn from the data collected in this study.

Major Findings

Once data collection was complete, the researcher coded the data, categorizing trends into formal leadership development experiences and informal leadership development experiences. Through this process, the researcher made the following seven findings related to the leadership development experiences of mid-level leaders in community colleges.

Finding 1: Mid-level leaders engaged in leadership development experiences based on ongoing challenges and opportunities, as they lacked formal pathways.

Through experiences shared by mid-level leaders in interviews, the study found that mid-level leaders lacked formal leadership development pathways and engaged in

learning experiences based on ongoing challenges and opportunities. Each of the seventeen mid-level leaders (100%) acknowledged their decisions to participate in various activities as opportunities were presented, often selecting experiences directly related to their current challenges. This finding was identified 92 times in the data, as the mid-level leaders described how they engaged in the activities they felt would be beneficial in preparing them for the complexities of their roles at the time.

Finding 2: Theory alone is not enough; Mid-level leaders develop leadership skills by applying educational concepts in the workplace.

This study found that mid-level leaders felt that while learning leadership theory contributed to their understanding, skill development occurred when applying educational concepts in the workplace. Of the seventeen study participants, fourteen (82%) discussed how applying the concepts learned in a formal learning setting was instrumental to their leadership skill development, at a frequency count of 27. While formal learning concepts served as the foundation of the mid-level leaders' leadership skills, opportunities to contextualize the concepts by applying them to their work were the true catalyst for growth in leadership abilities.

Finding 3: Mid-level leaders consciously sought advice from communities of practice in challenging situations.

Following the analysis of data collected through semi-structured interviews, the researcher found that mid-level leaders consciously sought advice from communities of practice in challenging situations. Mid-level leaders explained that bringing problems to working groups comprised of leaders with similar roles and responsibilities allowed them to learn from the experiences of others and incorporate those lessons into their approach.

This finding is supported by experiences shared by fifteen of seventeen (88%) study participants at a frequency of 47, as they detailed communing with communities of practice when navigating complex issues.

Finding 4: Mid-level leaders developed leadership skills through multiple types of mentorship.

This study found that mid-level leaders developed leadership skills through multiple types of mentorship at a frequency of 45, with fifteen of the seventeen participants (88%) describing various experiences of mentoring relationships. During semi-structured interviews, participants were asked to share their informal leadership development experiences, including any mentorship experiences. Participants explained they developed leadership skills through insight gleaned during mentorship by supervisors, peers, and direct reports, as each of these stakeholder groups offered valuable considerations for the mid-level leaders. The mid-level leaders also spoke of the benefits they experienced while mentoring others, explaining that reflecting on previous experiences allowed them to consider what they would do differently in the future and incorporate fresh ideas into their practice.

Finding 5: Mid-level leaders leveraged formal leadership development experiences as opportunities to network across organizations.

This study found that mid-level leaders leveraged formal leadership development experiences as opportunities to network across organizations. Fourteen of the seventeen study participants (82%) discussed networking at formal leadership development experiences, explaining that learning from others' experiences and developing supportive relationships with like-minded peers was invaluable. While discussing formal leadership

development experiences, participants shared that the most beneficial component was the opportunity to network and develop relationships with peers at a frequency of 29.

Finding 6: Mid-level leaders intentionally leveraged formal learning to broaden opportunities.

The interview questions utilized in semi-structured interviews asked study participants to describe their motivations for engaging in specific leadership development experiences. Of the mid-level leaders interviewed, twelve of the seventeen participants (71%) stated that, at a minimum, they knew that earning additional credentials would open the door to future leadership positions. This study found that mid-level leaders leveraged their formal learning experiences to broaden their opportunities at a frequency of 24.

Finding 7: Mid-level leaders navigate isolating roles through collaboration with peers.

While analyzing data collected on the participants' informal leadership development experiences, it became clear that the mid-level leaders recognized emotional support and the feeling of belonging as positive contributors to their leadership development. This study found that mid-level leaders navigated their isolating roles through collaboration with peers at a frequency of 25, with fifteen of the seventeen participants (88%) discussing their experiences of working with peers to learn, as few truly understood the challenges specific to their roles.

Unexpected Findings

Following data collection, the researcher made three unexpected findings that could not be categorized as formal or informal leadership development experiences.

Instead, the following findings represent the mid-level leaders' leadership development experiences as a whole. The unexpected findings of this study make up 33% of the study's findings, offering meaningful insight into the leadership development experiences of mid-level leaders in community colleges.

Unexpected Finding 1: Advocacy increases leadership development opportunities for marginalized populations.

This study found that in several instances, mid-level leaders connected leadership development opportunities to a mentor who advocated on their behalf or their own self-advocacy. While this sentiment was shared by only seven of the seventeen (47%) participants at a frequency of 15, it is essential to note that each had self-identified as members of various marginalized populations. This finding supports Brunson's (2020) conclusion that marginalized populations must seek alternative means of support to persevere as leaders.

Unexpected Finding 2: Mid-level leaders were selective in engaging with leadership development opportunities due to limited time and financial resources.

While life-long learning is idealistic for all leaders, the nature of community college leadership has led to roles with limited capacity and professional development funds reallocated to other areas of the college. A key finding of this study is that mid-level leaders are selective about the leadership development opportunities they engage with, as limited time and financial resources reduce the number of experiences they could participate in. At a frequency of 22, fourteen of the seventeen (82%) mid-level leaders interviewed for this study cited their packed schedules and available funds as their most

significant barriers to leadership development. Several participants further explained that despite their interest, leadership development fell low on their list of priorities.

Unexpected Finding 3: Mid-level leaders incorporated lessons from positive and negative interactions with their supervisors and peers into their leadership style.

While this study specifically focused on formal or informal leadership development experiences, it is valuable to consider the various factors that affect one's identity as a leader. This study found that both positive and negative interactions with supervisors and peers influenced mid-level leaders' leadership styles at a frequency of 37. Though this finding was unexpected, it is significant to the study, as sixteen (94%) participants spoke about the impact of specific interactions with supervisors or peers that influenced their leadership style. In several instances, participants described their early visions of the type of leader they would become after witnessing examples of "what not to do" as a leader. At the same time, many participants described supervisors that modeled compelling leadership practices, inspiring them to incorporate those examples into their leadership style.

Conclusions

The researcher drew ten conclusions based on the findings of this study and related literature. The ten conclusions provide deeper insight into the leadership development experiences of mid-level leaders in community colleges.

Conclusion 1: For marginalized populations to have equitable access to leadership development opportunities, community colleges must adopt a culture of advocacy on behalf of their mid-level leaders.

Based on the finding that advocacy increases leadership development opportunities for marginalized populations, it can be concluded that for marginalized populations to have equitable access to leadership development opportunities, community colleges must adopt a culture of advocacy on behalf of their mid-level leaders. This conclusion aligns with the work of several researchers, including Brunson (2020), who concluded that marginalized populations must seek alternative means of support as they recognized fewer opportunities to access leadership development. Curameng (2023) identified similar findings in their study of the informal learning experiences of female mid-level administrators in higher education. Curameng concluded that participants felt isolated by a lack of access to mentors and had committed to advocating and mentoring future female leaders.

Conclusion 2: To regularly engage in leadership development experiences, mid-level leaders need additional support managing competing priorities depleting their time and financial resources.

Based on the finding that mid-level leaders were selective in engaging with leadership development opportunities due to limited time and financial resources, it can be concluded that for limited funds and over-scheduling not to impact mid-level leaders' leadership development, mid-level leaders need additional support managing priorities depleting their time and financial resources. Baber (2020) asserted that mid-level leaders in today's community colleges work within a "paradoxical environment" with increased

demands and declining financial support (p. 91). The literature supports the responses shared by study participants that time and fiscal resources are the most significant barriers to accessing leadership development experiences.

Conclusion 3: Mid-level leaders must glean lessons from both positive and negative interactions with others to intentionally develop a leadership style that reflects their values.

As the researcher sought to identify formal and informal leadership development experiences of mid-level leaders in community colleges, several stories shared by participants demonstrated their ability to learn through observation. It became clear that exposure to leadership behaviors could be a learning opportunity, whether the behaviors modeled were positive or negative. Based on the finding that mid-level leaders incorporated lessons from positive and negative experiences with their supervisors and peers into their leadership style, it can be concluded that for mid-level leaders to intentionally develop a leadership style that reflects their values, they must glean lessons from both positive and negative interactions with others.

Several participants shared examples of influential leaders, describing how they incorporated compassion and curiosity into their leadership style. However, the vast majority of participants shared how examples of poor leadership shaped their leadership style. As they recognized behaviors that went against their morals and values, these mid-level leaders vowed to foster a culture of support and inclusivity in their organizations. This conclusion aligns with Brunson's (2020), as she found that "mid-level administrators were more driven to succeed when they recognized both positive and

negative experiences as learning opportunities and used both as a way to shape their leadership skills" (p. 108).

Conclusion 4: Mid-level leaders flourish in supportive spaces with opportunities to apply leadership principles directly to their work.

Participants were asked to share their stories of formal and informal leadership development experiences during the semi-structured interviews. Several participants shared that their formal learning experiences were strengthened when given the opportunity to apply theory in the workplace. Based on the finding that theory alone is not enough as mid-level leaders develop leadership skills by applying educational concepts in the workplace, it can be concluded that for mid-level leaders to flourish, they must seek supportive spaces with opportunities to apply leadership principles directly to their work.

In Brunson's (2020) study of mid-level leaders in private, non-profit universities, she concluded that "mid-level administrators have more context to solve problems when leadership theories were extended through practical applications of the theories" (p. 112). This conclusion supports the findings of Brunson's study, as study participants recognized the application of leadership concepts as the foundation for developing new skills and deeper understanding.

Conclusion 5: Mid-level leaders should meet with a community of practice on an ongoing basis to generate innovative ideas.

This study aimed to identify and describe the leadership development experiences of mid-level leaders in community colleges, specifically focusing on formal and informal learning experiences. Based on the finding that mid-level leaders consciously sought

advice from communities of practice in challenging situations, it can be concluded that for mid-level leaders to incorporate new ideas into their work inspired by peers' experiences, they should meet with a community of practice on an ongoing basis to generate innovative ideas.

While discussing informal experiences, several mid-level leaders shared about their participation in a community of practice, a group that constructs new knowledge through communication and one another's expertise (Wenger et al., 2002). These communities encourage innovation by design, as participants bring forth new ideas by sharing their unique experiences and brainstorming how to apply lessons learned with their peers (Wenger et al., 2002). Mid-level leaders benefit from communities of practice, as they feel supported while problem-solving in their complex roles and can bring new ideas presented by peers into their work.

Conclusion 6: To feel supported in their isolating roles, mid-level leaders should develop support networks with peers who understand the unique stressors of their positions.

Through this study's exploration of the formal and informal leadership development experiences of mid-level leaders in community colleges, it became evident that mid-level leaders benefit from networking opportunities with peers in more ways than one. Based on the finding that mid-level leaders navigate isolating roles through collaboration with peers, it can be concluded that to feel supported in their isolating roles, mid-level leaders should develop support networks with peers who understand the unique stressors of their positions.

As participants shared stories of their informal leadership development

experiences, the researcher learned that participants felt that networking with peers in similar roles offered a level of emotional support that was unmatched in other relationships. Several participants shared of the loneliness they experienced in their roles, as most others would not understand the specific pressures of being situated between faculty, staff, and senior-level leadership within their organizations. Researchers such as Eddy, Garza Mitchell, and Amey (2016) argue that there is not enough visibility given to this population, explaining that mid-level leaders "ultimately determine the effectiveness of top leadership" (Eddy, Garza Mitchell, & Amey, 2016, para. 2). As the unsung heroes of their organizations, mid-level leaders often fall in the shadow of their senior leaders and are left feeling alone, questioning their capabilities.

However, when mid-level leaders in community colleges come together, the loneliness dissipates, instead leaving a sense of belonging and understanding. The emotional support felt amongst mid-level leaders is monumental, with several participants of this study crediting relationships with their peers as instrumental to their efficacy as a leader. Brunson's (2020) study of mid-level leaders in private, non-profit universities supports this conclusion, finding that participating in a community of practice helps mid-level leaders feel valued, motivated, and current in their field. For mid-level leaders in community colleges, a network of peers can create a sense of belonging that will bolster their ability to navigate their unique challenges.

Conclusion 7: Mid-level leaders thrive while incorporating feedback into their leadership principles and reflecting on past experiences with others.

Based on the finding that mid-level leaders developed leadership skills through multiple types of mentorship, it can be concluded that for mid-level leaders to thrive, they

should incorporate feedback into their leadership principles and reflect on past experiences with others. As this study aimed to identify and describe the leadership development experiences of mid-level leaders in community colleges, participants were asked to share stories of formal and informal learning moments. Participants noted that learning from others played a significant role in their leadership development, recognizing that there were lessons to learn from experts all around them. The mid-level leaders interviewed for this study described experiences as they were mentored by supervisors, peers, and direct reports learning from the different stakeholder groups' expertise. Further, the participants explained that acting as a mentor was a learning opportunity, as they could evaluate their practices and incorporate new ideas. The conclusions of this study support Bernthal and Wellins' (2006) description of mentorship as opportunities to receive feedback, unlock talents, and identify and evaluate areas for growth.

Conclusion 8: Mid-level leaders must engage not only in formal learning that opens the door to acquiring leadership positions but also in informal learning experiences.

The purpose of this study was to explore the leadership development experiences of mid-level leaders in community colleges, specifically looking to identify and describe formal and informal learning experiences. Based on the finding that mid-level leaders intentionally leveraged formal learning to broaden opportunities, it can be concluded that to prepare for diverse responsibilities, mid-level leaders must engage not only in formal learning that opens the door to acquiring leadership positions but also in informal learning experiences.

While most study participants spoke of their involvement in both formal and

informal leadership development experiences, the experiences mid-level leaders cited as most impactful on their leadership skill development were informal. Nevertheless, formal leadership development experiences still have a place in mid-level leaders' overall leadership development journeys. In many fields, listing degrees, certificates, or credentials on one's resume indicates a trained professional, presenting new employment opportunities (Indeed, 2022). For several participants, formal leadership development experiences served as a "means to an end," as they recognized that most leadership positions would require an advanced degree. This conclusion supports Brunson's (2020) conclusions that mid-level leaders that engaged in informal learning were better prepared to address the diverse responsibilities of higher education leadership.

Conclusion 9: To help mid-level leaders thrive, organizations must facilitate access to networking through formal leadership development opportunities.

As study participants shared stories of their formal leadership development experiences, an unexpected theme was related to informal social learning that occurred during these experiences. Based on the finding that mid-level leaders leveraged formal leadership development experiences as opportunities to network across organizations, it can be concluded that to help mid-level leaders thrive, organizations must facilitate access to networking through formal leadership development opportunities.

Participants shared that formal learning activities provided opportunities to network with peers, developing relationships they could turn to with questions or for support. This conclusion is supported by the concept of communities of practice, which provide opportunities to find support from like-minded peers in the greater community (Wenger et al., 2002). Wenger et al. (2002) explain that while communities of practice

can form naturally, organizations can cultivate the experience by removing potential barriers and encouraging employees to participate.

Conclusion 10: To cultivate a culture of growth, organizations should develop formal leadership development pathways for mid-level leaders.

While exploring the leadership development experiences of mid-level leaders in community colleges, the researcher noted several instances shared by participants of irrelevant or ill-timed experiences. Based on the finding that mid-level leaders engaged in leadership development experiences based on ongoing challenges and opportunities as they lacked formal pathways, it can be concluded that to increase opportunities for mid-level leaders to engage in relevant learning experiences, organizations should develop formal leadership development pathways.

Several participants described experiences that did not apply to their positions, came too early in their careers when they had little context of the challenges they would face, and concepts learned after experiencing negative encounters they were ill-equipped to confront. The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) has documented the importance of relevant leadership development for leaders of different experience levels in the 2018 Competencies for Community College Leaders revision. The third edition of the AACC's Competencies (2018) provides focus areas based on employment level and encourages leaders to assess their level of readiness. The AACC explains that this assessment can guide leaders so they may seek learning opportunities related to identified gaps in knowledge.

Implications for Action

This phenomenological study aimed to provide a deeper understanding of the

lived experiences of mid-level leaders in community colleges related to their leadership development experiences. As higher education faces a leadership crisis, leaders at all levels simultaneously take on new challenges and problem-solving with declining resources. In light of these difficulties, the researcher recommends the following steps to support the leadership development of mid-level leaders in community colleges. These implications for action acknowledge opportunities for several stakeholder groups, including the state boards over-seeing community colleges, college presidents, executive teams, Boards of Trustees, professional organizations, and mid-level leaders themselves. The researcher's recommendations aim to improve conditions related to the leadership development experiences of mid-level leaders in community colleges.

Implication for Action 1: State Boards form a Leadership Development Advisory Council tasked with developing fellowships for leaders at all levels, utilizing the AACC Competencies for Community College Leaders as core program goals.

As community colleges navigate the ongoing leadership crisis in higher education, they face an impasse in the leadership pipeline. This study found that mid-level leaders engaged in leadership development experiences based on ongoing challenges and opportunities as they lacked formal pathways. Based on this finding and the conclusion that organizations should develop formal leadership development pathways, it is recommended that State Boards form a Leadership Development Advisory Council tasked with developing fellowships for leaders at all levels, utilizing the AACC Competencies for Community College Leaders as core program goals.

Community college systems that desire well-prepared leaders should take action to facilitate the development of the next generation of leaders. While focus areas for

assessing community college leaders' preparedness have been well documented, there is a lack of planning for developing the required competencies. Instead, mid-level leaders grasp onto leadership development opportunities as they arise, leaving severe gaps in knowledge. With well-researched content to serve as the foundation for program goals, developing learning experiences could expand leaders' capabilities, encouraging them to develop new leadership skills and define their mindset as a leader.

Implication for Action 2: Mid-level leaders annually attend conferences and institutes offered by organizations championing diverse leadership.

a. **It is further recommended that Boards of Trustees invest funds annually for mid-level leaders to participate in these experiences.**

By examining the leadership development experiences of mid-level leaders in community colleges, this study found that mid-level leaders were selective in engaging with leadership development opportunities due to limited time and financial resources. Further, this study highlighted that barriers were exacerbated for mid-level leaders of marginalized populations, finding that advocacy increases leadership development opportunities for marginalized populations. Based on these findings and the conclusions that community colleges must adopt a culture of advocacy on behalf of their mid-level leaders and that mid-level leaders need additional support managing priorities depleting their time and financial resources, it is recommended that mid-level leaders annually attend conferences and institutes offered by organizations championing diverse leadership. It is further recommended that Boards of Trustees invest funds annually for mid-level leaders to participate in these experiences.

The findings of this study indicate a need for prioritization of leadership

development for mid-level leaders belonging to marginalized populations. As mid-level leaders must be selective in which leadership development experiences they participate, it is important to consider which activities they should prioritize. Whether belonging to a marginalized population or the majority, all mid-level leaders in community colleges stand to learn how to be stronger advocates by engaging with organizations that champion diverse leadership. Further, organizations can better support their leaders by dedicating funds specifically to this focus, allowing more mid-level leaders to participate.

Lacking representation of their diverse identities in community college leadership, current and potential leaders struggle to find mentors that have overcome adversities related to their identities. This is a significant factor in attracting diverse applicants to leadership roles because, as Garza Mitchell and Eddy (2008) described, senior-level leadership looks unappealing to mid-level leaders that lack insight and support from experienced leaders guiding them. Several organizations have developed leadership development programs and resources, championing diverse leadership in higher education and community colleges, including the following:

- The American Association for Women in Community Colleges
- The American Council on Education, ACE Women's Network
- LGBTQ Leaders in Higher Education
- The National Community College Hispanic Council
- The National Council on Black American Affairs
- The National Institute for Native Leadership in Higher Education
- The National Organization on Disability

As community colleges seek diversified leadership, they must first consider how the institution's culture affects the identification and development of diverse leaders. By investing in the leadership development of their leaders belonging to a marginalized population, the institution can demonstrate its commitment to its leaders' learning.

Implication for Action 3: Boards of Trustees hire an outside agency to conduct an efficiency study and develop strategies for process improvement, creating space for implementing policies that support leadership development during working hours.

A reality of mid-level leadership is that leadership development activities hold a lower priority than other responsibilities of the roles. Based on the finding that mid-level leaders were selective in engaging with leadership development opportunities due to limited time and financial resources and the conclusion that mid-level leaders need additional support managing priorities depleting their time and financial resources, it is recommended that Boards of Trustees hire an outside agency to conduct an efficiency study and develop strategies for process improvement, creating space for implementing policies that support leadership development during working hours.

Creating policies prioritizing leadership development supports a learning culture, as leadership development would be considered an essential function of leadership positions rather than a suggested activity. Several examples of incorporating time for learning and creativity can be found in the corporate world. For example, Google coined the "20% time" rule that encourages employees to spend 20% of their time following their curiosity and exploring new projects (Clark, 2021). Using a different format, LinkedIn hosts an "Investment Day," or InDay, each month for employees to invest in themselves, inspiring learning and innovation (McQueen, 2015). Further still, BetterUp

offers employees 1:1 coaching sessions and opportunities to join "coaching circles" with a small group of peers (Wool, 2022). There is no "one-size-fits-all" approach for organizations to cultivate leadership development, and community colleges have endless possibilities for approaching investment in learning and development. Community colleges can better support the continued learning of their mid-level leaders by evaluating how the organization operates and identifying blocks of time that can be used for learning.

Implication for Action 4: Boards of Trustees hire an outside agency to investigate inclusive hiring practices and institutional bias, identifying leadership positions that could incorporate competency-based hiring methods.

The stories shared by study participants highlighted a disparity between the critical role of informal leadership development experiences and the necessity of formal learning to obtain leadership positions. This study identified several findings related to informal learning:

- Theory alone is not enough; Mid-level leaders develop leadership skills by applying educational concepts in the workplace.
- Mid-level leaders consciously sought advice from communities of practice in challenging situations.
- Mid-level leaders developed leadership skills through multiple types of mentorship.

While the evidence demonstrated the importance of informal learning, this study also found that mid-level leaders intentionally leveraged formal learning to broaden opportunities. Based on these findings and the conclusion that mid-level leaders must

engage in both formal and informal learning experiences to prepare for diverse responsibilities, it is recommended that Boards of Trustees hire an outside agency to investigate inclusive hiring practices and institutional bias, identifying leadership positions that could incorporate competency-based hiring methods versus those that require advanced levels of education.

The evidence of this study shows that hands-on practice, social learning, and mentorship are highly influential for leaders navigating complex responsibilities. Still, informal learning plays a small role in the hiring practices of higher education leadership, with a much stronger focus on credentials earned through formal learning. Higher Education has a long-standing history of evaluating candidates on their level of education and years of experience, often utilizing rating systems that give advanced degree-holders an advantage in the hiring process. However, recent research has raised the question of the effectiveness of this model, as there is a lack of evidence showing that hiring based on educational level results in more talented or better-prepared leaders (CUPA-HR, 2020). In fact, preferential hiring for degree holders presents alarming equity issues. It should come as no surprise to community college leaders that there is an attainment gap in college degrees, with a higher percentage of white and Asian people holding degrees than black and Hispanic people (see Table 19).

Table 19

Educational Attainment in the United States: 2022

Degree Attained	White	Asian	Black	Hispanic
Bachelor’s degree	26%	33%	17%	15%
Master’s degree	12%	19%	8%	5%
Professional degree	2%	2%	1%	1%
Doctorate degree	2%	5%	1%	1%

Note: Adapted from *Table 3. Detailed years of school completed by people 25 years and over by sex, age groups, race and Hispanic origin: 2022*, by United States Census Bureau, 2023. (https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2022/demo/educational-attainment/cps-detailed-tables.html).

Considering these statistics, it is clear how hiring practices prioritizing education level create a barrier to inclusive hiring.

An alternative to historical hiring practices is exploring competency-based hiring for positions that do not require specific degrees and licenses, such as lawyers and healthcare professionals. Organizations such as the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (CUPA-HR) have begun exploring competency-based hiring to increase the diversity of applicant pools (CUPA-HR, 2020). CUPA-HR (2020) describes the practice of competency-based hiring as rethinking job requirements, focusing on traits and skills that demonstrate the candidate’s ability to do the job effectively. CUPA-HR (2020) describes a pilot study at Minneapolis College in which hiring based on competencies led to improved quality of the hire, an increase in hiring diverse candidates, and an increase in employee retention. As higher education leaders

seek opportunities to close the attainment gap for their students, they should be equally concerned about how historical, systemic biases affect their employee population.

Implication for Action 5: Presidents and their Executive Teams partner with the campus' Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion to conduct a focus group of stakeholders to identify mentorship and networking opportunities across the organization for diverse leaders.

The experiences shared by this study's participants have highlighted the benefits mid-level leaders receive from informal learning opportunities like mentorship and networking with peers. This study found that advocacy increases leadership development opportunities for marginalized populations. Based on this finding and the conclusion that community colleges must adopt a culture of advocacy on behalf of their mid-level leaders, it is recommended that Presidents and their Executive Teams partner with the campus' Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion to conduct a focus group of stakeholders to identify mentorship and networking opportunities across the organization for diverse leaders. Through this partnership, the executive team can demonstrate their commitment to a culture of inclusive leadership development.

Learning from others' experiences and incorporating feedback into leadership practices allows leaders to identify areas for growth, evaluate skill development, and build confidence (Bernthal & Wellins, 2006; Thomas et al., 2015). Still, participants of this study shared that as a member of a marginalized population, it was challenging to find mentors and peers with similar lived experiences. Curameng (2023) had similar findings, concluding that a lack of access to mentorship in their early careers left female mid-level leaders in higher education feeling isolated and frustrated.

Community college leaders must recognize inequity in accessing leadership development opportunities for marginalized populations. Because of this inequity, colleges must bolster the support available to diverse leaders so they may benefit from resources available to majority populations. Further, diverse voices must be present in these conversations, as blind spots exist for those who have not faced adversity due to their identities.

Implication for Action 6: State Boards create an ongoing series of interviews to be recorded and dispersed system-wide, increasing representation of the industry's diverse leaders and allowing new and upcoming leaders to learn from others who have overcome adversity in their leadership journeys.

For community colleges to foster a culture of inclusive leadership, they must consider the difference between diversity and representation. This study found that advocacy increases leadership development opportunities for marginalized populations. Based on this finding and the conclusion that community colleges must adopt a culture of advocacy on behalf of their mid-level leaders, it is recommended that State Boards create an ongoing series of interviews to be recorded and dispersed system-wide, increasing representation of the industry's diverse leaders and allowing new and upcoming leaders to learn from others who have overcome adversity in their leadership journeys.

In the context of leadership, diversity refers to various perspectives present in the leadership team, while representation refers to the ability for others to see and hear from those diverse voices on their experiences and contributions. Representation is vital for mid-level leaders, as a system lacking representation of diverse leaders sends an implicit message to marginalized populations that opportunities are not available to people with

similar identities (Schreiber-Shearer, 2022). On the other hand, the opportunity to see others with similar physical features or hear stories of similar lived experiences sends a message to employees that there is a path for them to attain leadership positions and contribute in a meaningful way to their organization.

Higher education lacks representation of diverse leaders and their stories. In 2022, Bailey explored specific behaviors of female African American Deans in higher education and the impact of those behaviors on their career development. Bailey (2022) identified the feeling of isolation as a barrier to leadership development, explaining, "When Black women are isolated, they often feel no one believes in their abilities and they lack support or encouragement" (p. 47). To cultivate truly inclusive environments in community colleges, organizations must act to increase the representation of diverse leaders, sending a message to future leaders that their diverse perspectives are welcomed and needed.

Implication for Action 7: State Boards allocate scholarship funds for mid-level leaders to utilize for leadership development opportunities when departmental or institutional funds have been depleted.

When describing barriers to accessing leadership development opportunities, one of the most frequently noted barriers was financial resources. This study found that mid-level leaders were selective in engaging with leadership development opportunities due to limited time and financial resources. Based on this finding and the conclusion that mid-level leaders need additional support managing priorities depleting their time and financial resources, it is recommended that State Boards allocate scholarship funds for

mid-level leaders to utilize for leadership development opportunities when departmental or institutional funds have been depleted.

Several study participants who had worked in Washington State community colleges for over a decade discussed decreased resources for leadership development. They explained that while resources for traveling to conferences were bountiful in the past, their departmental budgets could not sustain regular attendance today. Additionally, some participants discussed refraining from attending specific leadership development experiences as they wanted to allocate their department's budget to opportunities for their employees. With limited access to funds, the State Board should identify new ways to support mid-level leaders seeking leadership development opportunities through financial assistance.

Implication for Action 8: Mid-level leaders establish annual leadership development action plans grounded in collaboration and reflection, initiated each year by conducting a 360 Leadership Assessment to guide the development of the following year's goals.

This study aimed to identify and describe the leadership development experiences of mid-level leaders in community colleges by collecting data through semi-structured interviews. This study found that mid-level leaders developed leadership skills through multiple types of mentorship, incorporated positive and negative interactions with their supervisors and peers into their leadership style, consciously sought advice from communities of practice in challenging situations, and navigated their isolating roles through collaboration with peers. These findings led to several conclusions for this study:

- Mid-level leaders should incorporate feedback into their leadership principles and

reflect on past experiences with others.

- Mid-level leaders must glean lessons from both positive and negative interactions with others.
- Mid-level leaders should meet with a community of practice on an ongoing basis to generate innovative ideas.
- Mid-level leaders should develop support networks with peers who understand the unique stressors of their roles.

Based on these conclusions, it is recommended that Mid-level leaders establish annual leadership development action plans grounded in collaboration and reflection, initiated each year by conducting a 360 Leadership Assessment to guide the development of the following year's goals.

Several researchers, including Karavedas (2019), have identified clear leadership plans as an impetus for leadership skill development. Literature supports the notion that mid-level leaders should develop annual leadership development plans to guide their activities, incorporating feedback, lessons learned through collaboration, and self-reflection. By doing so, mid-level leaders can be better prepared for their future challenges.

Implication for Action 9: Mid-level leaders choose formal learning experiences that incorporate mentorship, cohort models, and practicum components, offering opportunities to learn from experienced leaders, network with fellow students, and learn through the real-time application of educational concepts.

This study found that formal learning experiences incorporating informal learning concepts were highly impactful for the mid-level leaders' development of leadership

skills. Throughout interviews with study participants, the mid-level leaders shared several activities and practices that strengthened their learning while engaging in formal learning experiences. As mid-level leaders consider which formal leadership development experiences to engage with, it is recommended that they consider the findings and conclusions of this study, selecting experiences that incorporate informal concepts that reinforce their leadership development.

First, it is recommended that mid-level leaders choose formal learning experiences that incorporate mentorship, allowing students to learn from experienced leaders. This recommendation is based on the study's finding that mid-level leaders developed leadership skills through various types of mentorship and the conclusion that mid-level leaders should incorporate feedback into their leadership principles and reflect on past experiences with others. By selecting leadership development opportunities that include mentorship, mid-level leaders can learn from real-life examples, allowing them to conceptualize concepts presented in the classroom.

Secondly, it is recommended that mid-level leaders choose formal learning experiences that incorporate cohort models, allowing students to network with fellow students. This study found that mid-level leaders consciously sought advice from communities of practice in challenging situations and navigated isolating roles through collaboration with peers. Based on these findings, the researcher concluded that mid-level leaders should meet with a community of practice on an ongoing basis and develop support networks with peers. At their core, communities of practice are groups comprised of members with similar experiences and focused on foundational learning needed to be successful in the field (Wenger et al., 2002). With these characteristics in mind, cohorts

within a learning space could be categorized as communities of practice, adding depth to students' understanding and expertise by regularly interacting with others. By engaging with leadership development experiences with cohort models, mid-level leaders can expand their professional networks and work with classmates to cultivate spaces of belonging with peers facing similar challenges.

Finally, participants shared that applying leadership concepts studied in formal learning settings to their work strengthened their understanding and led to the development of leadership skills. Based on the finding that mid-level leaders develop leadership skills by applying educational concepts in the workplace and the conclusion that mid-level leaders must seek supportive spaces with opportunities to apply leadership principles directly to their work, it is recommended that mid-level leaders select learning experiences that incorporate practicum components, to learn through the real-time application of educational concepts. In doing so, mid-level leaders can benefit from supportive spaces to practice new methods and receive feedback to guide future practices.

Implication for Action 10: Mid-level leaders seek opportunities to meet regularly with peers through a community of practice.

a. **It is further recommended that Presidents partner with their Executive Teams to create a culture of collaboration and learning by developing working groups to act as communities of practice, encouraging employees to learn from others with similar roles and responsibilities.**
b. **Additionally, it is recommended that Commissions and Councils organized by State Boards develop Resource Guides for new and potential leaders in their focus areas, offering guidance on groups and listservs to join, leadership development experiences to engage with, and general advice for the first-year in their role.**
c. **Finally, it is recommended that professional organizations such as the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) develop ongoing, industry-wide networking opportunities, not limited to singular events, as with conferences and institutes.**

Through the exploration of mid-level leaders' leadership development experiences, this study found that mid-level leaders gained both knowledge and emotional support from regular meetings with a group of peers, also referred to as a community of practice. Seminal authors of the community of practice literature, Wenger et al. (2002), define a community of practice as a group of members with similar goals, working within a larger system and meeting regularly. The conclusions of this study align with Wenger et al.'s (2002) work, as mid-level leaders learned through members' expertise shared through conversation. Further, the participants of this study shared the feeling of belonging and

mutual commitment to each other within their communities of practice, which Wenger et al. (2002) credit as the basis for these groups. Brunson (2020) had similar findings, concluding that regularly collaborating with groups of peers allowed mid-level leaders to stay current in their field, become more innovative, and feel valued and motivated. Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, it is recommended that mid-level leaders seek opportunities to meet regularly with peers through a community of practice. Still, there must be opportunities for mid-level leaders to join or create a community of practice, which can require the support of several stakeholders.

As leadership roles in community colleges grow increasingly complex, a culture of collaboration and learning is vital for community colleges to adapt to the ever-changing needs of their stakeholders. Presidents and Executive teams should recognize their role in establishing an institutional culture and take action to support collaboration by endorsing working groups within their organizations. Therefore, it is further recommended that Presidents partner with their Executive Teams to create a culture of collaboration and learning by developing working groups to act as communities of practice, encouraging employees to learn from others with similar roles and responsibilities.

Stories shared by study participants highlighted the need for the community college system to facilitate opportunities for social learning between peers. Throughout the mid-level leaders' interviews, the researcher learned that several leaders were involved in Commissions and Councils organized by the SBCTC. In each instance, participants described their engagement in these groups as critical to their leadership development. However, upon further investigation, the researcher learned that several

SBCTC Commissions and Councils set a limit for the number of members from each college. With these limitations in place, leaders are missing the opportunity to develop a network of peers and learn from the experiences of others. This is especially true for potential leaders whose current roles would not prioritize membership in one of these groups.

For community college systems with similar limitations, adjusting practices could create more inclusive spaces that foster informal learning. To support current and future leaders, it is recommended that Commissions and Councils organized by State Boards develop Resource Guides for new and potential leaders in their focus areas, offering guidance on groups and listservs to join, leadership development experiences to engage with, and general advice for the first year in their role. In doing so, these communities of practice can maintain the efficacy of their group by keeping them more personal with smaller numbers of members yet sharing the wisdom gained through their experiences with new and future leaders.

Mid-level leaders shared several experiences developing relationships with peers through formal leadership development experiences, explaining that they would often see familiar faces at events each year. Still, outside of singular events, there was a lack of networking opportunities to support the continued social learning of these leaders. Opportunities for ongoing connections with peers should be facilitated by organizations that bring leaders together regularly for learning experiences. For example, the American Council on Education (ACE) facilitates online meetings for groups of campus leaders with transformative goals called Learning Circles (ACE, n.d.). However, the ACE Learning Circles are expensive to access and do not address the specific challenges faced

by leaders in community colleges. Based on the finding that mid-level leaders leveraged formal leadership development experiences as opportunities to network across organizations and the conclusion that organizations must facilitate access to networking through formal leadership development opportunities, it is recommended that professional organizations such as the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) develop ongoing, industry-wide networking opportunities, not limited to singular events, as with conferences and institutes.

While evidence shows that all mid-level leaders can benefit from participation in a community of practice, it is vital to consider the impact on marginalized populations who lack representation in community college leadership. Wenger et al. (2002) explain that communities of practice have social and emotional benefits, creating inclusive environments of peers who understand one another's goals and challenges. These benefits were demonstrated by Curameng's (2023) finding that connecting with like-minded leaders through a community of practice led to validation and further support for female mid-level leaders in higher education. By creating inclusive working groups that promote encouragement and validation, community college stakeholders can better support mid-level leaders belonging to marginalized populations.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study explored the formal and informal leadership development experiences of mid-level leaders in community colleges. Based on the findings and conclusions made in this study, the researcher recommends further research related to community college leadership and inclusive leadership development and identification:

1. Replicate this study in community college systems outside of Washington State,

determining if the data presented in this study is shared across multiple state systems.

2. Replicate this study with mid-level leaders in community colleges with intersecting marginalized identities, investigating potential systemic biases that impact access to leadership development.
3. Conduct a comparative study focused on the differences in leadership development experiences of community college mid-level leaders in academic, student, and business services. This study could provide a deeper insight into how leadership development is prioritized across institutions.
4. Conduct a phenomenological study that explores methods used by senior leaders in community colleges to identify and develop future leaders. The data gathered from this study could be used to develop institutional practices and policies to cultivate an inclusive culture of leadership development.
5. Conduct a mixed methods study investigating mid-level leaders' self-assessment of the AACC Competencies for Community College Leaders and exploring the leadership development experiences that contributed to their knowledge and skill development in specific focus areas.
6. Conduct a case study on mid-level leaders in community colleges belonging to an SBCTC Commission or Council, providing a deeper understanding of how these groups operate as communities of practice.
7. Conduct an ethnographic study that explores the informal leadership development of neurodivergent leaders in community colleges. As neurodivergent individuals often experience social situations differently than their neurotypical peers, a study

on this topic could provide new insight for this population.

8. Conduct a retrospective study with mid-level community college leaders in their late career or recently retired, comparing the experiences of leaders with long tenures in one institution against those who have led in multiple community colleges. This study could provide insight into how community college leaders' leadership practices are impacted by developing a deep institutional history versus introducing new ideas utilized in other organizations.
9. Conduct a phenomenological study with participants that left mid-level leadership in community colleges and became senior leaders in other industries. This study could highlight barriers existing in community colleges' leadership development and identification that prevent leaders from reaching a higher potential.

Concluding Remarks and Reflections

When I reflect on my dissertation journey, I am filled with pride and hope. I am proud to contribute to community college leadership literature and the potential change this study will inspire. I feel hope for the future of our industry and the mid-level leaders within - the others just like me, passionate about the mission of community colleges and higher education, who deserve the chance for growth and fulfillment in their careers.

I opened my dissertation with a story about Morgan, a leader with years of experience who struggled to find a pathway for growth within the field of higher education. While some may be familiar with my history, others may be surprised to learn that Morgan's story reflects my own. My disappointing entrance to the field led me to this research as I asked myself, "What am I doing wrong?" As I sought answers, I found literature covering the competencies that would help me as a community college leader,

yet I struggled to identify the experiences that would lead to attaining those competencies. A breakthrough moment came when I learned that several researchers had documented a long, substandard history of leadership identification and development in higher education, and I could no longer convince myself that this was my problem alone.

As I spoke with the mid-level leaders who participated in this study, I heard story after story of mentors and peers that guided the participants' leadership journey and recognized how significantly informal social learning had impacted their development. At the same time, I heard from mid-level leaders who struggled to find examples of leaders who looked like them or shared lived experiences. I learned that those who have been systemically marginalized would continue to have barriers on their leadership paths until they found an advocate or advocated for themselves. I found that community college leaders face the same obstacles of inequitable opportunities they fight so desperately to remove for their students.

My hope is that this study will inspire change in the industry I care so deeply for. I dream of a future where industry leaders take up these calls to action and create transformational change in higher education leadership. My dream is that people like me, neurodivergent folks who experience social situations differently than our neurotypical peers, will use these findings as tools to carve their paths and be embraced by the field they have dedicated their careers to. My dream is that our marginalized leaders will have the opportunity to see the representation of their identities at the highest levels of community college leadership. I dream that our industry transforms so that others may see their dreams fulfilled.

The answer to solving the leadership crisis in higher education lies in caring for

the people who act as champions for our students daily. I am optimistic that this study's findings will inspire leaders throughout the industry to stand for change and shift the culture, so the path to growth is clear and inclusive for all.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Synthesis Matrix

Source	Community Colleges	Mid-Level Leaders	Leadership Development	Formal Learning	Informal Learning
Abutin, A. (2019). Community college leadership experiences: Developing the classified staff into future administrators [Doctoral Dissertation, University of La Verne].	x	x	x		
Academy, W. E. L. Creating Tomorrow's Leaders Today. Retrieved July 29, 2022 from http://wela.ctc.edu/default.aspx		x	x		
Adams, T. M. (2013). Lifting as we climb: A multiple case study of succession planning in historically black colleges and universities [Doctoral Dissertation, Regent University]. ERIC.	x				
Afolabi, K. P. (2011). Gateway to opportunity: A history of the community college in the United States. Harvard Educational Review, 81(4), 773-773,776.	x				
American Association of Community Colleges, W. D. C. (2006). Competencies for Community College Leaders.	x	x	x	x	x
American Association of Community Colleges, W. D. C. (2018). AACC Competencies for Community Colleges Leaders.	x	x	x	x	x
Amey, M. J. (2006). Leadership in higher education. Change, 38(6), 55-58.	x		x		
Amey, M. J., & Eddy, P. L. (2018). Leading in the Middle. In Understanding Community Colleges (pp. 203-220). Routledge.	x	x	x		x

Amey, M. J., VanDerLinden, K. E., & Brown, D. F. (2002). Perspectives on community college leadership: Twenty years in the making. Community College Journal of Research and Practice, 26(7-8), 573-589.	x		x		
Asadov, I. (2020). The effectiveness of a community college's grow your own leadership development program: A follow-up study [Doctoral Dissertation, Wilmington University].	x	x	x	x	x
Astin, A. W., Astin, H. S., & Kellogg Foundation, B. C. M. I. (2000). Leadership Reconsidered: Engaging Higher Education in Social Change.	x	x			
Baber, L. D. (2020). Living in paradox: Midlevel leadership in administrative affairs. New Directions for Community Colleges, 2020(191), 89-97.	x	x			
Barton, A. (2016). Preparing future leaders: An ethnographic study exploring the culture of succession planning and leader development in Christian higher education [Doctoral Dissertation, Brandman University].		x	x		
Beach, J. M. (2012). Gateway to opportunity?: A history of the community college in the United States. Stylus Publishing, LLC.	x				
Bennett, N. (2015). Our leader left. Who's left to lead? State News Service.	x				
Bernthal, P., & Wellins, R. (2006). Trends in leader development and succession. Human Resource Planning, 29(2), 31-40.		x	x		x
Betts, K., Urias, D., & Betts, K. (2009). Higher education and shifting US demographics: Need for visible administrative career paths, professional development,	x		x		x

succession planning & commitment to diversity. Academic Leadership: The Online Journal, 7(2), 6.					
Birnbaum, R. (2017). The implicit leadership theories of college and university presidents. The Review of Higher Education, 12(2), 125-136.		x			
Bisbee, D. C. (2007). Looking for leaders: Current practices in leadership identification in higher education. Planning and changing, 38(1-2), 77-88.	x		x		
Bolton, K. (2016). A qualitative study to discover and describe conflict strategies used by exemplar community college presidents who proactively transform and resolve conflict [Doctoral Dissertation, Brandman University].	x				
Brint, S. G., & Karabel, J. (1989). The diverted dream: Community colleges and the promise of educational opportunity in America, 1900-1985. Oxford University Press on Demand.	x				
Brunson, M. (2020). Efforts and courage are not enough without purpose and direction: A phenomenological study on how mid-level administrators learn and acquire leadership skills in higher education [Doctoral Dissertation, Brandman University].		x	x	x	x
Campbell, D. F., Syed, S., & Morris, P. A. (2010). Minding the gap: Filling a void in community college leadership development. New Directions for Community Colleges, 2010(149), 33-39.	x	x	x		
Chandler, F. P. (2008). Rethinking the "L" Word in higher education: The revolution of research on leadership Adrianna J. Kezar, Rozana Carducci, Melissa Contreras-McGavin. Jossey-Bass, 218 p. Journal of Research Administration, 39(1), 79-83,76.		x			

Cohen, A. M., & Brawer, F. B. (1996). The American community college (3rd ed.). John Wiley & Sons.	x	x			
Coll, J., & Weiss, E. L. (2016). Rethinking leadership development in higher education. evollution.com. https://evolllution.com/managinginstitution/operations_efficiency/rethinking-leadership-development-inhigher-education/		x	x		x
Drury, R. L. (2003). Community colleges in America: A historical perspective. Inquiry, 8(1).	x				
Duran, D. J. (1998). Philanthropy and public policy: The W. K. Kellogg Foundation's influence on community colleges from 1960 to 1980 [Doctoral Dissertation., The University of Texas at Austin].	x				
Duree, C., & Ebbers, L. (2012). The AACC Competencies in action. New Directions for Community Colleges, 2012(159), 41-52.	x		x	x	x
Duree, C. A. (2008). The challenges of the community college presidency in the new millennium: Pathways, preparation, competencies, and leadership programs needed to survive [Doctoral Dissertation, Iowa State University].	x		x	x	x
Ebbers, L., Conover, K. S., & Samuels, A. (2010). Leading from the middle: Preparing leaders for new roles. New Directions for Community Colleges, 2010(149), 59-64.	x	x	x	x	
Eddy, P. (2010). Community college leadership: A multidimensional model for leading change. Stylus Press.	x		x		
Eddy, P., & Rao, M. (2009). Leadership development in higher education programs. Community College Enterprise, 15(2), 7-26.	x		x	x	
Eddy, P. L. (2005). Framing the role of leader: How community college presidents construct their leadership.	x				

Community College Journal of Research and Practice, 29(9-10), 705-727.					
Eddy, P. L., & Garza Mitchell, R. L. (2017). Preparing community college leaders to meet tomorrow's challenges. Journal for the Study of Postsecondary and Tertiary Education, 2, 127.	x	x	x		
Eddy, P. L., & Khwaja, T. (2019). What Happened to Re-Visioning Community College Leadership? A 25-Year Retrospective. Community College Review, 47(1), 53-78.	x	x			
Eraut, M. (2004). Informal learning in the workplace. Studies in continuing education, 26(2), 247-273.			x		x
Forthun, G., & Freeman Jr, S. (2017). Community college leadership preparation programs: A review of the literature. Community College Enterprise, 23(1), 69-81.	x	x	x	x	x
Fountain, B. E., & Tollefson, T. A. (1989). Community Colleges in the United States: Forty-Nine State Systems. ERIC.	x				
Garza Mitchell, R., & Eddy, P. (2008). In the middle: Career pathways of midlevel community college leaders. Community College Journal of Research and Practice, 32(10), 793-811.	x	x	x	x	
Garza Mitchell, R. L., Amey, M. J., Rosales, J., & Giardello, K. J. (2020). Reconceptualizing midlevel leadership. New Directions for Community Colleges, 2020(191), 127-132.	x	x			
Gilbert, C. K., & Heller, D. E. (2013). Access, equity, and community colleges: The Truman Commission and federal higher education policy from 1947 to 2011. The Journal of Higher Education, 84(3), 417-443.	x				

Giles, F. T. (1969). Washington shows new life at forty. American Association of Junior Colleges.	x				
Gillett-Karam, R. (1999). College Presidents Examine Midlevel Management in the Community College. New Directions for Community Colleges, 105, 37-46.	x	x			
Graham, C. (2009). Investing in early career general staff. Journal of Higher Education Policy & Management, 31(2), 175-183.			x		
Jurgens, J. C. (2010). The Evolution of community colleges. College Student Affairs Journal, 28(2), 251-261.	x				
Karavedas, J. (2019). Becoming leaders: A phenomenological study of how mid-level leaders in Christian universities develop leadership skills [Doctoral Dissertation, Brandman University].		x	x		
Klein, M. F., & Salk, R. J. (2013). Presidential succession planning: a qualitative study in private higher education. Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies, 20(3).	x		x		
Koos, L. V. (1925). The junior-college movement. Ams PressInc.	x				
Korschinowski, C. (2018). Sustaining a career in community and technical college leadership by coping with job stress through emotional intelligence [Doctoral Dissertation, Brandman University].	x				
Little, E. S. (2016). Preparing future leaders in higher education: Excellence practices from staff to mid-level management role transitions [Doctoral Dissertation, Pepperdine University].		x	x		
Luna, G. (2010). Succession planning: A doctoral program partnership for emerging community college leaders.	x		x	x	

Community College Journal of Research and Practice, 34(12), 977-990.					
Luna, G. (2012). Planning for an American higher education leadership crisis: The succession issue for administrators. International leadership journal, 4(1), 56-79.	x		x		x
Luna, G., & Cullen, D. L. (1995). Empowering the faculty: Mentoring redirected and renewed. Association for the Study of Higher Education.	x		x		x
Martin III, Q. (2021). Preparing the next generation of community college leaders: The role of community college leadership programs. Community College Enterprise, 27(2), 9-19.	x		x	x	
Mautz, S. (2021). Leading from the middle. John Wiley & Sons.		x			
McNair, D. E. (2010). Preparing community college leaders: The AACC core competencies for effective leadership & doctoral education. Community College Journal of Research and Practice, 34(1-2), 199-217.	x		x	x	
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Vines McDermott, T. A. (2021). Washington state community college Leaders: Perceptions of the 2018	x	x	x	x	x

American Association of Community Colleges Competencies for Community College Leaders [Doctoral Dissertation, University of Massachusetts Global].					
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APPENDIX B

UMass Global IRB Approval

Mackenzie Hutchins <mklinker@mail.umassglobal.edu>

IRB Application Approved As Submitted: Mackenzie Klinker Hutchins
3 messages

Institutional Review Board <my@umassglobal.edu> Fri, Sep 23, 2022 at 7:34 AM
Reply-To: webmaster@umassglobal.edu
To: mklinker@mail.umassglobal.edu
Cc: jlee1@umassglobal.edu, irb@umassglobal.edu

Dear Mackenzie Klinker Hutchins,

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

Email to Sponsors

Dear ______,

I hope you are well and looking forward to the new Academic Year!

As you may remember, I am a doctoral candidate at UMass Global, studying Organizational Leadership. I am conducting my dissertation research on leadership development in Community Colleges, and I am interested in learning about the experiences of Community College leaders, such as yourself, that have grown within the Washington State Community College system.

It has been recommended that I reach out to you based on your experience and position within the Washington State Community College system. I believe you can be a strong advocate for my study by helping me identify study participants. Would you be interested in sponsoring my study?

I am looking for participants that are willing to meet over Zoom for 1-hour interviews and meet the following criteria:

- Currently holds or previously held a mid-level leadership role in a Washington State Community College;
    - These roles may include Director, Associate Dean, or Dean, though titles vary between organizations and regions.
- Held their current or a previous position in community college mid-level leadership for at least two years;
- Previously held a part-time staff, classified staff, faculty, or another non-leadership role in a Washington State Community College.

I appreciate your consideration and look forward to speaking with you soon.

Thank you,
Mackenzie Klinker Hutchins

APPENDIX D

Endorsement Email from Sponsors

RE: [EXTERNAL] - Fwd: Request for Sponsorship - Klinker Hutchins, Dissertation

Thu, Sep 29, 2022 at 4:42 PM

To: Mackenzie Hutchins <mklinker@mail.umassglobal.edu>

Hello Mackenzie,

I would be happy to help as a sponsor.

Thanks,

RE: [EXTERNAL] - Fwd: Request for Sponsorship - Klinker Hutchins, Dissertation

Tue, Oct 4, 2022 at 9:37 AM

To: Mackenzie Hutchins <mklinker@mail.umassglobal.edu>

Hi Mackenzie,

I put out the call to the and have 3 volunteers already. I just sent the general information minus your name along with the criteria, not the attachments. Would you like me to respond to their emails and introduce you with a CC? Or do you want to take it from here?

Checking In & Request

Fri, Oct 7, 2022 at 1:32 PM

To: Mackenzie Hutchins <mklinker@mail.umassglobal.edu>

Hi Mackenzie,

I am so glad you reached out and, yes, I will absolutely see what help I can offer. I know the current (where did we land on including technical colleges in your study?), and a good friend of mine works for I'm sure between those three and my ability to reach out to my fellow degree program alums via Social Media, we can dig up some additional names.

How are you doing otherwise?

APPENDIX E

Informational Letter

Date

Dear (Study Participant):

My name is Mackenzie Klinker Hutchins, and I am a doctoral candidate at UMass Global, studying Organizational Leadership. My research focuses on leadership development for mid-level leaders in community colleges. More specifically, I would like to understand mid-level leaders' leadership development experiences in both formal and informal settings. In addition to being a student, I have worked in higher education for five years. Currently, I work at the University of Washington after spending three years working in a community college.

I am asking for your assistance in my study by participating in an interview lasting approximately 60 minutes, set up at a convenient time 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 that only I can access. No other person from your college will have access to the interview information. You will be free to stop the interview/discussion and withdraw from the study anytime. Further, you may be assured that I, the researcher, am not affiliated with your institution.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at mklinker@mail.umassglobal.edu, or (360) 689-1056.

Sincerely,

Mackenzie Klinker Hutchins

APPENDIX F

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.

UMass Global IRB Adopted 2021

APPENDIX G

Informed Consent Form

INFORMATION ABOUT: Unsticking the Middle: A Phenomenological Study on How Mid-level Leaders in Community Colleges Engage in Leadership Development Activities

RESPONSIBLE INVESTIGATOR: Mackenzie Klinker Hutchins

PURPOSE OF STUDY: You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Mackenzie Klinker Hutchins, a doctoral student from UMass Global's Doctorate in Organizational Leadership program. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to identify and describe the formal and informal leadership development experiences of mid-level leaders promoted within Washington State Community Colleges. The study will strive to discover the mid-level leaders' perception of various leadership development activities, and to understand which activities impacted the mid-level leaders' career path.

By participating in this study, I agree to participate in a virtual interview. The interview will last approximately 60 minutes and will be conducted over Zoom.

I understand that:

a. 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 safe that is available only to the researcher.

b. I understand that the interview will be audio recorded. The recordings will be available only to the researcher. 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.

c. The possible benefit of this study to me is that my input may help add to the knowledge of how mid-level leaders in community colleges engage in leadership development activities. The findings will be available to me at the conclusion of the study and will provide new insights about the experience in which I participated. I understand that I will not be compensated for my participation.

d. If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact Mackenzie Klinker Hutchins at mklinker@mail.umassglobal.edu or by

phone at (360) 689-1056; or Dr. Jeffrey Lee (Advisor) at jlee1@umassglobal.edu.

e. 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.

f. No information that identifies me will be released without my separate consent and that 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 re-obtained. 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(s) set forth.

____
Signature of Participant

____
Signature of Principal Investigator

____
Date

APPENDIX H

Interview Protocol

Interview Date: ________________

Cohort Participation Year: _______________

Interviewee Pseudonym: _________________________

Introduction

Thank you for meeting with me today and taking the time to participate in this interview! As I explained in my email, my name is Mackenzie Klinker Hutchins, and I am a doctoral candidate at UMass Global, studying Organizational Leadership. I am conducting my dissertation research and am interested in learning about the leadership development experiences of community college leaders, such as yourself, that have grown within the Washington State Community College system. I believe this insight will benefit future community college leaders, as the information gathered in this study will hopefully detail how mid-level leaders in community colleges develop leadership skills.

Informed Consent

Before we begin the interview, I emailed you the Participant Bill of Rights and the Informed Consent Form, which you have signed.

- Do you have any questions or need clarification about either document?

Thank you so much! I am looking forward to our conversation and want you to feel comfortable sharing your stories. If at any point you need to step away, want to skip a question, or feel that we need to stop the interview entirely, please do not hesitate to ask.

- Do you have any questions before we begin? Then let's get started.

Demographic Questions (ask pre-interview & confirm at interview)

- What is your current position at your community college?
- How long have you held that position?
- Tell me about where your career in community colleges started and the path to your current position.

Interview Questions

The questions I developed for this interview align with the study's two research sub-questions about leadership development experiences —the first focuses on formal learning, and the second on informal learning.

Leadership Development through Formal Learning

This first set of questions will focus only on how you have developed leadership skills through formal learning. Many aspiring and current leaders turn to formal learning for skill development, as programs offer the opportunity to engage with content prepared by experts in the field. When I talk about formal settings, I am referring to structured learning that occurs in settings like a classroom or conference hall. We often see this structure in programs offered through a university or professional organization, and they typically have an ending milestone, like earning a degree, certificate, or credential.

1. Here is the first question. How has your engagement with formal learning advanced your career? For instance, does your current position require a specific education level or credential?
2. Fantastic, thank you! What are some ways you have learned leadership skills in the formal setting? For example, have you attended any workshops or classes that focus on leadership?
2. Great! Thanks for sharing that. I would love to know more about your experience.

When was this? How long was the (workshop/class)? Was there any follow-up after?

3. Wonderful, thank you! Where was the (workshop/class) held? What do you feel the benefits or cons of holding this (workshop/class) (in-person/online) were?
4. Thank you very much! Can you tell me Who conducted the (workshop/classes)? Who attended? How were your interactions with the other people involved?
5. Terrific, thank you for sharing. This is our last question on this topic. Why did you choose this learning experience? What benefits did you perceive from your attendance?

Leadership Development through Informal Learning

This second set of questions will focus on how you have developed leadership skills through informal learning. When I refer to informal learning, I mean learning experiences outside formal environments like classrooms and workshops.

There are many examples of how leaders learn informally, and I have found two models repeatedly in leadership development literature. The first is mentorship, and the second is a community of practice.

While mentorship allows leaders to learn from those who came before them, communities of practice create space for mutual learning between peers. An example of a community of practice could be a group on LinkedIn, where professionals share their experiences and provide one another with advice. Another example could be a monthly lunch date between mid-level leaders sharing the same responsibilities and challenges.

Here is the first question about informal learning.

6. What are some ways you have learned leadership skills in informal settings? For

example, have you been involved in a mentoring relationship or community of practice?

7. Fantastic, thank you! I would love to know more about your experience. When was this? How long were you involved in (mentorship/community of practice)?
8. Great! Thanks for sharing that. Where did your learning occur? What were the benefits or cons of meeting (in-person/online)?
9. Excellent, thank you! Can you tell me Who led the (mentorship/community of practice)? Who else was involved? How were your interactions with the other people involved?
10. Thank you very much! This is our last question on this topic. Why did you choose to engage in this learning experience? What benefits did you perceive?

Wrap-Up Questions

Thank you again for sharing so much with me today! I have a few final questions for you.

11. Now that we have discussed your formal and informal leadership development experiences, which do you feel were the most effective in your leadership development?
12. Fantastic, thank you! Have you had leadership development experiences where you felt like you did not see a return on your investment of time and energy? Can you share more about (that/them)?
13. Thank you so much. This is our final question. What, if anything, do you feel was your most significant barrier in accessing leadership development activities?

APPENDIX I

Protecting Human Research Participants

Completion Date 21-May-2021
Expiration Date N/A
Record ID 42635976

This is to certify that:

Mackenzie Klinker

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

Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify/?w4f3b306d-bebc-4e6b-9a82-cc484839bb84-42635976